Report from the Field: Practices Laid to Waste – Symbolic Classification, Healing and Pandemic Ritual Transformation in a Bhutanese Village

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Abstract:

This report from the field in the form of a photo essay explores the shifting religious landscape of Ketokha, a village in the Chhukha district of southwestern Bhutan. Historically, Buddhist and shamanic traditions coexisted in Ketokha, negotiating varied positions of power, influence and healing. The *nejom* (female medium) and *pawo* (male medium) played pivotal roles in ritually protecting the villagers' health and prosperity until 2018, when, with infrastructure development and through modernist discourses, Buddhism became the dominant religion and mediumship was discontinued. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, marked by the decline of shamanic traditions and the establishment of a refashioned protective ritual called *Aum Bogum* as the primary marker of the community's ritual identity. This report focuses on this ritual and the life story and perspectives of 94-year-old Tandin Om, the then oldest living *nejom,* and examines the laying to waste of the community's archaic shamanic practices. Using insights of Discard Studies that treat waste as a system of symbolic classification and moral politics, this essay unpacks the marginalisation of elderly ritual practitioners as community elites propagate the adoption of what they consider a more progressive socio-religious order of Vajrayana Buddhism. The photographs document elements of these shifts, offering visual cues of Ketokha's changing community and ritual lives.

Keywords: *Bhutan; COVID-19; waste; discard studies; mediumship (nejom/pawo); religious transition; Vajrayana Buddhism*

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Introduction

Until recently, Ketokha and its neighbouring villages, situated in the subtropical forests of the Bongo *gewog* (block) in the southwest Bhutanese district of Chhukha, were well known for their ritual plurality (Chophel 2020). This plurality was marked by the fluid services of its Buddhist priests and shamanic mediums, the latter being part of the autochthonous Bon practices in Bhutan (Tashi 2023).[1] These mediums are known as *nejom* (female) and *pawo* (male). Their main responsibility is to channel deities, treat disease, perform divinations and provide counsel on village decisions (Prien 2015; Tandin 2007). Their continuing decline has been documented in several regions (Chophel 2024; Tashi 2023). Like much of Bhutan, Ketokha is a place undergoing major transitions. Newly constructed roads connect the village, and telecommunication, health and education services have been established. Through growing prosperity, the villagers have built new and bigger houses. They have greatly expanded the small community temple, and the resident Buddhist lama has been appointed by the district monastic body over the last couple of decades. Similar to what Ortner (1995) observes among the Sherpa communities in Nepal, this 'upgrading' of Ketokha's socio-economic status creates modernist discourses[2] resulting in a parallel 'upgrading' of its religious practices geared towards establishing Vajrayana Buddhism as the dominant religion in the community.

This modernism in Ketokha necessitated the laying to waste of what the community perceived and classified as the anachronistic ritual practices of the past. Drawing on insights from the emerging field of Discard Studies, we analytically approach our observations of how the lives and practices of elderly ritual practitioners were devalued and actively marginalised by a new Buddhist elite. This process, we argue, unfolded through shifting reinterpretations of what it means to be valuable. Highlighting what he terms the 'moral politics of waste', Reno (2022) shows that through 'shared values' and 'systems of symbolic classification', the life cycles of things and people are organised into categories of what is regarded as valuable, dangerous or disposable in society. Waste, in this sense, becomes not merely a material residue but also a fluid imagery and symbolic system through which lives and livelihoods can be delegitimised. Similar dynamics of devaluation have been documented elsewhere, such as by Bauman (2006), who uses the concept of 'wasted lives' to examine

the predicaments of the unemployed, refugees and other people rendered superfluous by the processes of modernisation. For Bauman, waste is not an accidental byproduct of progress but a structural and semiotic feature of modernity itself: every project of order and efficiency produces its own forms of disorder and exclusion. Studies like these underscore the role of moral politics and symbolic classification in determining which beings and practices society elevates or renders waste.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic affected Bhutan in early 2020, the shamanic practices of the female *nejoms* were already undermined by local Buddhist priests who dissuaded the *nejoms* from practising and confiscated their ritual implements, prompting them to retire from their vocation. When the three of us visited Ketokha in March 2023, only four elderly *nejoms* remained. There were no *pawos*, and no new medium had been trained. We met two of the four *nejoms*, 85-year-old Jamchu and the oldest, 94-year-old Tandin Om.[3] We also met the latter's grand-niece, Choki, who cared for Tandin Om. During a second visit in November 2023, two of us (Chophel and Thinley) interviewed Tandin Om at length, as well as *Tsip* Dawa, the village elder and elected community leader.[4]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the *nejoms* could not offer their protective and healing services because, without their ritual implements, they could not channel their deities. Buddhism had become further entrenched in the community with the Buddhist leaders reconfiguring and instituting a major Buddhist ritual called *Aum Bogum* as Ketokha's exclusive community ritual. *Aum Bogum* is a *phurpa* exorcism ritual[5] with shamanic Bon elements involving a figurine with nine goitres. Previously it was performed only occasionally when the community faced human or livestock disease or unnatural crop failures. In 2022, *Aum Bogum* was reinvented as a pandemic protection ritual and by November 2023, it was performed during the major calendrical New Year festival called *Nyaru*.

This photo essay documents elements of these transitions, allowing the images to carry ethnographic insights through human gestures, objects and ritual events. Methodologically, our aim is that these 'images take us deeper into the sensory knowledge of a subject through a visual portal' (Crowder and Cartwright 2021: 3). We selected each photo and added a descriptive caption followed by the stories told around different aspects of ritual and societal changes so that images and text are 'complementary rather than supplementary to each other'

(ibid.). In particular, the photos are arranged to highlight the life of Tandin Om, her surroundings and the *Aum Bogum* ritual.

Tandin Om had been a mainstay of the community's ritual life and a living repository of its social and medical history. However, in her remaining years, the village relegated her from the centre of the village's health and vitality to its periphery. Coincidentally, the house where she lived in 2023, belonging to her grand-niece Choki, stood at the northern edge of the village. Even though her symbolic and physical relegation to the margins was purely coincidental, it mirrored the decline of her ritual and social positions, especially when viewed through the lens of Discard Studies. Tandin Om passed away in November 2024 and our interview with her remains the only video-recorded account of her life story.

Photo 1: Ketokha village with its temple complex, houses, fields and grazing cattle, November 2023. The new village temple, located towards the right of the photo, is a large, whitewashed building with extensive woodwork and a *sertog* (gold-coloured rooftop pinnacle). The old temple remains standing to its right, a kitchen building to its left and a smaller butter lamp house in the front. Tandin Om's dwelling (not visible) is situated to the northern edge of the village.

Ketokha village consists of around sixty households. Compared to other places in Bhutan, people here tend to be taller and stronger. This is one reason why many Ketokha men enlist in the armed forces, a tradition that has continued to this day with new generations joining the same profession due to the social capital it generates for their families. Being well employed, many of them can build bigger houses upon their return from the army and reinvigorate the community's economy. Through a combination of the community's new wealth and state grants, together with local labour mobilisation, the village enlarged its community temple.[6] Previously, shamanic rituals took place at major natural landmarks such as prominent trees and boulders while Buddhist rituals took place in the old temple as well as at natural landmarks. Nowadays, the new ritual landscape is predominantly centred on the enlarged village temple.

Photo 2: A Ketokha cattle herder in his cowshed, wearing his traditional robe, November 2023.

Even though new agricultural practices, including paddy cultivation, have been introduced, Ketokha was historically a pastoral community where men spent much of the year herding cattle deep inside subtropical forests. Close affective bonds developed not only with their livestock but also with the forests that provided fodder, shelter

and fuel. Villagers followed shamanic practices that included routine ritual sacrifices of roosters, pigs and cattle. These animal sacrifices have prompted progressive members of the community to oppose their own traditional practices. Since mediums performed these rituals, they became the prime targets of modernist cultural interventions. For example, a 2005 article in the national newspaper *Kuensel* (Wangchuk 2005) reported the widespread practice of animal sacrifice in the Bongo region, of which Ketokha is a part. Many community members now perceive these practices as archaic.

Photo 3: Setting up the video recording for an interview with Tandin Om at her home in November 2023. Gangtep, the field assistant, is standing behind Tandin Om checking the light conditions.

In March 2023, when we first met Tandin Om, several years had passed since her ritual services were prohibited. Although people whom we talked to remained vague regarding how exactly this prohibition happened, Tandin Om recalled the head lama and village leaders persuading her to hand over her ritual paraphernalia, including her headgear (*rigna*), handheld drum (*tangtri*), bell (*drilbu*) and robe (*khamar kabney*). One of the *nejoms* was not even in the village when leaders confiscated her implements. Those who enforced the prohibition apparently provided modest compensation to the *nejoms* in the form of money and food.

When two of us (Chophel and Thinley) visited Tandin Om again in November 2023, we video-recorded an interview in which she recounted her life story and reflected on previous epidemics[7] and shamanic practices (Thinley et al. 2025a). She described how she had internalised the prohibitions. Having accepted her new Buddhist vows, she no longer called her shamanic deities by name:

> When the lama [who has since passed away] told the people that we as mediums were not allowed to even mention the names of our deities (*rigzang lha*) and touch our implements, the people tried to follow that seriously. I was particularly targeted. Even my niece took this advice seriously. The lama said that our children will be negatively affected if the prohibitions are not upheld. I have given up struggling against such arbitrariness. I don't mention the names of my deities. I am now beginning to forget them also. I think if I go against these prohibitions, I am transgressing my vows [*damcha*, vows renouncing her old practice].[8]

Photo 4: Ritual bells confiscated from the mediums that were kept at the community temple in Ketokha, in November 2023. The one on the left is missing its handle. Some of them are apparently still used during Buddhist rituals.

When Chophel and Thinley asked villagers whether the confiscated paraphernalia could still be seen, they revealed that five bells taken from the *nejoms* were stored at the temple. Tandin Om recalled that those paraphernalia that could not be repurposed for Buddhist rituals, such as the hand drums, were burnt, while implements like the bells—commonly used in Buddhist rituals—were readily repurposed. Thus, even as the mediums' lives and practices were laid to waste, their implements still found reuse. Following insights from Discard Studies, objects and people become 'waste' only when they no longer find usage or acceptance. When Buddhist lamas replaced *nejoms* as the community's primary ritualists, the mediums and most of their objects no longer found relevance or acceptance in the community.

Photo 5: Tandin Om (left) and Jamchu (right), two of the four mediums who still lived in Ketokha in 2023.

Tandin Om and Jamchu both recounted that they had once served as the primary source of health care, healing and vitality in the village. Whenever there was illness, whether human, livestock or crop, the villagers called them. Both remembered their services as thankless and tedious, called on every day and at odd hours, sometimes even in the middle of the night. They also had to perform annual commemorative rituals to propitiate the local deities as well as periodic revitalisation rituals to renew ties with their tutelary deities. All these services were sponsored by patrons. Mediumship was never lucrative, and most *nejoms* had to supplement income with routine agricultural activities. However, besides enjoying elevated social standing, they welcomed the fees (in cash or in kind) they received.

With their services no longer required, Tandin Om, Jamchu and other former mediums grew financially and socially marginalised. Tandin Om lived at the very edge of the village in a wooden house next to her grand-niece's unfinished house, with little comfort. When we met her, she was highly protective of some guava bushes, which she described as her only source of income. Yet, while filming our interview with her, a person passing through from the neighbouring village stopped to give her some cheeses. It seemed that even though

ritual connections had ended, sentimental and familial ties remained and were expressed through occasional gifts and acts of kindness.

Photo 6: Tandin Om telling her stories. Despite her advanced age and physical limitations, she used her hands expressively to articulate her thoughts and emotions.

Even at 94, Tandin Om was remarkably coherent and displayed an acute intellect, remembering and connecting various community events with their consequences. For example, she provided detailed accounts of the epidemics that struck the village over her long life. Located near the country's most important trade route, the Ketokha community historically had to carry out corvée services for the state, which included transporting goods.[9] This frequently exposed people to unknown diseases. During our first conversation in March 2023, Tandin Om recounted *ma chem* (smallpox) as particularly challenging, claiming many lives in her village.[10] During the second interview, she recalled that *ma chem* and other disease outbreaks led to strict quarantine measures, isolating people in their homes and the sick in tents outside the village. She said *nejoms* could not practice during these restrictions and often got sick themselves.

During these epidemics, dead bodies were buried temporarily until Buddhist lamas could safely perform cremations. The division

of religious duties meant that mediums looked after the health and wealth of the people in their lifetime, while the lamas cared for the people in their afterlives. Since death and afterlives are considered matters of paramount consequence in Buddhist reckoning, villagers classify lamas as more venerable ritual caregivers (Chophel 2024). In general, *nejoms* need to be highly persuasive and performative, because the people's allegiance to them is maintained through their charismatic personalities. By contrast, a lama's power comes from his ability to rigorously execute formalised ritual codes.[11] When 'moral politics' bring ritual worldviews into conflict, as has happened recently, mediums are more easily marginalised, whereas the lamas retain their prominence as they are considered indispensable.

Photo 7: Tandin Om sitting beside her hearth. She cooked her food on an open wood fire, which has been replaced in most village kitchens by imported liquefied gas.

Tandin Om recalled that her mother and several relatives had been mediums, including her elder brother, a *pawo* who had trained a young *nejom*. Tandin Om copied the young *nejom's* practices. After a formal initiation, she became a *nejom* herself three years after the death of her mother, whose deity passed on to her. Tandin Om had four children, but all of them died in infancy. She attributed this loss to ongoing difficulties of reconciling with her husband, who was also a *pawo*. There were several issues between them, including the incompatibility of their personal tutelary deities. They eventually separated, and she remained

unmarried and childless. Following that, she helped raise the children and grandchildren of her siblings, one of whom was taking care of her.

Tandin Om attributed her long life to the blessings of her teacher and tutelary deity. Yet under the village's new religious order, the power of her deity had lost its relevance. Within the emerging moral politics that relegated her presence, her longevity, once a sign of spiritual fortune, had been reduced to an unending burden. Her welfare was precarious. In a private conversation, she confided that she no longer felt useful to her community, a painful recognition that compounded the many other losses she had endured.

Photo 8: Ketokha villagers participating in the annual agricultural New Year festival of *Nyaru* in November 2023.

A new period in the village has produced new imperatives and leaders. Elected leaders and village elders now believe that the village has to outgrow its image as a holdout of archaic shamanic practices, as portrayed in the national newspaper. Within their modernist worldview, the village's development potential can be fully realised only when its religious practices are suitably 'upgraded'. As in other communities in this predominantly Buddhist country, such religious upgrading has involved the development of Buddhist infrastructure (temples) and human resources (trained priests) (cf. Cho 2024). Reinventing the community's

image has also involved fluidly and creatively blending existing and new practices to construct coherent and persuasive ritual narratives.

By November 2023, the village had reinvented the *Aum Bogum* ritual as part of its annual agricultural New Year festival, called *Nyaru*. The *Bogum*, with its shamanic Bon elements, was portrayed as 'ancient' and highly efficacious. As discussed above, its elevation as a major community ritual was a part of the invention of a new religious identity. In a few years, it may well be remembered as an 'old' annual Buddhist ritual, thereby achieving the intended goal of its reinvention.

Photo 9: Men playing archery during the *Nyaru* festival in November 2017, years before it merged with the *Aum Bogum* ritual.

Nyaru is celebrated as a New Year festival in several contiguous districts of western Bhutan, including in Chhukha, when the full moon (*nya*) and the Pleiades star cluster (*smin drug*) appear together in the night sky. In Ketokha, the *Nyaru* celebration spans five days and is marked by a friendly archery competition among village men. Women join in as dancers, and the community mobilises resources to host the event. Although often presented as ancient, interviews with older community members indicate that several elements of this festivity are recent additions. Increasing employment in modern state services has provided resources for new festive grandiosity and has led to an embellishment of community celebrations. This suggests a pattern

of periodic reinvention of the community's ritual culture as greater resources enable larger ambitions.

Photo 10: Performance of the main Buddhist rite of *Aum Bogum* by the village priest and village elders of Ketokha, November 2023.

In 2022, the village decided to revitalise an exorcism ritual called *Aum Bogum*, now performed on the 14th day of every tenth lunar month (late November/early December) by its resident lama. The main component of this repurposed *phurpa* ritual is the exorcism of a central feminine effigy (called *Aum*) who has nine goitres (*bogum*).[12] In November 2023, *Tsip* Dawa, one of Ketokha's village elders, told us during an interview[13] that, 'traditionally nine eggshells were used to represent the nine goitres of the effigy. But since our village now practices the "white religion" (*karchoe*) [without using animal products], we use painted dough (*pandey*) for this purpose.' He further explained that 'after the COVID-19 pandemic, this ritual was restituted and revitalised.' When we asked whether this ritual is now a remedy against pandemics, *Tsip* Dawa answered:

> Yes, even in the manual, it says that if there is disease this ritual should be performed. And when there are cattle diseases in cattle pastures, this

> ritual should be performed. […] The ritual is supposed to have potency against multiple circumstances like *ngen* (black magic), *thuk* (harmful mantras), *jekha phurkha* (pernicious gossip), weak *wangthang* (personal power) and weak *lungta* (good fortune).

During the ritual, a villager (left in Photo 10) held an offering bowl with effigies made of dough. The villagers surrounded the ritual performance, which took place at night. The head lama (centre) wore a black costume and an elaborate black headgear. *Tsip* Dawa told us that, 'The previous lama could also perform the Black Hat Dance (*zhana nga cham*); that is why we have the black hat'. *Bogum's* ritual costume indeed looks like the costumes worn during the Black Hat Dance, performed, for instance, as part of the annual Vajrakīlaya ritual *Kangsöl* in central Bhutan (Nyenda 2016). During the dance, the lama enacts and invites the deity Vajrakīlaya into the ritual performance (Nyenda 2016: 36). *Tsip* Dawa explained that previously they had only one copy of the text, which was read by the lama. This handwritten copy, made of traditional Bhutanese paper, was deteriorating with age and usage. To save it from destruction or discard, *Tsip* Dawa recently arranged to have multiple new copies printed on modern paper.

Photo 11: Used objects were ritually discarded and carried to the edge of the village, where they were burnt, November 2023.

Accompanying the main female effigy, the community assembled various discarded household accessories, which were once cherished but are now considered waste. In some ways, this is symbolic of the *nejoms* themselves. It also echoes waste studies scholar Reno's (2022: 6) observation that 'unwanted things and people are more than symbolically, but also practically connected'. The entanglement of discarded objects and ritualists in Ketokha resonates with the 'broad and systematic approach to how some materials, practices, regions and people are valued and devalued, become disposable or dominant' (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022: 3). Ketokha villagers see the disposal of the segregated material waste in a final fire ritual as a means of cleansing and improving the community's wellbeing.

Previously, the community offered meat, dairy and poultry products during the ritual, which followed animal-sacrifice traditions (*marchoe*). Nowadays, they make only plant-based offerings (*karchoe*), reflecting the Buddhicisation of community rituals. With increased consumption of packaged foods, ritual organisers discourage the offering of inorganic materials like plastics and tin, which cannot be effectively or safely incinerated at the ritual's conclusion. We interpret such segregation practices as discursive ways that empower some community members to not only decide which objects are admissible for ritual use but also to determine who can and cannot conduct the community's approved ritual regime. Amid growing concerns within Buddhist communities about rising consumption cultures, along with the depletion of resources and the related challenges of waste management, we can situate Ketokha's sorting practices within contemporary Buddhist discourses and research on waste (e.g., Brox 2022).

Conclusion

The transformation of ritual practices in Ketokha reveals the village's significant shift from a pluralistic religious landscape, in which mediums once played a central role, to a more institutionalised Buddhist ritual regime. This transition is emblematic of broader changes visible in many rural Bhutanese communities, where indigenous shamanic traditions are increasingly marginalised in favour of institutionalised Vajrayana Buddhism (Chophel 2024; Tashi 2023). The rituals once performed by *nejoms* are being supplanted by standardised Buddhist

ceremonies, reflecting the power of hegemonic religious reforms willingly adopted by villagers who are increasingly integrated into the country's mainstream economic and ritual practices.

Modernisation has played a pivotal role in this transformation. The construction of roads, the expansion of education and healthcare and the integration of Ketokha into national and global networks have all contributed to the weakening of the *nejom*'s significance in the community. As modernising communities reappropriate state development grants to build Buddhist temples and train priests, they have discarded traditional practitioners such as mediums. With the surviving mediums old and frail, soon only the memories of their existence will remain.

The pandemic has accelerated this process, specifically through the reinvention of the *Aum Bogum* ritual, now integrated into the agricultural New Year festival. As a protective rite, it offers villagers an opportunity to express their religious beliefs in new ways. Once an irregular feature in the village's ritual calendar, it is becoming central to Ketokha's identity, elevating Buddhism as the dominant faith. The *Aum Bogum* ritual reflects both the village's embrace of change and the need to maintain some forms (imagined and real) of connection to its past.

Personal stories like that of the *nejom* Tandin Om illustrate the human dimension of these religious and cultural transitions. Her life, once devoted to safeguarding the village's vitality through shamanic rituals, shifted to one of marginalisation and wasted potential. Her story provides a poignant lens on the costs of change, on what is gained and what is lost as village communities like Ketokha continue to transform. Attending to practices of reuse, waste and revival, this photo essay has foregrounded the situated agency of villagers and lamas as they devalue and revalue objects, rituals and shamanic relations in order to protect against disaster, maintain ritual continuity and reconfigure religious authority into their future.

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NOTES

1 This essay uses the categorisation of mediums as shamanic, following Tashi (2023), to highlight their charismatic and persuasive characters.
2 We use the terms 'modernist' and 'modernism' as they circulate through development and religious renewal to indicate recent developments that community members themselves articulated and perceived as 'modern'. We acknowledge their historical situatedness and do not assume a unitary or linear modernity.
3 In the interview, she said she was 96 and born in the year of the horse. 1930 was a horse year, which would make her 94 in the traditional way of counting the birthday as the first year (Thinley et al. 2025a, minute 1:35).
4 Both interviews were translated and published with English subtitles (Thinley et al. 2025 a,b).
5 *Phurpa* (Tib. *phur pa*), or *kīla* in Sanskrit, is a ritual dagger used in exorcism rituals aimed at purifying emotional afflictions. The deity Vajrakīlaya (Tib. *rdo rje phur pa*) manifests through the *phurpa*. See Nyenda 2016 for a study of a Vajrakīla performance tradition in central Bhutan.
6 For a video documentary on the history of the temple's expansion, see Tshering and Tshering 2018.
7 During the video interview, Tandin Om mentioned outbreaks of *jana migsoem, jimtha yarim, ma chem, phabi chuthoe* and *poro kachu* (Thinley et al. 2025a). *Ma chem* was identified as smallpox in Dorji and Melgaard 2012 and Tashi 2020; others are difficult to identify.
8 Thinley et al. 2025a, minute 40:37. Translated into English by Dendup Chophel and Sangay Thinley.
9 Such corvée services do not relate to serfdom, which was abolished in Bhutan in the 1950s. Corvée services were imposed not on serfs but on land-owning households, but have been gradually abolished.
10 The WHO declared this highly infectious viral disease globally eradicated in 1980. Between 1905 and 1945, Bhutan recorded nine smallpox outbreaks, six of them in southern Bhutan. According to Tashi 2020, 'The First King hired vaccinators from Jalpaiguri, India, to vaccinate the people on four of these occasions (1923, 1927, 1943, 1944)'. On Bhutanese perspectives on vaccinations in relation to Buddhism and COVID-19, see Gerke 2024.
11 See Chophel (2024) on the creative division of labour between Buddhist lamas and mediums.
12 Using goitres on a ritual effigy might refer to illnesses characterized by enlargements of the thyroid gland, a condition that was historically endemic across the entire Himalayan belt (Ramalingaswami et al. 2001). However, we were unable to collect ethnographic details regarding its past ritual treatment, if any, in the Bongo region.
13 All his quotes are from Thinley et al. 2025b, published with English subtitles.

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