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## **Khiksaba. A Festival in Sherdukpen Country (Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India)**

Pascale Dollfus, François Jacquesson

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A Festival in Sherdukpen Country  
(Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India)



Pascale Dollfus & François Jacquesson

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(Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India)

By

**Pascale Dollfus & François Jacquesson**

With maps and illustrations

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I. Assamese House in Maj Rourari



II. Offerings in the room where the Areca nuts are kept



III. Meeting at the Gompa



IV. Village Chiefs



V. Kachinpo carrying a bag of areca nuts





VI. Distribution of the areca nuts



VII. Clan House in Rupa



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XI. Dance of the Gomchinpos





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XX. The Six 'Kings'



XXI. Baidongpo Singers before entering a house



XXII. Priests praying for the House





XXIII. Changmepos, young people assisting the priests



XXIV. Presentation of the costumes





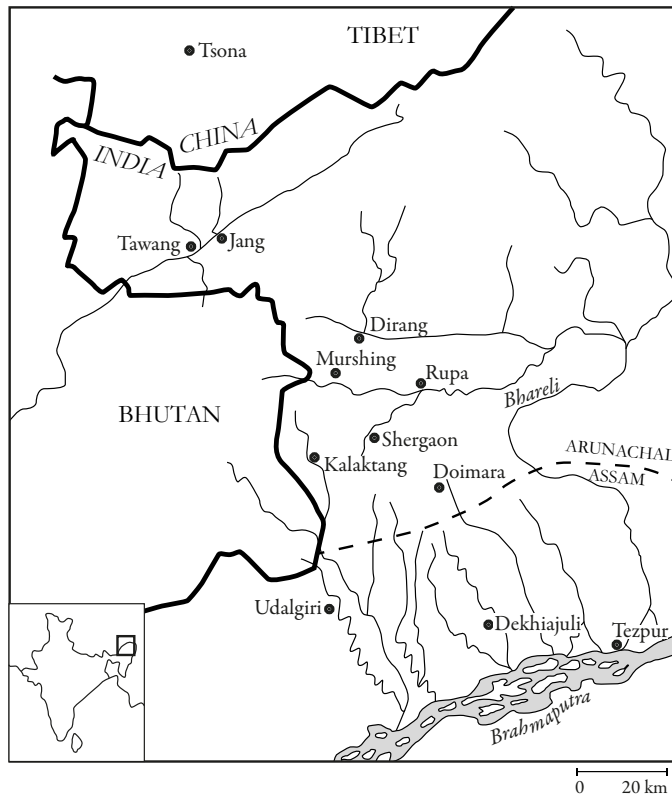
XXV. Bropo performer showing *khikgao* necklaces

## *Prologue*

The Khiksaba festival is certainly the greatest moment of the year for the Sherdukpen people. This rather small but nevertheless important population lives in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, close to Bhutan and Tibet, in the eastern Himalayas. It numbers less than 5,000 and this has no doubt been the case for centuries. Regardless of its small size, the population is a rather distinctive one, with its own language, its own religion (although Buddhism also has its followers here), its own territory, its own customary law with a sizeable power of jurisdiction.

They live halfway between the high plateau of Tibet and the low valley of Assam. Rupa, the main town (c. 3,000 inhabitants of which about 1,200 are Sherdukpen), is only 1,500 m. above sea level, though several Sherdukpen villages are situated above 2,000 m. The Sherdukpens possess a rather vast territory, which stretches from Assam in the south to the northern areas inhabited by several Monpa groups that form a chain up to the secluded Tawang region close to the Chinese border (Fig. 1).

In fact, the Sherdukpen people used to control an important point of access to Assam or, to put it another way, they played a key role on one of the main north-south routes between China and India. They astutely managed to maintain a balance between pressure from Tibetan culture and power, and the nearby Indian influence. Until the 1970s, nearly all Sherdukpen people migrated to the Assam border for winter: hundreds and



1. The location of Rupa village  
(West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh, India)

hundreds of Sherdukpens, many with horses, moved down to the plains for a period of four months—not quite to Assam itself, but on the very last hillocks before the border where they camped in bamboo huts. From their winter camps, they visited the neighbouring Assamese villages where they owned land, and they brought back food and implements to their camps, then up to their houses in the hills. Down in Assam, some British officers started to notice them, and to take the very first photographs we have of the Sherdukpens.

However, whether during British rule or since then, no precise account has ever been written about the winter migration, or about the great Khiksaba festival that announced it.

Although nobody ever migrates any more, the festival has maintained all its glory. It is a rather complex affair that lasts five days (and nights) in Rupa. Several distinct groups are on duty during this period: village heads and senior people, representatives of the clans, but more to the point, several special priests and their helpers, young warriors in full military attire, including shield and hat, a curious group of ‘kings’, fraternities of singers, as well as other groups. These people have very precise roles to play that lead them into the hills, across or to rivers, to special houses in the Old Village, to major ritual places named *Loblang* and *Sri Kamcha*, and to many other trees, stones and half-hidden places.

All Sherdukpen people take part more or less in the festival, many of them to a much greater extent. But the great Khiksaba festival is not just routine ceremonial

dances, running through water and ritual songs in the dark of night. It is also like a detailed representation of Sherdukpen society's structure. The precise role of each participant is linked to their status and is designed to make this obvious. Strict hierarchies—sometimes rather old-fashioned or forgotten in everyday life—stand out clearly here, as in a showcase. It is as if the full force of Sherdukpen norms and values is supposed to apply during the actual enacting of rituals, where any transgression is rapidly detected.

The Khiksaba festival is typically Sherdukpen. The fact that it is known in a simpler form in some villages north of Bomdi Pass (Bomdila, a new town on the northern road) is logically linked to the fact that these northern villages actually speak a Sherdukpen dialect.

Locally, the meaning of *Khiksaba* is open to various interpretations. While *saba* means to perform (a ceremony) in Sherdukpen, *khik* is diversely interpreted. According to some informants, *khik* refers both to Khikzizi, the local priests who are the main ritual practitioners of this festival, and to the special necklace called *khik*, which is given to all participants on the fifth day of the festival. However, according to others, *khik* derives from *khit* meaning God, the main purpose of the Khiksaba festival being to worship the local mountain deities, Sung Khit and Soro Khit.

This work is the result of three short stays that a social anthropologist and a linguist spent in Sherdukpen country during the winters of 2009, 2010 and 2011. The social anthropologist was familiar with Tibetan-speaking populations in the western Himalayas, especially in Ladakh, and the linguist with communities

in the plains of North-East India—so that while in Rupa we felt both at home and in a new found land. Our first stay was rather exploratory as we travelled around Sherdukpen country up to Tawang in the north and the Bhutanese border in the West. It later proved to be very useful when the Sherdukpens told us about their neighbours. With the second stay, the shortest of the three, we began to understand how Sherdukpen society functions. Rupa became a sort of natural centre for our travels, and a place where we could talk to people and ask them about many topics. People from Tukpen Village Council, among others, began providing us with excellent advice. The third stay, in the winter of 2011-2012, was the most profitable. We succeeded in arriving in good time for Khiksaba. It does not fall on the same date every year; priests and the authorities set the date a relatively short time before the event itself, and to organize our trip from Paris within such a short time was not easy. The Sub-Divisional Officer in Rupa was, as usual, very helpful and he made enquiries for us and telephoned from Rupa to tell us, in Paris, the exact dates of the festival.

This book is a description of the Khiksaba festival that took place in Rupa in December 2011. Rather than giving an account of a standard festival, it seemed preferable to describe one particular occasion when we were able to follow the celebrations from start to finish, from the preparations in Assam to the final episodes that took place in Rupa. We believe that this description, which is no doubt incomplete and far from perfect, is the most reliable way of addressing such a complex event. We avoided interpretations that we felt

would be too blunt or dogmatic (the Tsokbos ‘are like this’, the Lorjangpos ‘are like that’, the festival ‘means this’, etc.). We wanted to show what happens, including participants’ opinions, and to make some suggestions.

During our winter trips, we were more and more actively offered the affectionate and often enthusiastic support of many Sherdukpen people and their organizations. They taught us everything, without ever imposing their views on us. This free spirit, as well as a surprisingly open confidence in the way they talk about their society, their families and sometimes their secrets, whether big or small, helped us immensely in writing these illustrated pages which often echo their words, their sentences and their voices.

It would be almost impossible not to forget somebody when the time comes to thank everybody. After Khiksaba, we recognized so many people in the streets of Rupa, familiar faces, people we had met before or during the festival, people who talked to us that we are afraid of not being able to recognize them all now, and that would be a real shame. We hope that we will be forgiven for giving only a short list with very little detail. And we hope that the people from Tukpen Village Council (TVC), always so helpful and kind, will forgive us for naming only a few of them. The cited persons are listed more or less according to the order in which we first met them.

Sange Chhom Thongdok and Prem Khandu Thongon, who first told us about Khiksaba when we arrived in Rupa;

Pema Chhom Thongdok, Sange’s elder sister, a living Who’s Who in Sherdukpen country;

Tsering Dorjee Khrime & Netan Dorjee  
Thongdok, TVC Secretary & Vice-Secretary;  
Nawang Norbu Khrime, Gaonbura;  
Sang Tsering Musobi, the oldest man in Rupa, his  
son Rinchen Norbu and their family;  
Dharmendra Boro and his wife, who invited us both  
to Dekhijuli (Assam) and to Rupa.;  
Isor Koch, at whose house we stayed in Roumari  
(Assam);  
Tourang Nazari who welcomed us twice to his house  
in Jhargaon;  
Rinchin Dorjee Thongon, Sub-Divisional Officer;  
Prem Dorjee Khrime, engineer and a knowledgeable  
correspondent;  
Tsering Dorjee Khrime, who taught us some of the  
language;  
Netan Dorje Thongon, Gaonbura in Doimara and a  
famous hunter;  
Dr Sang Khandu Thongon, his mother Pema Yodon  
and their family;  
D.K. Thongon, film director;  
Tenzin Chege Khrime and his daughter Lakshmi;  
Dorjee Khandu Thongdok, ex-minister;  
The Baidongpo Tsering Thongdok, his wife and  
their son Khandu;  
Dorjee Khandu Thongon, the Lorjangpos' Master;  
Rinchen Khandu Karma, the senior Baidongpo;  
Dorjee Khandu Dinglow, The Director of Sports  
and Youth Affairs in Arunachal;  
Sang Khandu Musobi and his family;  
Tsering Mejiji, Asu Dechao.



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### *Credits and Orthography*

All photographs were taken by the authors between the years 2009 and 2012.

All maps and line drawings were done with the help of Coline Fontaine.

Cerise Fontaine and Bernadette Sellers translated the French chapters into English.

Khandu Thongdok contributed with his narrative of the Mokphēpo's expedition.

This research was financed by the CNRS units UPR299 (Centre for Himalayan Studies) and UMR7107 (Lacito), and by two ANR projects: Project 'Brahmaputra' (Languages, Cultures and Territories in North-East India) and Project 'Himalart' (Himalayan art objects: creation, circulation, innovation).

Sherdukpen words have been written according to a simple system devised by the authors. It includes the notation of several nasal vowels written with a tilde: ã ě ĭ õ ũ. Personal names have been written according to local usage.

All words with \* are Indian words, and can be found in the Index.



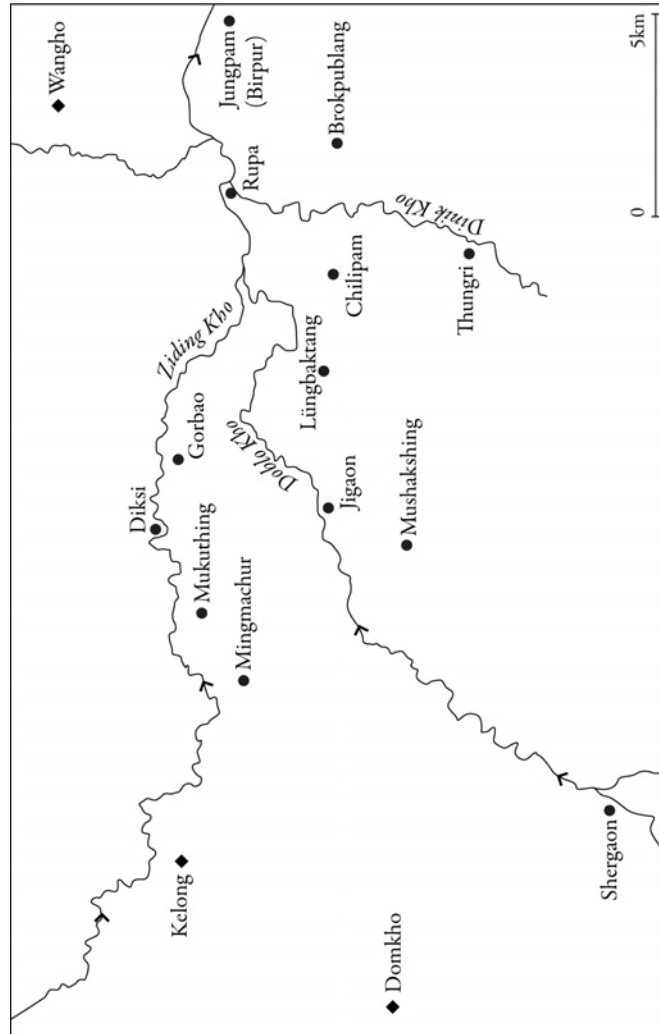


Fig. 2. Map of Sherdukpen villages (marked by a black dot). Wangho is a Bugun village, while Kelong and Domkho are Western Monpa villages.

## *Introduction*

The Sherdukpen people, speaking the Sherdukpen language, with their own social and ritual organisation, number about 5,000 in West Kameng district (Arunachal Pradesh). They are distinct from the two so-called Monpa communities of the Tawang Valley and of the western valleys up to the Bhutan border and beyond. They are also distinct from the Akas (= Hrusso) to the east, and from the smaller Bugun (= Khowa) population living on the left bank of the River Tenga to the north-east.

The Sherdukpens have settled mostly in the small township of Rupa situated at the confluence of the rivers Ziding and the Dinik, about 1,500 m above sea level and in twelve small localities in the surrounding area, the furthest being the isolated townlet of Shergaon located 25 km to the south-west, 2,000 m above sea level (Fig. 2).

The word Sherdukpen is probably a recent coinage for the inhabitants of *Sher* village (Shergaon) and *Tukpen*, the old name for the Rupa area as far as Jigaon. The two regions are distinct and though people may marry 'beyond the border', Tukpen Village Council is not responsible for matters in Shergaon, although they speak almost the same language.

Buddhism is indeed a regular religious practice among the Sherdukpens, but less so than among the two neighbouring Monpa groups. In fact, Sherdukpens have

their own religious life with their local mountain deities, their own special priests and the fascinating Khiksaba festival which usually takes place in December.

The Khiksaba festival is a performance staged in various places, in the mountains or in the village of Rupa, the main village of the Sherdukpen community. It lasts several days and involves ritual associations and groups that sing and dance. It is part of the agrarian and ritual calendar, as well as of the Sherdukpens' social or economic geography. It takes place after contact has been renewed with Assam, where every year before the festival the community from Rupa and the neighbouring villages sends several persons down to the plains during the few days that activities up in the hills are at a standstill. Khiksaba begins when these persons come back carrying products from Assam. In the past, the Sherdukpens' great winter migration to the Assam plains, *bahme*, used to start after the festival.

It occupies the old village's entire space, with its old traditional houses, the two rivers encircling it, ritual places of greater or lesser importance, and the paths linking them. But it also extends beyond the village, since the whole festival—at least in its present form—is based on the performance of the six Mokphēpos. These armed and colourful warriors, who play several roles, face a succession of trials and tribulations, as in a sort of initiatory voyage, from their secret journey through the pathless mountains to the handing over of weapons in the Clans' houses to which they belong.

Khiksaba is a showcase for a large part of the village's cultural heritage through the choice of costumes, dances and songs that are distributed among a few well-defined

groups of ‘performers’, who make an appearance every year during the festival: the Tsokbos, the Batpos, the Gomchinpos and perhaps most importantly the two traditional choir groups, the Baidongpos and the Lorjangpos, as well as the groups of children who tirelessly assist the performers throughout the festival’s numerous episodes.

The Khiksaba celebrations also feature the Khikzizis, the local priests, who are specially assigned to the mountain deities and who have an exhausting, nonstop part to play over these few days. Finally—and it is one of the most important aspects—it lays bare, so to speak, the hierarchies organizing Sherdukpen society. The eminent part played by the noble Houses, the ambiguous status attributed to inferior clans, even though the priests themselves come from them, and the complex relationship between seats at assemblies and places between which the festival shifts, all this comes across clearly at a festival whose obvious function is to reaffirm ‘tradition’, that is to establish an order.

Sherdukpen society is divided into two socially differentiated and hierarchized groups—the Thongs and the Chaos. The Thongs are regarded as the descendants of the mythical ancestor Asu Gyaptong and form the upper group. The Chaos, on the other hand, are thought to descend from the porters and servants who accompanied Asu Gyaptong on his way to Rupa. They form the lower group. Both Thong and Chao are ascribed statuses i.e. a status people are either born with or have no control over.

In the past, say one or two generations ago, the Chaos were expected to act as workers or servants for



Thong people. The situation has certainly changed. We now come across newly rich Chaos, and some elderly Thong gentlemen (though not all of them) complain today about the Chaos' uncouth behaviour. Yet, whatever the changes that have taken place and result from the many legal decisions, the land still lies mostly in the hands of the Thong clans, along with some of the trade. Nevertheless, Indian government jobs are open to everybody and in some cases important positions are attributed to families that not so long ago were servants.

While children of both sexes inherit from their father's clan, only men can pass this clan on to their descendants and inherit their ancestors' land and property. When married, women belong to their husband's clan. Neither men nor women can marry into their own clan (and sub-clans) or into their related clans.

Tukpen people are divided into a number of exogamous clans, *rung*, but a social barrier separates the Thong or upper clans: Thongdok, Thongchi, Thongon, Musobi, Thongdok Chung, Khime; from the Chao or lower clans: Dingla, Megēji, Mejiji, Monoji and Sinchaji. Each Thong clan is associated with a Chao clan, which is expected to carry out menial work as well as ceremonial duties for the former. The Thongdok Akhao (Eldest Thongdok) and the Thongdok Chung (Middle Thongdok) are thus related to the Megēji, the Thongchi and Thongon (or Tongo) to the Mejiji and Monoji, the Khime to the Dingla and the few households belonging to the Musobi clan are related to the Sinchaji. As people like to point out, in the past when wars and raids were frequent occurrences, the officers were Musobi and the soldiers were Sinchaji.

Today belonging to a clan still determines both a person's social and ceremonial activities. It governs marriage, funerals and most religious rituals. Certain functions or roles are reserved exclusively for one group, or even for a specific clan. For example, Gaonburas\* or village headmen are only chosen from Thong clans, whereas local priests, Khikzizis, have to belong to Dingla or Megēji clans.

During the Khiksaba festival, both the role of warrior, Mokphē, and of the so-called Tsokbo kings may only be enacted by Thong people. On the other hand, Asu Dechao, 'the elder who is an expert in speaking', has been played by a male member of the same Mejiji family for decades.

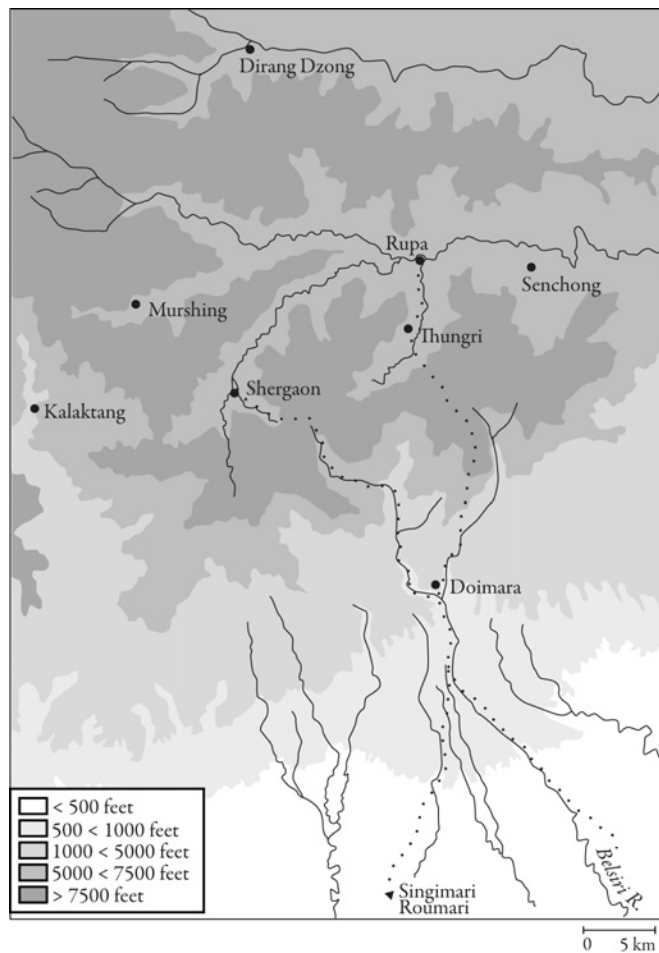


Fig. 3. *Besme* migration route

## CHAPTER 1

### *The Journey to Assam*

#### *1. The Sherdukpens and Their Friends in the Valley*

Until the 1970s, every year in November, everybody would pack up their belongings, take their cattle and children, load their heavy things onto the backs of horses, lock up their houses, and the whole long line would move up slowly to Thungri, an old village located a dozen kilometres from Rupa. It would then move on, up along the Bugun border to the mountain passes and, after two nights on the road, it would lead the villagers to Rochong, a place located on the River Bisiri, not far from the Assamese border, where they would camp for three or four months in bamboo huts, spending the days hunting and fishing (Fig. 3).

Neither this old settlement where the Sherdukpens spent the winter, nor the new one situated two kilometres away, known locally as Srahor and founded in 1976, is in Assam. They are just above the line where the forest stops and the plains begin. It is as if the Sherdukpens came to a stop on the very edge of Brahmaputra territory. However, from there it was possible to visit the next Boro or Assamese village, a one- or two-day walk away. A continuous fringe of lowland villages was therefore within reach of the Sherdukpens' winter camp. This territory, located between the River Dhansiri and the River Goburu, became something of a

kingdom in its own right and where Tukpen people still own land today.

Indeed, the people of Rupa, especially the Thongs, have maintained close ties for many years with some families who, having settled on their land, gave them several bags of rice every year as payment for their rent. The Sherdukpens like to say of these families whom they call their *bohita*: 'They treat us like kings. Whatever we want, we get'; 'They bow before us and we bless them'. Or else, 'on our arrival they wash our feet and then they throw the water on their fields to make them more fertile.'

As the PDS (*Public Distribution System*)<sup>1</sup> expanded to encompass the entire district (Arunachal Pradesh) on which the Sherdukpens depend administratively, it was no longer necessary to travel to Assam. Nevertheless, the Sherdukpens have maintained links with the people from the plains, and every winter, about a dozen men called Tonnyūpos, 'men (*po*) who go to the Assam plains (*nyū*) during the winter (*ton*)', go down to fetch the areca nuts that are essential for the Khiksaba festival celebrations.

For about twenty years after the launching of the *Timber operation*, followed in 1975 by the opening of a sawmill, and then by the construction of the new

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<sup>1</sup>The *Public Distribution System* refers to a network of retail outlets through which the government sells subsidized rice, wheat and kerosene at fixed prices lower than those of the market. The sale of goods is liable to certain conditions: first, the buyer must possess a ration card; second, purchases are subject to a quota.

Srahor/Doimara settlement, the Sherdukpens who lived closer to the Plains were in charge of collecting these nuts. And they did indeed work hard at it. Moreover, thanks to the transportation of wood, the new roads linking the settlement to the main road were well maintained and saw a lot of traffic; many truck drivers journeying along this road were willing to take a traveller a short distance. In 1996, the situation changed drastically after the Supreme Court of India decided to ban the cutting of any wood in order to protect the forests that had been ravaged by the *Timber Operation*; as a consequence, the sawmill was forced to close. It became difficult for Sherdukpens from Srahor/Doimara to find transportation. Besides, they were fewer, as most of those who had gone there had moved back to their native villages up in the hills. That was the reason why, on behalf of its people, the Doimara Gaonbura\* (or Village head) asked for a rota system to be set up between all the villages and hamlets of Tukpen Village Council (TVC). The proposal was ratified in 2001. Since then, every village or group of villages has taken its turn to send Tonnyūpos down to the Valley.

## *2. Winter Envoys*

In this month of December, 2011, the men going to the plain come from Brokpublang and Thungri. Next year, they will come from Jigaon and Mushakshing; in 2013 from Rupa and Jungpam (alias Birpur) on the banks of River Tenga; in 2014 from the new settlement in Doimara; and in 2015, from Chilipam and Lungbaktang.

There are four other Sherdukpen villages, Gorbao, Diksi, Mingmachur and Mukuthing, grouped together under the name *Kho dok khruk*, 'Head of the Great River', because they are situated on the right bank of the Ziding Kho,<sup>2</sup> close to where it meets the Doblo Kho (Fig. 2). These four innermost hamlets have an altogether different purpose. Just like every year, they have to go to Mandala Puthung to fetch the eight sheep that, along with a yak every three years, constitutes the grazing tax levied by the TVC in return for the right to put their cattle out to graze on land recognised as Sherdukpen land.

The day the Tonnyūpos have to leave is chosen, like any other important date, by the community lama, a tantric priest from Dirang, known for his skills in carrying out astrological computations. Local Khikzizi priests bless the men about to leave for the plains and give them white protective woollen threads that they tie around their necks and wrists. They purify the village of Rupa by burning incense and by sprinkling maize wine everywhere, then they symbolically close it by walking around it to protect it from any defilement and to encourage the deities to go and celebrate there. Henceforth and until the drum roll announces the opening of the Khiksaba festival on the night the full moon and the Seven Sisters meet, it is forbidden to fish, to hunt, to beat a drum or to light a fire inside this symbolic enclosure. Likewise, women have to give birth on the other side of the River Dinik, in Manthing, a locality that has now developed but which was still surrounded by jungle only fifteen years ago. In addition,

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<sup>2</sup> *kho* means 'water, stream, river' in the Sherdukpen language.

if someone dies, their body must be burnt outside the village.

This year, thirteen men were sent down to the plains. They left in a truck from Thungri village on 29<sup>th</sup> November. They stopped at Srahor, ‘the place (*hor*) of the wild goats (*sra*)’, to gather in the jungle the large, tough leaves that look a little like banana leaves, in which food is usually wrapped. These are used to envelop the large red chilli peppers that are given with Sichuan pepper in Assam villages.

During this stop, they also took the opportunity to fish in the River Bisiri that flows a few hundreds metres below. They caught about fifty kilos of fish that they left to dry on bamboo baskets above fires. This fish was all for them.

When they reached the plain, the thirteen men were divided into two teams according to their affinities and to their liking for wine. Indeed, in the western villages inhabited mostly by Boros (Kacharis in Assamese), rice wine is served from the morning onwards and you have to be able to hold it! In the eastern villages where more Assamese people live, tea is the usual beverage. It is served with curious sweet rice pancakes, flavoured with coconut, a local specialty called *pita*\*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There are also Adivasis —a word used here to refer to people from Orissa or Jharkhand, who in the past were displaced by the British to work in tea gardens.



Each team nevertheless has to include an elder who knows the paths, the villages and their inhabitants.

Six men make up the first team: Tsering Norbu Thongdok, Dorje Khandu Sinchaji, Rinchen Norbu Megēji, Karma Jacho Khrime, Pema Dorje Megēji and Tsering Dorje Megēji. The team covers four villages that are very close to each other: Kachari Gogra, Hundi Gogra, Panbari 1 and Panbari 2 or Hundi Panbari. They start their round in Gogra, a village four kilometres away from Dekhijuli along the Hospital Rd, at Hathi's house (Fig. 4). Hathi is a sixty-year-old man, who got this nickname, meaning 'Elephant' in Hindi, when he was young because of his strength. He is known as the Gaonbura\* of Arunachal and has been chosen by Tukpen Village Council (Rupa Panchayat). The areca nuts are brought from the other houses to be stored in his house.

The second team is noticeably younger. It is made up of seven men: Leki Khandu Tongchi, Rinchen Dorje Khrime, Khandu Thongdok, Gombo Thongdok, Senge Dorje Megēji, Dorji Thongdok (the son of Tsering Norbu Thongdok from the first team) and Phuncho Wangja Khrime. Their field of action is much wider and they go to a larger number of villages: Jhargaon, the relay-village which to them is what Gogra is to the first team, Sopai Baligaon, three kilometres away from Jhargaon, Nereng Kati, Thungthung Mari, Maj Roumari (Phabrang Sibri in Sherdukpen), Laobari and Naharbari. After a day in Jhargaon, they stop at a house in Maj Roumari run by an old woman, Isor Koch, who is 72 years old. There, they have their own room where they can sleep and stock the bags of areca nuts that they have

collected, as well as the other presents they have received individually or as a group (Colour Plate I).

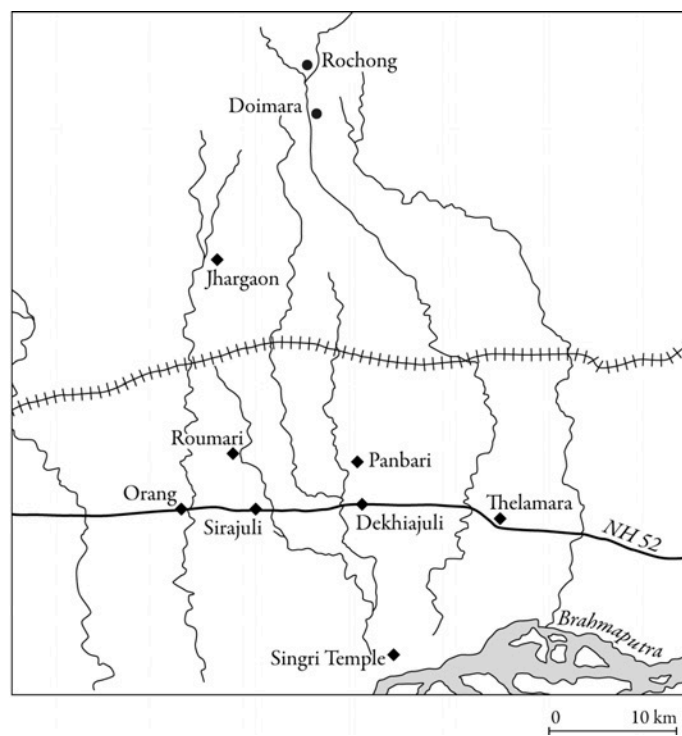


Fig. 4. Some of the places visited by Sherdukpens (marked by a black diamond). Rochong and Doimara are the old and new settlements in the foothills.

### 3. What you Give and What you Get

In Gogra, just as in Jhargaon, they are given lists of houses to visit. Depending on the year, the houses to be visited may vary considerably. Some families ask their village headman to add them to the list because they wish to make offerings to the Sherdukpen deities and thereby place themselves under their protection.

Before collecting anything, the Tonnyūpos offer up large red chilli peppers, known as *mong* in Sherdukpen, that are milder than bird's eye chillies and much appreciated by people in the plains, who do not cultivate them. It is worth noting that the active piquant chemicals that give these chilli peppers their intensity when ingested (i.e. capsaicin and capsaicinoids) are also a defence mechanism against microbial fungi. In fact, chillies develop these substances to inhibit harmful germs long enough to give birds and other animals time to scatter the pepper seeds, thereby helping to propagate chillies. Consequently, chillies are hotter in tropical areas where fungus enters the peppers through holes made by various insects.

With these chilli peppers, the Tonnyūpos offer a handful of 'Sichuan pepper' *sö* (*jabrang* in Assamese). Despite its English name, the latter is not related to black pepper or to red chilli peppers. It refers to the outer pod of the tiny fruit of a number of species of the *Zanthoxylum* genus (from the citrus family), a deciduous shrub which grows to a height of 1.8 metres, with a prickly bark, bright leaves and paired spines (Fig. 5). The fruit is harvested when it reaches maturity between September and October and is then left to dry. The dried fruits have an aromatic smell that can be

described as lemon-like. The taste, which comes from the outer shell of the brown fruit, not the seeds, is pungent and sharp. It may take some time to develop, but it eventually produces a strange numbing sensation on the tongue.



Enlarged view of berries (actual size: 3 to 5 mm)



Ripe fruits on a branch

Fig. 5. Sichuan Pepper

The same scenario takes place from one household to another: the Tonnyūpos are met by the mistress of the household who offers them tea (*dzo*) or rice wine (*phok*). She then brings an empty winnowing tray into which the Sherdukpens put several handfuls of red chilli peppers and a large handful of *sö*. In exchange, she returns with a bundle containing a branch full of areca nuts (*Areca catechu*). It is seemingly very important for this branch to be whole and intact, that is, the two 'horns' formed by the part attached to the trunk of the areca palm tree are an integral part of it. A branch without any 'horns' or where a 'horn' is broken is a bad omen (Colour Plate II).

*Areca catechu* or areca nut palm is a species of palm tree, which grows straight, up to a height of 20 metres, with a trunk 10 to 15 cm in diameter. This palm tree is often mistakenly called the 'betel tree' because its fruit, the areca nut, is chewed after it has been wrapped up inside a betel leaf, a glossy heart-shaped leaf from an evergreen, perennial creeper of the *Piperaceae* family.

In addition to the areca nuts and the betel leaves that come with them, a handful of newly husked rice, a small amount of money and a small bottle of oil for the butter lamps that are lit in front of the deities' images in the Buddhist temple in Rupa are given as well as, on occasion, special gifts for one particular clan chief or local priest. The names and addresses of both donors and beneficiaries are written on a piece of paper placed inside the bundle or on the white piece of fabric it is made of.

For example:

Village name: Nare [Nareng] Kati

Name: Konu Rabha

Father's Name: Mukura

To: Sang Khandu and Pema Jung Sombi

Sometimes a message is added that will be read in Rupa on the day the bags are opened and the areca nuts are distributed.

In addition to this standard bundle, some villagers give coconuts or bamboo cages that hold a couple of white doves marked with vermilion powder (*sindhur*\*) to honour the recipient. These additional gifts, like the unhusked rice they collect in large jute bags, are extras meant only for the Tonnyūpos. Only the areca nuts and the betel leaves are mandatory.

#### *4. Drama Theatre and Visit to Singri*

On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2011, a theatrical performance, *bhauna*\*, took place in Roumari in the open temple (*namghar*\*) that can be found in every village in Assam. This performance followed a long *puja*\*. It features Krishna as a child, then Krishna as an adult, Varuna, Shiva, Lakshmi, a few *rishis*\* and black howling devils, as well as kings proudly followed by their court, queens and ministers, warriors and messengers.

Due to this religious performance that celebrates the opening of the rice harvest and that lasts all night, there is no nut gathering that day. The Sherdukpens thus make the most of this free time to go to the little-known

temple of Gupteshwar Shiva in Singri, about 10 kilometres south of Dekhijuli (Fig. 4). According to an ancient yet apocryphal tradition, this Hindu temple is considered to be an ancient seat of Buddhism. The Sherdukpens know little of Hindu customs and this occasion is the first time for most of them to go to Singri. They invite several young girls from Roumari to join them (which they heartily accept) and, for their visit to the temple, they are accompanied by the youngest boys from the group, who explain which offerings they have to buy (a plateful of flowers, incense, oil, butter lamp and coconut), the path they have to follow and the gestures they have to perform, especially before the *pujari*\*.

After the devotions, the Sherdukpens treat their guests at the temple teashop to tea, canned juice, sodas, cookies and potato chips, then they organize dances under the trees. The truck that provides them with music is driven as close as possible to the makeshift dance floor where the girls from Roumari attempt to teach the Sherdukpen boys the rudiments of Assamese dances, and vice-versa. The dances are also part of 'the custom'.

The team that is hosted in Roumari attends the theatrical performance at night.

##### *5. Areca Nuts Arrival in Rupa*

On Tuesday, 6<sup>th</sup> December, after having gathered together 113 bags of areca nuts (55 come from eastern villages and 58 from western villages), the Sherdukpens get ready to return to Rupa by truck, but mechanical

problems force them to postpone their journey. The next day, as soon as they get to Rupa, the bags are stored in the single-storey building devoted to the Blu (Sherdukpen name for the Village Council) situated within the Buddhist monastery.

The monastery was built in 1974, more or less on the spot where the *dzong* (fortress) used to be, described by the many people who saw it as a forbidding, wooden-roofed, three-storey, stone building: on the first floor there used to be a (seldom occupied) jail; on the second floor, the temple;<sup>4</sup> and on the floor above, hay lofts which held enough food to feed the Rupa population for a few weeks in the event of an attack by the Akas and the Mijis (Colour Plate III). When this vast space was abandoned in the mid-1960s, as raids were no longer to be feared, children used it as a playground. Tsering Dorje Khrieme, who was seven or eight years old at the time and today is TVC secretary, remembers this fondly. His office is on the second floor of the new building.

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<sup>4</sup> According to local archives, the first Buddhist temple in Rupa was dedicated in 1742; the following workers, masons and carpenters contributed to building it: Rinchen Kandu Megēji, Nawang Dingla and Chewang Sinchaji after the initiative taken by Lama Norbu, Bikai, Phuntso, Dondrup, Karpo, Wangja, Chewang, Chepel and Sonam from the Khrieme and Thongdok clans.



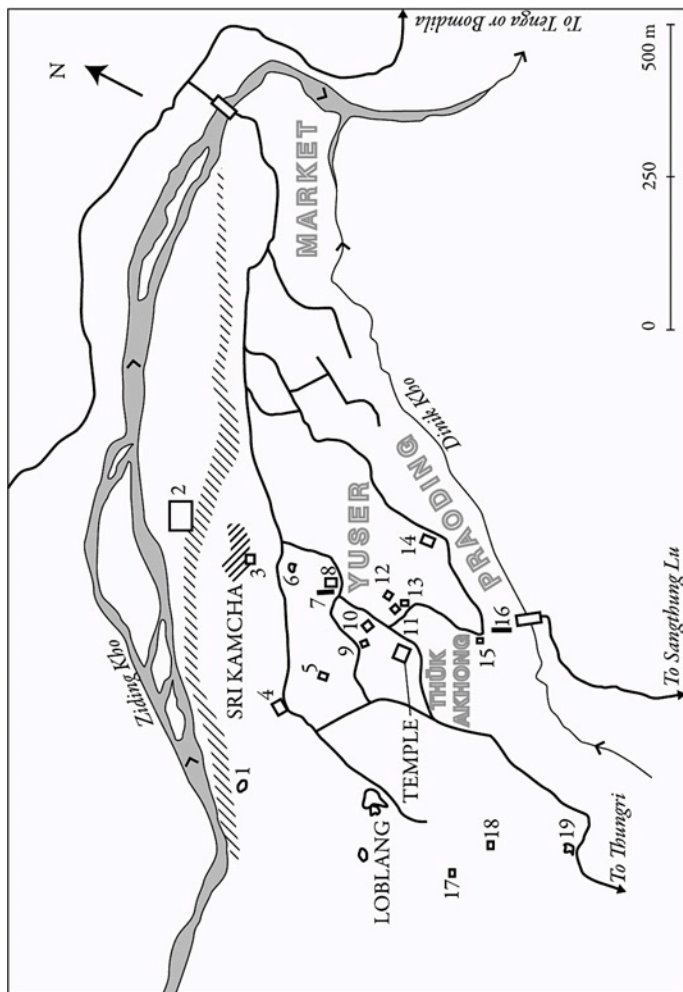


Fig. 6 : A sketch map of Rupa

1	Kho Hangho Noba's place	11	Khrime clan House
2	Guchu Hī, the Fish feast area	12	Thongdok Chung clan House
3	Sri Kamcha	13	Thongchi clan House
4	Abu Chilu clan House	14	Jogar Kamcha
5	Thongon clan House	15	Dingla clan House
6	Yang Sri Jom and the big juniper tree	16	Mane and bridge over the River Dinik
7	Mane Areng	17	Mokphēpos' fight area
8	Kakaling, the old village gate	18	Lorjangpos' prayer place in Jumu Sing
9	Thongdok clan House	19	Jumu Hangho Noba's place
10	Musobi clan House		



## CHAPTER 2

### *Festival Preparations*

#### *1. Collecting Taxes*

The count - during this *Kho Satpa* meeting - takes place in the grassy courtyard in front of the monastery (Colour Plate III). If they have not already done so, the *khomi* or tax payers (*kho* 'tax', *mi* 'person') give to the head of their section the 50 rupees needed for Khiksaba. The *khomi* from Jigaon are exempted, because they supply the firewood for the outdoor fires and for the kitchen. The *khomi* from TVC villages, i.e. Rupa, Thungri, Jigaon, Jungpam (Birpur), Gorbao, Diksi, Mingmachur, Mukuthing are divided by the Council into seven sections or *chkok*, generally listed in the following order: Thük *chkok*, 72 *khomi*; Yuser *chkok*, 70 *khomi*; Thongon *chkok*, 72 *khomi*; Thük Khong *chkok*, 70 *khomi*; Wangser *chkok*, 70 *khomi*; Ajilamu *chkok*, 72 *khomi*; Gompa *chkok*, 70 *khomi* (i.e. a total of 498 *khomi* when the previous assembly took place in 2008) (Fig. 6).

Each *chkok* is headed by a chief who is essentially responsible for collecting contributions in kind (wood, maize cobs or grain, lengths of fabric) or money owed by taxpayers to cover, among other things, the expenditure for religious celebrations. These include Khiksaba, which is held mid-winter, Chökor on the first days of summer, Wang in the autumn and Dzongklong in the late spring to pacify the storms that herald the monsoon.

This last ritual, however, in which a pig and fifty chickens were sacrificed, is no longer celebrated.

Nowadays, the head of every *chkok* holds a scrupulously maintained register in which he carefully records the contributions given by each and everyone, before he hands it over to the council treasurer. These accounts are a recent feature – ten years ago, nobody would have dreamt of such a thing: indeed, who would dare to cheat the deities by not paying their share?

The head of the *chkok* also has to record the name of the bad debtors and to report them to Council chiefs, who are appointed for life and co-opted. Today, there are two Council chiefs: Nawang Norbu Khriime who is 80 years old and Wangchu Thongdok who is 78 (Colour Plate IV). Another two, San Khandu Thongdok and Rinchen Dorje Thongon, who used to rank third and fourth, died a few months ago and have not yet been replaced. In Sherdukpen, these chiefs are called Thük Akhao, ‘village elders’, but since the introduction of the Panchayat system they are routinely called Gaonbura\* – a word that in Hindi also means ‘village elder’ and is used for village headmen, whatever their age.

To help the village headmen and above all to act as their spokesman, some Kachinpos or ‘messengers’ from each clan (*rung*) take turns in being appointed for a three-year period (Colour Plate V).

But let us go back to the monastery courtyard. There, Tsering Norbu, the oldest of the five priests or apprentices in Rupa has just arrived. Sitting close to the Gaonbura\* at a low table, he blows on the embers to

revive the juniper fumigation that is burning next to him and producing heavy smoke, then he declares the session open. He is not wearing the ceremonial horned hat but, in order to carry out the libations to the deities, he removes his regular hat, a felt hat made of black yak hide which has five felt 'tabs' or 'fingers' on its lower part and is adorned with a colourful plait. On the right side is a 'fluffy' pompom made out of white yak hair, and on its left a sort of bouquet of very colourful woollen flowers.

Tsering Norbu chants a few prayers in a barely audible voice then begins a discussion with Nawang Norbu Khrime, the first Gaonbura\*, who has been holding this position for decades. The council treasurer acts as their spokesman.

## 2. *Distributing Tasks*

When the discussion is over, the council treasurer stands up, and in a clear, firm voice, reminds the assistance of the tasks that befall each *chkok* and the men who have to perform them. These tasks consist mainly in cleaning the places where the dances and the ceremonies are to be held, as well as the paths that lead to them.

Thus, *Thük chkok* is in charge of cleaning the *Loblang* area and the surrounding area, and of collecting the pine needles that cover the ground where the members of the Khikspus will stand and where the dances are to take place.

*Yuser chkok* is in charge of cleaning an important spot near the banks of the River Dinik, close to the

suspension bridge. Others are assigned to the stadium where the Fish Feast will be held on the evening of the first day of Khiksaba.

The men in charge of supplying the vegetables, fruit, flour and meat required for the offerings to the deities and for the collective meals—maize flour, nuts (*mukhu*), sweet potatoes (*ingti*), bananas and a sort of latex harvested by slitting the bark of indigenous trees—are chosen too. In the past, these foods were provided by the Buguns from the neighbouring villages of Sengchung and Wangho, but since their quarrel with the people from Rupa, the latter now has to buy these products at the bazaar. According to the Circular TVC, dated on 26.12.2011,

‘Marketing committee: Sri Nima Tongchi, Shri R. N. Musobi, Shri R. D. Wangja and Shri Prem Dorje Thongdok. They will collect traditional food [items like jumu, gachen, dachak...]

Finally, the 15 men in charge of supplying meat and most importantly fish for Sunday's feast, on 11<sup>th</sup> December, are selected.

‘They are to move on 5<sup>th</sup> December. Transport, Fooding and Accommodation shall be arranged by TVC.’

After the council treasurer's speech, Tsering Dorje Khriime, son of the first Gaonbura\* and TVC secretary, and his assistant Netan Dorje Thongon from Jigaon, both briefly take the floor. They ask everyone to try their best to make the Khiksaba celebrations a success.

The assembly ends with a distribution of brooms to the teams in charge of cleaning the strategic places for the celebration. These teams are not overly enthusiastic and have their own conception of what is ‘clean’

### 3. *Beating the Drum*

This night—after an unexpected lunar eclipse<sup>5</sup> that did not seem to worry anyone—the moon met the Seven Sisters called *karma min du* (stars-sisters-seven) here, a Tibetan idiom which has no relation to the Sherdukpen word for star: *zük*. This ‘confluence’ marks the beginning of the festival.

All the priests are gathered in Sri Kamcha, a grassy esplanade where some of the few *sri* or sacred stones of the village can be seen. One is linked to the name and to the memory of Ayo Lule, the greatest Sherdukpen priestess of all times. She was a *raoma*, a priestess of considerable power, who had many followers.

Sri Kamcha is the Khikzizis' headquarters and a key place during the Khiksaba festival. It sits atop a hill, in a defensive position, and it is said to be the place where the village's first fortress, *Lome Khar*, was built, surrounded by the first stone houses, one for each clan. The Thongdok clan's motherhouse was abandoned and demolished some time after the 1960s, following the death of Thongdok Mu (‘the Mother of the Thongdok’, i.e., seemingly the oldest member of the clan's eldest branch), a woman with a strong personality who still

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<sup>5</sup>*Namblu mok chuba* (moon-war-eat): lunar eclipse.



lived in the house at the time. She died in 1965, at the ripe old age of 97 or 98. Today, only ruins are to be seen, which are not easy to date, and that look more like low walls surrounding a field than foundation walls. Indeed, many changes have been made. To build a water tank the soil has been moved away and in order to grow tomatoes, adjacent parcels have been levelled. Some years ago, when the small building that houses the priests during Khiksaba was restored and when the passage that leads to the esplanade was made, a skeleton was found under the main slab and was immediately returned to its place.

With its pagoda roof made of corrugated iron and painted yellow, the small building in which the Khikzizis wait for the moon and the Seven Sisters to meet looks like a temple (Fig. 8). On the second floor that is reached via an outside stone staircase are two small adjoining rooms. In the first room there are tall iron tripods used for cooking; the second room contains mattresses, rugs and covers. For the duration of the celebration, this is where the five Khikzizis and their young assistants, Changmepos, sleep. They are all there, waiting. Only the two oldest priests, Tsering Norbu Dingla and Tsering Megēji, who is a few years younger than the former, wear the traditional headpiece with two horns, called *keng* (horn), made of *gamosa*\* (pieces of white fabric with red patterns, that can be seen everywhere in Assam) spread over a finely woven bamboo frame. The other three, who all belong to the Megēji clan, are bareheaded or wear a skull cap. To the left of Tsering Megēji sits Rinchin Norbu, who is 42 years old; he knows these practices well and actually seems to be the team's

kingpin. Next, in order of age, come two Khikzizi trainees, the youngest being about 12 years old.



7. Durio, the drum player, wearing his special cap

That same evening, a Kachinpo went to fetch the drum (*tsing*) from the Thongdok Khikspu where it is kept. The same drum is used every year. It is blessed with a libation of maize beer, using a juniper tree branch as a sprinkler. The official drum player is there too, bearing the name of his charge, Durio, a word borrowed from Assamese meaning 'the one who bangs the drum'. He wears a leather skull cap covered in one of the pieces of white fabric in which the 'brothers from the plains' have wrapped the areca nuts (Fig. 7).

People whisper that he is not really a Sherdukpen. Maybe for this reason, or maybe because it is his nature to be diffident, the man does not say much. Throughout the Khiksaba festival, he stays silent and withdrawn.

The priests sing, sometimes interrupting their chant to drink beer. They keep a careful eye on the time: it is precisely ten o'clock when the drum roll announces the opening of Khiksaba. On the esplanade (fig. 8), around fifteen young men start dancing to the drum beat: *Han, nyik, ung, Khitmo ho ho!* One, two, three, prosperity! (the numbers are often said in English: *One, two, three, Khitmo ho ho!*). This dance and its song are repeated several times during the festival, by some of these young men who will by then be wearing their costume and playing their part as Mokphēpos.



Fig. 8. Sri Kamcha,  
the building and esplanade.

## CHAPTER 3

### *The First Day of Khiksaba*

#### *1. Distributing the Areca Nuts*

Around 11 a.m., fifteen men, including several Kachinpos, come to fetch some of the 113 bags of areca nuts (*thok*) that are stored in a room within the temple walls, carefully lined up in rows of seven (Colour Plate VI). After the Khikzisis have blessed these bags, the parcels are taken away, each man carrying three or four of them, wrapped in the white shawls (*alung*) that are also used to carry the sacred scriptures during Chökor, the Buddhist ritual circumambulation of the fields to cleanse both landscape and its inhabitants. Today, these loads are taken to a field further down, in the Yuser area. The men walk in single file and have to make several journeys.

The field that has been cleared of its tomato seedlings is located close to the remains of the stone house (*dedza yam*) that had been built by Yeshe Dorje Thongdok's ancestors. Those in attendance sit in four rows, creating a square, whose centre is occupied by the white bags that are brought there and laid alongside each other. The areca branches can be seen peeking out of the bags, like horns. Each of the men sits where he is supposed to, according to his role, his clan and his age. At their head sits Sang Tsering Musobi, 89 years old, the Bako Asu or 'the wise man' of the community. To his left, sit the two Gaonbura\* then other important

members. To his right is another side to the square: first the lama Yeshe, a Nyingmapa priest who is from Dirang and lives with his wife and children within the Buddhist temple (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Lama Yeshe,  
a Nyingmapa priest from Dirang

Next to him are the heads of the Houses (or Khikspus) of the six upper clans. First comes the head of Thongdok Akhao, then the head of Thongchi, of Thongon, of Musobi, of Thongdok Chung and of Khcrime.

After the head of the Khcrime clan, starts another side of the square and this new row faces the Gaonbura\*. First sit the local Khikzizi priests: the eldest, Tsering Norbu Dingla, then Tsering 1 and Tsering 2

Megēji who are also called *Achung* ‘younger’ and *Atsan* ‘youngest’, followed by Nima Dondu Mejiji. At the end of the row, the three from lower clans, the Chaos, are sitting; the Khikzizis also belong to the Chao clans, since they are all either Dingla or Megēji. Finally, on the fourth side and facing the upper Khikspu clans sit the important members of the Council along with the Tonnyūpos. (Fig. 10)

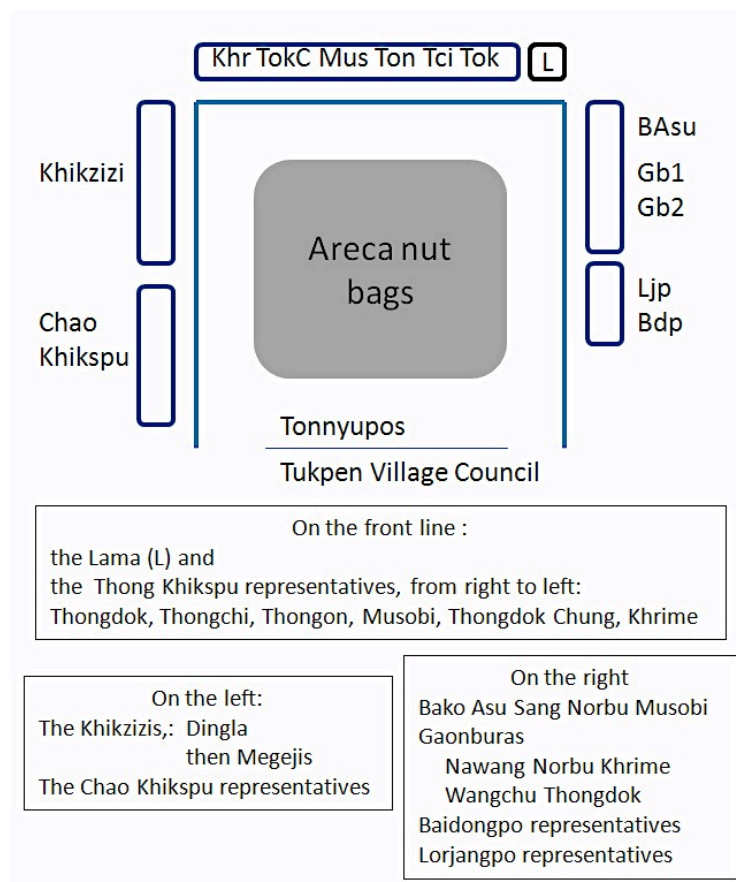


Fig. 10. Sketch of the Areca Nut Meeting

There are no women, either among those sitting in the square or in the audience. Sherdukpen people readily admit that women play a very minor part in the Khiksaba ceremony. They are in charge of preparing the food and only come to the public stage to pour drinks or to bring offerings.

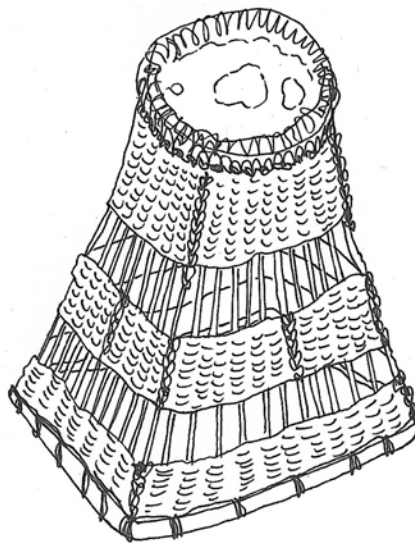


Fig. 11. A bamboo plaited vessel used for alcohol libation

The Khikzizis bless the areca nuts, chant prayers and perform libations with maize alcohol (Fig. 11). Then the eldest of the Tonnyūpos stands up and recounts their expedition to the plain and the difficulties they encountered. This narrative is performed in a rather formal way. The aim appears to be to state that everything was 'as it should', leaving no time for details.

The bags can at last be distributed. The first bag is given to the lama. Then each Khikspu, who represents

his clan in terms of its responsibilities, its duties and its privileges, receives a bag. The order in which the bags are given is the same as the order in which the Khikspu men sit. It remains consistent throughout the ceremony. It is the same for the Chao clans: Dingla, Megēji, and then Abu Chilu (this last category encompasses all Chao clans except for the first two which are also the priests' clans). Then it is the turn of the Lorjangpo and Baidongpo representatives, two troupes of singers, each of them with his own set of ritual songs. A last bag of areca nuts, the only package to be wrapped in a piece of red fabric, is finally allotted to the Buddhist temple.

The remaining bags are then opened. The messages they hold, written in Assamese, in Hindi or in English, are brought to the Thongdok clan's representative, and the associated money, a symbolic sum of 5 to 10 rupees each, is given to the temple or to the Council, depending on what the lama says. The lama also receives a few handfuls of newly husked rice, a few sticks of incense, and some little bottles of oil, used to fuel the ritual lamps that are lit on the altar devoted to the Buddhist deities.

The remaining nuts are torn from the branches and piled in a heap, then they are distributed among the attendance, using hats as a measuring unit. Children play with the fruitless branches, wearing them on their head like antlers.

Once the nuts have been distributed—to tell the truth, not all the bags have been brought here—the Thongdok representative lists the names of the donors and concludes by announcing the sum that has been collected: 91.50 rupees. Small branches from



Himalayan black juniper, whose aromatic needle-leaves are used as incense *posi*, are then distributed. Only then and in complete silence does the first Khikzizi begin a chant that ends in a prayer and a last libation with which the ceremony comes to a close. Along with the three apprentice priest, he sings for prosperity for the year to come: *Khitmo ho ho! Khitmo ho ho!* – a prayer in which the Khikspus join him, followed by all the men present, who are bare-headed out of respect for the mountain deities to whom they address their chant, especially the God Sung Khit.

As they did after the drum roll the previous day, the young men start dancing: ‘One two three, *Krio!*’ throwing their arms up in the air when they shout *Krio!* a cry for courage and success, and spin around.

## 2. Preparations at the Clans' Houses

In the afternoon, the Khikspus busy themselves in the houses that serve as a symbolic home for the clan. These Khikspu Houses are the places where they have to host and feed the groups who come there one after another during the days of the festival: the priests and their assistants, the Lorjangpos and the Mokphêpo warriors, the Baidongpos and the children who accompany them, etc.

The Khikspu houses are all situated in the old quarters of Rupa (Yuser, Thük Khong, Thük Bao) that, even when taken together, cover a very small area (Fig. 6).

Let us bear in mind, by the way, that all the elderly persons in town admit that Rupa was a much smaller place during their childhood. Although few houses were still inhabited in Sri Kamcha, only the area of Thük Khong, 'the old village' and some surrounding land were occupied, precisely where Khikspu houses now stand. Loblang acted as a village limit, and the present-day bazaar leading to the new bridge did not exist, which is made clear by the old village gate. Whole sections of modern Rupa, such as Praoding, were simply fields or wasteland. This is also obvious from the few photographs of Rupa dating from the 1960s that we have collected: it looked very much like present-day Thungri with traditional wooden houses scattered over fields. It started to grow at a formidable rate in the early 1980s owing to its relative prosperity thanks to the timber trade.

Khikspu Houses are traditional Sherdukpen houses, all built on the same pattern: a stone basement where farm animals can be kept, including pigs; one part made out of wooden planks intricately put together – 'no nails,' as Sherdukpen people like to say with pride –, where the household lives (it can be accessed by an outside staircase that leads to a platform onto which the main door opens); and above it, under the shingle- or bamboo-roof, is a *zo* attic made of bamboo mats, where goods are kept, which can be accessed by a notched wooden beam-like ladder (Colour Plate VII). Some of these houses are inhabited all year round, such as the Thongdok Akhao house (oldest branch of the Thongdok or 'Great Thong'), a clan that is often described as the original clan, the Musobi house and the Khrime house. Other houses, on the other hand, are only

open during Khiksaba. This is the case of the Thongchi house, an old building that has recently been restored, which is run by two brothers who live in the large village of Thungri, a few kilometres from Rupa, or of the Thongon house where four families take turn to live there during the festival, year after year, or of the Thongdok Chung house that belongs to the younger branch of the Thongdok clan and is run alternately by two families.

Ceremonial, so-called 'traditional' foods are prepared. They include vegetables, pieces of meat or slices of fried spiced fish (*kaji*), small pyramids made out of a wheat flour dough and steamed (*sorjong*), and fermented maize or rice beer (*phok*), that can also be distilled to obtain a stronger alcohol called *photko*. This drink is indispensable for the celebrations and is considered typically Sherdukpen. People smile about it, and make fun of those who drink too much, but they also hold the drink in admiration and praise its qualities. Stories are told about it, in particular the main episode in the story about Sambruk's horse, which we will tell later on.

The complicated Mokphē warrior outfit that every Thong Khikspu (therefore every Thong clan) has to provide is also prepared (Colour Plate VIII). The six Mokphēpos have to leave in the middle of the night to fetch tall bamboos from far away in the mountains and to bring them to the village.

Hence the Mokphē's shield, or *khuk*, has to be repaired or cleaned. It is made out of wild goat skin, stretched over a bamboo frame, and decorated with brightly coloured papers and pieces of cotton (white,

red, yellow, blue, and sometimes green). The *dzong* spear, which is another of the warrior's cumbersome attributes, has to be adorned with a flag. The black yak felt hat or *chitpo guthung* worn only by men in Sherdukpen country, while in Monpa country women also wear it, has to be made into a warrior's hat by decorating it with cowries, balls of felt, pompoms, feathers, ribbons, etc. (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. *Chitpo guthung* hat decorated for the warriors

And finally, each house makes offerings from flour dough that they shape and paint, and present in a silver repoussé cup decorated with the twelve animals of the Zodiac. In the centre, a long-life vase is topped with a moon, a sun and a diamond-shaped flame. And all around it are four or five animals made out of flour dough: farm animals, sheep or cows of which they wish

to see more, or wild and feared animals, such as elephants, snakes, tigers or crocodiles that they want to be protected from (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Offering to the Gods

### *3. The Fish Feast*

6 pm. Night fell more than an hour ago at the place called Guchu Hi, now part of the Gyaptong Stadium built below Sri Kamcha on the right bank of the Ziding Kho, close to the military ground. An impressive

quantity of fish is being cooked that was fished over the last few days outside the traditional village limits to avoid transgressing the taboo.

Fish is a festive meal *par excellence*. When grilled, it is offered as a welcome snack to guests with a cup of maize alcohol or less often with black tea (called 'red tea' in Assam and in the surrounding area) or salted tea. Fish is part of every holiday meal and feast. It is also given to the local deities, namely to the God Sung Khit/Sung Khik who is particularly celebrated during Khiksaba.

It is said that in the olden days, the two rivers that encircle Rupa before joining up were full of fish both big and small. Nowadays, the *nyūlan*, large fish that can weigh up to four kilos have disappeared from the River Dinik, where only little fish for frying can be found.

In fact, Tsering Thongdok recounts that a long time ago an excellent fisherman lived there, but he was tight-fisted. He went fishing everyday and brought back large amounts of fish that he put away to dry, and which he would count over and over again. One day, he saw that some fish were missing. He told his wife about it. She said she had eaten some in order to be able to breastfeed their newborn child. The next day, more fish were missing, and again the next day. Every time he asked her, his wife said that she was eating the fish to feed their child. The fisherman grew more furious each day. One day when a large *nyūlan* was missing, and the woman gave him the same answer as always, he answered angrily: 'You are lying, you are eating the fish yourself' and with his knife he slit his wife's chest open to check his assertions. Fish bones poured forth from her open breasts, thus proving that the baby had indeed eaten the

rest. Realizing his mistake, the wretched man lamented over his wife's dead body. Then he went to the river, grabbed a large stone and threw it into the water pronouncing the curse: 'May this river be empty of *nyūlan* forever!' Since then, so the narrator concludes, no *nyūlan* is to be found in the Dinik Kho, only the smallest of fish.

The impressive concrete shell of the Indoor Stadium that was built for 'officers' posted in Rupa and who might get bored, has been waiting since 2002 to be completed; funding is still insufficient. Nearby, fires have been lit. Over one of them, fish livers are fried in oil; over another one, litres of a very spicy Sichuan pepper soup are boiling. Not far from there, on the low wall surrounding the stadium, slices of fried fish are arranged in neat rows in large round woven bamboo baskets, waiting to be distributed.

Guests come and gather around one of the fourteen fires (*brop*: 'fire, hearth') that are lit outside on the football playground and near which they sit on heaps of straw brought there for the occasion.

One of the fires is reserved exclusively for the Khikzizis, another for the Gaonbura\* and for the pre-eminent and elder members of the Blu, the council; another fire, slightly to one side, is reserved for Chao people. Around the other fires, friends of the same age sit together. They drink the local alcohol, *phok* and mostly *photko*, as well as industrially made beers and whisky. Each person comes with their own bottle, their own bowl often made out of silver to drink from, a wooden box that, when opened, forms two soup bowls, and cooked white rice kept in a round tiffin carrier

made of colourful straw in which they carry dried food and, when separated into two even parts, forms two plates – the kind of woven bamboo plaited vessels to be found in the villages of But and Khoina north-east of Rupa.

Soup and fish are served to everyone to be eaten with the white rice each person brings along and a small part of which, *zin spinba*, is given to guests from Assam or from the Bugun villages of Sengchung and Wangho. There are few guests: nine people from Assam and only two from the Bugun side, both from Wangho village, one Gaonbura\* and an old man who sits apart, Leki Sitam.

A little later that night, the old priest joins the group of village headmen, the eldest men and the House Lords. He sings for the deities. Once this prayer is over, Rinchin Norbu, a Khikzizi and main financial manager of the festival, speaks and gives his last recommendations for it to be a success. Then the men all take off their hats to pray to the deities that nothing will jeopardise the proceedings.

*Khitmo ho ho! Khitmo ho ho! Khitmo ho ho!* ‘Let there be no trouble, no obstacle’. Sung three times, each time to a different melody, then again three times, it goes from the group of Khikzizis, grows louder as it gets to the group of headmen, then intensifies as it passes from one fire to the next, to be sung in the end by the whole assembly at night, before it fades away.



#### *4. From the Sacred Place to the Clan Houses*

It is time to choose the *bropro* dancers who will go from house to house to fetch the six Mokphêpo warriors from the upper clans, who will go at night in search of the great sacred bamboos.

Everyone gets up and, despite the call for silence, it is not quite respected. They reach the road a little further up. When almost at the top, at a specific point along the path, the *bropro* are chosen. They are identified by wrapping a white ceremonial scarf, *khata*, around their necks. Some of them try to escape this fate, to avoid spending a sleepless night singing and dancing from one Khikspu to another. Leaving the main path, the selected dancers walk up a narrow trail to a boulder where a Kachinpo, 'messenger, spokesman,' stands. On his shout, which announces the Khikspus or House Lords' imminent return home, the procession moves off again, this time chanting *Khitmo ho ho!* loudly up the steps that lead through small tomato plants to Sri Kamcha by the north.

In Sri Kamcha, a few women welcome them with alcohol. A few of the dancers, already half-drunk, compete to drink their bowlful down in one go. 'It is completely stupid, they admit with a laugh, but this is a part of our culture, and besides it's cold here!'

The dancers dance in line, tapping the ground with their heel then dancing on the same foot. They chant, as always, even when the drum beats the rhythm. After a few dances here, they set out to the Thongdok house to fetch the first warrior, the one to lead the others. Once they are near the house, a special chanted dance, performed on the raised wooden platform in front of

the door to the house, allows them to step over the threshold and to enter the house slowly and in single file through the small square door.

Sherdukpen houses, i.e. old houses, are all built to the same pattern as we have already said. On the upper wooden floor, one large room is usually organised around two open fires, one near the entrance and another at the far end. The space by the side of the hearth is used for preparing, cooking and eating meals, but also as a meeting room and a room for resting. The family members sleep on bamboo mats spread on the wooden floor or on beds standing against the walls. Just under the roof, which is accessible by a notched beam-ladder, stores of flour, rice, maize and kidney beans are kept out of the way of rodents in large bamboo plaited baskets the bottoms of which are coated in clay. Pieces of meat and fish, often smoked, hang from strings to dry.

In the Thongdok House sit the master and mistress of the house, both of whom are elderly. They have five sons, but the 'warrior' who will go to the mountains tonight to cut the bamboo is not among them: he is a nephew from the same lineage.

To be a Mokphēpo, a 'warrior' (*mok* means 'fight, war'), you must necessarily be single. This duty lasts three years and can only be undertaken by members of Thong upper clans.

Before he leaves, the Mokphēpo has to wash with water in which purifying and cleansing juniper has steeped. He then dons the *sabe*, which is presented as Sherdukpen men's traditional costume: a white, untailed, knee-length garment, which is closed at the

neck by a hook fixed to a silver braided chain and at the waist by a large woven belt with flower and bird patterns on a pinkish red background. But he does not wear the warrior hat.

This year, Khandu, a student at a prestigious business school in Delhi, will be Mokphēpo for the first time. He knows that it will be a long, tough ordeal to walk at night, with no path to follow, through dense vegetation, up to a bamboo clearing, over two high passes, to go back down without having slept, carrying round his waist several 3- to 4-metre long bamboo sticks fixed to a harness-like contraption, and to dance day and night for two or three days ...

For the time being, Khandu savours the last moments he can be sitting down! The lady of the house places round his neck and his wrists protective white threads that she carefully ties, then she purifies his hat over juniper fumigation. Every precaution must be taken before he enters the realm of the deities, up there on Sangthung mountain.

Later at night, when the time has come to wish him a safe journey and to give him a knife and braided bamboo rope to carry heavy loads, the woman they call Khikspu Umu, 'Khikspu mother', rubs soot onto his forehead to protect him from evil spirits and from envious eyes, which is often done to young children.

Now it is time for a last dance and for the procession to make its way to the second house to be visited, the Thongchi house. In this way the dancers go from house to house to fetch the six Mokphēpos.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Warriors' Journey*

#### *1. Warriors on the Track*

A few hours have passed and it is after 1 a.m. when the Mokphēpo troupe goes to Sri Kamcha where the Khikzizis are waiting to give them their last instructions and tell them when they should set off – a time chosen by the lama to ensure a good trip. Each of the Mokphēpos carries a *dao* machete, a *thang* rope for carrying loads and a *jhola* bag containing food. As they sing to gather courage and to keep any difficulties at bay, they go down to the bridge, over the Dinik Kho and undertake the ascent. The path is marked only at the beginning, and a five-hour walk lies ahead of them. Fortunately, two of them are walking for the third (and last) time this year and they are in a position to lead those who are less experienced ... and those who are totally inexperienced.

During the first part of the climb, while the Mokphēpos climb up the slope that looks out over Rupa, they are cheered by the shouts of Changmepos, young boys who assist the Khikzizis during Khiksaba. In reply to these shouts coming from Sri Kamcha, the Mokphēpos reply until they their voices are drowned out by the night.

In spite of the dark, the Mokphēpos arrive without too much trouble at the sacred clearing, which is planted with bamboo, where the Thongdok warrior cuts the first bamboo, the one that has to be the longest of them

all. It takes the six of them another two hours to cut the bamboo according to the rules, to make harnesses (*ma khuk*) from young leafy branches braided into thick ropes to allow them to pull a large number of bamboo sticks behind them in one go. The descent, Khandu says, was fast: two hours to get to Machu Hī, 'Bamboo Plain', the place for the meeting with the Batpo people, an outcrop 1.800 metres high where there is hardly any bamboo but where a small isolated farm has been built.

## 2. *The Warrior's Narrative*

But let Khandu tell us in detail about his experience as a Mokphēpo:

Ever since my childhood, one thing that fascinated me about Khiksaba, our festival, was the Mokphēpos (warriors). Whenever I took part in the festival as a Batpo at Machu Hī hill, I would loiter around the Mokphēpos, asking them many questions. They wouldn't speak a word, the reason behind it I know now. Of course, it had been my dream since childhood that one day I would take part in the festival as a Mokphēpo, for the dress was so beautiful and the *chitpo guthung* (hat), appealing.

My dream came true last December i.e. December 2011. Call it luck, coincidence or God's grace, my vacations this time clashed with the festival. So without wasting any time I informed my parents back home that I would take part in the festival as a Mokphēpo. Lucky enough there was a vacancy, for the last

Thongdok Mokphē had completed his three years of service as a Mokphēpo.

*Preparation*

On the first day of the festival, we the six Mokphēpos were asked to report to our respective Khikspu (ancestral homes) by nightfall. The Khikzizis (local priests) after performing some rituals had fixed our time to leave for the mountains at 1:30 am the following morning. So in the evening I went to my Khikspu (Thongdok Khikspu). After a *posi kbo* (cleansing and purifying water) both the Khikspu Umu (mother) and her son in law helped me get dressed in traditional Mokphēpo attire. It was beautiful. I was neither supposed to think nor speak of anything wicked, for I had been purified now. I was not allowed to wear the *chitpo guthung* (Mokphēpo hat) yet. That would be given to me just before I left for the mountains. It is believed that the *Lo* (Gods) actually lay in the *chitpo guthung*. The Khikspu Umu told me that the *jhola* (bag) containing all the necessary items I was supposed to carry with me to the mountains would be kept next to the door and that I would have to collect them on my way back from the Kamcha before I left for the mountains later into the night. Also, I was asked not to utter a single word. I am sure all the other Mokphēpos were going through similar directions and formalities.

Soon, the men of the town entered my Khikspu singing songs and dancing, holding each other's hand (*bro chaoba*). This has been the tradition

since the time of our ancestors of seeing off Mokphēpos, for they were leaving for the land of our Spirit Gods. Also I forgot to mention we were going to the mountains to get bamboos. These would be offered to our Spirit Gods at Sri Kamcha. The Khikspu Umu tied a white holy thread round my neck and also round my wrist. Good wishes followed. I was given the beautiful *chitpo guthung*. I put it on with pride. Not everyone gets an opportunity to wear it. The men walked me out. Thongchi Mokphēpo followed, Thongon, Musobi, Thongdok Chung and then Khrime. We were six of us: Bhaiti, Chotu, Sange, Tenzin, Nyapa and myself.

We were supposed to report at Sri Kamcha by 1:00 am. Since we had some time left in hand we went to Thongdok Chung Khikspu, which is the resting place of all the Mokphēpos. My mates gulped in some local wine. Tenzin and myself were the new Mokphēpos while the other four had taken part the previous year. We reached Sri Kamcha and were seated at our respective place barefoot. Not to forget, it was winter, it was cold. The senior Khikzizi briefed us on what we should do as we walked up the mountains. Although I wasn't quite able to understand what he was saying as he was saying it quite softly, I nodded. My mates helped me later with the briefings. The Khikzisis performed some rituals and wished us luck. We left Sri Kamcha shouting *Khitmo ho ho* (Let there be comfort) ... as we walked. The Changmepo group responded shouting *Khitmo*

*ho ho*. They were supposed to do this till our voices could be heard as we walked up the mountains. The phrase *Khitmo ho ho* was for our own protection, and for us crossing the river safely with the bamboos the following evening. We left for our respective Khikspu to get our bags. After collecting them we walked down towards the river shouting *Khitmo* and the Changmepos responding. It was full moon night so the night was quite bright (this journey always takes place on a full moon night). On reaching the river we took our shoes off, our hats and our swords. We put the hats down. The hats facing us as we kneeled and bowed down three times asking Dinik Kho to bless us and protect us. After sprinkling water on our hats and putting them on we crossed the river. The feeling was incredible. I felt so much at peace, gratitude and blessed for I could feel the chills running down my spine. We put on our shoes and then began our journey uphill.

#### *Climbing through the forest*

My bag was quite heavy, as I had to carry a number of items being the Thongdok Mokphépo. There were two bottles of local wine (these were for rituals to be performed later), a bottle of beer, a metallic tiffin box containing my food, a 2-litre water bottle and a camera. So, it was quite heavy. Chotu, the Thongon Mokphé helped me by taking some of my stuffs and putting them into his bag. The *Khitmo* shouts started again which



was an indication to the Changmepos that the river ritual was over and that the Mokphēpos had begun their journey uphill. Not very far away up there was a *mane* (sacred Buddhist construction made up of stones) at a place called Manthing Bao and I was supposed to hide a bottle of local wine in the bushes. This would be used for performing *phok tso* (a ritual of pouring local wine on the bamboos) later in the evening before we crossed the river. After hiding it we walked again, shouting of course. The shouts of the Changmepos were fading and soon it was gone. It was just the six of us now. We divided ourselves in groups of two for the shouts. We would shout in turns. This way we would get some rest too. After walking non-stop for about 25 minutes we reached Machu Hī. We would be meeting the Batpos here the following evening. We rested for about 15 minutes and quenched our thirsts. We walked again. Our next stop was Khandok Blang. On the way we took some snaps too. I was tired but there was no looking back. I caught hold of a sleek stick for support as I walked. Bhaiti and Chotu were in front, leading us, for they knew the way. Both of them would talk when it was their turn to rest while I tried making the best possible use of the interval when the other groups shouted '*Khitmo*' by keeping numb and getting some rest.

All of us were thirsty, hungry and of course tired. But we were not even half way. We reached Khitmo Blang at 3:40 a.m. I sat down immediately on the dried leaves. Soon my mates

lit up fire and we warmed ourselves. My vest was all wet due to the sweat. And after I cooled down it made me feel colder. We took out our respective tiffin carriers and began eating like we had not eaten for days. There was only a bottle of water left. But each one of us had beer or local wine with us. So we had an alternative. We were supposed to leave all our belongings here including the *chitpo guthung*, our precious hat. We hung our belongings on different trees and branches. Chotu was busy digging. When asked what he was doing he answered that the previous year they had hidden a bottle of local wine here. But he couldn't find it. Nevertheless we buried another, so that next year when we come, we could look for it. We rested for some more time and then began our journey uphill again. And yes the uphill was very steep.

*Cutting bamboo and collecting bark*

As we walked, the darkness was fading away slowly and soon it was dawn. The scenery was beautiful and the whole area was engulfed in silence, not a sound to be heard. On our way we came across numerous elephant faeces. We soon stopped at a place called Mayung Tsokhan Bao. My mates told me we had to cut small branches which would later be used in making the *ma khuk* harnesses to hold bamboo load we were going to carry with us on the way back. They cut one for me too. After walking some more distance we stopped again: this time for collecting *shok shok*,

the bark of *shok shok* tree, a kind of *dhup* or incense tree. It wasn't very difficult, as we just had to hit the branches hard a number of times until it peeled off. This bark has many uses: as a rope to tie the Khitmo bamboos to the *phun chan kho* to be carried to the Kamcha after the river crossing ceremony; to make bunch of flowers *phun chan* to hang on top of *phun chan kho*; to decorate Mokphêpo shield; to hang fish over Loblang; to make the garland for adorning the *loyak*, the yak dedicated to the Gods, etc.

We got a lot of *shok shok*. My friends told me that we were very lucky as this thing was really difficult to find. We stuffed them into two bags and left them there. We would collect them on our way back. Well, we walked again as if there was no end. Soon we reached a plain. We were at the top of the mountain. I could already see numerous bamboos around. This made me very happy. However they were small and my mates told me that we had to walk down hill now. The downhill was really very steep and I was only worried as to how I would carry the bamboos on my way back this steep uphill.

*At Sangthang Lu, the House of the Gods*

Finally, we reached our destination, Sangthung Lu (*Lu* means mountain). I looked at my watch, 7.30 a. m. This was the House of our Gods (Soro - Nambang -Lakhin-Lo). It was more like a pass

with mountains on both sides. We were all thirsty and tired. But we had a lot of work to do. After resting for about 10 minutes we left our *than* (rope for supporting the harness to our foreheads) there and made our way into the bamboo forests. There was nothing but bamboos all around us. There was no definite path. We were making path for ourselves, and it was pretty difficult as it was very steep and muddy. We were all looking first for a big straight tall bamboo. This one would be for the Thongdok Mokphēpo and none of them would go looking for bamboos for themselves unless this bamboo was found and cut. This bamboo is to be held first by Thongdok Mokphēpo. Finally we found one. There was a ritual that had to be performed to see if the bamboo was strong enough. We had to shake the bamboo round and round hard, shouting '*Khitmo ho ho ho*' nine times. If the bamboo did not break it was a sign of good omen and luck. So we did that. We shook the bamboo very hard. I thought it would break. I was just waiting for the nine shouts to get over for I feared the bamboo would break. But it didn't and we were all so relieved. It was a sign of luck. I the Thongdok Mokphēpo then poured the local wine around the bamboo three times and then cut the bamboo. As I wasn't an expert Chotu helped me in cutting it. One of my friends, who had taken part earlier in the festival as a Mokphēpo, told me that during one previous journey while shaking the bamboos they had shouted '*Krio*' instead of '*Khitmo*'. At that very moment bamboo burst. They had a very

difficult time on their return journey as they lost their way half way. However, I believed we were better off as nothing bad happened. So now all of us dispersed to get our respective bamboos.

I was supposed to carry six bamboos: two for Thongdok, two for Thongdok's Chao, Megēji and two *phun chan kho* made with a very hard and straight type of bamboo known as *ma shik*. (These *phun chan kho* would be later tied to one end of the bigger bamboos and carried by the people of Rupa to Sri Kamcha from the riverside). I would be carrying the highest number of bamboos while the others carried 2 or 4 or 3. We spent around an hour looking for bamboos and cutting them. As I did not have much idea my mates helped me cut again. Finally we were done. However, the tough part now was carrying the bamboo to the place where we left our *than* as the terrain was steep and muddy and full of bamboos and other obstacles. Finally, after great hard work we reached there. I was tired. Since there was no water left we drank the local wine that was left after performing *phok tso* libations.

#### *Making harnesses and bringing back bamboo*

Two of my mates went down straight to make bamboo ropes (*ma san*) while two of them went to make the *ma khuk* harnesses. Tenzin, and I the newcomers were told to get as much bamboos as we could. We cut and collected a lot of bamboo

twigs and leaves (*ma shik*). It was never enough. The requirements for six *ma khuk* were indeed a lot. We were all hungry and thirsty. After 5 hours of non-stop work the beautiful *ma khuk* were ready. It was 11.30 am. It is interesting to know that the *ma khuk* harness is made up of bamboos only. We had to get to Machu Hí by 2.30 pm. Now we began moving in order. I was leading and walking up the steep hill was indeed difficult but not impossible. After about half an hour we reached the top. I was so happy. For now, it was only down hill. Chotu, the Thongon Mokphēpo, complained that he was in deep pain. His stomach ached, as he was very hungry. Looking at his funny face we couldn't help but laugh. We asked him to leave and told him to get to Khitmo Blang as soon as possible as there was food left there from morning. So he left. After a while we followed suit. I was literally running, aware but not caring about the leaves and sticks that hit me on the face, for I felt no pain, just determination, a deep sense of responsibility and yes, focus. We collected the bags containing the *shok shok* on the way and stopped at a place called Zingkhan Bao, this time to cut some small bamboos for the Batpos. I was hungry. We reached Khitmo Blang at 1.45 pm. We caught hold of our tiffin carriers once again and ate whatever was left from morning. The food was ice cold and so were the curries. But it did not matter. We were hungry. After resting for a while we left again, this time with all our belongings that we had left here. I ran even faster

now. It was risky but again, it did not matter. Our Spirit Gods were protecting us.

I entered the Machu Hī hill plain at 2.30 pm. To my surprise I saw a policeman. It was Chayo Broadu dressed as a policeman. The Batpos and others present there welcomed me. I was very happy I had made it. Soon all the Mokphēpos arrived. The messengers of our respective Khikspu had brought us our lunch. I had never enjoyed eating so much. After resting for a while my messenger and other friends helped me get dressed again. We had to get down to the river by 3.30 pm. Soon we began walking downhill with bamboos. The Batpos were in front of us shouting '*Krio*', '*Krio*', bursting crackers. They were all dressed funnily. Some had gunny bags on while some were dressed as army personnel and almost everyone had their face turned into a face of clown, coloured black, blue and red. Far down at a distance I could see the people of our town gathered along the river waiting for us, waiting to see us cross the river with bamboos.

Let us go back a little in time to meet these 'jokers wearing fancy-dress', who left Rupa in small groups on the morning of 12<sup>th</sup> December.

## CHAPTER 5

### *The Second Day*

#### *1. From the Hills to the Riverbank*

The climb after the bridge crossing the River Dinik is steep but short, half an hour's walk if a good pace is set. On the way, they stop at a pile of stones, pick up another one, spit on it and add it to the pile: this way, they ensure the deity's protection, so that the climb and descent take place unhindered.

At 11 a.m., the first to get to Machu Hí are six boys of between 13 and 16 years. After lighting a small wood fire, they let off some bangers with their catapults, partly as a game, partly to inform the Mokphēpos of their arrival.

As they wait for the other Batpos who are expected within the next two hours, they make decorations called *phun chan*, 'bunch of flowers'. To do this, they roll leaves they have chosen for the intensity of their colour – red, yellow, orange, green –, then they slide these little rolls inside a slit bamboo which is then hung by a woollen thread to the forked twig of a pine-tree (Colour Plate X).

By 1 p.m., all the Batpos are gathered together: about thirty people, ranging from 8 to 30 years old. They may begin to dress and make themselves up. Indeed, a Batpo must wear fancy dress, and must even be, if possible, unrecognizable, when he goes back down to the River



Dinik before the Mokphēpos. He must look wild. Today, chemical paint and marks made with lipstick have replaced the natural colours of bygone days: black and red made from soot, pine resin and crushed leaves or roots.

The disguises include a number of 'soldiers' wearing real uniforms that they have probably borrowed for the occasion, but also a lot of funny characters, dressed in potato sacks (with a hole for the head) that they wear as tunics, the youngest attaching balloons to their backs and wearing hats made out of a plastic bin lid or out of egg boxes, or long haired wigs or false tails (Colour Plate IX).

Around 2 p.m., the Mokphēpos turn up: they are to be seen only a few minutes before on the slope leading down to the clearing. They are out of breath and look rather tired but their costume is in good condition. They drag along long bamboos, which are attached to their waist by a thick hoop made of young bamboo branches braided together.

These harnesses are handed over for a while to former Mokphēpos, who know how they work and quickly rearrange them, leaving only two sticks of bamboo on each side. The bamboo that is taken off is then used to make poles for the pine tree branch decorations, their frills made of brightly coloured leaves. Meanwhile, the 'warriors' eat and drink the food a servant from their own clan has brought to the clearing.

While the Mokphēpos, their servants and the Batpos are having a quick lunch up in the hills in Machu Hī, the Gomchinpos arrive at the suspension bridge over the

River Dinik. There are twelve of them, two from each Thong upper clan. It is not easy to guess the part they play. They are supposed to be Tibetan warriors, but they look nothing like warriors: they have no shield, no spear, no weapon, except maybe for the colourful marks on their faces that allow them, but only as far as this is concerned, to look like camouflaged soldiers. They nevertheless wear the grand Tibetan crossover robe made of bright yellow, red or orange Chinese brocade, and a hat hidden under a heap of red, green, white, yellow or blue ceremonial Tibetan scarves that almost totally conceal their faces. They add to this hat some colourful rubber balloons, which make this strange outfit look a little more carnivalesque (Colour Plate XI).

Standing in line, the Gomchinpos dance to the sound of the drum Durio, the drum player, strikes (Colour Plate XII). They shout '*Khitmo ho ho!*' and spin around, then they all put their arms up in the air. Next to them, like discreet shadows, the Changmepos dance. They are dressed in the white clothing of Sherdukpen men over which they have thrown a shawl. Around their necks, they wear Tibetan necklaces and silver reliquaries adorned with turquoise stones and sometimes tiger teeth.

Almost the whole of Rupa, at least the Sherdukpen section of the population, has come to witness this moment, which is at the same time a ceremony, a sporting event and entertainment. Many women, whether young or older, are wearing their best clothes and some have difficulty walking in their high-heeled town shoes down the steep path leading to the river. Many elegant men are here too. Some of Rupa's 'high

society' is gathered, at this eminently social event. But lower-class people are here too, along with people who are not Sherdukpen but who have been drawn to the event: Assamese or Nepalese people, of whom there are many in Rupa, as well as a few young 'Adivasi', mostly young girls, who have been able to take a few hours off from their work as home helps.

## *2. Crossing the River and Going to Sri Kamcha*

The eagerly awaited moment – one of the high points of the festival – has come: the crossing of the river. The Batpos are the first to rush, free of any cares. However, the Mokphēpos stop briefly at the end of the mountain path to perform libations, to remove their shoes and to check their harnesses; indeed, they will have to go over two at a time, barefooted and as fast as they can, pulling their bamboo behind them: Thongdok-Thongchi, Thongon-Musobi, Thongdok Chung-Khrime. Three groups will be running almost at the same time ...

Barefoot and barelegged, they now enter the river, which is, if truth be told, not very deep. They must not stumble, never mind fall: it would be a bad omen. There, they have succeeded and are back on dry land; none of them slipped. They are welcomed with a feeling of relief by members of their clan, who are carrying the multi-coloured woven wool bag (Fig. 14) and wearing the scarf that are mandatory when attending any ceremony. They relieve them of their bamboo harnesses then tie each pair of bamboo sticks together to make a long pole (Colour Plate IX).



Fig. 14. Multicoloured woven bag

On the riverbank where, at this time of year, the water level is low, is also Tsering, the eldest of the Khikzizis from the Megēji clan. He is recognisable from afar with his two-horned hat. Alone for a moment, he is then joined by the younger Khikzizis. Now he has to officiate. While reciting prayers, he blesses the nine poles associated with the nine clans who are presented to him in turn by men from the Thongdok, Thongchi, Thongon, Musobi, Thongdok Chung and Khlime clans in the water of the River Dinik, a river associated with the god Sung Khit.

Let us leave him for a moment to hear Khandu tell us about his epic crossing and his walk up to Sri Kamcha where the eldest priest is waiting.

Far down at a distance I could see the people of our town gathered along the river waiting for us, waiting to see us cross the river with bamboo. However, the Gomchinpos looked even more distinct while the river looked black and still. Indeed the real test for we Mokphēpos was crossing the river, which we would be crossing barefoot and also at a very high speed. Since the olden days falling in the river would attract fine and it was also considered a shame, to the Mokphēpo and his family. All of us were worried about the river crossing ceremony and we had been praying since the previous night asking our Gods to help us to cross the river safely. Soon we reached the Mane where I had hidden the local wine in the bushes the previous night on our way uphill. We poured the wine on our respective *ma khuk*. We had to take our shoes off.

The Thongdok Mokphēpo was given a *phun chan kho* – the top most bamboo joined on top of other big bamboos - to carry on my right hand while a large *simli dom dom* garland for *lo yak* on my left. I was walking barefoot now. The people around me were telling me a lot of things, but I couldn't understand a word of what they were saying. My eyes were on the river.

We reached the plain. The Batpos had already crossed the river. We were broken into groups of

two. I was with Bhaiti, the Thongchi Mokphēpo. I held his *ma khuk* hard while he held mine. We had the hat straps inside our mouths so that the hat stayed intact. And then we ran ..... splash ..... Everything turns hazy for a moment. People cheered. We had crossed the river and none of us had made a fall. The people helped us get the *ma khuk* off. We then walked to our respective Khikspu with our *than*, not uttering a word, for it was customary that we did not talk to any body after we cross the river. As we walked back to our respective Khikspu we shook hands and congratulated each other and thanked God for everything. (Colour Plate XIII)

When I reached my Khikspu I was given a cup of butter tea. I had only taken a sip when the other Mokphēpos came and asked me to come with them immediately. We had to get to Sri Kamcha before the Khikzizis and the people of the town reached there.'

Indeed, the Mokphēpos have to be the first to reach Sri Kamcha to report to the eldest Khikzizis waiting for them there. Before doing do, they must not speak or they will be fined, even if they are asked questions.

The Mokphēpos, still barefooted, make the climb one after the other, followed at a distance by the Khikzizis. Then come the Gomchinpos and the Batpos, then the Tsokbos from the six Thong clans who are carrying the long bamboo poles upright, and behind them their Chao servants known as the 'naked Tsokbos.'

At Mane Areng, the 'long mane,' some of them stop, because the Gomchinpos dance for a while with the Batpos. Very close to Mane Areng is the Kakaling chorten, which used to be the former gateway to the old village of Rupa. Even about thirty years ago, everyone, including horses, would pass through this gateway to go to the village. Many Sherdukpens remember it clearly, even if they are not so sure about a wall that is said to have surrounded the village and that in any case disappeared a long time ago.

On the esplanade in Sri Kamcha, the Mokphēpos sit, each where they should be, on the right-hand side after the entrance, facing the Elders: the Bako Asu, the two Gaonburas\* and other old men. Nine bamboo sticks representing the nine Khikspus (the six Thong houses and the three Chao houses) are slipped into a hayrack on the other side of the door, facing the village. A pine tree branch is placed at the top and a few bunches are knotted around it midway up.

Tsering Norbu Dingla, the old priest, asks the Mokphēpos: 'Did you have any difficulties? Was the forest vast?' Chotu, from the Thongon clan, an experienced Mokphē, answers for the group: 'No, we didn't have any trouble; the journey went well ...' (Colour Plate XIV).

Once they have finished their account, the Mokphēpos dance for the village headmen. The women from the Khikspu Houses and from the main houses are there too, dressed in white, wearing a simple dress that can be slipped on over the neck, held in at the waist by a belt and worn with a waistcoat cut from the same fabric, a shawl over their shoulders.

For Khandu who is Mokphēpo for the first time this year, this first dance is a test.

I had practised a bit the previous night. However, I went wrong at intervals and the whole crowd would erupt in laughter. I laughed back. After seven rounds of dance we were asked to disperse.

During the last dance performed by the Batpos and the Gomchinpos, here on the esplanade, the Gomchinpos are pushed around. Some say that the Batpos dance against the Gomchinpos: this dance is indeed interpreted in many ways, including one whereby the Batpo savages succeed in conquering the Tibetans represented by the Gomchinpos who wear large Chinese brocade robes. In fact, after this dance, it is finished for the Gomchinpos, their part is over. After a seventh dance, the Mokphēpos also withdraw and go to join their Khikspus.

I went to my Khikspu and got my belongings. It was wonderful to have shoes on once again. The other Mokphēpos slept at their respective Khikspu. I however, walked back home. At home, mom, dad and a few relatives were present. They congratulated me and said that I had done my society and them proud. I was very happy. As I was very tired my mom prepared some soup for me. After dinner I just got into my bed, closed my eyes and fell asleep straight away.





## CHAPTER 6

### *The Third Day*

#### *1. The Sacred Stones and Clan House Tour*

After a short night, the Mokphēpos rise again, fully dressed to dance around the Sri sacred stones, then in the Khikspu houses. Today being a war day, a warrior from the Musobi clan, traditionally associated with war, leads the group, while the Thongdok Mokphē is exceptionally sent to the back of the procession. According to tradition, the Musobis used to be in charge of leading the army. During the conflict with the fortified village of Thembang, where it is said that a cannon from Assam was used, a Musobi led the troupe; he was hurt by a poisoned arrow, and while he was washing the wound in the river, he was betrayed, captured and killed. His skeleton still lies, so it is said, under the slab of rock at the fortified door of Thembang, so that each and everyone walks over his remains. Nowadays, the story is still known to the Musobi from Rupa, who tell it and add that they will never go through that door out of respect for their ancestor.

Each Mokphē wears a *sabe*, worn over a black long-sleeved jacket, *ringgo*, on the front of which several brightly coloured scarves, either green, yellow or red, are crossed at chest level. On their heads sits the black yak

hair hat *chitpo guthung*. For the warriors, as we have said before, this hat is adorned with pompoms, cowries, feathers and threads coloured in red or in orange. While the fabric in which the *sabe* is cut is weaved locally, as well as the belt and the shoulder bag (except when they are bought ready-made in a store in Bomdila), the double-breasted jacket and the yak hair hat are bought from Bhutanese sellers who make them to measure one can order and who come to the region once or twice a year. All Mokphēpos are barelegged but, freely adapting to modern times, they are no longer barefoot and wear white sports shoes. Finally, each of the warriors holds a wild goat skin shield in his left hand and, in his right hand, a iron-tipped spear embellished with a banner (Colour Plate VIII).

Two by two, just like they did the day before, when they crossed the river, they begin their tour of the sacred places in Rupa with three short dances in Praoding Dungjor in front of the Tibetan-style building where the Buddhist canon volumes are stored. They also go to the Sri in Jogar Kamcha where they dance three times round the sacred stone, and then again at the Sri of the Dingla house located close to the suspension bridge on the River Dinik, and again at Yang Sri Jom in Chamkhong, uphill from Mane Areng and Kakaling gate. In this field with its sacred stone and the village's second sacred juniper-tree, they dance one last time. Then they plant their spear in the ground, put their hat on it as they would on a hook, leave their shield on the floor and go to their respective Khikspu for lunch.

Throughout their tour, they are led by the Khampos, about ten boys 10 to 25 years old, shouting and running around, who endlessly excite them and cheer them on.

Defined by some as the 'Mokphēpos' catalysts' they are here to energize them. Often described as 'dressed in rough and tough clothes,' indeed the Khampos wear a much more ordinary outfit: a dark sweater or sports jacket over a pair of jeans. In their right hand, they hold the obligatory white scarf that they wave in front of the Mokphēpos to provoke them as well as show them the way. 'They are the ones taming us', Khandu says as he describes the ritual joust during which they face the Khampos (Colour Plate XI).

We – Mokphēpos - danced as we walked and as we danced opposite to us were the Khampos with *sabe*. They held the cloth on their right hand and swung it up and down as we swung our shield up and down. We shook our *kbuk* while hitting them hard on the spear at regular intervals.

After lunch, the Mokphēpos join the Tsokbos and their servants in the field where they left their warrior attributes – shield, spear and hat – to give them areca nuts and betel leaves, then they follow them to Sri Kamcha where the Khikzizis are celebrating new rituals. There, Tsokbos and Mokphēpos dance together three times before they leave the Sri Kamcha esplanade to go to the Buddhist temple.

Just as they go through the entrance gate, the Batpos, who were hidden there, start hurling tomatoes and dry dung at the Tsokbos' servants while the Mokphēpos hide behind their shield. Running for their lives, the Tsokbo Asus come and push the warriors, their shoulders against the shields. This has been the tradition since the olden days. Then they all walk down to the Gompa. The Mokphēpos dig their *dzong* once again and

leave their *guthung* and *khuk* to enter the Buddhist temple. They bow down on their knees three times and ask the Gods to bless them. The lama present there then ties holy threads around their necks.

## 2. *Getting Ready for the 'Place of the Gods'*

On the way to Lolang, which according to Sherdukpen language can be read as 'the Place *blang* of the God(s) *lo*', those carrying offerings await in line. They are young women, three from each Khikspu, all wearing a white or oatmeal silk dress, with a shawl over their shoulders. Some of them carry baskets covered with a red cloth and held onto their backs by a strap placed over their foreheads, others carry colourful woven wool shoulder bags, in their hands they hold plates carrying little figures made the day before out of flour dough or a pot full of wine (Colour Plate XVI). They come to offer to the God Sung Khit cakes made out of glutinous rice, vegetables fried in oil, salt and red chilli pepper, boiled kidney beans, distilled alcohol kept in a small terracotta jug decorated with flowers, seven areca nuts, seven betel leaves, seven sweet potatoes, seven bananas, seven pieces of sugar cane; to the goddess Jumu, they serve the same food but in smaller quantities: three areca nuts, three betel leaves, three sweet potatoes, three bananas and three pieces of sugar cane. (Fig. 15).

While the lama, alone in the temple, proceeds with a juniper fumigation ritual (*lhapchang*), whose sweet-smelling smoke purifies the place and nourishes the deities and spirits living in the vicinity, in the Lolang everyone is busy preparing for the celebration. A tent has been put up for officials who are foreign to the

community. The women come from every neighbourhood in Rupa with plenty of food and alcohol to share with their kin and friends. They are followed by other members of their family. Friends and family slowly gather around the fires.

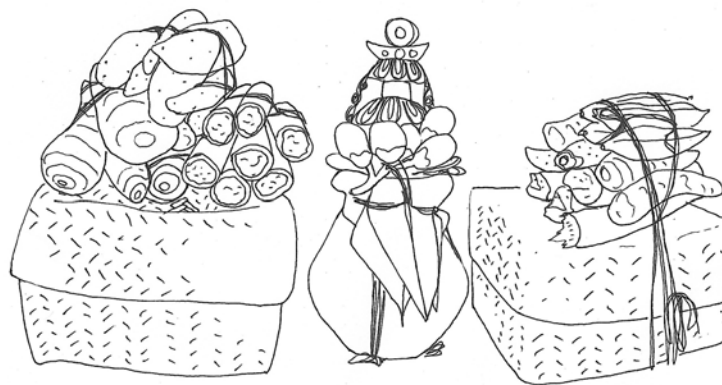


Fig. 15. Offerings to God Sung Khit

On this day, only Khikspu families may go into the Loblant enclosure, as well as people invited to the ceremony but who are not Sherdukpen and who have to sit on the periphery. Year after year, places fulfil the same function, and a person always sits on the same seat. Cement benches and tables have been built here and in Sri Kamcha, whereas the year before everyone was still sitting on carpets next to low tables or wooden planks: thus this spatial organization and its underlying hierarchy have been fixed even more permanently. And this hierarchy can also be seen in the way people behave and in the way they dress, particularly women. The wealthiest women wear ample clothes cut out of ecru-coloured silk from Assam, a Tibetan brocade hat with

fur ears, and their whole array of jewellery, especially large turquoise, agate and coral necklaces.

Men build the God's home around the centuries-old juniper tree by tying together dozens of long leafy branches of *jambang chaluk* tree, with ropes made out of long strips of *shok shok* bark brought there from the sacred mountain by the Mokphēpos. Looking like laurel leaves, *jambang chaluk* leaves are used in cooking to flavour meat dishes or in infusions. In this ritual context, they are meant to 'purify' places, the ground or the container, where the offerings to the Gods will be held, or that hold substances or objects such as the white woollen threads that have been blessed by the gods. To the left of the tree, the women carriers have laid down their offerings in a row (Colour Plate XVII). To the right, close to the place where they are to sit, the Khikzizi priests build a bamboo structure where they place six silver cups that belong to the Thong clans and the wooden horse that plays an important part later on, and that has been fetched from the Thongdok Akhao house where it is kept. This extraordinary horse is the subject of a story, told by the Baidongpos. (Colour Plate XVIII).

### 3. *Story of Norbu Zangpo's Horse*

There was once a Tibetan merchant—or perhaps he was Bhutanese—called Tsonqpon (meaning 'merchant' in Tibetan) Norbu Zangpo who, a tradesman, had an extraordinary horse that carried his loads. It replied to the name of Taphu Tashi, which can be translated from Tibetan as 'stallion of good omen'. It is said both that the animal had a white mark shaped like the moon and

the sun on its forehead, *nyima dawa*, an association that symbolises fulfilment and bliss, and that the white rings, *tingkar*, round its slender ankles were another auspicious sign.

According to Baidong Abo Tsering Thongdok, Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo, while admiring his horse, used to extol:

*I saw the sun rising, but it was not the sun.  
It was the head of my horse that was shining,  
and the golden crown on its head.  
I saw the moon shining brightly, but it was not the  
moon.  
It was the forehead of my horse that was shining  
brightly.  
I saw the stars twinkling, but it was not the stars.  
It was the eyes of my horse that were twinkling.  
With its right foot it blesses the family with a son.  
With its left foot it blesses the family with a  
daughter.*

Wherever Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo went, people showed an interest in his horse, not in the goods he was selling. However he refused to sell it.

Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo went to the East. There he met the three Gepu (kings) of the eastern region. They offered him twenty-nine heads of *mithun*\*, the famous mountain ox, in exchange for his horse. But Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo refused to sell his horse because he thought it would be too great a loss.

Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo went to the North. There he met the three Gepu of the northern region. They



offered him twenty-nine sets of *dardang* – colourful religious flags – in exchange for his horse. But Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo refused to sell his horse because he thought it would be too great a loss.

Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo went to the West. There he met the three Gepu of the western region. They offered him twenty-nine sets of *Domang*<sup>6</sup> – Buddhist sacred books – in exchange for his horse. But Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo refused to sell his horse because he thought it would be too great a loss.

Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo went to the South. There he met the three Gepu of the southern region. They offered him twenty-nine horses in exchange for his own. But Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo refused to sell his horse because he thought it would be too great a loss.

Then Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo went to Yi. There he met the three Gepu of Yi. They offered him twenty-nine *nayü* (a semi-precious blue stone, a turquoise?) in exchange for his horse. But once again Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo refused to sell his horse because he thought it would be too great a loss.

Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo finally arrived in Rupa. He was very tired and thirsty. There he met three ladies from Thongdok house. They greeted him with three big cups full of *phok*, the local maize beer, and they sang the *tsong chang* or merchant's beer song for him. After drinking a full jar of beer, he was so delighted with their

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<sup>6</sup> Tib. *mdo mang(s)*, lit. 'many sutras': collection of Buddhist canonical texts.

hospitality (and totally drunk) that he gave his favourite horse to the Thongdok Umu free of charge.

And that is why the curved branch of polished wood that represents Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo's horse is still kept today in the Thongdok Akhao house.

Although the ending is always the same, other slightly different versions of the story exist. In one of these, the king of the North offers twenty religious books (*puti*) in exchange for the horse, the king of the East twenty necklaces of pearls (*muthig*),<sup>7</sup> the king of the South twenty *mithun*, and the king of the West twenty of the best horses. In another version which, to highlight the veracity, situates the story of the merchant and his horse in today's landscape, Tawang people offer hundreds of yaks for Taphu; Aka belt people offer hundreds of *mithun*; and Assamese people offer one hundred acres of land.

#### *4. Plaiting Nine Threads into One*

Loblang is to be found, perhaps not exactly but at least formally, between the two rivers, at the bottom of a well-worn path that rises up at once into the mountains towards where the god Sung Khit lives. On one side of Loblang (on the right-hand side when facing the

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<sup>7</sup> *Tsong chang*, *puti*, *muthig* are Tibetan words. *Tsong chang* (Tib. *tshong-chang*) means merchant's beer. *Puti* (Tib. *pu-ti*), derived from the Sanskrit *punthi/pusitka* is a honorific term to designate the Tibetan loose-leaf sacred book, while *muthig* (Tib. *mu thig*) is a pearl.

mountain with your back to the village) you go to Ziding Kho, and on the other side (on the left-hand side) you go to Dinik Kho.

The assembly now makes its way towards Ziding Kho for the first of three wool thread ceremonies, the so-called *Kho hangho noba*, 'Stretch the threads at the River'. It stops at the foot of a rather small tree (an older one is no longer there), which, from its position at the edge of the field, overlooks the river that flows at the bottom. At the top of this tree is a pennant made out of one of the white cloths that the areca nut branches were wrapped up in, when they arrived from Assam two days ago. Meanwhile, the eldest Khikzizi briefly burns incense over a small bamboo altar that is protected from the wind by a Tibetan apron.

Then the proceedings begin: people line up in nine rows, each row made up of people from the same clan. The lines are arranged in the usual order, starting with the Thongdok and ending with the last clan, the Abu Chilu clan. At the end of each line is the Mokphē of the clan and at the head of each line, facing the tree, is his Abo su (Tsokbo). The Mokphē or his substitute then slowly unrolls the ball of white thread. The thread is then passed from one person to another all the way to the Abo su at the front of the line, who then gives it to a Khikzizi. The Khikzizi receives nine threads that he plaits together before giving this plait to his helpers who gather it into a pile. Meanwhile, the nine rows sing and dance slowly, the Khikzizi moving with them, a few metres to his right. Without breaking the thread made from the nine balls, his helpers start a second pile in front of this new position. The Khikzizi then has to move along again, this time to his left, and his helpers,

going over the initial pile, go on to make up the third pile of white thread which, like the two before, is coiled round some *jambang chaluk* leaves and maize kernels. They all sing the *Khitmo ho ho* while spinning round at the end of each phrase, careful not to get entangled (Colour Plate XIX).

This rite is as complicated in its actual form as it is simple in principle: the idea is to bring together the clans – all the clans, Thongs and Chaos – in a unit that is the Sherdukpen people. The name of the rite is easy to understand: *noba* means ‘to stretch, to spread’, *hangho* is the name of the white wool thread, and *kho* which means ‘water, river’ designates here, as everyone knows, the River Ziding, the one that holds large fish and is associated with the great God Sung Khit. It is facing this river that the Tsokbos, bareheaded, prostrate themselves once the nine rows are broken.

No one knows why three piles have to be made, and in this particular order, except to bring to mind the all too general fact that odd numbers are a good omen and that Sherdukpen rites often use the number three; we saw it this morning even, when the women who brought food came to Loblang in threes, one from each clan.

The Tsokbos, also called Abo su, ‘the Elders’, explicitly compare themselves to kings: ‘We are kings’, they say. They all belong to the Thong clans and wear splendid Chinese brocade clothes often with a waistcoat in the same fabric, partly covered by brightly coloured scarves that they cross over their chest. They sport silk hats with a black turn-up and a chinstrap, and flaunt beautiful Tibetan necklaces adorned with silver reliquaries (Colour Plate XX). Their servants, from

Chao clans, wear an ordinary jacket over a *sabe*, the white dress, and a sort of cowboy hat: maybe because their costume is not ornate or because they do not wear impressive jewellery, they are said to be 'naked' *asũ*.

Once the rite performed near the river comes to an end, it has to be performed again twice (there are three sessions in all). The second performance takes place in Loblang whence they came, and where the great juniper tree is then used as the reference tree. The third performance is in Jumu Sing neighbourhood where, during the *Jumu hangho noba* ceremony, the mountain-goddess Jumu is honoured. There used to be a sacred tree too, but only an offshoot is left there today. Each time, the proceedings are exactly the same, with the same players: a small flag on top of the tree, a fumigation ritual, nine rows representing the nine clans, unrolled balls of thread and the plaiting of the single thread which is then laid out in three successive piles, the same songs accompanied by the same steps.

Today in Jumu Sing the ritual takes place in a field hemmed in between the main road and large, recently built houses, a neighbourhood that was a jungle only twenty years ago. There was no path and a person was afraid of venturing there at night. A person had to be very careful that the spines of the numerous cactuses would not tear their clothes. In an environment that has been greatly transformed by modern technology, it is fascinating to be among these modern houses attending the same ceremonies that seem to have been taking place since times that for us appear (no doubt wrongly) to be immemorial, at exactly the same place, with the same songs and the same rituals in the middle of fields

now planted with recently imported cash-crops, in this case mostly tomato.

Around the Loblang, but also on the paths leading from one site to another, women carrying aluminium jars similar to milk churns, used here for alcohol, as well as shop-bought whisky and rum bottles, offer drinks to passers-by to ensure the souls of their parents who died over the past year have no difficulty in being reincarnated, and that they do not wander and cause trouble in the living world.

Everyone is now back at Loblang. They gather in the eastern corner of the enclosure, where a fat calf is tied up to a tree. This calf is a gift from the Khikspu Thongon. It has been chosen among this house's family herd (*spu speng*) by the Khikzizis. It has to be flawless, with no scar or wound, to have beautiful horns and a coat of the desired colour. It is called the 'gods' yak', *loyak*, because it used to be a yak, and because it is to be set free. It is still a yak, and still set free in Khoina village,<sup>8</sup> where it is bought from Thembang for 800 to 1,000 measures of maize.

A halter then a necklace—*simli dom dom*—both made out of strips of *shok shok* bark (brought down from the mountain by our Mokphēpos) and decorated with bells are placed around the calf's head. The calf struggles. A dot of butter is applied to its forehead and

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<sup>8</sup> Khoina is a village inhabited by 'Monpas' who speak a Sherdukpen dialect. In the past, Khikzizis were from Khoina. Khoina lies north of the Bomdi Pass (2,600 m.) and its people did not migrate to Assam during winter. A form of Khiksaba is performed in Khoina mid-February.

the Khikzizi at last succeeds in showering it with maize beer: the calf is set free and runs away. It is now forbidden to kill it, because it belongs to the gods who alone have the right to dispose of it.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the other priests continue to divide the white woollen threads. If people go to see them near the great tree, the former are given a piece of thread that is worn around the neck as a protection—a queue is forming in front of the Khikzizis.

A few yards from the cement bench where the Khikzizis are sitting, a newly wed man and a young boy are squatting on the ground. Over the past year, they have suffered diverse ailments, and on this auspicious day when the gods are honoured, they ask them via the Khikzizis to be spared any illness. Women come to give them white ceremonial scarves and to wish them a long life free of pain and illness, thus taking part in this blessing.

##### *5. The Lorjangpos sing for the Goddess Jumu*

5.15 p.m. Night has fallen. Forty men have gone to the Buddhist temple to attend the good omen ceremony *tashi*, celebrated by the lama, and to be blessed. We will catch up with them later.

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<sup>9</sup> A similar ritual is performed in the Tibetan area.



Fig. 16. Lorjangpo Singer

In the meantime, in a seemingly ordinary field planted with tomato, the Lorjangpos have started a cycle of sung and danced prayers. They stand in line, facing the south-east and the Jumu mountain: this mountain is both the kingdom on which the mountain deity Jumu reigns and the goddess herself. There are about twelve of them. They form the most renowned of the two fraternities of ritual singers. Their repertoire is rather vast, and they need to have a good voice. Furthermore, they must have a good memory because their songs are not in the Sherdukpen language but in a ritual language of which they only understand a few words – which is, thanks to tradition, enough for them to catch the gist of each song and to know where and when to sing them (Fig. 16).

Each verse of these songs starts with the word *laso*, except for the first one, which starts with *ono laso*. [In



Tibetan, the interjection *so* or *soso* aims at propitiating the *lha* gods.]

The first song is when offering areca nuts to the goddess:

<i>Ono laso tsochi tsoni</i>	<i>tso sum chi so</i>
<i>Laso khamsangde ame jomo</i>	<i>tso sum chi so</i>
<i>Laso gedangde dubgi de ne</i>	<i>tso sum chi so</i>
<i>Khamsangde ame jomo</i>	<i>khe nam lorang zi.</i>

*Khamsang ame jomo* to whom areca nuts, called *khe* (whereas in Sherdukpen they are called *sali*), are given is the possible name of Goddess Jumu's daughter(s). Their seat is the eponymous mountain situated on the way to Assam (from where the nuts come), and one of the mountains that was crossed by the old path running between the Plains below and Rupa. Anyway, Tenzin Gombu Khirime who recites and comments on this song considers it natural to begin the Jumu song cycle with the areca nuts, since it is with them that the whole Khiksaba festival cycle starts.

The second song, *Barche*, is supposed to get rid of any obstacle and hindrance. It is longer, made up of twelve stanzas. Its distinctive chorus is *Mō therangō the*: in almost all these songs a couplet phrase alternates with a chorus phrase, and together they form a whole stanza. This second song is more difficult to understand properly, but at some point there comes the word *mokpon* (*Laso mokpon dango bropo thamtse*) which is probably the equivalent of the Sherdukpen word Mokphē; besides, it has the same Tibetan-like suffix, *-pon*, that was part of the name of the mythical

tradesman who gave his horse to the Thongdok: Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo.

The third song is *Licho*, from the name given here to clothes. It is ten verses long and its chorus is first *Jangye botsi phi zin*, then *Du lo phi zin* which each time follows a different name.

The fourth song is sung many times, it is a farewell song and while singing it, the Lorjangpos walk back slowly, without turning back, and the whole choir gradually disappears into the night as the song fades away. This song is called *Ngapchu*, it has eleven verses and its chorus is *Ngapchu thamburang zi*.

This Jumu cycle is the first act of the solemn Lorjangpos' intervention in Khiksaba. From now on they play an essential part, as well as their friends and rivals, the Baidongpos. At the end of the first song, the singers take off their hats and bow down to Jumu. It is 5.35 p.m., it is pitch black, and there is a profound feeling of peace thanks to these voices singing in unison in the silence.

#### *6. The Battle and the Dinner*

Meanwhile, as we said before, about forty men have been in the Buddhist temple receiving wishes of happiness and long life from the lama. The latter has put white powder on their head, which they have rubbed on their faces and hair, and he has wished them: 'May your life be so long that your hair is white as snow!' Made-up like this, they now join the Lorjangpos who have come from Jumu Sing to mount a massive attack on the six

poor Mokphēpos standing on a small hill. These 'attackers' are supposed to be *nangpa*, 'Insiders' (in the Tibetan language; those who seek the truth not outside, but within the nature of mind, i.e. the Buddhists): are they not coming straight from the temple, blessed by the lama? Among them are village Elders and Baidongpos. Khandu, the Thongdok Mokphē recognizes his own father among the assailants. They shout, throw fire crackers, the younger boys run to the 'fight' and try, without being too rough, to knock about the Mokphēpos who are hiding behind their shields and are now playing the part of *phyipa*, in Tibetan 'the Outsiders', i.e. the non-Buddhists. The Khampos who have 'led' the Mokphēpos for a long time while they were walking to the *sri* sacred stones and to the Khikspu Houses, now act as go-betweens. It is said that they start to negotiate, telling the assailants that these Outsiders are not bad people, that they have learnt, and that they have to be accepted. Everyone agrees that this is the right thing to do: the Mokphēpos are decorated with white Tibetan *khata* scarves, a sign of friendship and respect.

The whole episode is rather surprising. It suggests that Mokphēpos are 'savages', that the Khampos (their name means 'Tibetan' in Sherdukpen language) have made them civilized by domesticating them through gestures and cries, and by making them walk to their sacred places. We might well understand the Mokphēpos' stay in the mountains and their sudden incursion across the river chasing the Batpos, as signs that they are the real enemies. Nevertheless, they also bring from the hills the great sacred bamboo and each of them represents one of the Community's six major

clans... Are we to regard the whole drama as a demonstration of friendship between the Tibetan powers and the local mountain tribes?

Everyone is back around the *brop*, the campfires lit inside and around Loblang. They have dinner. Every group, whether family or friends has brought food and drink in large quantities. Despite the place where most of them have settled (a former field that now serves as a depot for on-going building work and where rubble and scrap metal lie around) the night-time picnic takes place in an orderly fashion. Though people do drink a lot, elegant groups of people, sometimes richly dressed, ladies wearing jewels, stand out. The food is refined, as well as the drinks: every family—tonight, everyone is welcome—has done their very best.

Uphill, in the Loblang enclosure, the Mokphē warriors, carrying their shields and spears, perform a dance, or rather a fight.

Khandu says:

I shook the *khuk* hard and I was angry, I don't know why, but I was. I just felt I would hit anyone who came on my way. It was more like a dream. And then suddenly, a few men caught hold of me and took me to the side. It was over. Slowly all the Mokphēpos were caught and calmed down. A few rounds of *krio* dance followed. This time the entire town was dancing and the beat of the drum sounded magical. It was wonderful. I had never been so happy. Soon people began dispersing.

Only a few years ago, this short episode might have turned into a violent fight and might have ended with real wounds, the Mokphēpos using the opportunity to settle scores between houses or clans, or between individuals. A serious incident some years ago induced the Village Council to avoid more bloodshed, to forbid using spears and to punish every violation to the rule. Today, the fight is nothing but a mock performance. Yet, the sudden feeling described by Khandu is remarkable.

Once the Mokphēpos' dance or fight is over, the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos start singing. Although they might have stood out in the past with their special costumes, today this is not the case. The two choirs are placed according to a strict layout. The Lorjangpos form a line in the longest part of the enclosure, facing the priests. By singing for the Khikzizis, they obtain the sacred white thread, *hang ho*, from them.

Behind the Lorjangpos stand the Mokphēpos, who accompany them simply by hitting the ground with the end of their spears. The repertoire sung here comprises about ten songs, some of them quite long. Their titles are all in the Sherdukpen language: *Loblang*, *Dosom ehek oho nō khan*, *Sar dorji dzo dam*, *Jiring lo dan khan*, which tell the story of the creation of elements and *jiring* men; then *Namge lamu*, *Che ngarse gepu*, *Mi lo lo ngigi*, and again *Sung khik njan khan* 'going in (the house of) Sung Khik/Sung Khit' and the last three *Darshe* when the Lorjangpos take the Mokphēpos' *dzong* spears and hit the ground with them.

The Lorjangpos are more respectfully looked upon and are all, unlike the Baidongpos, from Thong clans.

The words of their songs are supposed to be more religious, while their form is considered to be more varied and melodious. They 'sing', while the Baidongpos, according to one of them, 'throw the words'. One unmistakable sign of their hierarchical superiority is that during the tour of the houses, they always arrive before the Baidongpos who have to wait until they have left to go inside.

When a person has been chosen by their elders to become a Lorjang Abo and when they have agreed to start this lifelong adventure, abandoning this commitment is very much frowned upon. Being a Lorjang Abo (or a Baidong Abo) is often passed down from father to son. The repertoire is handed down orally. The songs that are composed in a language locally described as a mix of 'Brahmi,<sup>10</sup> Tibetan or a language of a backward tribe from Bhutan' with a few Sherdukpen words thrown in, are learnt by heart along with the context. Even from the best Lorjangpos or Baidongpos, it is impossible to learn the exact meaning of the stanzas: they only know the overall meaning.

The Baidongpos, who number about ten, make a circle around the tall juniper tree, leaving open the side near the tree where the Khikzizis are sitting and where they are still receiving visitors. Behind the Baidongpo group, a few children play an important part by repeating over and over again between every phrase of each song the neigh made by the sacred horse, *Aō hē! Aō hē! Aō hē!* One of the children holds the mythical curved piece of wood, the icon for the extraordinary horse

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<sup>10</sup>This term certainly refers to a form of Sanskrit or Pali.

acquired by the Sherdukpens – and which also seems to symbolize their winter journey to Assam because ‘what did we do, before we had horses to carry our loads?’ Besides, the way the boy moves the wooden model, rocking it back and forth, makes it clear: it is not so much the horse as its penis, and these songs, as the Baidongpos clearly imply, are about fertility (Colour Plate XXI).

While the Lorjangpos have a hold over the mythological repertoire, the Baidongpos have more of a hold over epic stories, which can also be funny. The two repertoires are similar in many respects, but with interesting differences when it comes to listing deities, spirits and sacred places. Above all, the Baidongpos, followers of the tradesman Norbu Zangpo, know the story of the horse, whose neigh, the constant *Aō hē*, sets the rhythm in all their songs.

When they get to the Loblang, a long series of chants starts for them too, beginning with the *Dokso totpo*, ‘praise for the sacred place’, then the *Barche saba* ‘ritual to get rid of obstacles<sup>11</sup>’, and the long *Phu hinba* where three lists are drawn up: the sacred mountains *phu*, the supernatural beings *do*, the sacred places *ne*. Then the *Jiring kerap* ‘story of men,’ and the *Zizi kerap* ‘story of priests.’ In this last song, the Baidongpos praise the Khikzizi priests, recounting tales about their prestigious ancestors and their magnificent appearance. Describing their horned hats, they sing:

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<sup>11</sup> This vocabulary has many parallel forms in the Tibetan language. Thus *stod-pa* ‘to praise’, *bar-che* ‘hindrances’, *nas* (pronounced *ne*) ‘sacred places’.

‘When we look at your right horn, we see a golden jewel. When we look at your left horn, we see a silver jewel. When we look at your face, we see a conch shell jewel ...’

By showering them with flattery, the Baidongpos obtain from the priests the wooden horse that they keep with them on a makeshift bamboo altar.

In a song called *Stu kerap*, ‘story about the horse,’ the Baidongpos tell the story of how Taphu Tasi the extraordinary horse came to life, then they sing about the fodder this horse must be given, *Phu hin ra soirap chongba* and how to tie it up with a rope, *Get thüyba*. This horse is the centre of Baidongpos’ care: every night when the Baidongpos gather in their house and it is time for bed, in their own privacy they sing a last song to ‘wish good night’ to the horse. Then there are songs of gratitude and praise where the divine beings are listed again. The *Tasi areng*, ‘the long blessing,’ stands out among these last songs with its chorus *Taphu tasi tasi so* that mentions the name of the horse: Taphu Tasi.

These songs in Loblang, both by Lorjangpos and Baidongpos, last for several hours—quite a feat if you remember that those songs are not really understood but learnt by heart. Although both groups stand only a few yards apart, their songs often mix in a very eerie and harmonious way. The simple tunes are different enough to blend nicely and they give everybody with an ear for music the impression of a rehearsal for a strange and familiar opera. Some of the most beautiful moments of Sherdukpen music take place then, that night, within the Loblang enclosure.



Sitting in a line, near the Khikzizis, are the six Tsokbos from the Thong clans and their three servants, the ‘naked Tsokbos’ from the Chao clans, who are more or less able to concentrate after this exhausting day; one of them is sleeping, two others play with their cell phones.

9.15 p.m. The Lorjangpos end their songs. The farewell song starts: they can be seen walking backwards, taking small steps, turned towards the tree swaddled in bamboos where the god Sung Khit lives at that moment, then prostrating themselves three times, still accompanied by the six Mokphēpos. They are going to Sri Kamcha together, taking care not to go through the main gate that opens onto the esplanade. According to the rule, they must indeed walk around it and enter sideways.

10 p.m. It is now the Baidongpos’ turn to sing while walking backwards slowly and throwing maize kernels around them. Behind them, children can still be seen and heard. They are sometimes called Batpos as well, and they sing *Aō hē! Aō hē! Aō hē!*, while shaking the bell collar which is another reminder of the horse.

In Sri Kamcha, the Lorjangpos sing for three hours. The six Mokphēpos, exhausted by this endless day, are still standing behind them.

We stood there singing *Lo nong bo lo sho, Lo june shara de* at regular intervals, spinning around as we sang it. It was a phrase for invoking our spirit Gods. My legs were already hurting and I just wanted to sit somewhere. But we were not

allowed. That has been the rule since the olden days.

It is 1 a.m. when the Mokphēpos go for their last official House tour. The warriors must indeed give back to the six Thong Houses the shields, in canonical order—Thongdok, Thongchi, Thongon, Musobi, Thongdok Chung, Khime—then they must go to the Chao Houses to say goodbye. Nevertheless, as it is already quite late, the tour tonight merely consists in a visit to the Thongdok House. There, the Lorjangpos sing the entire repertoire, then Khandu, the Thongdok Mokphē, gives to all the House members present white wool threads and leaves before ceremoniously giving back his shield, only keeping the spear. We know the white threads well: they are the protective strings that were given power during the *Hangho noba* ceremony that was celebrated three times, and the leaves are the *jambang chalu*k leaves picked by the Mokphēpos in the mountains when they walked up to Sangthung Lu.

### *7. Panorama of the Situation*

It is now 4 a.m. and the two teams agree to get a few hours' rest before hitting the road again the next day and finishing the Khikspu tour. The other groups do so too. The Lorjangpos and the Mokphēpos reach the Thongdok Chung house, their resting place during Khiksaba, the Baidongpos go to the Abu Chiluhouse with the children in tow and the Tsokbos arrive at the Dingla house. Finally, as they did the previous days, the Khikzizis and their young Changmepos helpers go to sleep in the small, icy cold and windy Sri Kamcha building.

The time has come to list who the active groups are, because these are now the last moments of the 'official' festival. Khiksaba will continue, as we shall see, but in another way, and normal activities will resume. Activities that have been forbidden since the official start of the festival, i.e. the drum roll on the first night (this year, on 10<sup>th</sup> December at 10 p.m.), such as building fires outside houses, hunting, fishing, drying in the village ... will now be allowed once more. In short, normal life resumes. Furthermore, not so long ago (as many old people remember), all villagers soon had to start getting ready for the winter migration to Assam.

The groups who took part in the festival are as follows: Khikzizi, Changmepo, Mokphépo, Khampo, Batpo 1, Lorjangpo, Baidongpo, Batpo 2, Gomchinpo, Tsokbo. Let us not forget the young women carrying the offerings who are called Tsokmu (from *tshogs* meaning offering, sacred food in Tibetan).

There are also usually jokers called Changkhans, who are played by anyone interested. Unfortunately there were none this year. According to Prem Dorje Khriime, they represent the people of Khoina, Rahung, Selari and Jirigaon who used to attend the festival in the past and to perform a ritual where animals were sacrificed. However, years ago, such sacrifices were banned in Rupa and so they stopped coming.

		1	2	3	4
Khikzizi	Priest	+	+	+	+
Changmepo	Priest helper	+	+	+	+
Mokphēpo	Warrior	+	+	+	-
Khampo	Mokphēpos' guide		+	+	
Batpo 1	Scout	+			
Lotjangpo	Singer	+	+	+	-
Baidongpo	Singer	+	+	+	-
Batpo 2	Taphu horse. Baidongpo servant	+	+	+	-
Tsokmu	Young women			+	
Tsokbo	'King'		+	+	-
Gomchinpo	'Tibetan man'	+			

The order in which groups are given is not according to any hierarchy.).

Some groups only play a very brief part, and the table shows which characters appear when others disappear. For instance, the Tsokbos or 'Kings' seem to substitute the Gomchinpos, who had some of the same attributes, namely Chinese brocade clothes. The Batpos, the 'scouts,' who went to the clearing on the first day to welcome the Mokphēpos who had come down from the Sangthung mountain, were a heterogeneous group that broke up at once: some of its members were men who actually guided the Mokphēpos and who knew how to take care of the harnesses, and some of these experts come back later as Khampo members. But they also consist of a variety of young men only there for the fun and who were not given a part later.

The groups of children who help the Baidongpos by taking care of the 'Horse' and by singing *Aō hē! Aō hē!*, or who assist the priests, form groups that are not necessarily the same from one year to the next, although this is encouraged. On the other hand, the six Mokphēpos fulfill their duty for three years, and the Lorjangpos and Baidongpos are fraternities where one is supposedly a lifemember.

The Tsokbos and their 'naked' servants, nine men, one for each clan, appeared for the first time when the areca nuts were distributed on the morning of the first day of the festival. We have seen that between the theoretical list of clan heads and the actual list of men present at the meeting there were a number of differences, that can be described as being for convenience's sake (X could not come; someone had to take his place) or for deference's sake (it was better that it be Y). The House heads are indeed designated via a complex system, when an elder dies leaving several sons who may live in Rupa or elsewhere; it is often decided that each of the sons will take turns to play the part. Yet despite these arrangements, prestige issues get in the way as much as availability issues. Besides, one can be a Tsokbo Abo without one's house becoming the clan's House that year.

Many Sherdukpen people who work outside the village, sometimes far away, travel to Rupa or take a few days off during Khiksaba. Khiksaba is not only an entertaining event in which many take part, it is a show where one has to be seen. Although failing to attend the festival, which Rupa people insist is their festival par excellence, is not punished by a fine, being there is regarded as an act of proud citizenship.

## CHAPTER 7

### *The Fourth Day*

#### *1. The Warriors and Singers' Tour*

9 a.m. The Lorjangpos are getting ready to leave the Thongdok Chung House and to resume their tour. The Mokphēpos stand in line behind them. The shield that is about to be given back to the Khikspus lies in a winnowing basket made of finely woven bamboo, its upper part turned towards its owners. The Mokphēpos set the rhythm to their song using their spear; the end of these weapons is sharp and could damage the floor of the house, had it not been covered with a wooden plank that they try to hit as they sing. When the song is over, they distribute among the Lorjangpos and the people who live there alcohol and ritual foods, *kaji* and *sorjong*, which will mostly be left untouched. And then the head of the Mokphēpos dances, bending his knees in turn and holding in front of him the winnowing basket where the shield lies. He then gives protective white wool threads to the hostess and thanks her for her hospitality. The Lorjangpo leader takes his turn to give thanks in a short, barely audible speech, which meets with applause. Cleansing water is then poured on the ground, and the Lorjangpo choir, holding a glass of *phok* in their hands, sing their farewell song:

*Ono laso phabrang-de nang la /  
langtsin mulorang zuk ...*

and walk out, slowly, one after the other, to go the next house.

The House tour is carried out in the usual order, but the Lorjangpos, accompanied by the Mokphēpos, begin. The Baidongpos have to follow them and must not overtake them; then come the Khikzisis with their Changmepos; then come the Tsokbos who have actually already left their official function and who are now called *bropo* – a general term for ‘performers’.

As we have said, the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos are like fraternities: a person enters the group of their own free will and no compensation is expected for this activity, to which the singer commits themselves for life. With both the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos, a long learning phase is necessary, which is all the more difficult since there is no training session: a novice learns by hearing others sing. Never in the past was there any written text that could be learnt. It takes five to six years to know the songs and five to six more years to become an Abo ‘leader’.

Being a Lorjang or a Baidong is often hereditary. Lorjang Tsering Gombu Khriime’s father was a Lorjang himself. Sadly, he died before he could hand down all the songs to his son. So that the latter could hand them down in turn, he felt the need to write them down—which had never been done before—so that they would never be forgotten. After fierce debates with the elders who felt that writing down songs was like destroying the tradition, he got permission to transcribe them in the Hindi/Devanagari alphabet. In order to acquire the entire repertoire, he had to go and see three Lorjang

Abos, since none of them knew all the songs. This work took him almost four years, from 1992 to 1995.

At about the same time, Tsering Thongdok transcribed into the English alphabet the Baidongpo songs. For him, it was an easier task. All he had to do was to ask his father, a famous Baidong Abo who gave new life to these songs when in the late 1970s they seemed to have been forgotten by everyone: only two to three elderly men knew them at the time. Dorje Thongdok himself sang them until he was 80 years old. He died in 2006 in his 90<sup>th</sup> year, after having handed down to his son all the songs he knew.

This is revolutionary among the Lorjangpo and Baidongpo fraternities: novices now have song books in which songs are transcribed, verse after verse, in the Hindi or English alphabet. Yet, even though they are written down, the songs remain mostly opaque, and only the general meaning can be grasped. Those who know Tibetan recognize some words, but this is still a different language. Moreover, the tunes are not written down at all.

On the way from one House to the next, the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos sing the *Barche* to keep away obstacles and misfortunes that could stop them, as well as another song that accompanies every fumigation ritual. The same order is always respected in the procession: elder men at the front, followed by younger men, then depending on the fraternity, the Mokphēpos with their spears or children with the wooden horse and bells.

For each house, the Lorjangpos sing several songs.



The first one, called *Yam khikspu* ‘the Khikspu house’, is sung in front of the house, before they climb the ladder that leads to the platform adjoining the living room. This song is dedicated to all the members of the Khikspu. The second one, *Yam* ‘house’, is sung just outside to the door and describes the outside of the house. The third one, sung inside the house, describes it in detail ‘from top to bottom’, from the main beam *ding* which runs across the house to the altar, *rabse*, generally placed along the wall facing the front door, not forgetting the cabinets where goods are stored and the fireplace, *brop*, where they are cooked.

We sing: ‘your house is very beautiful, so nicely decorated with gold and silver’; ‘your chests are brimming with goods’. Then we praise its inhabitants – ‘you are such good folk’, and they are so proud and happy that they prepare and offer us delicious wine’,

says Tsering Gombu Khriime, a well-known Lorjang Abo.

‘Then, we sing several auspicious songs, in which we promise couples who do not have any children that they will have some, as well as long life and good health to all the members of the household: ‘If you have no son, you will have a healthy son. If you have no daughter you will have a healthy daughter. You will be healthy and your life will be very long’. And finally, we round off the proceedings with the farewell song, ‘standing for prayer’ which we perform standing up while throwing grains of rice into the air.’

Similarly, Tsering Thongdok, a famous Baidong Abo, tells the following story:

Outside we praise the stairs and the house from top to bottom (Colour Plate XXI). Then we open the door that is described as being closed with an iron lock and, inside, we praise the household members: father, mother, sons and daughters. We bless both: old and young members alike. Then we bless the ladies who have no children, no sons. Upon leaving the house, we lock the door with 'a golden lock' *sin dimik*. And because we have blessed all the household members and have given them something extra (indeed a gold lock is better than an iron lock), they offer us good wine in return.

In my father's generation, he goes on, horses were of great importance to Sherdukpens: as a means of transport, for carrying loads, but above all for travelling to Assam during winter. Here, in Rupa, we had many horses. The wealthiest families owned 10 to 15 horses bought off the Akas or the Bhutanese and which they looked after with great care. At the Khiksaba festival, just before they migrated to Doimara/Rochong, the Baidongpos blessed the horses so that they would not be struck by any illness, so that no animal would attack them in the jungle but also so that the mares would give birth to beautiful foals in the year to come.

In those days, the Baidongpos' power was great, Tsering adds. See for yourselves: the butter mark

they would put on the horses' forehead to bless them would be seen again as an identical mark on the forehead of the colt born from the blessing. If the mare had moved during the blessing and the butter mark had been put in a slanted way, the white spot on her foal's forehead would have the same slanted shape.

Today, the Sherdukpens no longer breed horses, but the Baidongpos are still called upon by childless couples.

*With its right foot it blesses the family with a son.  
With its left foot it blesses the family with a daughter.*

A woman wishing for a child, a son, puts a white ceremonial scarf round the wooden Horse held by one of the young Batpos who accompany the Baidongpos. In exchange, she receives the 'Horse's blessing': a mark of butter on her forehead, which is made with the butter that lies in a thick layer on what is described by some as the horse's head, by others as the tip of the horse's penis. It is not said whether the child, like the foal, is then born with a similar mark!

After the Lorjangpos and the Mokphēpos, then the Baidongpos and the children carrying the Horse and its collar adorned with jingling bells, it is now the Khikzizi priests and their young Changmepo assistants' turn to visit the Khikspu Houses (Colour Plate XXIII).

In the Thongdok Chung house in the early hours of this afternoon, the Khikzizis arrive soon after the Baidongpos have left. There are four of them, all Megējis. The eldest one, Tsering Megēji, wears the two-

horned hat, while the other three wear brightly coloured 'Chinese' caps with black velvet turn-ups. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, in order of age, they sing prayers in a language that cannot be understood by the uninitiated. In front of them, on a low table, sticks of incense, stuck in flour, fill the room with their sweet fragrance (Colour Plate XXII).

The Changmepos rush in. They run around the room twice, holding bunches of purifying leaves, then go to sit in the middle of the room. One of them then distributes *kaji* and *sorjong* to everyone, then goes around again holding the empty dish for them to put back in it part of the food that has just been distributed. He then gives the full dish that acts as a blessing to the master and mistress of the household, then offers them some beer. He and his companions do not take anything. For some mysterious reason, on this very occasion serving drinks to the Changmepos is punishable with a fine ...

Blessed by the gods and their intermediaries, the priests, and protected by the white woollen threads they have been offered, the 'father' and 'mother' of the household listen to the compliments that Tsering Megēji quietly pays them.

The ceremony is over, but Rinchin Norbu Megēji, who is very talkative tonight, keeps chatting with the household members, telling them plenty of anecdotes to make them laugh and smile.

The last house on the tour is the Abu Chilu House, located at the far end of the village, on the way to Loblang. The Lorjangpos, still accompanied by the Mokphēpos, get there around 8 p.m. Here, as in all Chao

Houses, there is no shield to give back, so a *chitpo guthung*, a Mokphēpo hat, is put into the winnowing basket instead. The ceremonial performance and the dances are similar.

9 p.m. After a few glasses of strong alcohol, the Lorjangpos – 14 of them tonight – dance in a row, a white ceremonial scarf tied around their necks and, in their right hand, a silver bowl decorated with three triangular-shaped butter marks and filled to the brim with beer. The Mokphēpo chief, Khandu from the Thongdok clan, distributes white wool threads, and the Lorjangpo leader thanks the hosts, as is customary. Then they all leave the Abu Chilu house to go to Jogar Kamcha. The Baidongpos follow not long after. After this day spent drinking, some of them have trouble walking. Who cares: they are helped by the forever valiant Mokphēpos!

## 2. Ceremony for a Future Son

Willy-nilly, giving each other a hand, drunk and exhausted, they go down to the Dinik Kho that they cross by the suspension bridge and walk back up a few hundred metres to the sacred place. At this end of the village, Jogar Kamcha can be recognized by the two small groups of stones cemented in the ground. The name Jogar is a reference to the Assam plain. In the olden days, this place—like many sacred places in and around Rupa—was jungle. Today, nothing is left of this luxuriant foliage but a patch of grass that is yellow and short at this time of year, abandoned by the road and alongside which a shelter has been built, for rainy or windy days. The place is maintained by the neighbouring

houses that have brought wood for tonight's fire. Every year the *Uhu luba* ritual is held here and performed both by the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos. This ritual is requested by couples who do not have any children or sons—which is the case tonight—, or by Mokphēpo warriors coming to the end of their three-year duty, or by the Baidong or Lorjang Abos who decide to quit before they ought to.

Tonight, *Uhu luba* is celebrated for a couple that already has three daughters and now wants a boy. Indeed, in Sherdukpen society, only boys inherit the title as well as land handed down from generation to generation, from father to son. When they marry, girls inherit their husband's title. They no longer belong to the family into which they were born and must on all accounts marry within the Sherdukpen community if they want to remain part of it. In no case can a girl inherit land that has been handed down in the traditional way. Nevertheless, non-hereditary property can be sold, and consequently given to daughters.

For these reasons and for a few others, the doctor—he is a vet but everyone calls him this—and his wife wish for a son and are waiting in the cold to ask the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos to intercede with the gods on their behalf. To accompany them in this process and support them, women from their clan have come with plenty of beer as well as tea in thermos flasks and baskets full of *kaji* – only fish and *paneer*\* cheese on this occasion – and of *sorjong*, which they hand around to everyone, neighbour, visiting anthropologist or linguist. To refuse this fare would be a bad omen for the couple making a request and could compromise the success of the undertaking. Everyone accepts the food, even if they

only take a nibble. Here again, as has been the case all day during the ‘blessings’ given either by the Lorjangpos, the Baidongpos or the Khikzizis, each guest gives back a portion of the food and drink they have been given: these portions are then considered to be just as many blessings to increase the sacred quality of the event and to be vital for a successful outcome. To the same end and following the example of the head of the Lorjangpos, the couple’s female relatives give them *khata* bearing the eight auspicious symbols in Tibetan Buddhism (a white parasol, a pair of gold fish, a treasure vase, a lotus, a right-spiralling conch shell, an endless knot, a victorious banner and a golden wheel) in different colours: blue, white, red, yellow and green. Like many Tibetan-speaking groups and communities influenced by Buddhism, the Sherdukpens associate these five colours (the colours of Tibetan prayer flags) with different landscape elements. They are always listed in the same order, following a hierarchical principle that values high over low.

Blue	Sky
White	Clouds
Red	Sun or Fire
Green	Mountain, here described as woody
Yellow	Land

‘How do you make a garland? says Sange Chom Thongdok. First, put a blue coloured *khata*; then a white coloured *khata*; then a red coloured *khata*; then a green coloured *khata* and finish with a yellow coloured one.’

Note that any blue and white scarves, the first two colours in the list and symbolically the best, are given to

the man, while the woman gets only red, green and yellow scarves.

The colour of the scarves and the ideas they evoke in the visiting social anthropologist are of no interest to the couple who, sitting on a woollen Tibetan carpet, receives all these presents with deference and listens carefully to the words spoken by the head of the Lorjangpos, as they carry on receiving more *khata*, which are given this time by their female neighbours.

It is already 11 p.m. To save time, the Lorjangpos have split up into three small groups of four to five men, each group singing a different song from their repertoire. As the songs are not of the same length, they do not end at the same time. No matter, those that finish first wait for the others while they drink to warm themselves. When they are not handing around food, the Mokphēpos dance, hit the ground with the bottom end of their spears before spinning around. For their last dance, they give their spears to the Lorjangpos who brandish them like standards high in front of themselves before—as is their custom—leaving the stage backwards after prostrating themselves, then disappearing into the dark night to set off to the temple, the last stop on their journey.

11.30 p.m. The Baidongpos and the children are welcomed by women with white ceremonial scarves. Then they all sit and are served beer or tea. Like the Lorjangpos before them, the Baidongpos once more sing their entire repertoire, but instead of the warrior's hat, it is the wooden horse they put in the basket, which is presented to the couple who requested their intervention.



It has gone more than 2 a.m. when the ceremony comes to an end and the singers can retire, leaving the vet, his wife and their relatives to go home. For the Baidongpos, there is no question of resting. Before sunrise, they still have to go to the Buddhist temple to sing all their songs and finally a *sekso*, an improvised ‘closing song’ made up of verses taken from different songs. Its harmony and virtuosity is a feat, and some *sekso* are remembered, as is the chief of the fraternity who composed it.

Then, once again they have to meet the Mokphēpos in Mane Areng to receive ceremonial scarves from them. Together, they go to the Thongdok (Akhao) house to get rid of the clothes that mark them as Baidongpos, to receive ‘tradesman beer’ from the ‘House mothers’ and to trade it for the Horse, thus re-enacting the famous episode that took place between the Tibetan tradesman Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo and the Thongdok Umus—an episode which the Sherdukpen see through a rather hazy past.

All of this has to be over before sunrise. If they are late, if the star called ‘the light messenger’ (*sang kla*) which announces dawn rises in the sky, the trick is to close all openings (doors and windows) through which the very first daylight enters the house and to consider that it is still night-time.

### *3. To Drink the Beer of the Gods*

While the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos sing in Jogar Kamcha and then go to the Gompa, in Sri Kamcha, the lochang or ‘the beer of the Gods’ is opened and

heated. This special beer has been made on the seventh day of the tenth Tibetan lunar month—1<sup>st</sup> December in 2011—in a sheltered space within the monastery enclosure, symbolically closed for the occasion by a forked branch planted in the ground, a symbol whose meaning is known to everyone (Fig. 17).

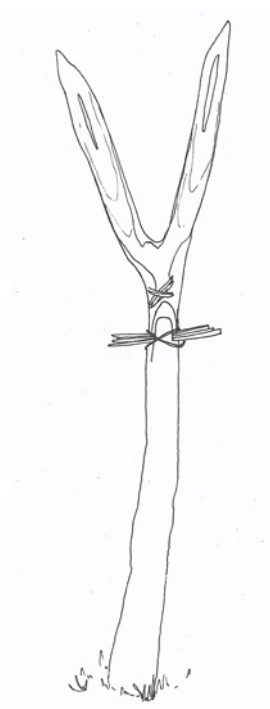


Fig. 17. Forked branch indicating forbidden entry

The beer has been drawn and stored in casks by women who have lost their husbands during the last year. Called *Lochangmus*, ‘the women *mu* [dedicated] to the beer of the Gods’, these widows are chosen by the Council and fulfil this function for three years. In this

year 2011, there are two of them and they are both Chaos: one of them belongs to the Mejiji clan and comes from Mingmachur; the other is Megēji and lives in Diksi. They arrived the day before and sleep with the Khikzizis and the Changmepos in the draughty Sri Kamcha building because, besides making this beer according to a secret process, they are in charge of serving it.

On the Sri Kamcha esplanade, girls and boys gather around small fires and chat while waiting to be served. The honour of being the first to taste the 'beer of the Gods' is given to the Gaonburas\*. In their absence, no important meeting or village ceremony can take place. The beer is then served to the House representatives and to the Khikzizis, as well as to everyone present, whatever their age or sex. Usually, 'drinking the beer of Gods' is a cheerful and convivial moment, but this year a clash arises between a Khikspu representative and the Khikzizis who refuse to acknowledge what the former is reproaching them for. It casts a chill over the assembly. Attempts are made on either side to calm the quarrelsome men in order to avoid a fight but the party spirit has gone. Once the beer has been drunk, everyone goes home.

Before they leave the esplanade in Sri Kamcha, the Tsokbos from the six Thong clans symbolically hand over their 'royal' clothes and accessories to the Khikzizi priests. Their shiny, colourful brocade clothes – a dress, a waistcoat and a shirt – are carefully folded and their two belts are laid in a square bamboo plaited basket with the silver reliquary-jewels, the knife in its intricate scabbard and, on top of the pile, the hat (*tsok za*) topped by its red tassel.

## CHAPTER 8

### *The Fifth Day*

#### *1. Presenting the Costumes in Sri Kamcha*

10 a.m. The sun is already high in the sky. In Sri Kamcha, people are slowly waking up. The two widows wash dishes and clothes at the water tap. The eldest of the Khikzisis warms himself in the sun. He dozes, resting on the large stone associated with Asu Gyaptong, the Ancestor. As usual, Rinchin Norbu Megēji is working. Using the bamboo poles brought from the mountains and which have been taken from the hayracks, he makes short-lived racks on which he will offer to the gods the costumes of some of the Khiksaba actors: the Tsokbos, the Khikzisis, their Changmepo helpers, but also the drum player Durio. The latter, or rather the clothes that symbolise his function, occupy first place at the top of the row. As though tied onto a mannequin is the leather cap covered with one of the pieces of cotton in which the areca nuts were kept and that he used as a hat, the piece of white fabric that he was wearing, a knife hanging on a belt, a portative silver reliquary and a necklace made out of large Tibetan-like coral beads, as well as the mandatory woven woollen bag. Then come the brocade costumes of the first two Tsokbo Asus (the ‘king of the Thongdok clan’ and the ‘king of the Thongchi clan’) along with their accessories. Then the Khikzisis’ costumes are laid out in order of age: the elders’ horned hats *keng guthung* and the younger Khikzisis’ silk caps, dark red shawls, plaited

silver necklaces, impressive *khik namkhör* necklaces made of semi-precious stones, intricate silver reliquaries and Tibetan knives. Finally, at the very end hang the Changmepos' clothes, also arranged on the racks following the usual order (Thongdok, Thongchi, Thongon, Musobi, Thongdok Chung and Khrame): *changme sinap* shawls, reliquaries in various shapes, knives and shoulder bags. (Colour Plate XXIV).

## 2. Dough Reliquaries and Wooden Penises

After waking up late and sometimes with great difficulty, the groups that took part in the festival set out once more on the House tour, but this time to collect whatever is needed to organize the next day's picnics and to receive from the women the *khik gao* that are kept upstairs in the loft under the roof. These 'necklace-reliquaries'—from *khik* necklace and *gao* (Tib. *ga'u*) reliquary—are a flour dough copy of the different types of Tibetan reliquaries worn as necklaces around the neck for special occasions: square- or round-shaped reliquaries in silver filigree, a tubular reliquary, a reliquary displaying two tiger teeth, etc. These *khik gao* are also given to visiting guests and to children who eat them at once! The latter also receive, two to three centimetre long, little wooden penises that are carved with a knife by the host out of tender wood and mounted onto a white woollen thread to be worn around the neck. These miniature penises are called *lök* or *yaling*, like the large wooden penises that hang under the roofs of houses to protect the inhabitants from envious looks and from the harm they cause.

In addition, the *bropo* 'performers, dancers' receive two jars of alcohol (or of malt to make beer), two measures of dry husked rice, and large fruit and vegetable necklaces arranged in a way that looks distinctively like the male sexual organ. Here, two fat red tomatoes are placed as testicles on both sides of a small cucumber playing the part of the penis. There, two potatoes chosen for their round shape or two clementines surround a large red pepper or a banana. There again, a bias-cut piece of sugarcane hangs between two impressive grapefruits (Colour Plate XXI).

These gifts in kind are part of a game between the women of the house and the dancers, the former preventing the latter from leaving until they have performed enough songs and dances, the latter not being shy about telling coarse jokes and making suggestive gestures towards the younger women. In a more refined atmosphere, free of any vulgarity, the Khikzizi priests also receive their share for the next day's picnic at the foot of the rough wooden ladder.

After having visited the nine Houses, the ex-Tsokbos, the Lorjangpos, the Baidongpos accompanied by the now shieldless Mokphēpos visit the Bako Asu, Sang Tsering Musobi, then the first Gaonbura\*, Nawang Norbu Khriime, the second Gaonbura\*, Wangchu Thongdok, and, if they have enough time, also the senior members of the Council.

Each group is received according to the same protocol. In each house, they are served beer with fried fish, peas or lentils. Then, after dancing in honour of their host, who expresses his compliments, the group receives rice, alcohol (generally a bottle of whisky) and

money of which he gives back a small part as a counter-gift (for example a handful of rice for several handfuls received or ten rupees for 110 rupees received) so that prosperity may prevail in the house that welcomes them.

One more dance and the men go back, most of them somewhat inebriated after five days' celebration, to Sri Kamcha esplanade. Many women wear the traditional costume—the Council recommended it this year—and heavy necklaces (*kbik*) where turquoise beads, corals and pearls are set alternately around a reliquary. These women represent the Khikspus and have come to bring to the priests the gifts prescribed by customary law. For the time being they are drinking beer and tea and eating fruit and biscuits near small fires, while in the kitchens the widows are busy preparing the *gomchi*.

### 3. Offerings to the *Khikzizis*

10.30 p.m. Sitting on the cement stands above the esplanade, wearing tight, down jackets, a shawl over their shoulders and a woollen hat or fur cap on their heads, the Gaonburas\* wait for everything to be ready to be able to start the ceremony. The Tibetan mats, unfolded on the cement benches they use as seats, do not isolate them properly from the rising humidity. Their tea goes cold quickly in their Chinese porcelain cups, even though they are fitted with a lid.

To the left of the two chiefs sit the Khikspu representatives with, in front of each of them, a bowl for alcohol, a round colourful tiffin made of woven bamboo for dry food, a wooden box that opens out into two bowls, one for fried fish or vegetables, the other for spicy

broth. They have kept all these utensils with them throughout the festival, along with the multicoloured woollen bag in which they carry them.

To the right of the Gaonbura\*, very dignified with his small round metallic glasses, is Tsering. A 56-year-old man, he belongs to the Mejiji clan and he has been an Asu Dechao for over twenty years. This title is supposed to mean 'the elder *asu* expert speaker *dechao/duchao*'. His place at the head of the rank indicates the importance of his function, but the height of his seat—he is sitting lower than the Gaonburas\* who are chosen only from Thong clans—shows that the social hierarchy prevails.

10.30 p.m. Standing, facing the Gaonburas\* and the Khikspu representatives, the Mokphēpos dance in line and sing. They hold hands, set the rhythm of their dance by hitting the ground with their foot, then raising their arms in the air, like the Sherdukpens do when they dance at weddings or on other festive occasions. They no longer hold shields or spears and they have removed all the decorations that turned their yak hair hats into warrior hats.

At 11 p.m., the women stand up and one after another they go and give the offerings they have brought to the priests sitting before the hayracks in which the clans' long bamboos stood a few days before. In their bamboo woven baskets are long red *mong* peppers, some *sorjong* and *kaji*, foods cooked in oil and pepper—fish, cheese and vegetables—, alcohol in an aluminium jar and a silver bowl decorated with three butter marks in which they will pour the alcohol before serving it. When all the bustle is over, the low tables set up before the



Khikzizis are covered in nine identical silver bowls filled with *phok*, each belonging to one of the nine clans that make up Sherdukpen society. In front of the tables, close to a censer in which odoriferous juniper leaves are burning, are seven large circular baskets set on the ground and filled with the different foods that have been offered.

#### *4. Asu Dechao's Speech*

It is midnight. A Kachinpo motions to Tsering who stands up. Standing, bareheaded and barefoot, a white ceremonial scarf tied around his neck and draped in a large white silk shawl which reaches his ankles, he salutes the Khikzizis and the Gaonburas\*, then starts talking, softly and respectfully, showing his deference by the tone of his voice (Fig. 18). On the esplanade, the chattering stops at once. Everyone turns to this small thin, solemn figure who is describing the royal lineage from which was born Asu Gyaptong, the mythical ancestor who taught the Sherdukpens everything they know, and who then recounts his conquests over the kings from neighbouring kingdoms. Using colourful and poetical language on quite another register than everyday language, he lists the sacred places in Sherdukpen country, praises the mountain-gods—namely Soro Khit and Sung Khit—and ends by thanking the Lorjangpos, the Baidongpos and above all the Khikzizis who have done so much for the Khiksaba festival to take place under the best omens. He talks about their 'silver sticks', suggesting with this metaphor the priests' great worth, as well as their great age, which in Sherdukpen society is synonymous with knowledge and wisdom.



Fig. 18. Asu Dechao, the 'expert speaker'

Asu Dechao's speech is the same from one year to the next. He might simply add an elegantly expressed compliment if a noteworthy guest is present. This speech, which he knows by heart, has not been passed down to him by his father, as would have been customary since Asu Dechao's responsibility is hereditary, but by Pema Dorje Thongon, a man who for forty-five years was Rupa's Gaonbura\* and is remembered by all who knew him for his charisma, his talent as an orator, as well as his ability to run the community's business. Indeed, Pema Dorje supported Tsering and his three siblings when they lost their parents. He kept the only girl with him in Rupa, and sent the boys to *ashram*-run schools in Assam. At the end of

primary school, Tsering was sent to Delhi where he learnt to be a tailor, before coming back to Rupa to get married and settle down. People say that he is just as capable with words as he is with thread and scissors. This speech, learnt 'from mouth to mouth' from the Gaonbura\* when he was 26 or 27 years old, was recited by him in public for the first time in 1989.

Once Asu Dechao's speech is over, the Gaonburas\* make a speech to close the ceremony and Khiksaba festival. On the Sri Kamcha esplanade, about a hundred people—only adults and mostly women—wait for the distribution of *gomchi*, a whitish dough cut into small 1 cm x 1 cm squares whose colour and consistency make it look like tofu. It is in fact not soya but red millet or *mukung*. Indeed, this ritual food is made from the dough spread inside barrels in which the 'beer of Gods' has been poured to make them more impervious.

Once more, the Mokphêpos are in charge of serving the food.

## CHAPTER 9

### *The Sixth and Last Day*

#### *1. Sharing and Eating the Sheep*

Today, the last day of the Khiksaba festival, four of the sheep given by villagers of Mandala Phutung to the villagers from Rupa are killed, cooked and eaten. One has been given to the Khikzizi priests and to the Changmepos, the second to the Tsokbos and the Gaonburas\*, the third to the members of the *Blu* Council, and the fourth to the Lorjangpos, the Baidongpos and to all those who have followed them on their travels: the Mokphēpos and the Batpo children who carry the Horse and the bells. This last sheep, that was skinned early this morning, is now being cooked outside the Abu Chilu house. The offal is fried in spicy oil, other parts are boiled in a soup flavoured with Sichuan pepper, and the choice parts are roasting over embers.

Inside the house, the Lorjangpos and the Baidongpos sit in groups in order of age along the walls on either side of the fire: the Lorjangpos are on the left-hand side as you go in, at the back of the room; the Baidongpos are on the right-hand side, near the front door. For once, given the privilege of their young age, the children are served first and eat with obvious pleasure the meat they are offered. Their elders wait their turn while drinking the beer and scotch they received the day before to thank them for taking part in the festival. The

Mokphēpos, who woke at dawn to prepare the food, are now in charge of serving it, ensuring that everyone has enough to eat and drink.

## *2. Thanks and Farewell*

For this great closing feast, care should be taken not to forget anyone: that would be a bad omen. Skewers of mutton are prepared for those who could not come, by threading a bamboo shard into fat pieces of meat. The guests have been generously served: now is the time for speeches and thanks. The eldest man present speaks. He first thanks the children for their unfaltering commitment and gives them 30 rupees each on condition that they promise to come back again next year. Then he turns to the mother of Khikspu Abu Chilu and compliments her at length on her hospitality. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room, looking very serious, she listens attentively while the Mokphēpos tie a white ceremonial scarf around her neck and place a winnowing basket in front of her, containing the sheep's head resting on its four legs, its skin rolled up into a ball, as well as a bowl of *phok*. The mother of Khikspu Abu Chilu lost her husband recently, so the party will not be held at her house, as would be the custom. Only a few dances will be performed there. The Mokphēpos are just getting ready to dance. Just as they did the day before at the Gaonburas\*' place, they dance in line while singing Sherdukpen songs that everyone here knows. Then, like the Batpo children before them, they receive money for their part in the Khiksaba festival: a 100-rupee banknote each. As a thank you, they do a new dance and sing a blessing song this time.

In the Dingla house, a few hundred metres below, the Gaonburas\* and the men who this year acted as Tsokbos gather around a similar feast. A feast is held at the 'Panchayat house' too, a house within the monastery where Tukpen Village Council members are hosted, as well as on the esplanade in Sri Kamcha, which serves as the headquarters for the Khikzizi priests and their Changmepo helpers. Everywhere in the village, friends and families also gather around good meals and alcoholic drinks. With this 'picnic' frenzy—the English term is used by the Sherdukpen people for these meals taken together but inside—and with the promise of sleeping in the next day, the Khiksaba festival ends late at night on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2011.'

In two days' time, like every three years, the customary laws will be discussed and the fines imposed on those who do not respect them will be revised—but that is another story.

As a conclusion, let us leave the final words to Khandu Thongdok who accompanied us throughout the festival:

Taking part in the festival as a Mokphēpo has been amongst one of the greatest achievements of my life. It is only the Mokphēpos who experience the entire festival from scratch to finish. It is definitely not easy and if one wants to take part as a Mokphēpo he needs to make up his mind for there is no looking back once you have volunteered. At one point of time on my way up the hill, thoughts of regret did flood my mind. But then, I asked our spirit gods to forgive me for the wicked thoughts and after that, the only thing that was in my mind was 'yes, come on,

you can do this'. After the festival I continuously dreamt of the journey in the mountains for about twenty days. It is said that the *Lo* (Gods) stay with us for some time even after the festival is over. It was tough, but then it was magical, and I know I have been blessed immensely.

## *Glossary 1 - Place Names*

Many of these place names can be located thanks to the various maps in the book.

Arunachal Pradesh	Indian state bordering China. Sherdukpens live in the westernmost part of this state.
Assam	An Indian state, south of Sherdukpen country.
Assamese border	The Sherdukpens have a common border with Assam, which is c. 30 km south of Rupa.
Bhutan	The Bhutan border is 20 km west of Sherdukpen country, with West Monpa country in between. Bhutanese merchants still come to Sherdukpen country.
Bomdila	A recently developed town and administrative centre just under the Bomdi La (Bomdi Pass), that leads to Dirang and further to Tawang. Not in Sherdukpen country, but just to the north of it.
Birpur	Hindi name for Jungpam village.
Bisiri	One of the two rivers in Rochong/Doimara.
Brahmaputra	The main river in Assam.
Brokpublang	One of the Sherdukpen villages.
Bugun border	Buguns are the Sherdukpens' close neighbours
But	A village in Khoina Valley, not usually regarded as Sherdukpen.
Chamkhong	A quarter on entering old Rupa, between Mane Areng and Sri Kamcha, with a large old juniper tree.
Chilipam	One of the Sherdukpen villages.
Dekhiajuli	A town in Assam.



Dhansiri	A large river from Arunachal that flows into the Brahmaputra.
Diksi	One of the Sherdukpen villages.
Dinik Kho	The River Dinik, that flows on the eastern side of Rupa.
Dirang	An important townlet with a dzong, on the road between Rupa and Tawang.
Dochong	Alternate name for Rochong.
Doblo Kho	A river that flows through Jigao and into the Ziding Kho.
Doimara	Sherdukpen settlement, close to the earlier Dochong/Rochong camping place during the winter.
Goburu	A river in Assam, flowing from Arunachal southwards into the Brahmaputra.
Gogra	A village in Assam.
Gorbao	One of the Sherdukpen villages.
Guchu Hi	A wide open space close to Rupa, now within the stadium.
Gyaptong stadium	In Rupa, named after Asu Gyaptong
Hundi Gogra	A village in Assam.
Hundi Panbari	A village in Assam.
Jhargaon	A village in Assam.
Jigaon	An important Sherdukpen village.
Jogar Kamcha	A sacred place in Rupa, above Praoding quarter
Jungpam	A Sherdukpen village on the River Tenga (Hindi name: Birpur).
Kachari Gogra	A village in Assam.
Kakaling gate	An old gate for entry into Old Rupa, now in Rupa centre and no longer a gate, close to Mane Areng.
Khandok blang	A place in the hills during the Mokphēpos' journey.

Khitmo blang	A place in the hills during the Mokphēpos' journey.
Khoina	A village NE of Rupa, not usually regarded as Sherdukpen.
Laobari	A village in Assam.
Loblang	The Loblang sacred place in Rupa.
Lungbaktang	A Sherdukpen village.
Machu Hī	Clearing in the hills east of Rupa where Mokphēpos stop during their journey.
Maj Roumari	A village in Assam.
Mandala Puthung	A Monpa village.
Mane areng	The 'long mane' in old Rupa.
Manthing (bao)	A place close to Rupa, but across the River Dinik
Mayung tsokhan bao	A place in the hills during the Mokphēpos' journey.
Mingmachur	One of the Sherdukpen villages.
Mukuthing	One of the Sherdukpen villages.
Mushakshing	One of the Sherdukpen villages.
Naharbari	A village in Assam.
Nereng Kati	A village in Assam.
Panbari 1	A village in Assam.
Panbari 2	A village in Assam.
Phabrang Sibri	Sherdukpen name for Maj Roumari, a village in Assam.
Praoding	A quarter in Rupa, close to the River Dinik. Houses were built there only from the 1970s onwards.
Praoding Dungjor	The building, in Rupa, where Tibetan books are stored.
Rochong	The name for the Sherdukpens' winter camp. This is only jungle now. Some Sherdukpens live in the Doimara settlement, 2 km to the south.
Roumari	A village in Assam.

Rupa	Sherdukpen capital city.
Sangthung (Lu)	Mountains east of Rupa, the final destination on the Mokphēpos' journey.
Sengchung	A Bugun village.
Shergaon	An important Sherdukpen village.
Singri	The Singri temple, close to the Brahmaputra.
Sri Kamcha	An important ritual place in Rupa.
Sopai Baligaon	A village in Assam.
Srahor	Sherdukpen name for the Doimara settlement.
Tawang	A temple, market centre and town (c. 3,000 m alt.) neighbouring China.
Tenga	A river north of Rupa.
Thembang	A 'Monpa' village. Sherdukpens had good ties with it in the past, but a conflict, then a war broke out.
Thük Bao	A quarter in Rupa old town.
Thük Khong	A quarter in Rupa old town.
Thungri	One of the biggest Sherdukpen villages, c. 5 km south of Rupa centre.
Thungthung Mari	A village in Assam.
Wangho	A Bugun village, on the right-hand side of the Rupa-Bomdila road.
West Kameng	A district in western Arunachal, close to the Bhutan border.
Yang Sri Jom	A sacred place in old Rupa, between Mane Areng and Sri Kamcha.
Yi	A mythical country in one version of the Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo story. In this version, having heard about the four cardinal points, we come to Yi, probably the 'centre' according to Chinese people's perception.
Yuser	A quarter in Rupa old town
Ziding Kho	One of the two rivers encircling Rupa

Zinghan bao    A place in the hills during the Mokphēpos'  
journey

## *Glossary 2 – Non-English words in the text*

Most words in this Index are Sherdukpen words that are found in the text of this book. Some other words, used by Sherdukpens as well, are of Assamese, Hindi or Tibetan origin, and are mentioned as such: Ass. Hind. Tib. A Sanskrit origin may also be indicated: Skr.

Abu chilu	A Chao clan. In some cases, it can be considered as a 3 <sup>rd</sup> Chao clan after Dingla and Megēji.
achung	Not the eldest among brothers or sisters (chung in Thongdok Chung). See: akhao, atsan.
Adivasi	Among Sherdukpens, this label designates people from central India, often from the tea gardens. This term is not used for people from the Himalayas (Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, etc.), nor for the Assamese.
Ajilamu	Or: Ache lhamo. A type of theatrical performance using masks, widespread through the Buddhist eastern Himalayas and Tibetan plateau.
Ajilamu chkok	The 'Ajilamu' tax group
Aka	An important 'tribe' to the NE of the Sherdukpens, also called Hrusso.
akhao	Eldest among brothers or sisters (khao in Thongdok Khao).
along	Clothes, fabric.
areng	Long. See: mane areng.

ashram	Ermitage, religious school (Skr.)
Asu	Elder person.
Asu Dechao	The expert speaker.
Asu Gyaptong	The Sherdukpens' mythical ancestor.
atsan	Youngest among brothers and sisters.
Ayo Lule	A famous priestess ( <i>raoma</i> ).
Baidong Abo	A member of the Baidongpos.
Baidongpo	A group of ritual singers. They specialize in 'epic stories', mainly about Tsonqpon Norbu Zangpo and his horse. See: Lorjangpo.
Bako Asu	One of the oldest men in the village, considered to represent wisdom.
barche	A type of Lorjang ritual song.
Batpo	People who meet the warriors in the hills and bring them back to the river.
besme	The Sherdukpens' winter migration.
bhauna	A drama performance in Assam (Ass.)
Birpur	See: Jungpam.
Bisiri	Or: Bisri. A river in the lower country, close to Srahor/Doimara.
blang	An inhabited place .
Blu	Or: Bulu. Sherdukpen council.
bohita	The name for the traditional friends. Sherdukpens have in the Assam valley.
Boro	An important tribal population in Assam, also called Kachari.
Brahmaputra	The main river in Assam.
bro chaoba	To hold each other's hand to form a chain.
brop	Fireplace, hearth, cooking place.
Bropo	Performers, dancers.

Brokpublang	A Sherdukpen village.
Bugun	A neighbouring tribal community, also called Khowa.
changme sinap	Changme shawl.
Changmepo	Young boys assisting the Khikzisis during Khiksaba.
Chao	The 'lower clan' part of the Sherdukpen population. Chaos are divided into clans: Dingla, Megēji, Mejiji. See: Thong.
Chilipam	A Sherdukpen village;
chitpo (guthung)	The black felt hat with 'fingers', widespread in the region.
chkok	Or: chokok. A tax group.
chökor	A Buddhist festival.
dachak	A traditional foodstuff.
dao	Jungle knife, machete (Ass.)
dardang	Religious flags (Tib.).
dedza yam	Stone house.
Dhansiri	Name of a river (Ass.).
dhup	Incense (Ass. Hind.).
Diksi	Or: Dikshi. A Sherdukpen village.
ding	Main beam of a house.
Dingla	A Chao clan, a title.
Dinik	A river (di- is the Boro-Garo prefix for rivers).
Dirang	An important village between Rupa and Tawang.
do	Spirits. See: phu, ne.
Doblo Kho	The river flowing through Jigaon. It flows into Ziding Kho before reaching Rupa.

Doimara	A settlement, close to the earlier Rochong camping place during winter. The name is probably of Boro origin.
domang	Buddhist sacred books (Tib. <i>mdo-mangs</i> ).
Dormail	A settlement close to Doimara and Foothill.
durio	The drum beater (Ass.)
dzo	Tea.
dzong	Spear.
dzongklong	A festival, now abandoned in Rupa, but staged about twenty years ago.
gachen	Some traditional food.
gamosa	The traditional Assamese white and red scarf (Ass.).
gao	Reliquary (Tib. <i>ga'u</i> ).
gaonbura	Village chief ('village-elder') (Ass.).
gemu	Queen (Tib. <i>rgyal-mo</i> ).
gepu	King (Tib. <i>rgyal-po</i> ).
Goburu	A river in Assam.
gomchi	A tofu-like whitish dough, made of millet.
gomchinpo	A group of 12 colourful dancers, supposed to be Tibetans, who wait for the Mokphēpos when they come down from the hills.
gompa	Buddhist temple (Tib. <i>dgon-pa</i> )
gompa chkok	The 'Gompa area' tax group.
Gorbao	Or: Gorbaw. A Sherdukpen village.
guthung	Hat, headgear.
han nyik ung khitmo ho ho	'One two three Prosperity !', a frequent motto during the Khiksaba festival.
hangho	White wool thread, used during the <i>Hangho noba</i> rituals.



hangho noba	'Stretching the wool thread'. There are three rituals of this kind during Khiksaba: <i>Kho hangho noba</i> on the Ziding Kho side; in Loblang; and <i>Jumu hangho noba</i> on the Dinik Kho side.
hathi	Elephant (Hindi, Ass.).
hī	A wide open and more or less flat space.
hor	A place, a spot. See: Srahor.
Hrusso	The name Aka people give to themselves.
ingti	Sweet potatoes.
jabrang	Sichuan pepper (Ass.). The Sherdukpen word is <i>sö</i> .
jambang chaluk	A kind of creeper used to adorn the juniper tree in Loblang.
jhola	Bag (Hindi)
jiring	Men, people, human beings
Jumu	An important group of local gods and goddesses. Their mountain range can be seen from Rupa above the end of the Dinik Valley.
jumu hangho noba	One of the three <i>hangho noba</i> 'stretching the wool' rituals.
Jumu sing	A southern part of Rupa, on the road to Thungri, towards the Jumu mountain range.
jumu	Traditional food.
Jungpam	A Sherdukpen village in the Tenga Valley, also called Birpur.
Kachari	Assamese term for the Boro (and Dimasa) people.
Kachinpo	Messenger, go-between.
kaji	Fried slices of spiced fish or of fried vegetables in chilli.

karma mindu	The ‘Seven sisters Stars’ (Tib. <i>skar-ma min bdun</i> ).
keng	Horn (of animal, of hat).
keng guthung	The two-horned hat of the Khikzizi.
kerap	Story (esp. in ritual songs).
khampo	A group of about ten boys who cheer and goad the Mokphēpos during Khiksaba.
Khamsang ame jomo	(Lorjang speech), a goddess of the Jumu group.
khata	The (often white) Buddhist ritual scarf (Tib. <i>kha-btags</i> ).
khe	(Lorjang speech) Areca nut. In Sherdukpen: <i>sali</i> .
khiksaba	The main Sherdukpen festival, usually in December.
khik	Ritual necklace.
khik gao	Necklace and reliquaries, especially the dough imitations given during Khiksaba.
khik namkhör	Necklace of semi-precious stones.
khikspu	Head (‘owner’) of a Clan House, man or woman or both.
khikspu umu	Hostess (‘Mother’) of the khikspu or Clan House.
khikzizi	Traditional Sh. priests. They are from Chao clans.
khit	God, Deity.
khitmo ho ho	‘Prosperity !’
kho	1. Water, river. 2. Tax, see khomi.
kho dok khruk	‘Head of the great river’, a collective name for the four villages Gorbao, Diksi, Mingmachur and Mukuthing.

kho hangho noba	A ritual during Khiksaba: 'stretching the thread on the (Ziding) river-side'. See hangho, and noba.
kho satpa	The assembly for collecting taxes.
khomi	'Tax-payer', citizen.
Khrime	The 6 <sup>th</sup> of the six Thong clans, a title.
khuk	Shield.
krio	A Sherdukpen motto or war cry.
lama	Priest (Tib.)
lhapchang	Fumigation ritual (Tib.).
lichu	1. Clothes 2. A type of Lorjang song.
lo	God, spirit (Tib. lha).
Loblang	A sacred place in Rupa, 'god residence'
lochang	Beer of the Gods, a special beverage made only once a year.
Lochangmu	The (two) women chosen for preparing <i>lochang</i> .
lök	A name for 'penis', for instance those carved and hung above the entrance to a house, or those made out of flour dough that are given with <i>khik gao</i> . See yaling.
Lome khar	The earlier citadel in Sri Kamcha, now in ruins.
Lorjangpo	A group of ritual singers. See Baidongpo.
loyak	A yak dedicated to local deities, today a young cow in Rupa (but still a yak in the Khoina version of the festival), that is set free during Khiksaba.
lu	Mountain.
Lungbaktang	Or Lüngbaktang. A Sherdukpen village;

ma khuk	The vegetal harnesses used by the warriors to transport the bamboo poles.
ma san	Bamboo ropes.
ma shik	A hard and straight type of bamboo.
Mandala Puthung	A Monpa village.
mane	A wall-like structure to support religious stone inscriptions (Tib. ma-ni).
Manthing	A place close to Rupa, across the Dinik kho.
Megēji	A Chao clan, a title.
Mejiji	A Chao clan, a title.
mi	Person (see: khomi).
Miji	A neighbouring tribal community, north of the Akas.
Mingmachur	A Sherdukpen village.
mithun	A species of ox ( <i>Bos frontalis</i> ) that has been kept half wild by Himalayan and Naga-Kuki tribes, and used for ceremonial sacrifices.
mok	Fight, war.
Mokphē	Warrior; group participating in Khiksaba.
Mokphēpo	The warriors, now esp. during Khiksaba.
mong	Red chilli.
Monoji	A Chao group.
Monpa	A vague term for several distinct populations in the eastern Himalayas. In western Arunachal Pradesh, west and north of the Sherdukpen country, there are (linguistically) two different Monpa groups: one lives west of the Bhutan border and on the other side of it, the other begins before the Sela pass, but is mainly characteristic of the Tawang Valley.
mu, umu	Mother.
mukhu	Nuts.

mukung	Millet.
Mukuthing	A Sherdukpen village.
Mushakshing	A Sherdukpen village.
Musobi	The 4 <sup>th</sup> of the six Thong clans, a title
muthig	Pearl necklace (Tib. <i>mu-tig</i> 'pearl' is from Skr. <i>muktâ</i> 'pearl').
namblu	Moon.
namblu mok chuba	Lunar eclipse.
namghar	A village temple in Assam (Ass.)
nangpa	'Insiders'. In Buddhist countries this often means 'Buddhist' (Tib. <i>nang</i> 'inside'). See: phyipa.
nayü	A precious stone, a turquoise, in some versions of Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo's story.
ne	Sacred place. See: phu, do.
no-ba	To stretch, to spread. Especially 'to stretch <i>hangho</i> thread' during the three <i>hangho noba</i> rituals.
Norbu Zangpo	See: Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo.
nyima dawa	The sun and moon symbol (Tib.).
nyingmapa	Tibetan religious denomination.
nyü	Fish.
nyūlan	A big fish, not found in the Dinik kho
nyūning cheba	Fish Feast during Khiksaba.
panchayat	Assembly (Hindi)
phok	Fermented (usually maize) 'beer'. See: photko.
phok tso	The ritual of pounding <i>phok</i>
photko	Distilled <i>phok</i> .
phu	Mountain gods. See: do, ne.

phun chan	Bunch of 'flowers'. Ritual multicoloured bunches made of leaves.
phun chan kho	Poles with <i>phun chan</i> 'flowers' carried to Sri Kamcha.
phyipa	'Outsiders'. In Buddhist countries: 'non Buddhist' (Tib. <i>phyi</i> 'outside'). See: nangpa.
pita	A special flour cake.
po	A suffix indicating a person or a group.
posi	Incense (Tib. <i>spos</i> ).
posi kho	Purifying water.
puja	Religious service, prayer (Hindi, Ass.)
puti, poti	Sherdukpen form of a word common in India and meaning 'sacred book' (from Skr. <i>pustaka</i> 'book').
rabse	Altar in a house, often along the wall facing the main door.
raoma	A powerful priest(ess). See: Ayo Lule.
ringgo	A black long-sleeved jacket.
rishi	1. Primeval witness of the cosmic order. 2. Ascetic, sage.
Rochong	Name of the earlier Sherdukpen camping ground during winter.
rung	Clan (there are six Thong clans and three Chao clans).
Rupa	Main Sherdukpen town.
saba	Ritual, festival.
sabe	Male traditional garment.
sali	Areca nut.
Sang kla	Name of a 'star' (probably Venus), the cosmic messenger.

sekso	A final song in the Lorjang or Baidong repertoire.
Sher	Shergaon, the ‘Sher village’.
shok shok	The bark of the <i>shok shok</i> tree, a kind of incense tree.
simli dom dom	A necklace for the <i>loyak</i> , the sacred calf that is set free during Khiksaba.
sin	Gold.
sin dimik	(Baidong speech) ‘Golden lock (for the house door)’
Sinchaji	Or: Sinchāji. A Chao clan, a title.
sindhur	Vermillion powder (Hind.)
sö	Sichuan pepper, a kind of chilli. The Assamese name is <i>jabrang</i> . The vowel <i>ö</i> is actually nasalised.
sorjong	Small pyramid-shaped cakes, made of flour dough and steamed. Often with <i>kaji</i> .
Soro Khit	Or: Sro Khit. An important local god.
Soro Nambang Lakhin	Local gods (in the Mokphēpos narrative).
spu	Owner.
spu speng	A family herd.
sra	Or: sara. Wild goat.
Srahor	‘Place of the Wild Goat’, the name of the Sherdukpen present-day winter settlement
Sri	Or: Siri. Sacred stone(s).
Sri Kamcha	An important ritual place in Rupa, named after a <i>sri</i> .
Sung khit	Better than: Sungkhik. A major mountain god.

Tapu Tashi	Name of Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo's famous horse. This Tibetan name means stallion ( <i>ta-phu</i> ) of good omen ( <i>tashi</i> ).
tashi	Good omen (Tib.)
Tenga	An eastward flowing river, north of Rupa ('cold' in Ass. ?).
thang, than	Rope, rope for suspending bags or loads from foreheads.
thok	Bag, areca nut bags.
Thong	The 'upper' class of the Sherdukpen. population, divided into six clans.
Thongchi	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> of the six Thong clans, a title.
Thongdok	'Big Thong', the major Thong clan, a title.
Thongdok Akhao	'Elder Thongdok', the 1 <sup>st</sup> of the six Thong clans.
Thongdok chung	'Minor Thongdok', the 5 <sup>th</sup> of the six Thong clans.
Thongdok mu	The mother of the Thongdok. For instance in the Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo story.
Thongō	Older form of Thongon.
Thongon	The 3 <sup>rd</sup> of the six Thong clans.
Thongon chkok	The Thongon tax group.
thük	Village, a quarter in the old part of Rupa.
Thük Akhao	'The elder village', an old part of Rupa.
thük chkok	The 'Village' tax group.
Thük Khong	The 'Old Village', an area in Rupa old town.
thük khong chkok	The 'Old Village' tax group.
Thungri	An important Sherdukpen village.
tingkar	White circles around the ankles of a horse. (Tib.)



ton	Winter.
tonnyüpo	The Sherdukpen collectors sent to Assam before Khiksaba.
tsing	Drum.
tsokpo, tsokbo	Representatives for the clans. The Chao clans tsokpo are called 'naked tsokpos'.
tsokza	The hat of the Tsokpos.
tsong chang	A Baidong song.
tsongpon	Merchant (Tib.), used mainly to refer to Norbu Zangpo.
Tsongpon Norbu Zangpo	A mythical merchant who, after a long journey through the neighbouring countries, eventually sold his horse to the Sherdukpens. His story is the basis for several songs sung by the Baidongpos.
Tukpen	The actual designation of the (Sher)dukpen. It is not valid for Shergaon people.
wang	Festival in autumn.
Wangser chkok	The Wangser tax group.
yaling	Penis. See: lök.
yam	House.
Yuser	A quarter in Rupa old town.
Yuser chkok	The Yuser tax group.
Ziding Kho	One of the two rivers encircling Rupa.
zin spinba	The portion of a communal dish reserved for a guest.
zo	Attic, the upper part of the house, where goods are kept.
zük	1. Star 2. Stag, deer.