

Historical Roots, Spiritual Significance and the Health Benefits of mKhempa-lJong gNyes Tshachu (hot spring) in Lhuntshe*

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Abstract

Bhutan is a country blessed with many rich natural medicinal resources such as minerals, animals, plants, sman-chu (medicinal waters) and tshachu (hot springs). While minerals, animal parts and medicinal plants are used by the Institute of Traditional Medicine Services (ITMS) for compounding herbal medicines to provide health care services in Bhutan, tshachu are popularly used by the public as an alternative curative therapy for treating various diseases. Given such inherent health benefits that the tshachu reportedly have, the ITMS has carried out research on seven popular tshachu in Bhutan with a view to document, identify, validate and classify them according to the therapeutic properties described in the gSo-ba Rig-pa texts. Amongst all the seven tshachu studied, Kurtoe mKhem-pa lJong gNyes tshachu (in Lhuntshe-located in the north-east of Bhutan) was found to have profound religious, spiritual and historical significance, supported in many texts going back as far as the 8th century. It was reported that this tshachu was blessed by Guru Rimpoche and for the

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benefit of all sentient beings his manifestation Terton Pema Lingpa revealed it in the year 1475. Mainly for these reasons, it is considered the most sacred tshachu in Bhutan and people believe that it also cleanses one's defilements and sins. The literature reports the presence of nine related pools in the mKhem-pa Wjong gNyes areas. However, only three pools in close proximity, called Guru tshachu, Tshe-dpag-med-tshachu and mKha-'gro'i tshachu exist today. The users of this tshachu are mainly the people of Kurtoe, Kurman, Mongar, Tashigang, Tashi Yangtse and Bumthang. It is estimated that every year about twenty groups of at least 10 people each, visit this sacred tshachu. The study carried out by ITMS in 23rd January 2001 identified and established the main medicinal substances as well as the therapeutic properties of these three pools. The identification was based on their organoleptic properties.

Introduction

Bhutan is a country visited and blessed by a great Buddhist saint Guru Padma Sambhava (Guru Rimpoche) in the 8th century (Year 746 A.D)¹. With the visit of Guru Rimpoche and the advent of Mahayana Buddhism, gSo-ba Rig-pa, the art of healing sciences based on the Buddhist tradition, took root in Bhutan². At that time, Khandro Yeshe Tshogyal, a consort and a disciple of Guru Rimpoche meditated on rdu-rtsi sman-gi bchued-lan brgya-tsa brgyad at Mon-kha Nye-ring, Singye Dzong³. From one of the oral historical accounts, it is told that her meditation practice resulted in the emission of an unusual medicinal aroma in her meditation cave that diffused to nearby places like Khoma, Pangkhar, Gangla, Khoema and Lugchu under Lhuntshe Dzongkhag. The people of those localities pledged their respect and faith to Khandro Yeshe

¹ *Slob dpon* Padma Tshedwang (1994). *History of Bhutan*, Thimphu: National Library, p.26.

² Wangchuk, P., Wangchuk, D. and Aagaard-Hansen, Jens (2007). "Traditional Bhutanese Medicine (gSo-ba Rig-pa): An Integrated Part of The Formal Health Care Services," *Southeast Asian J.Trop.Med Public Health*, 2007, 38 (1), pp.161-167.

³ Nyoshul Khenpo Jamyang Dorji Rinpoche. *Zokchen Chos-jung*, Volume 1, New Delhi: Indraprastha Press (CBT), p.181.

Tshogyal and thereafter several rich elites became her patrons. Today, at her meditation cave stands a mortar and pestle that processed the medicinal materials to make a secret magical concoction. According to the oral transmission of Guru Rimpoche on *gter-rlung* (treasures), this secret magical medicinal concoction was then preserved as a *gTer* (treasure) at Mon Chumo Phug at Paro. The same treasure was later revealed by Guru Tsheten Gyeltshen, thus helping to spread and propagate *gSo-ba Rig-pa* in Bhutan⁴. The Bhutanese then learned to utilize available medicinal resources such as plants, minerals, animal parts, *tshachu* (hot springs) and *smanchu* (medicinal water) which were found abundantly in the country. For this reason, Bhutan also came to be known as *sMan-ljong*: The Land of Medicine⁵.

Tshachu are very popular in Bhutan. Unlike in other countries, where *tshachu* are more commonly used for recreation and relaxation, in Bhutan they are mainly used as a therapy for treating diseases. Every year, people from all walks of life: old and young, men and women, and rich and poor flock at the *tshachu* sites. Mindful of the health benefits that *tshachu* deliver to the Bhutanese people, the Institute of Traditional Medicine Services (ITMS) under the Ministry of Health carried out a series of research efforts on these popular *tshachu*. The main objectives of such research were to document, identify, validate and classify the *tshachu* according to the therapeutic properties described in the *gSo-ba Rig-pa* texts and ultimately to support their inclusion as an alternative medicinal therapy for the treatment of disease.

Definition and distinguishing features of *tshachu*

Tshachu literally means “hot water” and could include the

⁴ Stag-sgang mkhas-mchog nGya-dBang-bLo-gRos (1981). *Chos-'byung ngo-mtshar gtam-gi rol-mtsho*, Volume II, Paro: Ugyen Tempai Gyaltshen Publication, p.369.

⁵ Dorji, Yeshe (2005). “Sman-ljong zer-wai khungs,” in *Proceedings of the 5th Colloquium on Tangible and Intangible Culture of Bhutan*, Paro: National Museum of Bhutan, pp.55-64.

man-made boiled water that is created in artificial conditions. However, as defined in the gSo-ba Rig-pa tradition, *tshachu* in this context means only that water originating from a “natural source and emanating from natural phenomena which have associated hot properties”⁶. Given its origin, the water contains a combination of coal (*rdo-sol*), sulphur (*mu-zi*) and limestone (*rdo-sho*). Because of the presence of these minerals most of the *tshachu* have medicinal value. Spiritually, it is believed that *tshachu* owe their origin to the good wishes and blessings of Buddhas and Boddhisattavas. Hence, almost all *tshachu* are also held to be *gNyes* (sacred sites).

Materia medica of *tshachu*

According to our tradition, the origin of all natural resources is credited as a creation of the gods. It is believed that when the world was created, the sun and the moon were taken from the heavenly *Bumpa*, a container where the primordial substance was churned by the gods. The last churning of this primordial substance produced a holy fluid called *dhue-tsi* that cured every illness. The invention of *dhue-tsi* ensured immortality of the gods and preserved it for themselves. A demon, who knew this secret, disguised itself as a god and tried to drink the fluid. Unfortunately, other gods recognized it and beheaded it with a sword. The chalice containing the fluid fell down and was spilled. Wherever a drop of this heavenly *dhue-tsi* fell, plants, animals, minerals, *tshachu*, *sman-chus* and spring waters with medicinal properties grew abundantly⁷. Fortunately, Bhutan could have been one of the prime spots where this heavenly *dhue-tsi* fell, since it is blessed with a plentiful supply of all of these. So far, about ten *tshachu* have been formally reported in Bhutan (Table no. 1) but the number may be more than this.

⁶ Thogyé Rinchen Gyonpo (1977). *Rtsa-rgyud-'grel-pa-nga-dbang-rig-gnas-rgya-mtsho*, Volume 78, sMan-tsis-shes-rig-spen-dzod, Leh, Ladakh, p.51.

⁷ Dorji, Pema and Morrisco, Paula (1989). *An Introduction to Traditional Medicine in Bhutan*, Thimphu: National Institute of Traditional Medicine, Ministry of Health and Education.

Table No. 1. Ten tshachu reported in Bhutan

| Sl.No | Name of the Tshachu | Dzongkhag | Remark |
|-------|-------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | gNyes Tshachu | Lhuntshe | Study done |
| 2 | Yonten Kuenjong Tshachu | Lhuntshe | Not done |
| 3 | Dur Tshachu | Bumthang | Study done |
| 4 | Gaylegphug Tshachu | Sarpang | Study done |
| 5 | Dunmang Tshachu | Zhemgang | Study done |
| 6 | Koma Tshachu | Punakha | Study done |
| 7 | Chu Boog Tshachu | Punakha | Study done |
| 8 | Gasa Tshachu | Gasa | Study done |
| 9 | Laya Tshachu | Gasa | Not done |
| 10 | Wachi Tshachu | Gasa | Not done |

Out of ten *tshachu* formally known in Bhutan, about seven were covered in this study. Amongst all those studied, Kurtoe mKhem-pa lJong gNyes tshachu was found to be the most sacred. This paper records the investigation of the rationale behind the sacredness of Kurtoe mKhem-pa lJong gNyes tshachu basing on its religious significance, the historical panorama, our research findings and the reported health benefits.

Kurtoe gNyes tshachu and its historical roots

History and Origin

Amongst all the 20 dzongkhags of Bhutan and also amongst the dzongkhags of Shar-phyog-'khor-lo-rtse-rgyad, Lhuentse Dzongkhag distinguishes itself as a landmark of religious and geo-political significance. It is the place visited and blessed by Guru Rimpoche and Tertön Pema Lingpa. It is also the place where the great leader Jigme Namgyal was born to rule and take the country forward towards achieving independence. Even today, Dungkar village under Kurtoe Gewog, which is the motherland of the present ruling Wangchuck Dynasty, is the quintessence of Bhutan's proud

history. Two days travel west of Dungkhar village lies an important sacred site called sBaes-yul mKhen-pa-ljong gNyes (sacred site) (Sketch Map 1).

Sketch Map 1. Location and Trails to Kurtoe gNye Tshachu.



The guardian deity of this *gNyes* is *gTer-bdag Zo-ra-ra-skyes*. To the south of this *gNyes* is found the *gNyes tshachu* (see Photo no. 1). The identification and recognition, as well as the documentation of its history have been reported in as many as three sacred texts. One text *gnyes-chen-mkhen-pa-lung-gi-gnyes-yig-mkha-'gro-ye-shis-mtsho-rgyal-gi-shus-lan* points out that the revealer of sBas-yul mKhen-pa-ljong *gNyes*, its hidden treasures and *tshachu* was prophesized by Khandro Yeshe Tshogyal to be Terton Pema Lingpa. This prophecy is clearly indicated in one stanza of the prose-poem recorded in the above text. The prophecy is written thus:

Pad-ma'-ming-can-lho-nes-'hong
Spyod-pa-thog-'joms-snya-tshogs-byad
Skyes-bu-las-can-di-nid-kyis
Lho-yi-phyogs-nes-sgo-'byid-'gyur⁸.

Photo No. 1: View of Kurtoe gNyes tshachu



In the year 1475, as predicted and prophesized by Khandro Yeshe Tshogyal, the sBas-yul gNyes, its hidden treasures and *tshachu* were later revealed by Terton Pema Lingpa⁹. Then, in his oral transmission text *gter-ston-pad-ma-gling-pa'-bka'-'bum-zhel-gdams*, Terton Pema Lingpa intoned that in sBas-yul-mkhen-pa-lung there is a sacred religious site blessed by Ugyen Pema Jungnye and gifted with *tshachu* that have the

⁸ *gnyes-chen-mkhen-pa-lung-gi-gnyes-yig-mkha'-'gro-ye-shis-mtsho-rgyal-gi-shus-lan* (An Oral Transmission of Guru Rimpoche to mkha'-'gro-ye-shis-mtsho-rgyal in the 8th century), p.10.

⁹ *Slob dpon Padma Tshedwang* (1994). *History of Bhutan*, Thimphu: National Library, p.26.

medicinal property of curing diseases. This oral transmission reads as follow:

Snyigs-ma'i-gnyes-chen-rnams-su-byin-gyis-brlabs
Khol-du-phyung-ba-sbas-yul-mkhen-pa-lung
Pad-mas-byin-brlabs-gnyes-chen-khyd-par-'phags
Chab-tshen-sman-chu-zhi-byed-nad-sel-yong
Dbul-phongs-nad-sel-ljong-shing-'bres-bu-mang¹⁰.

In another text *sbas-yul-mkhen-pa-ljongs-gi-gnyes-yig-nima'i-'od-zer* it is reported as:

Bkra-shis-sgang-gi-'og-phyogs-na
Chu-tshen-spun-dgu-'dus-pa-yod.¹¹

This means that in the place called Tashigang there are nine related hot springs. Tashigang falls under mkKen-pa-ljong and it has an individual history. It is chronicled that it was a land once inhabited by King Khye-Kha-Ra-Thos when he was exiled by King Khri-srong ldue-bsan of Tibet in 775-797 A.D.¹²

Categories of Kurtoe gNyes tshachu and their therapeutics

Although the literature on gNyes tshachu¹³ which is also popularly referred as mKhen-pa-lung tshachu reported the presence of nine related pools, currently people use only three pools (see Photo no. 2). They are Guru tshachu (Pool 1), Tshedpag-med-tshachu (Pool 2) and mKha-'gro'i tshachu (Pool 3).

¹⁰ pad-ma-gling-pa'-zhel-gdams (1975). *The Recovered Teachings of the Great Pema Lingpa*, Volume 13 (Pa), Sonam Tobgyal Publications (reprinted under the patronage of Late Queen Mother Ashi Phuntsho Choden), pp.256-257.

¹¹ *sbas-yul-mkhen-pa-ljongs-gi-gnyes-yig-nima'i-'od-zer* (An Oral Transmission of Guru Rimpoche to Lha-lcam Padma-gsel in the 8th century), p.6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Photo No. 2: Three pools of Kurtoe gNyes tshachu



Amongst all the pools, Guru tshachu is the biggest and is found just near the foot of the cliff. There is an oral account that while Guru Rimpoche was taking a bath in that pool, a demon miraculously channeled cold water towards Guru tshachu pool. However, in order to prevent the cold water getting into it, Guru Rimpoche diverted it using his magical pen. The resulting channel carved in the stone is still seen today in the vicinity of Guru tshachu. Just below and to the right of the Guru tshachu lies the Tshe-dpag-med-tshachu and mKha-'gro'i tsahchu respectively. The pool of mKha-'gro'i tsahchu is amazingly located within a beautiful bowl of stone.

Although, these pools had been identified long ago and have thus been used for centuries, the specific therapeutic properties for each were not formally established until the research team from the ITMS studied this *tshachu* in 23rd January, 2001. The formal validation and identification of their therapeutic uses was accomplished by analyzing the specific organoleptic properties of smell, physical appearance

and colour of the *tshachu* at its source and the stones around it, and also recording the temperature, altitude and proximity of the locations of each pool (see table no. 2).

Table No. 2: Different pools of Kurtoe gNyes tshachu and their therapeutic properties

| Pool name | Altitude (Meters above sea level) | Temperature (degrees celsius) | Medicinal substance present | Therapeutic properties |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Guru tsha-chu | 2,925 | 40.2 | Sodium carbonate (<i>chong-zhi</i>) and sulphur (<i>mu-zi</i>) | Helpful in treating indigestion, phlegm disorders, <i>lhrn-skren</i> , <i>lchag-dreg</i> and various <i>grang-wa</i> disorders that include urinary tract infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. It also cures skin diseases including scabies and heals bone fracture and chronic wounds. |
| Tshe-dpag-med tshachu | 2,920 | 40 | Limestone (<i>rdo-sho</i>), sulphur and coal (<i>rdo-sol</i>) | Helpful in treating <i>bad-smug</i> , indigestion, <i>lhren-skren</i> , <i>chu-ser</i> , <i>sha-pags</i> , bone and tendon disorders and atrophy. It also cures skin diseases including scabies and heals bone fractures and chronic wounds. |
| mKha-'gro'i tsahchu | 2,925 | 40.3 | Limestone and sulphur | Helpful in treating <i>chu-ser-dreg-nad</i> , gout, rheumatoid arthritis, polio and paralysis. It cures skin diseases including scabies and heals bone fractures and chronic wounds. |

Users of Kurtoe gNyes Tshachu and its Public Health Impact

In one text describing the *gNyes*¹⁴, it is reported as “Lho-gNyes-'gro-na-dgun-'gro” and, as indicated, the best time for visiting *gNyes tshachu* is from November until the end of March. After March, the road to *gNyes tshachu* is difficult to traverse.

So far, the users of Kurtoe *gNyes tshachu* have been mainly the people of Kurtoe, Kurman, Mongar, Tashigang, Tashi Yangtse and Bumthang. From local oral accounts it is estimated that every year about twenty groups of at least 10 people each, visit this sacred *gNyes tshachu*. Despite its sanctity and legendary historical significance, the number visiting this *tshachu* is small compared to Gasa *tshachu*. This is attributed to the fact that the journey is long and difficult especially for old and sick people. Also the road is very narrow and there is no proper lodge in the *tshachu* area. There are two ways to go to *gNyes tshachu* (see Sketch Map 1 above). One way is through *gNyes Pema Choling* via Yangri Gang river crossing. The other way is through Kurtoe Dungkhar via Jasibi and Chumig Gang river crossing. The latter trail also requires two days to reach the *tshachu*.

While taking a bath in the *tshachu*, there are several important polite conventions as well as rituals that people believe should be performed - even if one is a non-believer in the supernatural being commonly believed to be a protector of this area. Many of these traditional practices described for the visitors to Kurtoe *gNyes tshachu* may apply to all the *tshachu* and their users. First and foremost, on arrival, people pay homage to the Guardian Deity of the *tshachu* by offering a specific prayer. The Guardian Deity of the *gNyes tshachu* is called *gNod-sbyin-rgod-ma-kha* and his homage prayer is as follows:

gNod-sbyin-chen-po-rgod-ma-kha
Ngyur-smrig-gos-gyon-rkang-gling-'bud

¹⁴ Ibid.

Kha-char-bu-yubs-thog-ser-gtong
Yul-bdag-chen-po-khyod-la-bstod¹⁵.

gNod-sbyin-rgod-ma-kha is depicted as a “monk” wearing the yellow *pan-zha* (scholar) hat, riding a yeti and blowing a y trumpet fashioned from a *rkang-gling* (human femur) (see Photo no. 3).

Photo No.3: Painting of gNod-sbyin-rgod-ma-kha, the Guardian Deity of Kurtoe gNyes tshachu



It is believed that he orders fierce and wrathful punishments comprising sudden snow falls and downpours of rain accompanied by abnormally large hailstones, dreadful lightning and thunderbolts aimed at those who have breached

¹⁵ Trulku Chogden Goenpo. *mKhen-lung-gTer-bdag-gsol-mchod*, p.5. (Note. Trulku Chogden Goenpo is the disciple of Tertön Pema Lingpa).

their pledges and to those violating acceptable practices in his domain. His appeasement offerings comprise *'brang-rgyas* symbolic ritual cake, black chicken, hoisting new scarves with five colors (white, yellow, red, green, blue), libations (of alcohol), burning of offerings (excluding meat) for the dead (*dkar-bsur*) and recitation of his invocation prayer. This appeasement offering to him, may not serve its purpose if strict cleanliness, in and around the *tshachu*, is not maintained. While visiting the Kurtoe gNyes tshachu, people believe that the Guardian Deity gNod-sbyin-rgod-ma-kha disapproves of the following:

1. The presence of clothes of the dead or of those attending the delivery of babies.
2. Shouting or whistling loudly.
3. Throwing meat or blood in the source of *tshachu* and its surrounding areas.
4. Burning meat or animal skin.
5. Defecating or urinating in the *tshachu* pools.
6. Having sexual intercourse inside the *tshachu* pools.
7. Bathing in pairs especially couples, and
8. Women and girls bathing when menstruating.

Failing to adhere to any one of the above restrictions, means subjecting oneself to his afore mentioned wrathful punishments. These practices and beliefs are a Bhutanese way of living, a way of being in the world that recognizes our innate wholeness, holiness, connectedness and the right relationship with ourselves, our family, our communities, with nature and the environment, and with the supernatural beings. Therefore, we need to reflect that our actions affect every part of each ecosystem where the supernatural beings and the elements of the physical cosmos co-habit. It is thus important that credence be given to the existence of the Guardian Deity-gNod-sbyin-rgod-ma-kha as well as to offer him due respect.

To derive the best health benefits from gNyes tshachu, besides appeasing the wrathful Guardian Deity, it is also

advisable that the following things are given due attention.

1. Before availing the *tshachu* treatment, it is always better to consult an astrologer or a traditional physician to determine the auspiciousness of the planned visit, diagnose any complaints, and to obtain any specific instructions.
2. *Tshachu* bathing is not advisable for pregnant women, infants, those suffering from blood pressure abnormalities, cough and cold, jaundice, headache and giddiness, heart disease, conjunctivitis, trachoma and leprosy.
3. While bathing in the *tshachu*, it is always better to pray either to Guru Rimpoche or to Sangay Menlha, the Medicine Buddha, reciting their sacred mantras and awakening to their blessings.
4. Long exposure should be avoided especially by old people since it can induce headache and vomiting. Therefore, the optimum duration of bathing is one hour.
5. Bathing right after a meal is not advisable. There should be at least a 30 minutes gap.
6. Right after the bath, one cannot stay in the cold wind and should stay covered with a blanket.

When treatment days are over and it is time to return home, it is also customary that certain rules are followed. In the early hours of the day and before the long arduous return journey begins, it is important to burn incense and offerings (but excluding meat) for the dead (*dkar-bsur*) and also offer libation. Then, at the source of the *tshachu* one should offer precious jewels or paper money or coins and must wish for the blessings of good health. If there are no precious jewels or money or coins to be offered, at least few grains of rice should be offered. In the past, people used to offer even very highly prized and precious jewels like turquoise, coral and silver as a token of respect, but today Bhutanese offer only coins or rice.

Conclusions and future directions

Amongst all the seven *tshachu* studied, Kurtoe mKhem-pa lJong gNyes tshachu was found to have profound religious, spiritual and historical significance supported by many written texts. This does not mean that other *tshachu* are not significant. In fact, Gasa tshachu is very popular in Bhutan and has been providing a health care service, directly or indirectly, to both the Bhutanese and tourists for decades.

Our findings only confirm that Kurtoe mKhem-pa lJong gNyes tshachu was blessed by Guru Rimpoche in the 8th century and revealed to the people of Bhutan by Tertön Pema Lingpa in the year 1475. For these reasons, it is considered the most sacred *tshachu* in Bhutan and people believe that it also cleanses one's defilements and sins. To preserve the sanctity and also to validate the therapeutic properties of gNyes tshachu, the research team from ITMS identified the therapeutic properties of each pool: Guru tshachu, Tshedpag-med-tshachu and mKha-'gro'i tshachu. The team has also erected sign boards mentioning the pool names and their individual uses.

Since the *tshachu* have been used by the Bhutanese for centuries for generating spiritual and health benefits, it provides an important tangible cultural feature of our country. Therefore, in order to particularly promote the Kurtoe gNyes tshachu, it is important that the trails to it are improved and the basic lodging facilities are provided either through government initiative and support, or through the contributions and donations of well-wishers.

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