

**SPLENDOURS OF OUR CULTURE**  
**FESTIVALS OF BUMTHANG DZONGKHAG**

**Research & Media Division**  
**National Library & Archives of Bhutan**

**Splendours of Our Culture: Festivals of Bumthang Dzongkhag**

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## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i> .....	v
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	vi
<i>Note for Readers</i> .....	vii
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	viii
<b>CHOEKHOR GEWOG</b>	
Chapter 1	
Jakar Tshechu: Annual Festival of Jakar Dzong.....	3
Chapter 2	
Jampa Lhakhang Drub: Commemorating the Consecration of Jampa Lhakhang.....	13
Chapter 3	
Thangbi Mewang: Fire Blessing Festival of Thangbi .....	33
Chapter 4	
Ngang Rabney: Commemorating the Consecration of Ngang Lhakhang.....	47
Chapter 5	
Tamzhing Phagla Chodpa: Annual Festival of Tamzhing Lhundrub Choeling Lhakhang.....	66
Chapter 6	
Petsheling Kuchod: The Annual Commemoration Event of Petsheling Monastery .....	88
Chapter 7	
Lhodrak Kharchu Treltha Tshechu: Monkey Month Festival of Lhodrak Kharchu.....	103
<b>TANG GEWOG</b>	
Chapter 8	
Namkha Rabney: Annual Festival of Upper Tang Community.....	127
<b>URA GEWOG</b>	
Chapter 9	
Sumthrang Kangsol: Sumthrang's Ritual of Fulfilling and Mending .....	149
Chapter 10	
Gedhan Chodpa: Annual Festival of Ura Gedhan Lhakhang.....	165
Chapter 11	
Shingkar Rabney: Commemorating the Consecration of Shingkar Dechenling.....	184
Chapter 12	
Yakchod: The Grand Festival of Ura Village.....	208
Chapter 13	
Azhey Lhamo: The Ritual Dance of Divine Sisters.....	221

Chapter 14	
Yak Lhai: Propitiating the Yak Deity.....	233
Chapter 15	
Shing-nyer Meto Chodpa: Annual Flower Offering Festival of Shing-nyer .....	250
Chapter 16	
Tangsibi Mani: Annual Mani Festival of Tangsibi.....	263
<b>CHUME GEWOG</b>	
Chapter 17	
Buli Mani: An Annual Festival of Buli Gonpa .....	279
Chapter 18	
Domkhar Tshechu: Annual Festival of Domkhar Community.....	296
Chapter 19	
Nyimalung Treltha Tshechu: Annual Festival of Nyimalung .....	308
Chapter 20	
Trakhar Kuchod: Annual Commemorative Event.....	321
Chapter 21	
Tala Chodpa: A Multi-Community Festival in Chume.....	334
Chapter 22	
Zhuri Duechod: Annual Commemoration of the Zhuri Lineage.....	344
G L O S S A R Y.....	354

## Chapter 12

# Yakchod: The Grand Festival of Ura Village

*Karma Phuntsho*

### **At a Glance**

<i>Festival Name:</i>	<i>Ura Yakchod</i>
<i>Venue:</i>	<i>Ura Makrong Village</i>
<i>Gewog:</i>	<i>Ura</i>
<i>Frequency:</i>	<i>Annual</i>
<i>Date:</i>	<i>12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> days of the third lunar month</i>
<i>Category:</i>	<i>Intangible Cultural Heritage – Community Festival</i>
<i>Host/Organizer:</i>	<i>Ura Dozhi/Makrong</i>
<i>Event Highlight:</i>	<i>Throchu Dance, Mangchen Dance and Tenkor</i>

### **In Brief:**

*The Ura Yakchod is an annual festival observed by the Ura Dozhi, or Makrong village. A local village affair, it is said to have started as a commemoration of Guru Rinpoche's arrival in the village to help residents overcome an epidemic. The main part of the festival is comprised of five days of public performances. Sacred mask dances, folk dances, a thongdrol display, and a religious ceremony that forms the core part of the festival, as well as a tradition of making rounds to local homes for alcohol and food. Oral accounts relay the festival's historical origins and evolution, spiritual and religious significance, cultural traditions, and a distinctive socio-economic system of organisation and management. As a community cultural practice, Ura Yakchod is a special event employed in the transmission of cultural ideas, values, knowledge, skills and stories from one generation to the other.*

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Community Background**

Nestled in the middle of Ura valley at roughly 3200m above sea level, Ura Makrong village is located forty-eight kilometres east of Jakar, the administrative centre of Bumthang. The village is surrounded by forests of spruce, pine, larch, fir, juniper, bamboo and rhododendrons where wildlife such as tigers, leopards, bears, boars and red pandas roam. Its beautiful landscape, bestrewn with the farmhouses, watermills, temples, stupas and prayer flags, provides a wonderful balance between a pristine natural environment and thriving traditional ways of life. Ura is one of the largest clustered villages in Bhutan, consisting of some sixty-five households and about three hundred residents. Three affiliate villages—Gedhan, Pangkhar and Sumthrang—are located in the upper reaches of the valley.

Ura is named after Ugyen Guru Rinpoche, also known as Padmasambhava, the great Indian mystic credited with bringing Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Older people in the region still call the valley Urbay, the hidden valley of Ugyen Rinpoche. Ura Makrong, as the term suggests, is the main village. The village is also known as Dozhi, or four sections, as Ura village is composed of four administrative divisions through which it is traditionally organized and run. A thriving community, the village produced leading religious figures, statesmen, scholars and artists throughout Bhutan's history. Some people credit this to

Ura's drinking water while others believe it to be the blessings of a 'hidden land' and the works of its powerful territorial deity. It is more likely that the social structure and sense of community, for which Ura is acclaimed, are the main factors that have contributed towards making Ura a successful society. As a large traditional settlement, children had many elders to learn from and role models to emulate. Moreover, with its high altitude and comparatively arid location, the people of Ura had to struggle to survive. The geographic location of the village on a traditional trade route and modern motorable highway has also helped people gain greater exposure. Given these factors, the village has become well-known in Bhutan as a lively hub of Bhutanese culture and religion, and has served as a source of the same for other parts of central and eastern Bhutan.

Although there is no written record of about how the village was founded, some semi-historical accounts contain fascinating but legend-laden information about Ura's distant past. The accounts of local historians perhaps start with Padmasambhava's visit to Ura on his way to the court of Sindharaja in Jakar valley. Roughly a thousand years ago, Ura probably had its first *dhung* ruler, from whom rose the line of *dhung* nobilities in Ura and other parts of central Bhutan. A Tibetan lama Nyoe Dechog (1179–1265) settled in the valley in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and gave rise to the Sumthrang *choeje* family from whom the numerous lines of *choeje* religious families in Bhutan descended. In their accounts of Ura, Guru Chowang (1212–70) and Longchenpa (1308–63) state that there are descendants of Tibetan royal lines in Ura. We also find some information about Ura in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the biography of Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), whose father was a native of Ura valley. In the seventeenth century, we have written accounts of how Ura, under the rule of Dhung Nagpo, was overcome by the forces of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651), the founder of Bhutan, and the territory was subsequently made part of the new state of Bhutan.

People of Ura were generally farmers practicing agriculture and animal husbandry although many men in past also served as religious priests and government functionaries. People cultivated bitter buckwheat, sweet buckwheat, wheat, barley and many kinds of vegetables and fruits. They reared lowland cattle as well as highland yaks, and many families also kept flocks of sheep. Horses were widely used as pack animals. Ura appears to have flourished both culturally and socially. The proceedings of some dozen festivals in a calendar year indicate Ura's vigorous cultural life and the archaic social structures, organizational mechanisms, community contracts, customs and practices suggest a vibrant and sophisticated social life.

## 1.2. Founding of Ura Community Lhakhang

In spite of Ura's rich history and religious life, it is difficult to tell when the temple, commonly known as Guru Lhakhang, was founded. It is quite plausible that a temple existed in the village for many centuries as public Buddhist ceremonies such as the worship of the Chagna Dorje (Skt. Vajrapani) relic, which we shall see below, were held in the village. The main relic in the temple is a bronze statue of Guru Rinpoche, which is said to have been created by an artist named Pentsadeva. This artist probably lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the statue was brought to Ura in subsequent centuries but aside from oral accounts, we have no records to confirm this.

The *Kangyur* and *Tangyur* texts were gifted to the temple by a scion of the Ura Gup family, perhaps towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tradition of inviting the Gup's family to breakfast during the Yakchod festival as token of gratitude for this gift continues to this day. Some of the clay sculptures in the temple are said to have been created by Nyungney Rinpoche, a lama who lived in Ura around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, there is no



doubt that the Ura Guru Lhakhang existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Older village residents have very clear memories of the previous temple, which was in existence throughout most of the twentieth century. That smaller temple was replaced by a new, larger temple, which was consecrated in 1986 by His Holiness Dodrubchen Rinpoche. The temple, which today houses a two storeyed statue of Guru Rinpoche, was built in the 1980s through voluntary labour and contribution of resources from the villagers. In 2004, a new turret was erected by the members of the village with His Eminence Thukse Rinpoche as the chief officiant.



*Ura Makrong, the main village of Ura*



*Ura Community Lhakhang*

## 2. Yakchod Festival

### 2.1. Introduction of Yakchod festival

Yakchod festival is the main cultural event of Ura's social calendar. The five-day festival brings together the members of the village to celebrate life and honour the gods. The villagers stop their agricultural works for the festival's duration so they can to take part. The festival is always held between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> days of the third Bhutanese lunar month. Events combine spiritual practice, religious worship, cultural celebration, social gatherings, and a respite from the backbreaking work on the farms.

There are two etymologies given to explain the name Yakchod. In what looks like the original etymology, the festival name seems to stem from a seasonal ritual of making offerings (*mchod pa*) to the cattle god, particularly the yak god (*gyag lha*). Before it was impacted by new Buddhist rituals, it is quite likely that the villagers were simply making offerings to the pre-Buddhist cattle gods. Even today, a ritual is performed in the deity's chamber in the temple by a priest dressed as a pre-Buddhist shaman. The text used for this ritual is the same as the one used during the Yakhlhai ritual of worshipping cattle gods in the summer. Thus, the core of the festival perhaps predates the introduction of Buddhism to the Ura valley and originates from an archaic Bon ritual.

A second etymology is based on a Buddhist ritual of thanksgiving involving the lama and the relic. The villagers are said to have observed a ritual of offering gratitude to the lama and the relic—as we shall see below—and the lama is said to have remarked that it was a good or *yagpo* offering or *chodpa*. The name Yakchod is supposed to have developed from this. However, this etymology is problematic as the term *yagpo* is a Tibetan word, not a local language, and also syntactically in the wrong place. This is most likely a later reconstruction in order to Buddhicize the festival at every level, even in its etymology.

While it is quite plausible that the original core of the festival stems from a pre-Buddhist offering ritual, a legend has emerged to account for how the Yakchoe is celebrated today. According to this account, many centuries ago the village suffered from a leprosy epidemic. The members of the village gathered and prayed to Guru Rinpoche for a cure. In response, Guru Rinpoche came to the village in the guise of a wandering mendicant. He showed up at a house on the northern edge of the village, where the lady of the house was spinning wool on the terrace. She invited him to lunch and went into the house to prepare some buckwheat pancakes while the mendicant waited. When she finished, she went out to invite him in, but the mendicant could not be found anywhere. Puzzled by the uninformed departure, she sat down to resume her work and as she lifted the bamboo container that held her wool, she found it unusually heavy. Opening it, she found a small metal statue of Chagna Dorje.

She took the statue to the village priests, who advised her to keep the statue in her shrine and not expose it to light. On the third day, the window shutters were accidentally opened and the statue is said to have flown out of the room to Gedhan Temple across the valley. In an alternate and more plausible version, the lady, after consulting the priest and other villagers, is said to have offered the statue to the lama of Gedhan Temple. Gedhan Temple was the base for a religious nobility which claims descent from Wangchuk, one of the five sons of Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo (1184? -1251?), the master who introduced the Drukpa Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism to the western valleys of Bhutan.

When the statue reached Gedhan Temple, local legend has it that a nine-headed serpent rose from the centre of the valley floor and made its way along the course of the river. The spot from where the serpent rose and where a school is located today, is still called



Pongdhogo, shortened from *po guyung dhogo* or ‘nine headed snake’ in the local language. The villagers have since believed that the wandering mendicant was Guru Rinpoche coming in disguise to answer their prayers. The statue represents Guru Rinpoche’s method to cure the problem of leprosy, as the disease is traditionally believed to be caused and spread by the serpent world. Chagna Dorje, holding a snake in his hands and mouth, is considered to be the most effective antidote to the serpent world. Residents claimed that the village was cured from leprosy after the statue’s arrival.

Today, Ura Yakchod is observed to offer thanksgiving to Guru Rinpoche and to commemorate the arrival of the Chagna Dorje relic. The festival programme and its main religious ceremony are directly connected to this local account of the image’s arrival in the temple. The festival begins with a procession wherein the lama from Gedhan Temple brings the relic to the village. A religious ceremony focussed on the meditation on Chagna Dorje is the main spiritual practice, and the festival concludes with the lama and statue touring the village before the relic is left at a specific house, which is thought to be the house of the lady who long ago prepared the meal for the mendicant. The Chagna Dorje stays in the house for three nights, mirroring the story of its initial arrival.

Ura Yakchod is not only a festival of spiritual and social celebration for the people of Ura, but it also gives them a break from their onerous farming work through an event that connects them to their shared past. It forms an important component of their perceived history, aiding in the formation of social wellbeing and cultural identity. It is perhaps the most important avenue in Ura Makrong in building community solidarity and transmission of local values, knowledge, skills and practices.

## 2.2. Hosts and Organisers

The Ura Makrong village is the main host and organiser of the festival, which is an entirely local enterprise that receives no support from the state. The Ura Makrong, or main village, is also known as Ura Dozhi, after its traditional quadripartite social and administrative units. The four units are Todpa, Charzhungpa, Tarshongpa and Krispa. Oral traditions explain how the Ura settlement was divided into four administrative units in reference to their location vis-à-vis the castle of the *dhung* ruler who once ruled over Ura and the adjacent area. Bhutanese historians generally agree that Ura had a strong *dhung* family who ruled over many areas of central Bhutan and subsequently also led to the rise of many *dhung* nobilities. As mentioned above, the last *dhung* ruler, Dhung Nagpo, was defeated by the forces fighting for Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651), the founder of Bhutan. Following the annexation of his territory to the new Drukpa state under Punakha, he escaped to Tibet and perhaps died there.

The four units are composed of twelve to eighteen households. Each unit appoints a representative household, called the *letshan*, to serve one year on a rotational basis. Every *letshan* is supported by two other households known as *taza*. Collectively, these twelve families—three households from each of the four units—assume the primary responsibility for organizing Yakchoe. The meetings for administration of the village, partying and other village events take place in the respective *letshan* households and the four breweries that are needed for the festival are also run by the *letshan* and *taza* families. In addition to the twelve *letshan* and *taza* households, four individuals are also each year appointed as *mangmi* or common representatives, who are responsible for those activities associated with the temple and the festival that lie outside the traditional duties of the *letshan* and *taza*. These four are also known as *lhakhang tshogpa*, or member of temple committee, as they look after the welfare of the temple. There are two additional persons, normally

trained in religion, one appointed as *konyer* or temple caretaker and another designated the *kangyunpa* or priest for carrying out daily rituals. As part of their duties, these two look after different parts of the temple, help with the ritual proceedings during the festival, and manage the religious artefacts such as masks and *chamgoe* or dance costumes.

### 2.3 Contributions and preparations

Preparations for the Yakchod festival begin nearly a month in advance with the collection of cereals for brewing *singchang*. The village astrologer is then consulted and he selects an auspicious date to start the process of making this drink. The young men who perform the sacred mask dances also start learning and rehearsing the dances some ten days before the festival. A day before the festival, the *letshan* and *taza* families also collect the necessary food, dairy products and vegetables for the festival. The unit representatives collect a set amount of cereals, flour, rice, butter, cheese and vegetables collected from each household.

With economic changes that have made imported basic food items more available, the village has now started a festival fund, a part of which is used annually to buy raw materials that are no longer produced in the village. During the public performances, the villagers offer a lunch of local dishes, festival drinks, seating facilities and a talk on the festival, for which fees are collected from the non-Bhutanese tourists at the entrance. This money is then used for buying festival resources the following year. About a week before the festival, the four *mangmi* officers withdraw the money and procure the materials that have to be bought from outside the village.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the third lunar month, the temple caretaker leads a few priests in making the ritual dough figures called *tormas*. That evening, the village men gather in the temple in order to taste the festival *singchang* drink and also appoint people to different tasks. Older men are appointed as *dodampa* (disciplinarians), *nyerpa* (store managers), *dronyer* (guest in-charge), *chadpi garpa* (penalty officers), or *thabtshangpa* (cooks), while younger men and women take up the role of *drangzhagpa* or persons who serve guests and perform folk dances. On the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> day, the priests, dancers and men gather to hoist the flags, unfurl wall hangings and make preparations for the ritual.

### 2.4. Ritual Prayers Conducted during Yakchod

The main religious ceremony performed during the Ura Yakchod festival is a Vajrayana Buddhist meditation ritual focussed on Chagna Dorje, the Bodhisattva of Power, and his retinue. The meditation practice is based on a text which is believed to have been hidden by Guru Rinpoche and rediscovered by Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), Bhutan's foremost religious figure and one of Himalayan Buddhism's eminent treasure discoverers, from Mendo cliff in Lhodrak in southern Tibet. The practice begins in the evening of the first day with the ritual of exorcism to cleanse the area of negative forces and to create a sacred space. Over subsequent days, the priests carry out a rigorous practice of visualisation of the deities in the *mandala* of Chagna Dorje, recitation of mantras and prayers, and offering of various items before finally receiving the blessings on the fourth day. The ceremony is carried out with the accompaniment of various religious music and dances.

In addition to the meditation practice involving Chagna Dorje and his maṇḍala, the priests also carry out elaborate prayers to Guru Rinpoche in the morning sessions and supplications to dharma protectors in the evenings. On the second day, the priests conduct an elaborate prayer to Guru Rinpoche involving dances, instrumental music and singing. On this day, the priests also carry a detailed supplication of all tutelary deities of Ura, including territorial deities, using specific texts that contain the ritual liturgies.

### 3. Proceedings

#### 3.1. Day One: Inaugural Day

10.00am	Priests and men gather in the temple
12.00pm	Departure for Gedhen Temple to invite the Lama and the Yidam deity to Ura
2.00pm	Start procession from Gedhen temple
3.00pm	Procession reaches Ura Lhakhang
4.00pm	Perform <i>cham</i> dance test
7.00pm	Start religious ceremony
8.00pm	Perform exorcism ritual and dance
9.00pm	Perform longevity ritual
9.30pm	Changkor <i>singchang</i> tasting and review meeting
10.00pm	Music announces the end of the day

#### 3.2. Day Two: Chagna Dorje Day

4.00am	Music for wakeup call
4.30am	Prayers and rituals begin
5.30am	Offer breakfast porridge
7.00am	First tea for priests
8.00am	Guru supplication and dance in temple
8.30am	Breakfast round for villagers
8.30am	Second tea for priests
9.00am	Brunch for priests
9.30am	Musical orchestra to herald public performance
9.45am	Bringing the masks
10.00am	The Dance of Old Man and Old Woman
11.00am	Dance of Male and Female Yamantaka
11.30am	Black Hat dance
12.00pm	Festival briefing for guests and lunch
1.00pm	The Dance of Ten Wrathful Deities and Four Door Guardians
3.30pm	Public Tea Ceremony
4.30pm	The Stag and Hounds Dance
6.00pm	Ura's public folk dance
6.30pm	Priests resume religious ceremony
8.00pm	Tshog offering, dance and dinner for priests
9.00pm	Changkor <i>singchang</i> tasting and review meeting
10.00pm	Music announces the end of the day

#### 3.3. Day Three: Day of Protector Deities

4.00am	Music for wakeup call
4.30am	Prayers and rituals begin
5.30am	Offer breakfast porridge
7.00am	First tea for priests
8.00am	Guru supplication and dance in temple
8.30am	Breakfast round for villagers
8.30am	Second tea for priests
9.00am	Brunch for priests
9.30am	Musical orchestra to herald public performance
9.45am	Bringing the masks
10.00am	Dralha Pangtoe Ritual
10.30am	Dramitse Drum Dance

12.30pm	Festival briefing for guests and lunch
1.00pm	The Ging Tsholing Dance
2.00pm	The Juging Dance
2.30pm	The Dri Ging Dance
3.00pm	The Nga Ging Dance
3.30pm	Public Tea Ceremony
4.30pm	The Handsome Men and Beautiful Women
6.00pm	Ura's public folk dance
6.30pm	Priests resume religious ceremony
8.00pm	Tshog offering, dance and dinner for priests
9.00pm	Changkor <i>singchang</i> tasting and review meeting
10.00pm	Music announces the end of the day

### 3.4. Day Four: Mangcham Day

4.00am	Music for wakeup call
4.30am	Prayers and rituals begin
5.30am	Offer breakfast porridge
7.00am	First tea for priests
8.00am	Guru supplication and dance in temple
8.30am	Breakfast round for villagers
8.30am	Second tea for priests
9.00am	Brunch for priests
9.30am	Musical orchestra to herald public performance
9.45am	Bringing the masks
10.00am	The Stag Dance
10.30am	The Raksha Dance at the Door
11.30am	Festival briefing for guests and lunch
12.00pm	The Dance of the Messengers of Death
3.30pm	Public Tea Ceremony
4.30pm	The Stag and Hounds Dance
6.00pm	Ura's public folk dance
6.30pm	Priests resume religious ceremony
8.00pm	Tshog offering, Chala Prediction and Tashi ceremony
9.30pm	Changkor <i>singchang</i> tasting and review meeting
10.00pm	Music announces the end of the day

### 3.5. Day Five: Tenkor Day

7.00am	Preparation of <i>Thongdrol</i>
8.30am	Breakfast round for villagers
8.30am	Brunch for priests
9.00am	Bringing out the <i>Thongdrol</i>
9.30am	<i>Thongdrol</i> ceremony
10.00am	Zhengshi Pema Dance
10.30am	<i>Zhugdrel</i> Ceremony
11.00am	Offering to <i>thongdrol</i>
12.00pm	Folding of <i>thongdrol</i>
12.30pm	Lunch
1.30pm	<i>Wang</i> ceremony
2.30pm	<i>Tenkor</i> Tour of the Village
7.00pm	Farewell to the Lama
7.30pm	<i>Changkor</i> in the village.



The festival events are often followed by a day of archery among men or a picnic on the meadow for all the dancers and priests who took part in the festival.

#### 4. Performances Unique to Yakchod

##### 4.1. The Chagna Dorje Dance

The set of dances depicting the Chagna Dorje *mandala* and the associated spiritual practices is the main ceremony of Ura Yakchod, and is unique to this festival. The dance has three components. First, the dance of *nyulema* or *zhaul*, which symbolizes the ego and all concomitant negative emotions, is performed by a mostly naked dancer. This is followed by the dance of four *garuda*, which represent spiritual forces emanating from the figure of Chagna Dorje. The main component is the *throchu* dance of Chagna Dorje and the ten wrathful deities in his retinue. The dance of *gomazhi*, or the four door guardians, takes place in the middle of the main *throchu* dance.

##### 4.2. The Public Dance

Every evening, after the end of the *cham* dances, the village men and women led by a man playing a chain of bells perform some of Ura's unique folk songs and dances. Many of these compositions are not known outside Ura and rarely performed, even in Ura.



*The Procession from Gedhan*





*The Relic and Lama are received in a procession on the first day*



*The effigy of ego is slain in the dance of ten wrathful deities*





Ladies join procession to receive the Lord of Dead

#### 4.3. The Jakor Changkor and Tenkor Rounds

Among the most jovial of festival events are the breakfast rounds led in the morning by the two clowns, and the village tour with the relic and lama held on the final afternoon. Traditions of checking the quality of *singchang* drink, local hospitality, robust sense of humour and some unique songs and chants can be observed during the rounds.

#### 5. Other Religious Events Held at Ura Community Lhakhang

The Yakchod is one of over a dozen festive events in Ura's annual ritual calendar. The Ura Guru Lhakhang is the venue for most of these scheduled events including the *nyungne* ritual in the first month, reading of the *Kangyur* in the second month, *zhingdrub* ceremony in the fourth, *sang* in the seventh, *drubchen* in the eighth and *gonpo* ritual in the ninth month. Other religious events and funerary ceremonies also take place in the temple.

#### 6. Challenges for Its Survival

The Ura Yakchod Festival today has become a very elaborate event for the Ura Makrong village. Yet, like many other festivals across Bhutan, it is also facing unprecedented challenges. Foremost among them is the problem of demographic shift. With the general development of a cash economy and secondary and tertiary sectors of employment, almost two-thirds of Ura's working adult population now lives and works in other parts of Bhutan or abroad, primarily in government offices, schools, hospitals and companies. This outward migration has reduced the work force in the village, leaving behind mostly aged parents. Although Ura Makrong does not yet suffer from rural-urban migration as severely as some other parts of Bhutan, and no households have been left vacant, the shortage of manpower for organizing the festival is emerging as a serious problem.

As the residents who live outside the village cannot always make it to the festival, there are not usually enough people to perform the *cham* and folk dances, brew alcohol, work in the kitchen, serve guests and carry out the religious ceremonies. Faced with the problem of not having enough *cham* dancers, the village has made it mandatory for all men below forty years of age to learn the *cham* dances and offer a modest daily fee for the training. This, however, soon turned into a financial burden for a festival, which generated little or no income. Moreover, as agricultural production has gone down in the village and people's consumption habits have changed, most of the ingredients for food during the festival are also bought from outside. This requires significant funds which the village cannot easily generate.

As in other communities, materialism has also been insidiously creeping into Ura Makong and is eating away the traditional spirit of solidarity and voluntarism. Personal economic gains are placed before community events such as the Yakchod festival and some villagers even miss the festival in order to tend to their business, while others exploit the occasion to make money for themselves. There is also a rising sense of individualism and self-importance which is gnawing at the traditional sense of mutual concern, robust humour and ways of respecting elders and guiding the youth. With no secure source of revenue and dwindling voluntary participation, the Ura Yakchod festival faces the serious challenge of sustainability. Some villages in Bhutan have completely stopped their festivals; the sustainability of Yakchod festival will be a true test of Ura Makrong's social persistence and solidarity.

## 7. Significance

The Ura Yakchod festival plays an important role in the wellbeing of the residents of Ura Makrong. From a spiritual and religious perspective, the festival is considered an important spiritual and religious event, when people come to pray and make offerings to the Three Jewels and the tutelary deities of Ura. Above all, it is an occasion to commemorate Guru Rinpoche's help the local residents, and to offer him continued gratitude for his intervention. Yakchoe is a time to make amends for one's failures and transgressions, and to beseech the deities to give protection and blessings. Most residents view the Yakchod festival as an annual *rimdro* ritual that ensures the welfare of the village. The rituals they attend and the dances they watch have strong spiritual messages for them, which they internalize as part of their spiritual life.

The festival is the most important cultural event for residents, and one when the best traditions of the community are observed and reinforced. From religious rituals, *cham* dances and folk dances to hospitality practices and brewing *singchang*, the event gives villagers an opportunity to practice and uphold cultural heritage. It is an avenue by which traditional values, practices, knowledge and skills are passed down from the older to the younger generations. Thus, the festival serves as a vitally important channel for cultural transmission.

Socially, the festival is the biggest occasion which brings villagers together in celebration. Providing a respite from back-breaking labour in the fields, the festival offers villagers one of the longest holiday periods of the year, and a chance to relax among family. It also gives them an opportunity to connect with other members of the village and external guests, to eat and drink together, play pranks, dance and pray together. Leaving behind their individual and family lives for the duration of the festival, the village spends much of the time together as a community.

Economically, the festival is a clear marker of Ura's economic standing. More recently, the Ura Yakchod has become a highlight in tourist programmes, being ranked as the fifth most popular cultural event in Bhutan after Paro, Thimphu and Wangdi Tshechus and the Jampa Lhakhang Drub. Among small village festivals, it has attracted the highest number of visitors with as many as two hundred tourists attending the festival each day. Today, a vast majority of the audience in the temple courtyard are tourists who hail from around the world. The festival, therefore, is an opportunity that can benefit the village economically while also enriching the experience of the visitors. To this effect, the villagers have started offering the *singchang* drink and tea, a luncheon of local delicacies, a talk on the festival and seating facilities in return for a collection of small donation. In this way, Ura Makrong hopes to better leverage its rich past towards a sustainable future.

To the rest of the world, Ura's festival is a main event when hundreds of visitors from the around the world converge in the village to witness its cultural and social vitality. Thus, the festival offers a window into Ura's cultural, social and economic standing, and proof of Bhutan's claim to cultural integrity and social wellbeing.

### Conclusion

The Ura Yakchod epitomizes the stresses, tensions, challenges and opportunities that many community festivals in Bhutan face today. With its rich history, vibrant spiritual, cultural and social aspects, Yakchod also represents an exemplary cultural heritage, which many prosperous communities of Bhutan practised in the past. As globalization continues its march across the country, bringing about massive socio-cultural changes to the lives of people even in the remotest outposts, cultural events such as Ura Yakchod will face numerous challenges. Their status will serve as a yardstick of the Bhutanese aptitude for visionary thinking, social resilience, smart adaptation and sustainable development.

Undoubtedly, the force of change will put Ura's social integrity and conviction to a real test, and in the years to come Ura will desperately need the vision, wisdom, dexterity and dedication, for which it has been renowned in the past. Only then can the village be sure that the prayers of Gedhen Gadpo, the chief clown and master of ceremonies, that the festival 'next year be grander than this year, the year after next be grander than next year' (*daning wa namung jaiwa, namung wa di mung jai wa*) really will come true.

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