

THE CULT OF RADRAP (RA DGRA),
“NEP” OF WANGDUE PHODRANG (BHUTAN)

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Introduction

Ropitiated as a destroyer and worshipped as a creator, Radrap (Ra dgra), the guardian deity of Wangdue Phodrang (dBang 'dus pho brang) is more familiar to the residents than Lord Buddha. Through the conduct of various rituals all the villages in the region pay homage to him. Even people from other parts of Bhutan who are stationed in the area frequently visit Radra Nekhang (*Ra dgra gnas khang*), the temple of Radrap in Wangdue Phodrang town, to make offerings¹ and also receive the blessing of the deity. For the people of Shar, Radrap is the source of peace and prosperity as well as fear. Despite their attachment to Radrap, only a few can recount a vague and chronologically disjointed history of this personality. However, the rituals in his honour are alive, though comparatively indistinct. Within this framework, the research on which the present article is based was conducted in the village of Bjena gewog² (sBe nag rged 'og) under Wangdue Phodrang district. The rationale for choosing it comes from the fact that Radragang (Ra dgra sgang), the peak of Radrap is located in the area. This paper will make an attempt to briefly touch on the history of the deity, besides describing the festival and the rituals conducted in his honour.

Historical background of Radap

Before discussing details of the cult, festival and rituals in honour of Radrap, it would be worthwhile to know the story of this supernatural figure. The background anecdotes can help us to understand the reasons behind Radrap's emergence as the guardian deity of Wangdue Phodrang. Originally this deity was a Tibetan *btsan*. In the eight century when Guru Padmasambhava visited Tibet this *btsan* promised to be the gurdian(*gter bdag*) of his treasures. As a mark of appreciation, Guru named him Genyen

¹ The offerings generally consist of rice, fruits, meat, wine, oil for butter lamps, incense sticks and money.

² A gewog (dz: rged 'og) is a local level administrative unit comprising several villages. A number of gewogs then make up a district. In our case, the name of the gewog is Bjena.

Chenpo³ (*dge bsnyen chen po*), the great upasaka. This, however, is not a feature that is unique to him as many such figures were made to take vows to protect the Doctrine of Buddha. Then, in the thirteenth century, in Druk Ralung (*'Brug ra lung*) in front of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo⁴ (*Pha jo 'Brug sgom zhigpo*), this treasure guardian of Guru rededicated his service to the protection of the Dharma. Thereafter, he became bound by oath (*dam can*), to protect the Doctrine of Buddha. At an unspecified period, when Mendi Phud Nidup, a trader from Khothangkha village⁵ went to Tibet, he met this *btsan*. The trader, realising the power of the *btsan*, tempted him to come to his village as their general (*dmag dpon*) and deity. On being asked to describe the mountain in his village which was offered as the abode, the man said:

The summit is the blooming place of chuga (*chu kha*)flowers.
 The middle is the singing place of khuju ngyoem (*khu ju sngom*).
 The base is the growth place of patsha damru (*dpag tsha 'dam ru*).⁶

As the chuga flower blooms only in the highlands and cane shoots and elastostoma in the lowlands we can understand the enormity of the mountain with its base in the sub-tropical zone and its summit among the cold high peaks. The trader said this with the intention of igniting the interest of the *btsan* to come to Bhutan. Having tempted the deity, the two journeyed to Bhutan. A little before entering into the territory of Bjena gewog, when they reached a small pass the *btsan* complained that he was feeling lethargic (dz: *tser yang 'tseraw mas*). This gave the pass the name the "lethargic mountain" (*tser las la*⁷). On reaching another peak the *btsan* moaned that he was feeling sick (dz: *na yang naw mas*). So the mountain

³ Source: *brGya tsar* ritual text, p.8. This text is read while conducting the ritual which is also called by the name of the text. (see footnote 13). The text is available in all the Radra Nekhang. The one mentioned here is that of the Nekhang located in Wangdue Phodrang town.

⁴ Phajo was a 13th century Buddhist saint who introduced Drukpa Kagyu (*'Brug pa bka' brgyud*) school to Bhutan. The title Phajo is also referred to the local priests who conduct *lHa 'bod* festival in Shar and Central part of Bhutan. However, It should be noted that Phajo Drugom Zhigpo is not associated with *lHa 'bod* as he was a Buddhist while this festival is a non-Buddhist one.

⁵ This village is under the jurisdiction of sBe nag rged 'og. We find the peak adode of Radrap in this village.

⁶ // mgo chu kha me tog shar sa./ bar khu ju sngom 'khyams sa./ mjug dpag tsha 'dam ru skyes sa./

Chuga, khuju ngyoem, patsha and damru are Bhutanese names for *Rheum nobile* (a specis of rhubarb), the cuckoo, cane shoot and elastostoma (a type of weed consumed as a vegetable) respectively. In the text patsha and damru appears like one word but they are not; it is the Bhutanese way of naming them together.

⁷ Tser is the contracted form of tser yang 'tseraw mas.

was named the “sick mountain” (*na ri mu*).⁸ On encountering the third peak the trader announced that this would be the abode. But when the *btsan* reacted strongly, saying that it was much smaller than the one described, the trader admitted that he had told him a lie and the peak acquired the name the “lie mountain” (*dz: shob la*⁹). Even today these mountains are referred to by the same appellations. Continuing a little further the two reached a place from where the present abode could be seen. So, the trader informed the *btsen* that the peak which was visible from where they were standing was the abode where *chuga flowers* bloomed. In comparison with the high mountains of those in Tibet, this one in Bhutan appeared rather small to the *btsan*, which provoked him to comment: “it just has the height of a goat” (*dz: ra bzum chig rang mas*). Thereafter, the peak became the abode of the *btsan* and it was named “goat-like mountain” (*ra 'dra sgang*). The *btsan* too was given the title Radrap which is derived from the name of the mountain. He then settled on the peak and became the deity of the people in the locality. However, there were times when he turned wrathful and caused harm to the people. It was only when the villagers sacrificed a bull that the anger of the deity could be appeased.¹⁰

On the other hand, a contradictory version claims that this figure was known as monk Sangay Tenzin (Sangs rgyas bstan rdzin) who was born to mother Lham Goem (lHam gom) and father Tshen Dey Rikay (Tshan lde ri ke) from Kham (Khams). At Druk Ralung he took monastic vows and later followed Phajo Drugom Zhigpo to Bhutan, where he assisted in the propagation of the Drukpa Kagyu (*'Brug pa bka brgyud*) school. As Phajo gained political importance in the course of the diffusion of his school of Buddhism, Garton (Gar ston),¹¹ one of his sons, was sent to Khothangkha as a chieftain. Monk Sangay Tenzin, only an assistant companion, soon gained popularity as a lama. After the death of the monk, a man of the locality was supposedly possessed by his spirit, who spoke through him to the other residents. Fearing the destructive side of the spirit, they agreed to

⁸ *Na* stands for sick while *ri* could mean mountain or forest.

⁹ *Shob* means lie.

¹⁰ The version of the encounter of Radrap and Mendi Phub Nidup was recounted orally by the residents mentioned here below. The interviews were conducted in the villages of Trashi Tokha, Balakha and Tokha from 17th to 23rd December, 1998. The fieldwork was sponsored by Sherubtse College.

- a. Chhimi Dema, 81 year-old villager.
- b. Ugyen Dorji, 75 year-old local priest.
- c. Agay Dorji, 69 year-old farmer.
- d. Pema Tenzin, 58 year-old bar-tender.
- e. Sangay Dawa, 41 years old shopkeeper.
- f. Dorji, 21 years old farmer.

¹¹ History of Bhutan: Course book for class IX and X, part I, published by CAPSS, Education Division of Bhutan, 1994, p. 36.

accept him as their guardian deity. A mountain peak known as Radragang was then offered as his abode and the deity was named Radrap thereafter. Despite this generous gesture and their high regard of him as their deity, the local residents could not escape his malevolent nature and fell victim to it. It was only after they promised to sacrifice a bull and conduct a festival in his honour that his wrathful manifestation was calmed.¹²

Until a few years ago, a bull was sacrificed and the festival known as *Bala Bongko* was conducted collectively by the people of Bjena Gewog from 18th to 20th of the first month of the lunar calendar. Today, however, with strong influence of Buddhist teachings, the villagers of the area do not perform any more bull sacrifice, but buy meat from the market to conduct the festival. This will be discussed in detail at a later stage.

It is of course difficult to defend either of the two versions and say which holds more truth. Nevertheless, the former has claimed the general acceptance of the people. This can be supported by the fact that in the *brGya tsar*¹³ ritual text of Radrap, there is a mention that he was appointed the guardian of treasures (*gter bdag*) by Guru Padmasambhava besides naming him "*Genyen Chenpo*". Also, going by the names of the mountains the former version carries more weight for the people.

Coming to the second anecdote, the truth extends as far as the mention of one of the sons of Phajo Drugom Shingpo ruling the village of Khothangkha in Bjena Gewog, but written history does not give even a slightest information about Radrap. Furthermore, the ritual text also lacks information on his coming to Khothangkha as an assistant of the son of Phajo. Despite these shortcomings we cannot totally disregard the account, as the staunch followers of Radrap argue that their deity was at one time a learned monk named Sangay Tenzin.

Radrap: his manifestations

From a layman's conception the deity has three manifestations.¹⁴ He assumes the form of a king, a monk and a *btsan* known as Dupo Tiyag

¹² The second version was narrated by the following residents. The interviews were conducted in Themakha and Phuntshogang from 24th to 27th of December, 1998 under the patronage of Sherubtse College.

- a. Gomchen Samdrup, 65 year-old lay priest.
- b. Gyeltshen, 60 year-old ex-incharge of Bala Lhakhang.
- c. Getay Dorji, 67 year-old caretaker of Bala Lhakhang.
- d. Pow Taphu, 62 year-old shaman.

¹³ However, in this region, the ritual text as well as the ritual itself is popularly known as "*brGya tsar*". As such the concept of this nomenclature applied in this article is that of the villagers. *brGya tsar* actually means 100 times.

¹⁴ Informants (see footnote 12).

(*bDud po ti g.yag*). The king and the monk are the benign manifestations responsible for the provision of peace, happiness and prosperity. On the contrary, Dupo Tiyag with his fiery wrath acts as a destructive agent to punish people whose faith in Radrap turns shallow. The bull sacrifice and the *brGya tsar* ritual is conducted to assure that the wrath of Dupo Tiyag is not activated. As for the peaceful manifestations, they are content with fumigation, erection of white flags without inscriptions and libations (*gser skyems*).

The description of Radrap by the '*brGya tsar*' text differs as follows: Radrap resides in a three storeyed palace constructed of jewels and crowned with a golden pinnacle. The air is filled with the melodious music of the bells hung on the walls. At the four corners outside the palace are houses each adorned with a parasol on top. Three tiers of jewelled walls (*lcags ri*) protect the palace. Within the palace, on a golden throne shaped like a lion sits the majestic Radrap on the cushion of the sun and the moon. Flames of fire jet forth from his body. He has a red wrathful face, two eyes like the sun and the moon, a tongue like thunder and a terrifying voice. He is dressed in a gold-plated jacket of iron chain-mail and a helmet decorated with turquoise. In his right hand he holds a sword (*gle gri*) to destroy the foes. The gem (*nor bu*) in his left hand is the source of alms and charity. To tour the three worlds under his domain he rides the horse Chugsey. This horse has the power to tour the world in the wink of an eye. It also can read the mind of his master.

Around him are his manifestations:

- (1) In front of him is the white peaceful guardian of treasures (*gter bdag*) holding a bowl containing jewels. Riding on a white horse he moves around providing food and wealth to the subjects of Radrap.
- (2) On the right is the black wrathful three-eyed Dupo Tiyag. His responsibility is to destroy the enemies of the deity with the sword in his right hand and a mountain-sized tusk.
- (3) The rider of Tanag Tingkar (*rta nag rting dkar*), "a black horse with white hooves," Dushag Nagpo (*bDud zhags nag po*), stationed on the left, captures and tames evil people with the black rope from which his name is derived.
- (4) Nearby is a monk robed in yellow with a bowl in his left hand and a stick with stupa on the top (*mkar sil*) in his right. He preaches and guards the Dharma.
- (5) At the back is the great warrior Magpon Chenpo Lutsen Pelzang (*dMag dpon chen po Klu btsan dpal bzang*). He has a red wrathful face, three eyes and pointing hair. In his right hand is a spear, and in his left a snake (to be used as rope). Riding on the sunrays he destroys the enemies of Radrap and help people who seek refuge in him.

There is a variation between the oral and the written tradition as the scripture describes the deity as being surrounded by five manifestations. Here, the fact that Tiyag, Dushag Nagpo and Magpon Lutsen Pelzang perform the same function allows us to categorise them as one wrathful personality. In this case, the oral tradition and the text converge as there would be three forms: the benign guardian of treasures (*gter bdag*) who is the furnisher of food and wealth; the monk who is responsible for the propagation of the Dharma; and the three manifestations who destroys the adversaries of Radrap and also punish the people who commit sacrilege.

Bala Bongko - an annual festival

As the festival is conducted at Balakha village of Bjena gewog it is befittingly referred to as Bala Bongko. "Bala" is the contracted form of the village name "*Balakha*" but, unfortunately, no local resident could give the exact spelling of Bongko, let alone the explanation of it. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the term is derived from the combination of two words: '*bod*' meaning "call" and '*skor*' meaning "turn." The invocation of the local deity by the local priests and the male participants in turn on the final day of the festival supports the proposition. It is possible that time has worn out the original word "*'bob-skor*" and replaced it with the existing "*Bongko*." However, we cannot rule out the idea that it could also be *Bon skor*, a "Bon practice" which in Bhutan designates all non-Buddhist rituals. Not the least, it could also be interpreted as *Bon 'khor* which would mean a "Bon community."¹⁵

The 1998 annual festival could not be conducted on the usual date because of the unavailability of the local priests. About 95 households from the different villages, namely Themakha, Balakha, Lhamoekha, Phuntshogang, Trashi Tokha, Tokha and Dagaygang, all under the jurisdiction of Bjena gewog sponsor the festival through their individual contributions which may take the form of either rice to money. The first form of contribution is in the form of rice. Each household gives about two kilograms of rice which is used not only for the preparation of the sacrificial cakes, but also to feed the local priests for the three days and to host dinner for the local male participants on the final day. Money constitutes the next form of contribution. Here the households are categorized into three groups corresponding to their economic status. The rich group pays about ngultrum¹⁶ fifty, the middle income group about

¹⁵ This interpretation was suggested by Professor Charles Ramble while editing this particular paper.

¹⁶ The ngultrum is the name of the Bhutanese currency. The exchange rate oscillated around \$ 1 for ngultrum 44.15 in September, 1999.

thirty and the poor parts with ngultrum ten. The collected amount is used to cover the price of the bull which is slaughtered and sacrificed to the deity. As such the cash contribution fluctuates according to the price of the bull. Today, the sum is used for purchasing meat from the market.

A group constituting five men is nominated on a yearly basis to organise the festival. They are responsible for the collection of donations, issuing invitations to the priests and purchasing meat. They also look after the temporarily built residence, a hut, which is intended to house the sacrificial cakes and lodge the priests. Since it is the responsibility of the organisers to host the priests, they also sojourn in the temple for the entire duration of the festival.

The first two days of Bala Bongko holds little attraction for the spectators as they have hardly any dances and are more of a preparatory period. The priests remain occupied in preparing for the final day which involves making the sacrificial cakes and invoking Radrap at different intervals. The night, however, is enlivened with the arrival of the local male participants who rehearse for the final day following the instructions of the main priest. Interestingly there is a head male priest (*dpa bo*) (pronounced as *pawo*) and also the seasoned one, a male assistant (*dpa' chung*) (pronounced as *pochu*), and two priestesses (*rnal 'byor ma*) (pronounced as *neljorma*). The *pawo* becomes the leader and initiates the dance.

The presence of both the young and the elders adds to the already excited crowd. The night becomes more lively with the conclusion of the rehearsal session. What normally follows then is a competition of songs and dance between the men and the women and at times between the participants of different villages. While the older group remain engrossed in watching the scene, the frolicking youth (men in particular) indulge in eve-teasing the young maidens and annoying the elders. Yet for some, it is time for paying court to the ladies and starting amorous affairs which at times lead to matrimony.

The finale: 20th day of the first month

It is the day when people of all strata dress in their finest clothes, wear the best ornaments and jewellery and display their prized bowls carved out of wood and ivory and lined in silver. Although the festival has little didactic religious content a crowd, attired in colourful finery and bearing packed meals, assembles at the scene of the activity. This becomes an interesting sight for both the outsiders and the villagers as well.

The invocation of Radrap by the priests (*pawo*, *pochu* and *neljorma*) begins at around sunrise. With expectant eyes the villagers and even the monks wait for the priests to enter slowly into a trance as the spirit engulfs

them, and start to utter their predictions for the year ahead. The village folks are given a detailed account of both the good and the ills that await them during the course of the year. At times they delve further, attempting to elicit predictions about the well being of an individual household. It is for this very reason that the elders do not absent themselves from this part of the festival.

All the *pawo*, *pochu* and *neljorma* have their own specialized prediction. At this stage, as if they were selecting goods in the market, the interested candidates pick the priest of their choice and listen to the prediction. As the festival involves the same priests for several years, it poses no difficulty for the village folks to make their selection as they know the right person to listen to. However, most are attracted by the *pawo*, the head of the team and also the seasoned one.

While the men remain engrossed in the predictions the women folks attend to the rest of the family members, serving them tea and snacks or anything they have packed. While the priests remain preoccupied with their prediction, the organizers and the butcher slaughter the bull in a nearby forest. A symbolic part of the meat is then offered to the deity and the rest served as dinner to the local priests and the warriors (*dpa' zap*). Today, as mentioned earlier, in lieu of a bull, the local residents buy meat, following an unanimous decision made a few years ago. The post-invocation scene is the time for feasting as this is the moment when the villagers break for lunch, after which they gather once again at the festival spot.

A little before noon, about 28 male participants assemble in the temple (*mgon khang*) of Radrap. The men are the representatives of what are considered to be the 28 original households out of a total of 95. The rest consist of those who settled at a latter period or who have broken away from these original households.

The participants present themselves dressed in their finest. Their heads wrapped up in colourful scarves, swords slung on their left hips, their torsos covered with white scarves, they represent the warriors (*dpa' zap*) of the past who had been recruited to fight the civil wars as well as the battles with Tibet and the British. Like their forefathers they too offer money (*snyen dar*) to the local deity, and pray for his blessing. In the act of invoking Radrap, the warriors yell out at the top of their voices. In the past this was done to seek the help of Radrap before proceeding to the battlefield. However, today, the invocation is intended to subdue and pacify the evil spirits and to prevent them from causing any harm to the village. Following this, the warriors leave the temple in a procession with other men bearing banners. The aim of this banner is to usher in good luck. Circumbulating the temple once they march slowly and stop at a place called Bala Pogto which is about 400 meters south of the temple. The organizers come in tow to check the presence of all the 28 warriors in the

procession. If from any household, a mere 18 year old is found to be one of the participants, he would be sent back and the household marked for offence and for breaking the law, as only adult men are considered fit to be warriors. This done, the warriors face the temple and once again yell the invocation of the deity before finally returning to the festival spot. The warriors then draw their swords and make three rounds of the hut where the sacrificial cakes are kept. With one hand holding the sword high up in the air and the other gripping the end of the scarf, their movement becomes very wild and vigorous. They turn and spin as they shout and yell, reproducing the noise of the battlefield.

Exhausted now, the warriors march back to the courtyard of the temple, line up in two rows and settle for tea while an elderly man carrying the banner and a sword chants words in praise of Radrap. In tune with his enticing words, his movement too becomes graceful and seductive as he spins and dances slowly and gently. Towards the end he yells and becomes wild threatening the adversaries about the power of the sword of Radrap. He then approaches the seated warriors who individually offer him betle nut and leaf as a gesture of gratitude and appreciation. Time permitting, a few folk dances are performed as an entertainment for the spectators, otherwise the "warrior dance" and the cry of the warriors follow. A little later the warriors rejoin the priests who are in the process of invoking Radrap.

The other priests take repose while the *pawo* who is now surrounded by the warriors initiates the wild dance. As he moves the *pawo* also recite words¹⁷ that are repeated by the participants. Gradually, the flow of words becomes rapid with the quickening tempo of the dance; the surrounding warriors jump in and out of the circle.

Eventually, the circle is broken as one of the warrior makes a grab at the *pawo*. Holding on to his belt, the rest of his companions follow suit as each holds on to the belt of the man in front, forming not a circle but a chain. The vigour of the dance is still maintained, as the participants jump and turn along with the *pawo* who stands at the head. The wild dance, which forms zigzags in the line, is believed to be an act of driving away the evil spirits. This continues for some time after which the dancers disperse for the evening tea. The concluding session of the festival begins a little before sunset.

¹⁷ The words recited are under:
 "Tonde Phajo said to Sonam Peldon:
 Sonam Peldon's vagina is large.
 Sonam Peldon is full of wetness.
 Sonam Peldon's vagina is large." (Cheki, 1994; 118).

The tour of the villages

The spectators return home and lie in wait for the reception of the warriors and the priests who would pay a visit to all the villages that had sponsored the festival. An old worn-out container is filled with varieties of crops (*bru sna dgu*),¹⁸ chilli, chopped pieces of meat and a bunch of willow twigs painted black at one end. These items of propitiation are prepared by each household. The folks of each village gather and normally put their propitiation container at crossroads and wait for the priests and warriors to come and ward off bad luck as well as other calamities.

In the meantime, the priests and the warriors assemble in front of Bala Lhakang and start the tour of the villages. The first village that they visit is Phuntshogang. In each village the warriors perform the warrior dance and repeat the words of the *pawo*. Then, they gather near the propitiation container and chant:

1 year, 2 years, 3 years.....9 years
 1 month, 2 months, 3 months.....9 months,
 1 night, 2 nights, 3 nights.....9 nights.
 Remain subdued here for 9 years, 9 months and 9 nights.¹⁹

Then they savagely smash and throw away the propitiation containers yelling: "Remain nailed down here." The evil forces dispelled and subjugated, the priests and the warriors sit in two rows. Tea and parched rice (dz: *zaw*) brought by each household is served lavishly, even to the children and other spectators. At the request of the villagers a few folk dances are performed by the warriors to entertain the gathering and especially to celebrate their subjugation of the obnoxious spirits. The same program is conducted in the villages of Tokha, Dagaygang, Trashi Tokha and Themakha.

It is only after the nightfall that the priests and the warriors are back at Balakha. Tired, they are only too happy to line up in two rows for dinner, which by tradition is delayed so as to oblige the warriors to dance and entertain the spectators. Despite their exhaustion, after tea is served they dance till dinner time. The warriors and the spectators return to their home yelling and singing in fulfillment as their deity is appeased and invoked and evil subjugated.

¹⁸ *Bru na dgu* (pronounced as *druna gu*) are the nine varieties of crops which differs from one region to another. Generally, these consists of rice, wheat, buckwheat, millet, maize, oat, mustard, soya beans, etc.

¹⁹ dz: // lo chi lo gnis, lo gsum.....lo dgu
 zla chi zla gnis zla gsum.....zla dgu
 zhag chi zhag gnis zhag gsum...zhag dgu
 bsnem nas bsnem //

Other rituals to the deity

The “*brGya tsar*”²⁰ ritual, that initially demanded a bull sacrifice is yet another salient ritual in honour of Radrap. Now, bull sacrifice is substituted by the purchase of meat. The “*brGya tsar*” ritual is conducted on any of the days convenient to the family. Contrary to the Bala Bongko, this ritual is organised by individual households. The priests have no role as it is performed by about five monks or lay priests. The only preparation required are the rice or flour sacrificial cakes and seven plates of offerings (*tshogs*) which comprises rice, fruits, vegetables, meat, biscuits, etc. The ritual, which is accompanied by instruments such as cymbals, trumpets and drums, lasts a little more than an hour. The rich conduct it several times a year. The poor, for their part, try to keep the ritual as an annual feature, lest the wrath of the deity strike them.

Offering of libation (*gser skyems*) requires no special preparation or the assistance of the specialists. Every morning with the rise of the dawn, many individuals praise Radrap. A bowl is filled preferably with wine (*dz: a.ra*)²¹ and if not with black tea and a short text²² that takes just a few minutes is recited. The illiterate followers of Radrap, for their part, memorise the text.

The cheapest but the most cumbersome offering of homage to Radrap is the erection of white flags without inscriptions at Radragang in Khothangkha. From the nearest village it takes more than an hour and a half of uphill climbing for an average walker. For this reason, many people send their flag through anyone paying a visit to the peak abode of Radrap. Only after the purification of the flag by fumigation (*bsang*) and sprinkled water, is it taken to the peak. Once there, people prostrate three times, attach the flag to a pole, offer fumigation (*bsang*) to cleanse the impurities that might have been brought with them. When the fumigation is offered they just say “*bsang, bsang, bsang*” which could mean “be purified” or “be cleansed.” The next step is the offering of money (*snyen dar*) which is normally put in the holes around. Following this, with the participants yelling three times at their loudest, the flag is erected. Then, prostrating three times, they take leave of the abode. Despite the lack of prayer inscriptions on the flag it bears important significance. The flag is the symbolic dress of Radrap. At times, the villagers detach the old flags and bring them home as a gift of their deity. This cloth is used to wrap the packed meals and other items. The local residents believe that the probability of polluting the abode by woman is more resulting from their menstruation cycle. If a female pays a

²⁰ see footnote 13.

²¹ *A. ra* is a kind of wine prepared by distilling fermented malt. It is a popular drink in all the villages of Bhutan.

²² The name of the text is also called *gser skyems dpe cha*.

visit to the abode of Radrap, the deity transforms himself in a wrathful form and punishes the people with unwanted rainfall and hailstorm. So, as in the case of temple of the deities (*mgon khang*), the abode of Radrap is barred to the female visitors.

Conclusion

Some refer him as father (*ap*) Radrap while for others he is their brother (*a jo*) Radrap. It is no surprise that the villagers of Bjena gewog before their meal chant:

The Triple Gem,
Radrap, brother of Shar
Accept this offering of clean food.²³

Even while going to bed people chant:

The Triple Gam,
Radrap, brother of Shar,
I take refuge in you.²⁴

For his subjects, Radrap is omnipresent and all-powerful. During archery and other games, many contestants seek the help, strength and the skill of the deity for victory. The blessing of Radrap is sought for safety even when making long journeys and while going to a new place. Today, when people purchase new vehicles they offer money (*syam dar*) and scarf to Radrap and in return they receive the blessing in the form of talismans and scarf. These are then tied inside the vehicle so that the chance of accidents is minimised. Rituals are conducted at regular intervals and prayer flags erected in honour of Radrap, the "father and brother of the Shar people." In return for their zealous faith in the deity, people believe that they will be rewarded with prosperity, success, good health and happiness. All in all, the faith of the people and the power of Radrap can be subsumed in three sentences:

"Go for trade; he is the merchant.
Reside in the village; he is the chieftain.
March to the battlefield; he is the general."²⁵

²³ dz:// blam dkon mchog gsum
a jo shar gyi Ra dgra
lto phud gtsang ma'i phud las bzhes//

²⁴ dz:// blam dkon mchog gsum
a jo shar gyi Ra dgra
skyabs dang mgon gzigs cig//

²⁵ dz:// tsong lu 'gyon tsong dpon
gyul lu sdodn gyul dpon

For the people of Bjena and of Wangdue Phodrang, in general, Radrap is the almighty, the embodiment of their hope, prosperity and wellbeing as well as an object of awe.

Acknowledgement

I take this privilege to thank Madam Françoise Pommaret and Professor Samten G. Karmay for constantly guiding me in my research works. I also extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Ch. Ramble for editing this work.

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