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From Popular Pilgrimage Festival to State Monastic Performance – The Politics of Cultural Production at Gomphu Kora, East Bhutan

Summary

Over the past two decades, the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Gomphu Kora was transformed into a key travel destination in east Bhutan. The annual folk festival there was famous for attracting different ethno-linguistic groups from Bhutan's far eastern borderland with India. Pilgrims and traders from both sides of the border and local inhabitants were actively involved in social, economic and cultural exchanges including folk song and dance performances. This chapter examines recent developments in cultural production at Gomphu Kora, and how an invention of tradition through state tourism orchestrated by the local monastic and lay administration emerged. It looks at how the former folk religious festival was converted into a generic state monastic event that has lost much of its original popular character.

Keywords: Pilgrimage; folk festival; monastic dance and state performance; tourism; development

In den letzten beiden Jahrzehnten wurde der buddhistische Pilgerort Gomphu Kora in eine touristische Hauptattraktion im Osten Bhutans transformiert. Das dort jährlich stattfindende Volksfest war bekannt dafür, dass es verschiedene ethno-linguistische Gruppen auf beiden Seiten der Landesgrenze zwischen Ost-Bhutan und Indien anzog. Pilger und Händler aus der Grenzregion sowie Ortsansässige waren aktiv durch sozialen, ökonomischen und kulturellen Austausch und an der Aufführung von Volkstänzen und -gesängen beteiligt. Dieses Kapitel untersucht neuere Entwicklungen kultureller Produktion in Gomphu Kora, und wie die Erfindung von Tradition durch staatlichen Tourismus und durch lokale Autoritäten des zum Teil klerikalen Verwaltungsapparats orchestriert wurde. Es wird untersucht, wie das ehemalige Volks- und Pilgerfest in eine generische und klösterliche Staatsauffüh-

rung umgestaltet wurde, die viel von ihrem ursprünglichen, populären Charakter verloren hat.

Keywords: Pilgerfest; Volksfest; klösterliche Maskentänze; Staatsperformanz; Tourismus; Entwicklung

I am thankful to the German Research Foundation (DFG) for financing a pilot study on ritual healers in Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (Nov. 2011–Jan. 2012) while I was affiliated with the Central Asian Seminar, Humboldt University Berlin, during which I first encountered the pilgrimage place of Gomphu Kora. I wish to thank the Centre for Bhutan Studies for granting me research permission. In particular, I owe my gratitude to Dorje Gyaltsen, Jigme Chöden and Tim Bodt for translations of interviews and text passages, and all my informants for their patient explanations of their points of views. I want to express my gratitude to Mareike Wulff for providing me with several references. Alas, the views presented here are my own. Also, I thank the Museum for Asian Art Berlin for sponsoring my specific ethnographic research trip in March 2012 to produce a 30 min. documentary film on the Gomphu Kora Tshechu for display at an exhibition on Padmasambhava at the Museum of Asian Art, Berlin (November 2013–August 2014), see also Schrempf 2013.

1 Introduction

This chapter examines the various ways and narratives through which the popular pilgrimage place and festival of Gomphu Kora in east Bhutan are socially constructed and culturally produced today. It will discuss their recent transformations and uneven appropriations by a set of key agents. They include local inhabitants, pilgrim visitors, both monastic and lay administrative organizers of the two east Bhutanese districts of Trashigang and Trashiyangtse, as well as tourism companies and entrepreneurs. At Gomphu Kora, pilgrimage and trade, history and myth, institutionalized religion and folk religious practices are reassembled and hierarchically structured under the state's modern development agenda focusing on tourism while trying 'to preserve culture.'

Bhutan's modernization processes were carefully initiated in the beginning of the 1970s by the Third King of Bhutan, Jigme Dorje Wangchuk.¹ Back then, however, small-scale tourism concerned only a couple of hundred foreign tourists visiting, while their number slowly increased to several thousands in the late 1990s. The country underwent further socio-political and economic transformations including a transition to a democratic constitutional monarchy with first elections in 2011. Also, within the last decade

1 Jigme Dorji Wangchuk ('Jigs-med rDo-rje dBang-phyug) reigned from 1952 to 1972.

the national philosophy and policy of ‘Gross National Happiness’ (GNH) became a global trademark for Bhutan, entailing the preservation of the Himalayan Buddhist kingdom’s culture and traditions, environmental protection of its unique fauna and flora as well as ‘spiritual values.’² Over 90 % of international visitors named these items as their main tourism interests. In 2016, 209 570 foreign nationals visited Bhutan – equivalent to over a quarter of Bhutan’s population, a considerable increase of 35 % when compared to the previous year alone. Royalties generated by so-called ‘gross earnings’ via a minimum daily package price (MDPP) for international visitors go to the Royal Government of Bhutan for investment into sustainable development and amounted to US\$ 20.28 million that year.³

In other words, since the beginning of the new millennium, tourism contributes considerably to Bhutan’s much needed foreign currency reserves. These changes also affected the pilgrimage festival of Gomphu Kora where development efforts through tourism are processes that at times correlate, collide or have eradicated local traditions at this place. Religious festivals feature most prominently among tourists’ interests and expectations when they visit Bhutan, so the Tourism Council of Bhutan has placed a special emphasis upon developing these festivals into major attractions. However, while some are concerned about the longer term impact of tourism and globalization on local traditions and the environment, there is little reflection about the recent involvement of local governments in the social production and organization of such ‘cultural heritage.’⁴ Different voices will be presented in this chapter reflecting various ways of engagement and points of views of those participating at the sacred site of Gomphu Kora, where a former lay pilgrimage festival with folk dances, songs, social and economic exchanges has been transformed into a hierarchically structured state monastic performance for tourism development.

The core myth of the sacred place and ritual actions by pilgrims at the site are based on the belief in the presence of powers of the great tantric master Guru Rinpoche. He is also known as Padmasambhava in Sanskrit and Pemajungney in Dzongkha and Tibetan, meaning ‘Lotus Born’. Popularly understood as the ‘second Buddha’, Guru Rinpoche is said to have introduced Buddhism to Tibet and the Himalayas during the eighth century, and through meditation he subdued demons at Gomphu Kora in dramatic battles that demonstrated the superiority of Buddhism. At the time of the festival, thousands of pilgrims encounter and make contact with Guru Rinpoche’s transformative, purifying

2 See the *Tenth and Eleventh Five Year Plans*, G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2009; G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2013.

3 In 2016 Bhutan’s gross earnings were US\$ 73.74 million based on international tourists (except for ‘regional’ Indian and Bangladeshi citizens) who pay US\$ 250 MDPP per day during the high seasons and

US\$ 200 during the low seasons, which covers all their inland costs, fees and charges; *Annual Report*, T. C. o. Bhutan 2016, 31.

4 On local perspectives regarding the impact of tourism on religious festivals, see Suntikul and U. Dorji 2016.

and protective powers through circumambulating a huge rock called Zangdok Pelri or ‘Copper coloured Crystal Mountain,’ representing his sublime paradise. Pilgrims recite prayers, ingest sacred substances imbued with long life and fertility, and with the potential for a better rebirth. Traditionally, the pilgrimage festival at Gomphu Kora was also a trade fair and provided an important space and time for exchanging goods and socialising among various ethnic groups in this region where predominantly the oldest Tibetan Buddhist school of Nyingma is practiced.

However, recent tourist brochures and pilgrimage guide books published by the local government and monastic authorities of the Tibetan Buddhist Drukpa Kagyü school nationalize both place and festival in their own ways. They have turned local myth into a history of state monastic power, attesting and reconfirming the sacredness of the place through visits of key religious and political figures at this site during the past two decades. Thus, they claim their historical presence stretching the whole period between the eight century until today, producing an imaginary, territorial and time continuum that includes the historically and politically rather resistant, eastern part of the country.⁵ It should be noted that historiography in Bhutan is a particularly delicate subject since it is closely connected to the legitimation and identity of the Bhutanese state that was based on a dual system of politics and religion dominated by the Tibetan Buddhist Drukpa Kagyü school as state religion. Non-monastic historical sources of Bhutan only start with the late seventeenth century *Gyalrig* claiming – but not proving – that the presence of Buddhist rulers in the area goes back to the eight century.⁶

Against the backdrop of an increasing urbanisation and out-migration driven by wage labour markets in the centre and west of Bhutan – developments which threaten to depopulate this remote and poorer far east part of the country – the local government has created a new tourist attraction. By instrumentalising both the presence of the colourful pilgrims dressed in their fineries and the purported antiquity of the pilgrimage place, the Drukpa Kagyü order was able to extend its monastic presence beyond its premises of near-by Trashigang Dzong. At the same time, the new standardized performance seems to have extinguished a rich diversity of folk dances and songs, languages and customs that has turned formerly active multi-ethnic and multi-lingual agents into more passive audiences and consumers of an invented state religious display at the site. Based upon ethnographic fieldwork at Gomphu Kora during 2011 and 2012, I examine these social transformations of the festival by describing the ways in which different

5 See, for example, Tourism Council of Bhutan <http://www.tourism.gov.bt/activities/gomphu-kora-festival> (visited on 01/03/2017).

6 Aris 1986. After the rise to power of the royal House of Wangchuk as rulers of Bhutan in 1907 and the

initial modernization efforts of the Third King, the most recent democratization policies and new constitution issued by the Fifth King in 2008 resulted in a final separation of religion and politics becoming entirely separate domains.

agents represent their points of views and try to reclaim both the event and this sacred space as their own.

2 The Place – past and present narrated by local voices

The first time that I visited Gomphu Kora, the pilgrimage place seemed unassuming and deserted. Only a couple of old local inhabitants were present. An elderly lady with short grey hair, simply clad in a one-piece cotton *kira*, was stoically swinging her hand-held prayer wheel, murmuring *mantras* while circumambulating the sacred rock, the paradise of Guru Rinpoche. She was willing to be our local guide, narrating various stories of the tantric master's arduous but in the end successful battle against a particularly obnoxious demon here. All the peculiar formations on and around the main sacred rock which is the paradise of Guru Rinpoche, are read like a map of the embodied powers of this greatest of all tantric masters, powers one gets into contact with when venerating the Guru at this sacred site, that includes a stretch along the rocky bank of the Drangme Chu river. The myths are told as an embodied history of the place, authenticating and preserving the heroic and magical powers of the Guru and his 'hidden treasures' (*terbey*) that connect the past with the present and the potentials of the future. To perform 'circumambulation' (*kora*) around the sacred site in effect reconstructs its sacredness, and gives meaning and importance to being at this place. Pilgrims' ritual actions promise the potential for personal transformation in return through an accumulation of religious 'merit' (*sönam*) that might counteract bad *karma*, enabling the purification from moral, cognitive and physical 'defilements' (*drib*). Such defilements are also understood as potential causes for illness and bad luck, and therefore receiving personal protection from the Guru against demons, illness and natural disasters in this life, including blessings (*jinlab*) for a better rebirth in the next, are important this- and other-worldly benefits of his veneration.⁷

We were lucky on that day – the sun was shining brightly from a clear blue sky onto Guru Rinpoche's sacred rock, projecting vivid shadows onto its surface through the wind-blown leaves of a huge old pipal tree leaning against the rock like a giant old witness of former times. Only the sound of the gushing waters of the near-by Drangme Chu river were to be heard. We had slowly followed the old lady walking around the sacred rock in a clockwise direction, listening to her detailed explanations, story by story, imagining Guru's battles with and final victory over evil demons here. Suddenly excited, she motioned Dorje, our translator, to fetch water which seemed to have appeared from

7 Devotional acts of purification, protection and blessing are characteristic of popular pilgrimage around

'holy places' (*ney*) in culturally Tibetan Buddhist worlds; Huber 1999.

nowhere, trickling down over the face of the Guru's paradise rock. "It only happens rarely that the sacred water of Guru Rinpoche appears", she marvels at our good luck. "It only appears to people with good *karma*." While she offers incense smoke at an altar right next to the sacred water source, Dorje translates the myth of how Guru Rinpoche got hold of this 'nectar of immortality' (*chime kyi dütsi*). Originally, it came from another sacred pilgrimage site of Halase-Maratika in Nepal,⁸ from where it was fetched by a messenger of the eighth-century Tibetan King Trisong Detsen who had himself been seriously ill and had sent for it as a cure. However, the king had died in the meantime and Guru Rinpoche, who was meditating at Gomphu Kora at that time, had a premonition and asked the messenger to give it to him instead. So he hid the nectar of immortality within the sacred rock at Gomphu Kora as a 'treasure' (*terma*) for the well-being of future generations.⁹ With cupped hands, we gratefully received this sacred water from a green pipal leaf rolled up into a small tube that Dorje skillfully prepared for us.¹⁰ I was impressed and decided to come back and explore this place more thoroughly next time, during the Gomphu Kora Tshechu, the big annual pilgrimage festival attracting several thousand people from east Bhutan and increasingly so, tourist from all over the world. The nectar of immortality, however, did not appear again.

Returning several months later during mid March 2012, I first interviewed Lopen (or 'Lop') Kunzang Thinley, one of the foremost scholars of local history and religion in the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon.'¹¹ I met him together with my research assistant who was a former student of his, Jigme Chöden, at the Karma Café in Thimphu, the bustling modern capital of Bhutan. I was pleasantly surprised to find a man full of enthusiasm for the subject of 'holy places' of the great tantric master Guru Rinpoche.¹² As it turned out, both Lopen and Jigme are Sharchokpas, people from the east of Bhutan who also speak Sharchok or Tshangla, the unofficial lingua franca of that part of the country.¹³

- 8 The Maratika caves at Halase are a well-known pilgrimage place in eastern Nepal where Guru Rinpoche and his consort, the 'sky-goer' (*khandroma*) Mandarava, performed the practice of long life, receiving a blessing by Amitayus, the Buddha of Longevity, in a vision, placing the nectar-vase with the water of immortality on their heads; Buffetrille 1994.
- 9 All pilgrimage sites in the Himalayas and Tibet are connected with salvational promises surrounding the Buddhist narrative of remedying a (by now) present age characterized by moral decline and natural disasters. Guru Rinpoche's transformative powers are believed to be embodied in 'treasures' that were hidden by him, and revealed by so-called 'treasure discoverers' (*tertön*) in later centuries.

- 10 This short scene has been included in my ethnographic film on the Gomphu Kora Tshechu, available for popular view at URL <https://vimeo.com/105325261>, also published as DVD in Schrempf 2013.
- 11 See one of the many scholarly works by Lopen Kunzang Thinley, for example, his co-edited work on Bhutan's sacred sites; Thinley et al. 2008.
- 12 Interview conducted in Thimphu at Karma Café, March 18, 2012, taking notes.
- 13 Dzongkha is the official lingua franca of Bhutan. On Tshangla and the many different ethno-linguistic groups in East Bhutan see van Driem 2001 and Bodt 2012.

Lopen grew up in a village not far from Gomphu Kora¹⁴ until he was a young man of about 18 years, and moved to the capital of Thimphu. With a big smile on his face, he spontaneously recalled the festival as ‘a time of great pleasure’ during his childhood and adolescence:

There was no road in the 1960s at Gomkora. Every family pitched up their own tent for two or three days. We had a black tent made out of wool. The white ones were made out of cotton. I remember well how the young teenage boys were teasing the girls when they did the *kora* [‘circumambulation’] at night around the sacred rock, the paradise of Guru Rinpoche. This ‘night *kora*’ was the main activity of the festival. Also, groups of women and men were performing various local folk dances and singing songs alternately while the old people were praying.¹⁵

Pilgrims have always come from far and near, in past and present times alike, it seems. Next to locals from the two big regional districts or *dzongkhags* of Trashigang and Trashiyangtse that are now directly involved in organizing the festival, pilgrims come from other places in east Bhutan, such as Mongar, Kurtö, Pemagatse, Samdrup Jamkhar, Rizang.¹⁶ However, special attention was always given to pilgrims who arrived from across the nearby Indian border, from the region which used to be called the ‘Monyul Corridor’ in British colonial sources. These are mainly Tshangla-, Dakpa- and Brokké-speakers from Tawang and Dirang districts of present-day Arunachal Pradesh (Northeast India), who share languages and many cultural similarities with their related neighbours from east Bhutan.¹⁷ Looking at their traditional dress when they all gather at the Gomphu Kora festival, it is difficult for an outsider like me to know where they are from.

It is obvious that before national borders were established and enforced, Tshangla-, Dakpa- and Brokké-speakers lived spread throughout the region across and on both sides of this frontier. The (semi-)pastoralist people from the areas of Merak and Sakteng in east Bhutan, who speak a nomadic dialect from the Tibetan Plateau called Brokké, wear exactly the same dress – made out of a characteristic hand-woven dark-red raw silk cloth whose borders are stitched with colourful animal- and plant designs in geometrical shapes – as the locals from Tawang on the Indian side who speak, however, a different language called Dakpa. This ethnic group is also popularly known as the ‘Dakpa’ or

14 Lopen refers to it as ‘Gomkora’, which is the short form for Gomphu Kora, literally meaning ‘circling the meditation cave’ (of Guru Rinpoche).

15 Interview with Lopen Kunzang Thinley, March 18, 2012, at Karma Café.

16 While east Bhutan is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic region, Tshangla speakers are in the majority here. Tshangla is also spoken on the other side of Indian border by some Monpas of Dirang and Tawang. On Tshangla language see Bodt 2012, 175–268.

17 See also Pommaret 2002.

‘Dhaps’ The particular dress is still worn and also traded at the Gomphu Kora pilgrimage festival, as I was able to witness in 2012.

Both Gomphu Kora and Chorten Kora, the two most important pilgrimage places staging annual pilgrimage festivals in Trashiyangtse Dzongkhag, are regularly visited by Dakpa from Tawang during annual festivals. A lama from Rigsum Gompa recalls a mythical story referring to a girl from Tawang who voluntarily sacrificed herself when the *stupa* at Chorten Kora was built, and this was the beginning of marriage relations between the two groups. Today, people claim that there is still a tendency for Dakpa girls from Tawang and local east-Bhutanese boys to befriend each other. A visiting female Dakpa pilgrim confirmed back in 2002 that “religion, topography, social relations, food and even ways of living are almost same across the border.”¹⁸ And it seemed that in the beginning of the millenium the attractiveness of the pilgrimage was still ongoing, especially among young people, from both sides of Tawang and east Bhutan. Another long-term pilgrim from across the border even claimed that in the past 13 years of his visits, “the festival is becoming more attractive every year.”¹⁹

Connections via social relations, intermarriage, migrations, and/or trade ties, though still articulated and discernable, are not yet well researched and remain for the most part unclear in this complex multi-ethnic area across the Bhutan-India border. The famous bags of the so-called ‘Monpa’ on the Indian side of the border, for example, often come from Eastern Bhutanese weavers even though they are now taken to be a characteristic item of the ‘Monpas’ of Western Arunachal Pradesh.²⁰ In any case, both ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness and diversity, as well as social relatedness through migration, trade and intermarriage, were once celebrated jointly at the festival of Gomphu Kora during the past. And even though references to these kinds of activities and their importance for pilgrims remain, interactions and performances at Gomphu Kora have shifted quite considerably in ways that will be examined below. There is no question, however, that the pilgrimage festival used to be a significant multi-ethnic and multi-lingual social event in this border region, and some of this character still remains to a certain extend. The following pilgrimage song from the early 1990s nicely demonstrates cultural diversity in unity. It is sung alternately in some of the different languages that are spoken in this part of the country – Tshangla, Chöchangacha, Dzalakha, but also in Dzongkha, the lingua franca of the modern state of Bhutan:

Today we came for circumambulation, *le sho le mo ya*

Tomorrow the kora will be empty, *le sho le mo ya*²¹

18 Direct quote, cited from U. Penjore 2002.

19 U. Penjore 2002.

20 They only recently tend to identify themselves as Monpa. Again, there is a group of ‘Monpas’ living

in Bhutan yet they do not seem to be related in any way to those in Western Arunachal.

21 *Thinong kornyī korba le sho le mo ya/ Namning kornyī tongpa le sho le mo ya* (old pilgrimage song sung by

You are like the sun, *le sho le mo ya*

I am like the lotus flower, *le sho le mo ya*

By the power of karma and prayer, *le sho le mo ya*

[We] are meeting here at this great pilgrimage place, *le sho le mo ya*²²

Back at the Karma Café in Thimphu, Lopen Kunzang Thinley explained the main ‘sacred sites’ (*ney*) at Gomphu Kora, all of which are located along the torrential river of Drangme Chu at and around Gomphu Kora. Lopen first mentions the main sacred site of Guru Rinpoche’s paradise rock, Zangdok Pelri, around which pilgrims perform their circumambulation, but particularly at night. Next to this huge rock, a large, heavy, oval shaped and smooth black stone is laying on the ground. Tradition has it that any nine people (men and women) should be able to collectively lift this heavy stone using their index fingers only. If they can succeed in lifting it properly off the ground, this is a good omen, a sign of fertility, and of impending rainfall according to Lopen.

Later I watched a group of pilgrims at Guru’s paradise rock who were trying to do exactly this lifting exercise with the rock while guided around the place by the present monastic organizer of the Gomphu Kora festival, Udzin Thubten Tashi. They were only able to lift the heavy stone for a split second, laughing a lot about their failure to do so. Interestingly, the high ranking monk of the Drukpa Kagyü order of Buddhism reinterpreted this special treasure stone in the characteristic ‘official’ fashion that one finds all over the country, wherever miraculous tantric powers of Guru Rinpoche are concerned. Accordingly, rather than relating the power of the stone directly to Guru Rinpoche (as public knowledge reiterates), Udzin instead explained that this special stone was a ‘treasure’ left by Bhutan’s most famous local ‘treasure revealer’ (*tertön*) and Buddhist hero figure Pema Lingpa (1450–1521).²³ In his explanations to the pilgrims, Udzin Thubten Tashi assimilated – apparently in error – the power of this fertility stone to Pema Lingpa’s male potency. Infertile couples should pray to Pema Lingpa inside the temple where a

Ata Yeshi, here Tshangla language part, translated by Tim Bodt).

22 *Chö ni thridu nyima* (Wylie, *khyod ni kbri gdugs nyi ma*) *le sho le mo ya*/ *Nga ni pemai meto* (Wylie, *nga ni pad ma'i me tog*) *le sho le mo ya*// *le dang melam wanggi* (Wylie, *las dang smon lam dbang gis*) *le sho le mo ya*/ *nechen di ru zombe be* (*gnas chen 'di rung 'dzom bas dba'i*) *le sho le mo ya* (Dzongkha language part with Wylie transliteration in brackets). This old pilgrimage song was sung by Ata Yeshi in the 1990s; it was recorded, transliterated and translated by Tim Bodt whom I thank for his permission to publish both his transliteration and translation.

23 Pema Lingpa from Bumthang, east Bhutan, is said to have visited Gomphu Kora in the 15th century when he traveled through the area. He was a member of the oldest school of Vajrayana Buddhism, the Nyingmapa, whose tradition of ‘treasure revealing’ was later adapted by the Drukpa Kagyü school. Pemalingpa was crucially active in giving public empowerments and staging displays of revealing treasures hidden by Guru Rinpoche seven centuries earlier. Apparently, treasure revealing was part of his mode of successful conversion, augmenting his group of followers considerably in east Bhutan as well as in Southern Tibet, Lhodrak; Gayley 2007.

‘treasure’ in form of his petrified phallus would be kept, and that the stone outside was the female counterpart. The Gomphu Kora tourist brochure, however, clearly identifies the ‘treasure’ phallus as belonging to the Indian tantric master Guru Rinpoche; it is kept safely in a vitrine inside the temple.²⁴

Both local inhabitants and pilgrims, however, had their own way of interacting with the site and the relics. On one of the festival days, for example, a tall Indian man who could have been one of the many visiting engineers working on the remarkably well-paved roads of Bhutan (in comparison with those made in his own country, just across the border) or at the huge hydroelectric power project in the south, showed off by carrying the heavy stone imbued with fertility on his shoulder, while walking around the paradise rock on the inner circumambulation path. He was greatly admired by other pilgrims for his strength and tallness. Young Bhutanese men were also testing their skills trying to impress the girls in other ways, and were climbing up the steep and smooth rock face, smiling victoriously when they reached the top of Guru’s sacred rock. They looked like they came straight from Thimphu, wearing baggy designer jeans that appeared to almost fall off their hips, and a fancy hair style that was then fashionable among Korean pop stars seen on television and internet. Gesturing through big, dark sunglasses they took selfies and pictures of the sacred place from above with their mobile phones (Fig. 1). I had to recall the warning that Udzin Thubten Tashi had related to a group of mostly older pilgrims earlier on, that the rock should not be climbed since this was a sacrilege. In any case, the majority of locals and pilgrims behaved rather piously and only tried to outdo each other in their colourful traditional dresses – the women in hand-woven cotton or silk wrap-arounds (*kiras*) with brightly coloured shiny jackets (*tego*) and the men dressed in new *gho* gowns as is commonly done at Bhutanese festivals, and for visiting government offices and buildings.²⁵

It transpired that Udzin Thubten played a crucial role in the present organization of the Gomphu Kora Tshechu festival. As a ‘principal’ (*udzin*) from the Drukpa Kagyü monastic congregation of Trashigang Dzong, the nearby district capital across the boundary from Trashiyangtse, he had recently become the head teacher of astrology for a newly established group of monk students at the site of Gomphu Kora. Udzin had been personally and strongly involved in reshaping the Gomphu Kora festival for several years. There is also a pilgrimage guidebook (*ney yig*) for the site published by the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs that he was involved in producing. It was

24 See the tourist brochure of Gomphu Kora in English; Department of Tourism 2007.

25 The socio-economic importance of weaving silk *kiras* for rural women, also for their household incomes, cannot be overestimated. The wearing of traditional clothes during such official festivals in

Bhutan used to be strictly reinforced, and is still compulsory for Bhutanese to wear when entering or working at government premises. The trade in cotton and silk came from Assam and Bengal, and via Monyul (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) in the past; Ray and Sarkar 2005, 13.

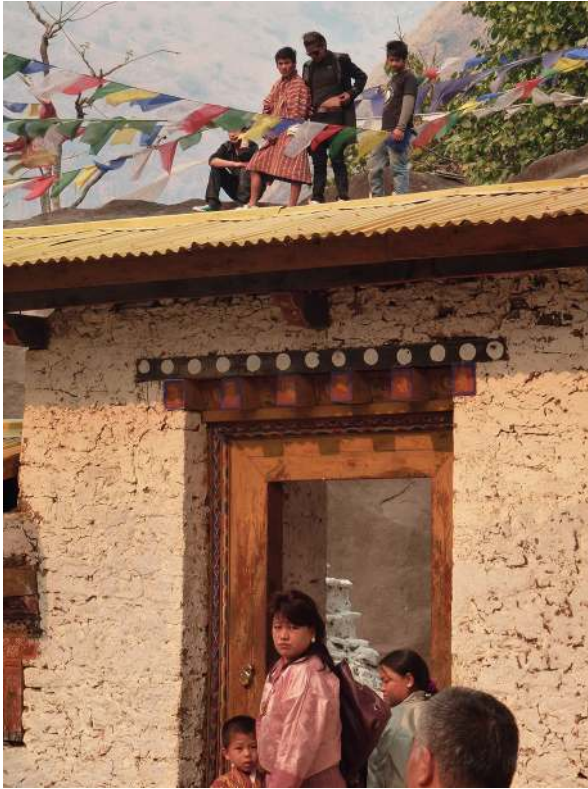


Fig. 1 Young men testing their skills in climbing Guru's paradise rock, Zangdok Pelri.

written in Dzongkha, the official national language based upon Tibetan orthography, and commonly called *chökey* in Bhutan, or the 'language of Buddhism.'²⁶ Udzin Thubten Tashi also organized the sponsorship of several recently established monastic rituals at the site of Gomphu Kora, following the Bhutanese New Year and preceding the Gomphu Kora festival. He had approached local business people involved in tourism to gain financial support for these newly established monastic ritual performances both inside and outside the temple, and that were ever increasing in size at Gomphu Kora.

26 Dzongkhag 2009. As festival organizer of the Gomphu Kora Tshechu in late March 2012, Udzin Thubten Tashi was one of my main informants. I filmed him during his extended guide tour over a period of four days during which he patiently and full of enthusiasm explained the site to me. Despite my continuous questions about the history of the dance performance at the place of Gomphu Kora,

nobody could answer in a satisfactory manner. Only later, through other channels, did I learn of the very recent history and involvement of the Drukpa Kagyü at this site. There is also an increasing number of English language publications on the 'sacred festivals' of Bhutan, see, for example, Phuntshok Tashi (Phun-tshogs-bkra-shis) 2011.

Most of the ritual masked dance performances known as *tshechus* that are performed throughout Bhutan – including those at Gomphu Kora – can be traced to the 4th Druk Desi, ruler of Bhutan, Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye (1638–1696). In his fascinating biography translated by John Ardussi,²⁷ it is described how, during the late 17th century, Tenzin Rabgye created and disseminated the *tshechu* dance performances throughout the country based upon Tibetan models. He had used them as a superstructure for incorporating other local religious dances, such as those belonging to the ‘treasure revealer’ (*tertön*) traditions, and integrated them into the dual lay-monastic hierarchy of the emerging state’s newly established *dzong* administration.²⁸ Since then, such state-orchestrated *tshechu* performances have always played a crucial political role in the state-building and centralised unification of Bhutan. At Gomphu Kora, however, the *tshechu* was introduced only recently and became a major tourist attraction at the site; it thus replaced the former folk religious pilgrimage festival, as will be shown in this chapter.

Back in the Karma Café, Lopen continued visualising the sacred place that he has not seen for decades. “The less obvious but actual sanctum at Gomphu Kora is the rock cave of Kapalidaphu where Guru Rinpoche dwelt in meditation for three months”, he explained. This cave is situated a little bit above Gomphu Kora, overlooking the valley of the Drangme Chu. One of the signs of tantric powers Guru Rinpoche generated through his meditation in this ‘cave’ (*daphu*) is the miraculous emergence of a sacred spring out of a hole in the rock wall that is shaped like a ‘skull cap’ (*kapala*), hence the name of the place Kapalidaphu. Guided by Udzin Thubten Tashi, I went to visit this place and was impressed by the stillness and peacefulness of the cave and the surrounding rock platform overlooking Gomphu Kora and the river valley. In March 2012, shortly before the Gomphu Kora festival, the local government had helped to canalize Guru’s ‘water of longlife’ (*tsechu*) into a pipe down to the valley. There it was cast into a well which had the form of a colourful female ‘sky-goer’ goddesses (*khandroma*), in reference to their role as Guru Rinpoche’s consorts who took care of him during his meditation. This well is conveniently placed at the main circumambulation path between the temple and the dance ground, making the visit up to Kapalidaphu now almost unnecessary. The beautiful ‘sky-goer’ statue is holding a vase in her hand from which the water is poured out during festival times. Pilgrims like to collect it in plastic bottles as a special gift of Guru’s blessing and bring it back to their homes.

In stark contrast to the matter-of-fact, glossy English tourist brochure produced by the Department of Tourism for foreign visitors to Gomphu Kora,²⁹ in which the temple, its ‘treasures’ (*terma*) and a long history are emphasized, Lopen cautioned me that an old

27 Ardussi 2008.

28 Based on the Tibetan state model, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal had introduced the dual system of governance with the Je Khenpo as the spiritual

head and the regent (Desi) as political ruler in 17th century Bhutan.

29 Department of Tourism 2007.

manuscript guide book (*ney yig*) for the site and all the details it contained had been lost, and that what he himself recalls of the place might not be complete. Unfortunately, it seems that the old guidebook had been borrowed by a lama from neighbouring Tawang in India, and never returned. There were rumours about its whereabouts, but nobody knew how to trace and find it. Later, I heard that there was a fire at Gomphu Kora, and the only other copy of the guidebook in existence was burnt during the blaze. Lopen suggested that we visit Gomphu Kora together next time, and he would ask his relatives at his natal place to perform the old folk dances and songs that are now almost forgotten and no longer performed. “I heard it has changed a lot,” he said simply. “At least those dances could be recorded with your camera, before they too are completely lost,” he added.³⁰

The importance of the local folk dances performed at the festival still exist in living memory. An itinerant Buddhist meditator (*tsampa*), whom we picked up on the way to Gomphu Kora in our little car, placed the origin of these local folk dances into the time when Guru Rinpoche was meditating at Gomphu Kora during the eight century. A demon had disturbed the great master in his meditation, he explained matter-of-factly. The demon had eaten up local people one by one. In order to help Guru Rinpoche capturing and defeating the demon, the local people distracted the latter by performing a particular folk dance, so that the great master was able to capture and subjugate the demon. According to Chingkula, the former caretaker of the temple at Gomphu Kora, this dance is called Acho Lam Chham and is only performed by the people of Shingkar Lauri today. He also claimed that the pilgrimage festival is about 400 years old.³¹ However, a representative of Trashigang monastic congregation claimed the same age for the performance of the *tshechu* festival, dating it back by ca. 370 years, and adding that Gyalsey Ngagi Wangchuk had built the *lhakhang* and Tertön Pema Lingpa had consecrated it.³²

Ayee Pemo, a charming, Chöchangacha-speaking lady in her late sixties, whom we met at Kapalidaphu where she spends her old age living with her husband in a small house right next to Guru Rinpoche’s meditation cave, happily recalled the ‘good old days’ of the Gomphu Kora pilgrimage festival. While constantly turning her handheld prayer wheel, she made special mention of the dances by the Dakpa people from across

30 Unfortunately, folk religious dances have hardly been examined in academic research. On the other hand, monastic ritual masked dances have often been portrayed in glossy coffee table books, while in most of the academic literature the ‘religious’ or ‘symbolic’ meaning of monastic dances in Tibet and the Himalayas is usually focused upon, taking for granted and reiterating the point of view of monastic authorities that these dances are used as a ‘medium’ to teach the uneducated lay people, cf. Pommaret 2006. However, this ignores both their

instrumental socio-political and communal significance as a cooperative monk-lay orchestrated event in terms of the active role that the state or monastic communities, as well as lay people, often play in their organization and sponsorship. It furthermore neglects the importance of folk dances that are often staged in connection with monastic festivals. See Schrempf 2000.

31 S. Wangchuk 2005.

32 See Rai 2003.

the border that she liked most of all. Each ethnic group would perform their particular dances, men and women often separately or alternately in rows. Love songs filled the air, and there was a lot of joking, laughing and drinking going on.³³ She reiterated in her eye-witness account that Gomphu Kora only consisted of the sacred rock around which pilgrims circumambulated. There were no houses or buildings, no road or electricity, and also no monastic masked dance performance (*cham*). Apart from a very few individual monks who came to attend the popular festival during the past, and aside from encountering Guru Rinpoche's tantric powers by touching the traces he left embodied in the sacred rock, Gomphu Kora was a place for popular lay people's amusement: a time when the second most important thing was having fun, earning some money through trade or looking out for a suitable marriage partner. With a smile on her lovely face, Aye Pemo fondly remembers that boys liked to wrestle, and that the cheeky ones were trying to pull the girls away from the circumambulation path at night. In this otherwise thinly populated region, chances to meet someone of the opposite sex who might be 'the right one' to marry were higher than ever during the Gomphu Kora festival, she explained.

In the middle of March 2012, when we visited Gomphu Kora just before the festival began, rumors made the round that three local couples would get married on this occasion, thus invoking the earlier associations the festival had for local people during the past. The rumoured marriage celebrations evaporated into thin air, however. Instead, we watched busy traders and families pitching their blue plastic tents as temporary shelters for sleeping in and selling their mainly plastic goods. It is still a lucrative time and place for selling things. "Commerce and Piety Cheek by Jowl" titled a journalist in *Kuensel Online*, one of the two popular state newspapers in Bhutan, referring to the Gomphu Kora Tshechu staged in 2012.³⁴ Next to plastic goods from China, local vendors are selling chilli seedlings from near-by Khamdang area, wooden bowls, dried chili, and kitchen items made of aluminum. The customers are pilgrims from other districts and those coming from Tawang. A video parlor, small food stalls and some tables offering games comprises the 'recreational' part of the lay folk side of the present festival. I did not see any particular group of pilgrims performing local folk dances, except for a masked Dakpa dancer rattling with his little bells and offering a 'good luck' dance to those who paid him a donation. He was probably an Ache Lhamo performer from the Tawang area (Fig. 2). The festival obviously must have changed quite dramatically

33 While love songs are now considered as part of Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage, and are also commonly performed at some *tshechus*, at the Gomphu Kora festival they have ceased to be performed

following the restructuring of the pilgrimage festival as a masked dance performance. Cf. National Library and Archives of Bhutan 2015, 7.

34 Tempa Wangdi 2012a.



Fig. 2 A Dakpa dancer offers a 'good luck' dance for money.

compared with the past, I thought to myself, while watching everyone enjoying themselves happily with games and mass produced plastic consumer goods. Older pilgrims complain about this new type of commercialization of pilgrimage festivals.³⁵

Among the audience, I could make out the characteristic handwoven raw silk cloths dyed in dark-red, worn by both women from Tawang and nomads from Merak/Sakteng (Fig. 3). Only a single trader offered such cloth for sale, although it used to be an important trade item during the festival in times past. I admired a group of female pilgrims from Tawang wearing their traditional, characteristic dark-red costume, and asked them if they would come to the festival often. "Yes, every year", one woman responded. Together with her women friends, she had walked for two days to cross the Indo-Bhutan border on foot as most pilgrims from the Indian side do. They were having a good time, a rare and welcome pause from intensive and physically demanding farm- and housework.

There were no baskets made out of bamboo nor the well-known wooden bowls from Trashiyangtse to be seen. Making my rounds circumambulating the sacred rock and the temple during Gomphu Kora Tshechu, I passed by an elderly ritual specialist (*gomchen*) belonging to the Nyingmapa or 'old school' of Vajrayana Buddhism, who had established himself on the outer *kora* path. He was wearing a monk's robe and a fancy hat for sun protection made of some fur or feathers sticking out above his grey hair and wrinkled face. He offered divination rituals while loudly reciting prayers and *mantras*, pouring water into a bowl as part of his ritual for divination. Not many of the passing pilgrims seemed to be interested. Right next to him sat a young man selling sunglasses and huge teddy bears in screaming artificial colours. Nearby, a quiet monk sold newly painted religious scrolls (*thangka*) depicting Buddhist deities, along with other paraphernalia. It was quite an exotic mix of old and new that seemed to come from worlds apart,

35 See Rai 2003.



Fig. 3 Group of semi-nomadic Brokké-speakers.



Fig. 4 Market stalls alongside the outer circumambulation path of Gomphu Kora.

yet all made available, becoming part of the lived realities at and around Gomphu Kora (Fig. 4).

The third important sacred site at Gomphu Kora that Lopen Kunzang Thinley had mentioned to me was a big white stone called *'korlung'*, a pointed triangular shaped rock that arises out of the middle of the paved road before one reaches Gomphu Kora from the lower part of the Drangme Chu valley. We had to drive around it in the car when we approached Gomphu Kora. This stone was placed here by Guru Rinpoche as a protective marker, Lopen explained. Guru had used it once as a 'weapon' (*zor*) for

defeating the demon whom he chased all the way from Samye monastery in Tibet to Gomphu Kora; so Guru Rinpoche demarcated a protective boundary for the site. Not far from the Guru's big 'weapon' rock is another small cave, the 'sacred house' (*neykhang*) of a former local demon called Tsergom Dūd whom Guru Rinpoche had bound by oath and transformed into a protective 'owner of place' (*neypo*). This cave is directly accessible from the motor road. Udzin Thubten Tashi showed and explained it to me. Pilgrims visit this place as the last or the first in a row of sacred places of worship, and conduct offerings for protection against evil forces that are always a potential threat to health, wealth and fortune in daily life. Traces of a female sky-goer's footprint belonging to the Guru's beautiful and powerful female consorts and even the heart of the Tsergom Dūd in the form of another triangular yet smooth shaped dark stone were placed in this cave on an altar-like rock, surrounded by offerings and candles that people had left here.

A female ritual healer with whom I worked on a different research topic, but whose natal place and present home is near Gomphu Kora and who knows all the local holy sites very well, had a different way of 'reading' of and interacting with the site of the sacred cave and its nearby '*korlung*' stone. She sensed the environment in a particular multi-layered way. She ritually travels through the local cosmological landscape during healing séances while embodying a regionally important mountain goddess, one of the daughters of Ama Jomo, or Gesar, a Tibetan culture hero and warrior who also possesses other spirit-mediums known as *phamo*.³⁶ She knew every tree and stone in the area, which beings dwell there and how to behave properly so as not to disturb or offend the local spirits. At the *neypo*'s cave, she offered alcohol to all kinds of local gods, including the local lord of the place for placating them, asking for protection and good luck – a way of ritual action that is entirely frowned upon in the eyes of any Buddhist monk since it would be understood as a type of 'demon worship'.

Also, the female healer interpreted the white '*korlung*' rock not as a marker and weapon left by Guru Rinpoche but as a 'feminine' sign of fertility left by his consorts, the female 'sky-goers'. In her narrative, this special rock and another smaller 'related' one located on a nearby village road are powerful sites imbued with the feminine fertility of these flying goddesses, sacred yet also 'sexy' beings (she actually used the English word and smiled at me), meant to be transferred to those who venerate and worship them at this place. According to both the healer's and others' readings of the sacred landscape, there were more special sacred places at and around Gomphu Kora where these *khandromas* – a group of five – play an important role, next to Guru Rinpoche. However,

36 Ama Jomo and Gesar belong to a characteristic hybrid healing cosmology that is both Buddhist and shamanic, imbued with local gods and demonic beings who are directly responsible for well-being or

ill-luck of local people, yet who have to obey the orders of higher ranking Buddhist deities. On this female ritual healer and her healing with Gesar, see Schrempf 2015b.

khandromas in the monastic (and always inherently male) interpretation of this pilgrimage site usually figure only as female consorts of the Guru, but not as powerful and autonomous deities in their own right. The female healer, in contrast, closely identified herself with them. When performing a Gesar healing ritual for a sick villager, her altar featured five *torma*, so-called seats embodying the five major 'sky-goer' goddesses. They were placed at the second highest level of the altar, with a small Guru Rinpoche statue at the top.³⁷

My two very different guides, the senior monastic principal and the female spirit-medium and ritual healer, once met up in a somewhat socially uncomfortable encounter while I was present at the site. I sensed a great tension between them, and it appeared that they usually didn't talk with each other. There was something close to mutual distrust, almost animosity, palpable, in particular from the monk's side. I admired the healer for her distanced yet self-assured attitude towards the monastic authority, whose body language was quite condescending towards her as I watched them exchanging some words. This was a markedly different attitude when compared to the way in which he had guided the pilgrims around the place, directing their minds to moral and soteriological goals in life, through prayer and veneration of Guru Rinpoche. The Udzin appeared as the present 'owner of the place' in this encounter and made the healer feel unwelcome. Later he privately asked me, slightly astonished, from what context I would have known 'that woman.' After I told him that I was also interested in ritual healing, and had been working with her for a while, he warned me. "Don't give her your birth date and name, otherwise she will harm you. She is not a good person."³⁸

Where many people gather, the potential for competition and sometimes conflict is high. Different worldviews might overlap or collide, and more often than not this has to do a lot with the different vested interests and socio-political status of the various groups involved. The female healer did not attend the Gomphu Kora festival, because of the danger of 'pollution' (*drib*). As she pointed out to me, "Where there are lots of people, I can get easily polluted by others." And then her gods become angry with her, she falls ill, and she cannot heal anymore. On a daily basis, she has to obey strict rules of purity, in particular not eat or even have indirect contact with certain 'polluting' foods, such as onion, garlic, egg, or any meats. However, it is also clear from what the high ranking monk from Gomphu Kora had indicated, that she is at least an ambivalent figure representing the low-ranking spirit world that institutionalized Buddhism claims to have overcome since many centuries through its own techniques of subjugation of demonic forces, and, moreover, through its alledged superiority over 'folk' or shamanic religion that it tries to dominate, and at times suppress, until today.

37 See Fig. 2 in Schrempf 2015b, 628.

38 On the life of this healer, see Schrempf 2015a and for a short description of one of her healing rituals related to Gesar, Schrempf 2015b.

Ritual contests between monastically backed spirit-mediums, called *terdak*, and so-called ‘village healers’ who are often associated with lower ranking deities or even demons, have been ongoing in this area – and are still occurring today, across the whole Himalayas. To a certain extent, this conflict reflects the hierarchical structure imposed by state religious administrative structures towards what is known as folk religious or shamanic rituals done by lay ritual healers known as *phamo*, *phawo*, *neljorma* or *jomo*.³⁹ It is an old conflict that is characteristic of both the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau, where institutionalized religion has displaced ‘village religion’ in many communities while formerly it was a wide-spread part of the daily web of social life.⁴⁰ In east Bhutan, there was hardly any form of institutionalized religion before the mid twentieth century, apart from the 200 year old presence of the monastic fortresses with their *dzong* administration connected with the centre of state power located in the west of the country. Clerical and lay officials of the hierocratic state shared their power over poor tax paying farmers and herders, sometimes so excessively that the latter had to migrate out of the region in order to survive.

Beyond these premodern *dzong* or monastic fortresses run by the Drukpa Kagyü school, the so-called *gomchen* or ‘meditators’, lay ritual specialists and village lamas of the Nyingmapa or ‘old school’ of Vajrayana Buddhism, represented the socio-religious sphere in this rather remote area. *Gomchen* took care of the ritual needs for their communities, living side-by-side with other ritual specialists belonging to a spectrum of folk religious practices, all integrated into the social structure of village life. However, today, these *gomchen* have become a rare feature. Local communal rites and festivals are also in sharp decline, mainly due to outmigration and modernization.⁴¹ In contrast to the thriving development of state religious festivals and ritual masked dances (*cham*) known as *tshechu* supported by the government and Bhutan’s tourism industry, there is an increasing competition for followers and sponsors among high-ranking representatives of different schools of Vajrayana Buddhism, a religious sectarianism that competes for the same funds among communities of lay sponsors or even against government supported events.

39 An unpublished report on different types of healers in Bhutan (n.d.), dating back to the early 1990s, represents the only comprehensive survey (to my knowledge); see Meyer and Sihlé (unpublished). See also bibliographies in and ethnographies on fe-

male spirit-mediums in Bhutan: Schrempf 2015a; Schrempf 2015b, Prien-Kaplan (unpublished).

40 Cf. on ‘village religion’ in Sikkim; see Balicki 2008.

41 Tenzin 2012.

3 Gomphu Kora – myth and trade routes intertwined

The core myth of Gomphu Kora is quickly told. It is known to everyone, whether local inhabitants or visiting pilgrim, monastic or lay persons. Gomphu Kora is one of many Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the Himalayas and Tibet where the great tantric master Padmasambhava alias Guru Rinpoche is worshipped in an annual festival. According to local myth, this is the place where Guru Rinpoche was able to finally subjugate one of the most notorious of all demons from Tibet during the 8th century. The Tibetan King Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan, 742–ca. 800 CE) had asked Padmasambhava for help building the first Buddhist monastery at Samye in Tibet. A demon (*dü*) had repeatedly obstructed the construction effort. So, Guru Rinpoche pursued him southwards from Tibet across the Himalayas, finally defeating him at Gomphu Kora. In this way he was able to establish Buddhism in the whole region of the Himalayas and Tibet.

This mythical conquest of the demon by Guru Rinpoche is renarrated by older pilgrims at this site as they read the embodied traces of the magical battles in the rocks of Gomphu Kora, the same traces that simultaneously are believed to purify, protect and bestow blessings upon pilgrims. The myth is also retold in tourist and public media as both history, meaning and identity of the place and pilgrimage. Some details of the pursuit and conquest of the demon in this myth are curious, however. According to one version, Guru Rinpoche passed from southern Central Tibet and between the highest Himalayan peaks along the Nyamjang and Tawang river valleys, and was about to reach Tawang when he turned westwards, passing Ombaney, Gongzaney and finally completed his conquest of the demon at Gomphu Kora (see map, Fig. 5).⁴²

This route corresponds pretty much to one of the old popular trading routes between Tibet, Bhutan and India, and this might be no coincidence. Tawang used to be an important and southern most trade and tax collection centre of the premodern Tibetan state (1642–1959), situated on an old trade route connecting Lhasa and Tibet with Assam on the Indian plains. From the Nyamjang Chu river in Tibet, one branch of this trade route ran south via Tawang and the Monyul Corridor to Udalgiri in Assam, where a small trading fair was held in February/ March. This trade route also forked off from Tawang westwards along the Tawang Chu, passing Gomphu Kora and reaching Trashigang in Bhutan after which it went south to Hajo in Assam (see map, Fig. 5). Hajo, another pilgrimage place with a religious cum commercial fair attracting both Hindus and Buddhists in winter, was the major end point of the Bhutan-Assam route. Most importantly, Trashigang was set at the confluence of several trade routes used at different

42 There are different versions of this legend as there are with any other legend. Another version claims a different path, yet also an old trade route, taken by Guru Rinpoche, along the Kholongchu which

existed until the border was closed in 1962, connecting Bhutan directly with Tibet rather than through the Monyul corridor via Tawang, situated further east in present-day Arunachal Pradesh.

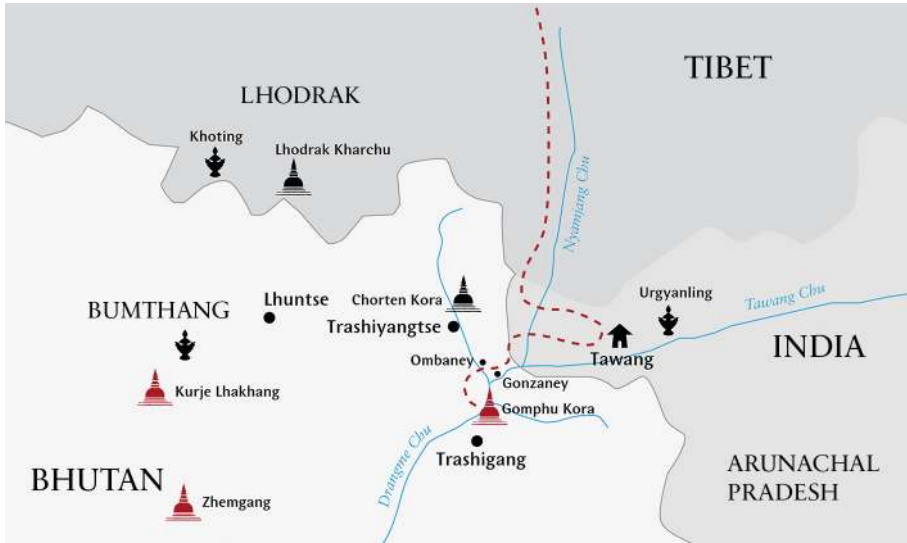


Fig. 5 Map of Bhutan bordering India and Tibet with route of Guru Rinpoche's demon pursuit (red dotted line) from Samye monastery in Tibet to Gomphu Kora.

times in summer and winter, connecting Tibet with India. According to British colonial sources from the 19th century, Trashigang was also considered to be the origin of the Bhutan-Assam trade route.⁴³ The administration of Trashigang *dzong*, situated very close to Gomphu Kora, was furthermore actively involved in the border trade with British India. Some locally made products from the valley of Trashigang included stick lac⁴⁴ and straight iron swords of three feet length that were apparently much sought after. Stick lac was used to dye the characteristic raw silk cloth that Monpas and east Bhutanese used for their traditional dresses. Until today, this cloth is one of the few traditional items that is still worn and sold at the Gomphu Kora festival, as we have seen (Fig. 3).

Yet, most of the goods arrived from Tibet, and Trashigang was an important hub frequented by Tibetan traders, building part of the southern 'silk road'. From there, goods were transported down south to Assam. Both Bhutanese and Tibetan traders sold their products further to pilgrims and Assamese traders at Hajo. Premodern trade fairs connected with pilgrimage sites were main centres for barter and exchange of goods and produce flowing between Tibet, Bhutan and Assam. These also conform to a common pattern encountered elsewhere throughout the Himalayas, where centres and routes

43 Ray and Sarkar 2005.

44 "Stick lac in its natural state that encrusts small twigs and the bodies of lac insects and is scraped off and dried in the shade to become the source of

seed lac, lac dye, and shellac wax".

See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stick%20lac> (visited on 17/10/2017).

of trade and pilgrimage converge in valley locations serving merit, merry and money-making. Tibetans used to bring goods from the High Plateau pasture lands, mainly salt, woolen blankets and ponies, some gold dust, musk, Chinese silk, probably furs and dried meat. Bhutanese bought woollen cloths, rock salts and ponies from Tibet for the Assam-bound trade and exchanged them with cotton and silk cloths for barter.⁴⁵

4 Tourism – new developments and the *tshechu* performance

Nowadays, the cross-border trade which was so important in the past has virtually no more economic significance in eastern Bhutan. Instead, over the past few decades tourism has become one of the most crucial pillars of Bhutan's economy and development plan, also in the so far underdeveloped east of the country.⁴⁶ Additionally, tourism is driving both state-orchestrated and private economic developments. This has also had a major impact on Gomphu Kora. While roads had been widened and tarred and other infrastructure had been built up, such as the opening of the south-east borderposts to foreign tourists,⁴⁷ Gomphu Kora received a special car parking area to accommodate the increasing numbers of vehicles including tour buses, especially during festival times. Also, a big gate and broadly constructed, cemented stairs have been built not too long ago, leading down to the temple, a row of *stupas* and the enlarged and flattened dance ground area. A new stone terraced amphitheatre now offers enough space for the audience to sit comfortably and watch the *tshechu* dances.

Tshechu dances in Bhutan play a particularly important historical role in Bhutan, related to the foundation of the state, the dual system of lay-religious government and the Drukpa Kagyu order of Buddhism. *Tshechus* are built on a repertoire of dances that were standardized and homogenized in the 1970s throughout the country. The Third King, who is generally known as the country's major 'modernizer', had already restructured the *tshechu* in 1961, extending their original purpose "beyond religious ceremonies".⁴⁸ In 1967 an Institute for Masked Dances was founded of which Dasho Nagphel and then Dasho Sithel Dorji became officially government employed 'dance masters' (*champön*).⁴⁹

45 Ray and Sarkar 2005.

46 Among the strategies of the *Tenth Five Year Plan* is that, "Special support will be provided to promote tourism in eastern and southern Bhutan with Sarpang and Samdrup Jongkhar to be included as entry and exit points for tourists". G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2009, 99.

47 A new border post has opened as to facilitate tourists' limited (and expensive) time, now allowing foreigners to also enter or exit the country directly through Samdrup Jomkhar at the border with

Assam rather than having to drive the long winded and slow way over mountain passes back to Thimphu and Paro. A new airport called Yonphola has been built near Trashigang Dzong, too; it opened in 2012.

48 D. S. Dorji 2001, ii.

49 The most authoritative publication on the masked dances of Bhutan to date was written in Dzongkha by Dasho Nagphel Nagphel (Drag-shos Nag-'phel) 1971/1972. Dasho Nagphel was also instrumental in

Today, the eastern Bhutanese districts of Trashigang and Trashiyangtse are advertising their pristine national parks and wild animals that are already extinct in neighbouring countries and elsewhere, eco-trekking tours through the nomadic areas of Merak and Sakteng and, as everywhere else in the country, the colourful ritual masked dances in honour of Guru Rinpoche during the so-called *tshechu* festivals. These are marketed as a must-see cultural event whose ‘uniqueness’ is propagated as a photo-opportunity for every tourist in Bhutan, something not to be missed. The *tshechu* are top tourist attractions, advertised by tour operators as Bhutan’s trademark tradition. They usually take place in the spectacular settings of the mountain fortresses or *dzong* that served as the premodern administrative centres of each district (*dzongkhag*), a role some of them continue to have today.⁵⁰ The Paro Tshechu in western Bhutan is one of the most famous festivals of this type and part of the national holiday calendar, as well as a major tourist event. A novel addition to the international tourist program, however, is that ‘Pilgrimage is considered as one of several ‘new and innovative activities’ based on natural and cultural heritage’.⁵¹

Having seen many ritual masked dance performances in Tibetan communities in Indian exile and China,⁵² I admired the professionalism of the *tshechu* performance in March 2012 at Gomphu Kora, the preciseness, vigour and elegance of the dancers’ movements, the well-made beautiful costumes, the impressive staging and smooth organization of the whole event. The morning of the 10th day (*tshechu*) of the second lunar month started with a large procession led by the present Lama Néten from Trashigang Dzong and high lay officials from Trashiyangtse, followed by monks and lay dancers around the sacred rock of Guru’s paradise and the temple, offering a ‘gold libation’ (*serkyem*) (Fig. 6).⁵³ Next, the huge appliqué scroll (*thangka*) measuring 25 x 39 feet – one of the main attractions for the pilgrims especially made by the lama in residence, and then consecrated in 2001, was unfolded. After a ritual offering by the Trashigang monastic

the standardization of *cham* dances from the 1970s onwards. His follower, Dasho Sithel Dorji, mentions the previously existing local variety of ritual masked dances throughout the country and quite proudly states, “Those differences are now dissolved and the dances have been standardized and developed for the whole country”. D. S. Dorji 2001, iii. Clearly, to preserve cultural diversity was not yet on Bhutan’s agenda at the time.

50 Back in 2014, except for January and February (winter time) and July and August (monsoon time) *tshechu* festivals were performed several times per month at different temples and *dzongs*. In 2017, however, more festivals were added to the offi-

cial tourist event calendar, including *tshechus* and newly established mushroom festivals located in the nomadic areas of Haa and Merak in the otherwise low-tourist season of July and August; see the 2017 festival calendar by the Tourism Department, <http://www.tourism.gov.bt/calendar> (visited on 20/09/2017).

51 G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2009, 98.

52 My PhD topic focused on the performance of ritual masked dances in a Tibetan community of Bonpo in North-West Sichuan, PRC, see Schrempf (unpublished).

53 This is a characteristic offering in Tantric Buddhist rituals.



Fig. 6 The 'gold libation' rite (*serkyem*), an offering by the Trashigang monastic congregation on their circumambulation path around Guru Rinpoche's paradise rock.



Fig. 7 Pilgrims receiving blessings from the large scroll image with Guru Rinpoche in the centre surrounded by his eight emanations.

congregation to Guru in front of an altar, accompanied by six 'sky-goer' dancers performing the Zheshi Pemo, the audience, patiently standing in line around the dance ground, was passing along and touching the hemline of this *thangka* that is called a '*thongdröl*', literally 'liberation through seeing,' with their forehead in order to receive Guru's blessing (Fig. 7). The scroll also formed a beautiful backdrop for the ritual and folk dances performed in front of it.⁵⁴

The structure of the ritual masked dance performance is complex yet hierarchically organized and directed by monastic and lay officials of both districts. Monks from

54 A detailed description of the highly structured and state orchestrated performance and the ritual dances at Gomphu Kora is given in Schrepf 2013. See

also the video film on Gomphu Kora Tsechu documenting both dance performances and pilgrimage activities, <https://vimeo.com/105325261>.

Trashigang Dzong belonging to the Drukpa Kagyü congregation perform those ritual dances that go back to the rulers and state builders of Bhutan coming from the West of the country (*gelong cham*), while male lay dancers from Trashiyangtse dance the more 'local' ritual dances connected with earlier *tertön* traditions from east Bhutan (*böcham*). Altogether seventeen different dances were displayed in 2012, alternating with lay folk dances performed by young women from Trashiyangtse, uniformly dressed in pink *kiras*. These folk dances called *shabdro*, however, are not identical with the formerly practiced, diverse local folk dances of the various ethnic groups from east Bhutan, but represent a standardized folk repertoire imported via Thimphu and Paro *tshachus* from the West of the country. In other words, nothing about these dances nor dance costumes represents anything 'local' anymore, and the casual, competitive exchange among pilgrims performing their folk dance and song traditions from east Bhutan and from Tawang across the Indian border has vanished. Instead, the event was organized with compulsory participation rotating among chosen members of local communities from different *gewok*⁵⁵ of Trashiyangtse District every year. Thus the former charming appeal and often spontaneous popular performance culture displayed between different neighbouring ethnic groups that eye-witnesses so fondly referred to, utterly changed.

It is also obvious that the new folk dances performed by young women do not contain any sexual references or salaciousness anymore that the old folk songs and dances were famous for but belong to a set of sanitized popular folk dance performances that have been promoted by the government as part of the standardized *tshachu*. In Gomphu Kora, they have replaced the former exuberance, friskiness and chance encounters as well as mock battles that the variety of local folk songs and dances as well as the 'night *kora*' provided, promoting a subordination into a state religious liturgy of an almost generic character. Some villagers expressed their regrets about this loss. The festival does not anymore represent their local traditions, nor does it allow for their own agency as dancers to be included anymore. Instead, they have been turned into audience members of a state religious event, serving as an 'authentic' backdrop in a tourist spectacle (Figs. 8–9).

Fertility was – and to a certain extent still is – an important daily concern in a thinly populated, agrarian society. Fertility concerned not only animals and crops but also humans, and is expressed in many folk cultural practices and even a religious cult that, however, is in stark decline.⁵⁶ While images of phalluses still decorate house walls in rural Bhutan, painted and variously adorned with wings or flying bow ties, sculptured in wood hanging from roofs or standing erect while rammed into the earth as protections

55 In Bhutan, larger districts (*dzongkhag*) are divided into smaller administrative units (*gewok*).

56 For example, until the government had established mother and child health care programs, Bhutan had

a rather low fertility and high child mortality rate; see the detailed study by Wikan and Barth 2011. See, in particular, Toni Huber's forthcoming book *Source of Life*; Huber (forthcoming).



Fig. 8 Cham dancer in front of temple at Gomphu Kora Tshechu.

against demons, these are now more decorative adornments and at times are commented on with shyness by ‘modern’ Bhutanese. Nevertheless, it also seems that this topic was absorbed in some of the tantric powers attributed to the great tantric masters. Therefore, it might be no surprise to find popular fertility temples in Bhutan. As we have seen, at the temple in Gomphu Kora, Guru Rinpoche’s ‘phallus’ is kept among the ‘treasure’ relics in a glass vitrine. *Cham* performances in Bhutan are also famous for their characteristic interpretation of the well-known figure of the Atsara,⁵⁷ a type of clown endowed with a big nose (an Indian feature as is claimed) and a big red wooden phallus. As part of the ritual masked dance performances, he loves to entertain the crowd with chasing after women, making fun of dignitaries or tourist cameras.

⁵⁷ Toni Huber has also worked on the ‘Hungla’ or ‘Haula’ traditions of east Bhutan that surround a similar figure who is, however, wearing a kind of

scull-like mask armed with a wooden phallus, a cult connected with the fertility of crops, see Huber 2015, 239.



Fig. 9 Pilgrims as spectators.

However, the issue of ‘safety, sanctity and dignity’ is also of concern in relation to tourism. Clearly, the Bhutanese state seeks to ensure a low risk environment for high-paying foreign visitors via police presence and other management practices. The tourism department wants to increase tourist attractions, by providing “greater access to cultural and natural wealth, such as Dzongs, Tshechus, religious ceremonies, Neys, parks, rivers and mountains” but also, tourist development needs to “be facilitated with proper rules to ensure safety, sanctity and dignity of people and tourism resources.”⁵⁸

Hence, nowadays various new security measures have been put in place at Gomphu Kora. Electric lights have been installed for pilgrim’s safety at night when the traditional ‘night kora’ is performed around Guru Rinpoche’s rock paradise. Police controlled the crowds also during the day when I attended. People are divided about these latest developments. Some welcome the new safety measures believing that they became necessary after some sexual assaults that happened to girls.⁵⁹ Others recall that traditionally, this was a place for young men and women to meet and have fun, and that in the old times, there were no such bad things happening.⁶⁰ A media report from the Gomphu Kora Tshechu in 2003 elaborates on the ‘night *kora*’, based on eye-witness-accounts:

By 11 pm, when the few electric bulbs hanging from the roof of the monastery are put off, hundreds of flashlights take over, which are shone directly into

58 G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2009, 99.

59 I also heard rumours that several years earlier some of the older men, however neither locals nor pilgrims but men of authority, were trying to take advantage of young girls at the pilgrimage site.

60 In any case, to be safe my female translator and interlocutor refused to stay overnight in a tent at Gomphu Kora as we had planned in order to observe the festival also at night. That is why, unfortunately, I was not able to participate in the ‘night kora’ myself.

the faces of people, mainly women, circumambulating the lhakhang [temple]. While a few young men and women pull and tease each other playfully in romance as is the tradition, groups of cigarette smoking youths do not hesitate to forcefully grab and harass the women despite their resistance and shouts. Others use the torch lights to look for sleeping partners for the night in the tents. The circumambulation continues till about three in the morning. In the past men and women teased each other with songs and verses, he said. Girls would circumambulate the lhakhang and men would grab them in the dark and carry them away. Such incidents would often end in marriages. Not anymore nowadays. Some devotees also expressed concern that the spiritual significance of the tsechu was being diluted by commercialism.⁶¹

It is interesting to review Bhutanese media, in particular the *Bhutan Observer* and *Kuensel Online*, over time. While over fifteen years ago, pilgrims still commented on and at times criticized the changes that happened at the Gomphu Kora Tsechu performance, and increasing numbers of visitors were taken as evidence for the rising popularity of the festival among pilgrims and tourists, nowadays their dwindling attendance, including visitors from Tawang, is referred to.⁶² By now, it also seems to be taken for granted that the monastic performance of the *tsechu* has a long history and tradition at Gomphu Kora. The lay folk dances and songs have already been forgotten. The local peculiarity of the popular pilgrimage festival, i.e. the slightly promiscuous ‘night *kora*’ and the trade activities surrounding Chinese plastic goods are treated at times as a form of moral decline and a new development of modern commercialisation.⁶³ In contrast, tourist agencies, such as Bhutan Green Travel emphasize the specific colourful folk character of the festival, advertising its ‘exotic’ factor, neglecting the fact, however, that Gomphu Kora *tsechu* has lost much of its local flair, through tourism and the more recent state monastic orchestration of the event.⁶⁴

Back in 2009, the government still blamed ‘globalisation’ for a potential loss of cultural diversity:

A major challenge for conserving the country’s rich culture will be to minimize the effects of globalization that tends to homogenize diverse and rich cultures and causes people’s cultural identity to wither often resulting in a dissolution of local languages, knowledge, beliefs and practices.⁶⁵

61 Quoted from Rai 2003.

62 See Tshering Wangdi 2015.

63 “For the thousands who attend the Gomphu Kora Tsechu in Trashiyangtse every year its main attraction, nowadays, is its culture of nightlife and com-

merce that has evolved around the festival. But [my emphasis] Gomphu Kora is an important nye (sacred site)” S. Wangchuk 2005.

64 Bhutan Green Travel 2014.

65 G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2009, 492.

However, Bhutan's more recent GNH policy acknowledges the impact of modernity and urbanization on its local traditions. The agenda also aligned itself more with UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage politics, including an emphasis on cultural diversity. The *Eleventh Five Year Plan* issued by the GNH Commission states: "The key strategy will be to promote Bhutan as an exclusive destination based on high level of services, diversified tourism products and improved tourism infrastructure facilities. The focus will be on regional spread, addressing seasonality issues and community participation."⁶⁶

During the past few years, more hotels and lodging facilities have been built in Trashigang in order to accommodate the increasing flow of tourists that 'flood' the small town during the festivals at both Trashigang Dzong and at Gomphu Kora.⁶⁷ Also, the timing or spacing of *tshechus* in the east reveals the orchestration by Bhutan's Tourism Department. In 2013, the *tshechu* festival staged at the neighbouring Mongar Dzong, a good half day's drive away from Trashigang Dzong, began shortly before the one at Trashigang Dzong with some days of overlap.⁶⁸ This allows for consecutive visits by tour groups, who usually arrive from Paro and Thimphu via Bumthang and head eastwards. The scheduling of the Gomphu Kora Tshechu has obviously been following the original date of the old popular trade festival in the second lunar month, ensuring enough pilgrims to attend regularly while conveniently objectifying them as 'colourful culture' for authentic snapshots. Yet, in 2012, I witnessed only about two to three tour buses arriving at the Gomphu Kora Tshechu, and saw not more than about forty foreigners who mainly behaved dignified, remained sitting on a rock, the sun in the back, photographing and filming the ritual dances, using the audience members of locals and pilgrims dressed in their stunning traditional costumes as a convenient backdrop framed by the temple towering above. Hardly any of the tourists were seen on the circumambulation path around Guru's paradise rock. It is possible that they neither had enough time for this given the strict schedule of such 8–10 day tours through Bhutan nor, possibly, were informed about or interested in joining the ordinary pilgrimage activity of circumambulating the sacred rock.

66 G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2013, 18.

67 Tempa Wangdi 2012b.

68 In 2013, Mongar Tshechu was scheduled for Nov. 9–12, 2013; and the Trashigang Tshechu for Nov. 10–13, 2013 while the Gomphu Kora Tshechu usually happens around March/April on the 10th day of

the second lunar month, some weeks apart from another important religious festival in the area, the Namgang Kora at the sacred site of Chorten Kora near Trashiyangtse Dzong. Here, too, people from Tawang join in.

5 A short chronology of recent developments

As we have seen, some date the Gomphu Kora fair and folk dance festival as far back as ‘400 years ago’, others also include the present temple (*lhakhang*) and even the monastic ritual dances of the *tshechu* in this time frame. Contradictions remain and dating the place and the festival remains difficult with myth, history and place entangled. Even though locals say that there was no temple at Gomphu Kora until about 30 years ago, Bailey reports that he saw a small temple here in 1913 which might have been destroyed or decayed in the decades inbetween.⁶⁹ However, it can be safely stated that Gomphu Kora lay directly at the confluence of important trading routes connecting Tibet with India via Bhutan since the second half of the 17th century when both the Tibetan and the Bhutane states were formed. According to local oral knowledge and some colonial British sources, it was one of few yet important pilgrimage festivals in this area bringing together people from Tawang, possibly formerly also traders from Tibet, with local east Bhutanese traders.

Clearly, the Gomphu Kora pilgrimage festival was an important meeting point for locals, pilgrims and traders, centering around Guru Rinpoche’s big sacred rock, with Trashigang Dzong as near-by trading post. Devotional activities such as doing *kora* and the performance of a range of local folk dances and songs performed by a variety of ethnic groups were the two main activities that came together once a year at this site. In 1987, after the temple was built, and under the sponsorship of the Fourth King, the monastic congregation of Trashigang Dzong began to perform the ritual cycle *Soldeb Bum*⁷⁰ in honor of Guru Rinpoche inside the small temple of Gomphu Kora. Since then, the *Soldeb Bum* is annually performed during the first seven days of the 2nd lunar month. With the extension of the infrastructure to eastern Bhutan in the early 1990s a new interest in the area, and also in Gomphu Kora as a site, began. This seems to have started off with visits, empowerments, and religious ceremonies held in the east by high-ranking Drukpa Kagyü lamas and authorities.⁷¹ The tradition of country-wide visits and the authoritative performance of state cum religious hierarchies goes back to Bhutan’s state founder Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594–1651).⁷² In 1993, the local

69 Bailey 1914, 142.

70 *Soldeb Bum* (*gsol ‘debs ‘Bum*) is a prayer (*gsol ‘debs*) for Guru Rinpoche to come back to the present, into this life as the ‘Lotus Born’ Pema Jungne (Pad-ma byungs-gnas), dedicated to the peace and well-being of the country. It is performed at the small temple at Gomphu Kora.

71 For example, in 1991 the 69th Je Khenpo Geshe Gedun Rinchen visited Gomphu Kora and conducted a public initiation (*wang*) in addition to delivering public teaching. In 2005, Je Khenpo Trulku

Jigme Choeda attended the Gomphu Kora festival on his way to Trashiyangtse to conduct the great prayer festival of Mönlam Chenmo in Chorten kora (announcement in S. Wangchuk 2005).

72 Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal also established the dual system of religious (Drukpa Kagyü) and political governance. On this system and the socio-political and cultural role of ‘rows of auspicious seats’ in past and present official ritual performances, see D. Penjore 2011.

Drukpa Kagyü lama in residence at Trashigang Dzong, Lama Néten Rinchen, enlarged the ritual. Following the *Soldeb Bum*, he introduced the first public monastic dance performance ('*cham*') at this place, an offering dance to Guru Rinpoche called Zheshi Pemo. It is performed both inside and outside of the temple by six 'sky-goers' as the first and most important sacred dance of the Gomphu Kora Tshechu until today. Facilitating the newly established dance performance, the ground was leveled and the temple was renovated in 1995, and a small painted scroll depicting Guru Rinpoche was displayed for public veneration.⁷³

From 1996 onwards, again at the initiative of a Lama Néten in residence, the Trashigang monastic congregation gradually introduced another series of ritual masked dances at Gomphu Kora by duplicating those already popularly performed at many other *dzongs* across Bhutan (including at Trashigang Dzong). In 2001, a huge new appliqué *thongdröl* scroll depicting Guru Rinpoche and his eight manifestations was publically consecrated by the monastic congregation of Trashigang Rabdey (see Fig. 7). Apparently, thousands of devotees from Trashigang and Trashiyantse Dzongkhags attended the consecration ceremony.⁷⁴ At that time, pilgrims from Tawang still flocked to Gomphu Kora interested in social cross-border relations among the youth as well as in amusement and shopping.⁷⁵ In 2004, Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck used the popularity of the festival to help promote the use of condoms as part of a family planning and HIV/AIDS campaign. 7500 condoms were distributed among all age groups of pilgrims and visitors, including children and monks, and also tourists happily joined in their distribution.⁷⁶

According to oral local accounts, the Gomphu Kora Tshechu had maintained its basic folk character until about 2005, yet the increasing involvement of the monastic congregation of Trashigang Dzong and of the secular administration of Trashiyantse seemed to change its overall character after that. More specifically, for example, resistance among locals and pilgrims arose when the statue of the state founder Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel – that is usually kept inside Trashigang Dzong – was brought down for the first time to Gomphu Kora at the time of the *tshechu*. When the monks asked the pilgrims to pass underneath the state founder's statue in a procession, they refused to do so apparently perceiving this as a gesture of unnecessary submission.

The protocol changed after that, and when I attended the festival in March/April 2012, which was the beginning of the Bhutanese New Year, the special statue of Bhutan's state founder was guided in an unofficial ceremonial procession by the monks from Trashigang Dzong, leading it from there down to Gomphu Kora, where it was temporarily housed at the small temple for the next two and a half months until the Gomphu

73 S. Wangchuk 2005.

74 R. Wangchuk 2001.

75 U. Penjore 2002.

76 Rai 2004.

Tshechu was over. In the same year, the ritual cycle *Soldeb Bum* performed before the Gomphu Kora Tshechu was sponsored by a local wealthy tourist hotel owner who already started to build the next big resort outside of the cramped little town of Trashigang. For this generous donation the lay sponsor was allowed to invite the monks for food and tea into the sponsor's restaurant, and to shortly house the special statue of Zhabdrung thus receiving blessings in return for the tourism venue and business.

Meanwhile, however, the government acknowledges the importance of local oral traditions for preserving the country's unique intangible cultural heritage, as expressed in the latest *Eleventh Five Year Plan (2013–2018)*. Two of nine domains of the 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH) Index concern "community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience."⁷⁷ In this plan, concerns are also expressed about endangered local traditions, such as local folk dances and festivals, attributed to outmigration rather than globalization at large. Apparently, aims have been reformulated, so "Preserving, promoting and documenting the fading intangible cultural heritage are crucial."⁷⁸

6 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how the pilgrimage site and annual festival of Gomphu Kora have been appropriated and increasingly instrumentalized during the past three decades by local government and the monastic Drukpa Kagyü congregation from Trashigang Dzong. The social transformations at this pilgrimage site need to be understood against the backdrop of Bhutan's ongoing strategy for both modern nation building and economic development through culture tourism. Despite a recently proclaimed call for cultural diversity and preservation, the Gomphu Kora Tshechu has transformed into a generic, sanitized state monastic spectacle for good. The key agents are the district administrations of Trashigang and Trashiyangtse shared by monk and lay officials, the state tourism department as well as private local entrepreneurs involved in tourism who also sponsor the event. Ritual procession, monastic dance performance and the public display of the large Guru Rinpoche thangka are focused on and, in fact, have transformed the whole festival by replacing the local folk dances and songs with a hierarchical monastic and state administrative structure. Last but not least, the former agents – local ethnic

77 "The GNH Index is based on biennial surveys and provides an overview of performance across 9 domains of GNH that include health, education, living standards, ecological diversity and resilience, good governance, psychological wellbeing, time use, community vitality and cultural diversity and resilience."

Continuing and expanding GNH, the main objective of the *Eleventh Five Year Plan (2013–2018)* is "self-reliance and inclusive green socio-economic development" G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2013, 3.
78 G. N. H. C. R. G. o. Bhutan 2013, 232.

groups including those from Tawang across the border with India – have been disempowered and instrumentalized, turned into exoticized spectators for the tourist gaze. Socio-moral distinctions delineating the boundaries between monastic and lay populations seem to have shifted from socio-economic exchange and marriage-making to the issue of controlling an alleged (a)moral behaviour among young males during the festival. Frictions occur where generational but also hierarchical political appropriations are pushed too far during the festival, while social inequalities might sharpen the rising gap between urban and rural incomes and lifestyles.

Given the governments' claim of 'preserving culture' through eco-tourism, one wonders a little why the old popular folk dances were not integrated at least into the recently established monastic and lay administrative structure, in a similar fashion as one of the first rulers of Bhutan demonstrated already in the mid 17th century. Tenzin Rabgyey introduced the new ritual masked dances imported from Tibet to Bhutan and incorporated the local folk dances of West Bhutan performed at harvest time into the monastic dance performance in which he himself took part in a key role. Yet, none of the concerns uttered back in 17th-century Tibet concerning the apparently problematic public display of 'sacred' ritual dances performed by monks for a lay audience – and which had provoked a dispute among different Buddhist schools about the appropriateness of 'dancers in the marketplace'⁷⁹ – were or are an issue in Bhutan, it seems. In contrast, facilitated by infrastructural development in the area and promotional support by the Tourism Department the Gomphu Kora Tshechu seems to be part of state development focusing on tourism, yet through an invention of tradition. As we have seen, today the *tshechus* are serving as most important cultural tourism asset in Bhutan. It seems that Bhutan's own nationalist cultural politics have helped to co-produce a generic festival that has lost its local specificity. Local traditions involving local communities, however, have only reappeared as a recently proclaimed, desirable 'added value' for a country on the search for its lost cultural heritage and diversity. One can only hope that the older generation still remembers some of the folk dances and songs sung at Gomphu Kora, and that the local governments who had hushed their voices in the first place, will re-encourage their participation in reviving their own cultural traditions and histories that are still embodied in this beautiful landscape of east Bhutan.

79 Cf. Ellingson 1979, 166–174.

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Illustration credits

1–4 Mona Schrempf, taken during fieldwork at Gomphu Kora Tshechu in March/April 2012.
 5 Map based on a design made and drawn by Britta Paulich for the exhibition and the catalogue *Die Acht Aspekte des Kostbaren Lehrers – Padmasambhava*

in Kunst und Ritual des Himalaya, Museum of Asian Art, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2012–2013. 6–9 Mona Schrempf, taken during fieldwork at Gomphu Kora Tshechu in March/April 2012.

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