

Wrestling with Change: The Story of Ura's Festival

This is a story of keeping the old and embracing the new. Ura's Yakchoe festival is an example of Bhutan's struggle to balance tradition and modernity.

The village of Ura is nestled in a valley in central Bhutan at roughly 3200m altitude, 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 pristine nature and thriving traditional life. It is one of the largest clustered villages in Bhutan consisting of some sixty-three households and about three hundred residents.

Ura is named after Padmasambhava, the guru from the land of Ugyen (Oddiyana) who brought Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8th century. He is said to have first passed through the village on his way to the court of Sindhuraja in Chagkhar. Since then, the village came to be called Urbay, the hidden land of Ugyen. People in neighbouring valleys still call Ura by this archaic name. It is however the second coming of Padmasambhava that the village remembers and celebrates through Yakchoe, the grand annual festival of Ura.

Padmasambhava and Yakchoe festival

An ancient account has it that the Ura community prayed to Padmasambhava to cure them of an epidemic leprosy. He answers their call by appearing as a mendicant at the house of an old lady, who was busily spinning wool on her terrace. The lady invites the mendicant to lunch, but he mysteriously disappears when she has finished making buckwheat pancakes. Thoroughly perplexed, she sits down to spin her wool only to discover to her astonishment a statue of the Buddhist deity Vajrapani sitting in her wool container.

There are two versions of the story about how the statue subsequently reached the house of the Gadan Lam, a descendant of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo. Some say it flew there after three nights in the old lady's house, others give a more human story. 'The statue was presented to the Gadan Lam through a village consensus,' says Lam Thinley.

When the statue of Vajrapani reached Gadan, a nine-headed snake rose out of the place that is now known as 'the nine-headed snake' (*puguyungdhogo*) and slithered out of the valley. Leprosy, the disease spread by the serpents, was eventually overcome by the blessing of Vajrapani, the subjugator of the subterranean world. 'The Yakchoe is a commemoration of this important event and an offering in gratitude,' comments Tshewang Dargey.

Fascinating as it may be, this account of the festival's origin does not explain the name Yakchoe. It may well be the case that the festival has an animistic Bon origin before it was turned into a Buddhist ceremony. Even today, an archaic ritual using the Bonpo liturgical text for fumigation is performed on the third day of the festival by one of the priest dressed as a Bonpo. The same liturgical text is used during the Yaklha, Ura's festival in summer when cattle gods are invoked. Few village elders also recall the days when the Yakchoe festival was just a simple occasion for offering food and drinks to local spirits. Thus, the origin of Yakchoe is far from a straightforward one.

Today, the Yakchoe has become an elaborate affair. It formally begins on the 12th of the third Bhutanese month with a procession from Gadan to Ura. The Vajrapani relic and the Gadan Lam are received by Ura's priests in a long procession which trails through open fields and meadows, over streams and brooks and past *chortens* and *mani* walls, all of which provide a magnificent backdrop to the event. In the last few years, hosts of tourists joined the procession often disrupting the file to get their best pictures.

Having arrived in Ura, the *gomchens* perform their dance tests and a religious ceremony dedicated to Vajrapani, which begins with the ritual of exorcism. This religious ritual continues for several days in early mornings and late evenings, while several dozens of masked, religious dances alternated by folk dances occupy most of the daytime. The festival ends on the fifth day with the distribution of blessings accumulated by the religious ceremony and the tour of the relic through the village before it is brought back to the old lady's house, where it remains for three nights to mark its initial arrival in the village.

The currents of globalization

But, Ura's local festival is no longer a local affair: most of its audiences is now from abroad. As the symphony of monastic music heralds the first mask dances from the temple roof top, crowds of shy villagers in their best clothes and eager tourists with cameras hanging down their necks fill the temple ground. Then, to the sound of cracking cymbals, the dark, wrinkled character of *Gadan Gathpo* emerges draped in a thick, long-sleeved Tibetan tunic, waving a large wooden phallus. He performs a bawdy dance interposed by Zen-like paradoxical chants.

When I descended from the summit of the white peak, a hundred people burnt incenses, but I saw not a single smoke.

When I descended from the summit of the white peak, a hundred damsels were waiting on me, but I had no company at night.

Each time he swings in rhythm to the erratic clashes of the cymbals, the crowd bursts into laughter. When he finishes his dance, he greets the audience, some of them in English. The *Gadan Gathpo*, the old man from Gadan, is a character combining the sacred and profane, wit and wisdom, humour and responsibility. His role spans from Gadan, where the procession on the first day begins, to the old lady's house where the

relic of which he is the guardian is temporarily stationed on the final day. He plays the host, the master of ceremony and the chief clown during the Yakchoe, responsible both for the entertaining the crowd and for the smooth running of the festival. Today, he, like rest of the village, has to shoulder an even greater responsibility of keeping in with tradition and keeping up with modernity.

‘I am also from the US,’ he tells an amused American woman. ‘George Bush is my brother but mine is bigger than his,’ he adds, wielding his phallus. Just then Atsara, the second clown jumps in saying: ‘No, no, he is Bin Ladin. This is his bomb.’ Their foreign audience erupts into laughter. Globalization, it seems, has even caught up with the pranks of Ura’s clowns.

Not long ago, a common saying in Ura went ‘Gyatsa is the end of sky (*Gyatsa namai thama*)’. Now, that Gyatsa is only two hours from Ura by car and most villagers have ventured out of their isolated valley to other parts of Bhutan and beyond. They talk about New York and Tokyo and a few members of Ura travel and work abroad. With the influx of tourists, the villagers also meet people from all over the world at their doorsteps. Consequently their world view has changed as have their dreams, values and ideals.

Ura had motor road since 1973 and electricity - from a local hydro-electric station installed by the Japanese - since 1986. The village has today a few shops, a handful of cars, trucks and tractors. Few households watch television captured through broad satellite dishes planted in their vegetable gardens. Telephone has finally reached Ura this year connecting it to the outside world. Despite being one of the highest and remote villages in Bhutan, Ura is changing and globalizing fast. Yet, Ura looks still more or less the same village as the one described in a 14th century Tibetan travelogue and in photos taken in the early twentieth century. The aura of the quaint “hidden land” still permeates the air.

The curse of consumerism and materialism

Globalization per se is less of a threat to Ura’s local culture and the smooth and sustainable management of the festival than the two other curses of our contemporary world: consumerism and materialism. In the past, Ura had a sizeable population which could easily organize the festivities for a small local audience. Beside, Uraps had a reputation for their dexterity and sense of communal solidarity. Neighbouring areas often looked up to Uraps as the cream of people (*miyi nangneng uraiba*).

Although Ura is primarily a farming community, the village has produced leading religious figures, statesmen, traders, artists and scholars throughout Bhutanese history. Ura’s success, many people believe, came from the blessings of a “hidden land” while some even ventured to credit it to the drinking water in Ura. It is more likely that the social structure and a sense of community, for which Ura is acclaimed, are the main factors contributing to Ura’s achievements as a society.

Today, however, Ura is running short of dexterous members. Most of its inhabitants are either aged parents or very young children, who attend the local school. Almost two thirds of Ura's adult population now live in other parts of Bhutan or abroad, either studying or working. The introduction into Bhutan of white collar employment and a cash economy, and the subsequent consumerist lifestyle and outward migration has drained Ura of many of its capable citizens and of much needed human resources for the festival.

It is now left mainly to the elderly villagers to take up the various responsibilities of the festival. Men do the catering from a large kitchen, tend to guests and support the priest in running the shows, while women perform folk dances, or brew and serve the festival's famous *singchang* drink. They observe every minute detail of the festival customs and routine with much dedication and humour creating a convivial atmosphere. Sadly, there are not many young people taking part in the old customs and fewer still committed to actually learning the old traditions. 'When my generation ends, there will be very few who will know the procedures of the festival,' laments Tshewang Dorji.

Bhutan's changing economy also has a serious impact on the festival. Materialism has insidiously crept in, increasing people's desires and shaking Ura's long standing social cohesion. Personal economic opportunities are now being put before community projects and events. Some villagers even miss the festival in order to tend to their businesses, whilst others try to exploit the occasion to make money, setting up stalls for food, drink and gambling. All this exacerbates the shortage of manpower needed for the running of the festival.

With growing materialistic leanings, the interest in the festival is declining. This is apparent at *choja*, the public tea session in the afternoon. Butter tea is served with rice accompanied by tea-songs and a unique tea-sermon. Now, many people do not take part in this custom, being too distracted by activities at the vending stalls. 'If we sit and form the rows, there aren't enough people to serve tea. If we serve tea, there aren't enough to form the rows,' jokes Jamyang Nidup. Another event suffering from poor attendance is the *changor churma* in the evening when the village men gather to taste the day's *singchang* and deliberate over the issues of the festival. There are far fewer men attending these sessions than in the past.

Modernization has also brought Ura a socially free and egalitarian attitude and, with it, a sense of self-importance and individualism. 'We now lack the social sense of mutual understanding to respect the older and guide the younger. No one listens to any one any more,' comments Tashi Dorji. Communal solidarity and the tradition of mutual social support, for which Ura was famous in the past, is ebbing away.

Yakchoe is one of over a dozen festivities and ceremonies in Ura's calendar year, which are all fully funded through contributions from the village. Unfortunately, the village's economy shows signs of decline, despite the numerous development efforts. Dairy farming, once a major

enterprise in Ura, is now slackened as is the work in the fields. ‘There is no point cultivating any crop if the wild boars harvest it,’ complains Dorji. The farmers blame the Bhutan’s excessive environmental and land policies for the decline in both dairy and agricultural farming. Ura’s days of a subsistence economy and self-sufficiency are long gone. It now depends, as never before, on external remittance and imports from India and other districts.

Thus, with no funding and the soaring prices of basic materials, the festival is turning into an economic burden. Small donations from visitors temporarily ease the financial difficulties but the problem is far from being solved. Despite being a major attraction of the season, tourism has not really benefited the village. ‘It is the tour operators who make the profit from our free shows and hospitality’, says Tashi Dorji. At the festival management meeting this year, the villagers have resolved that starting from 2007 tour operators will be charged a fee for each foreign guest they bring. ‘We do not want to commercialize the festival but we need funds,’ they argue. ‘The money will be used to build a festival fund’. A significant festival endowment, the villagers think, is the most viable way to sustain the tradition.

What does the future hold?

The impact of global and national trends on Ura and its Yakchoe festival is palpable. Yet, Ura’s festival is not a lost cause and is at the moment thriving against all odds. The residents of Ura conduct the festival with a zest for celebration. The healthy population of enthusiastic *gomchens* perform the rituals and dances with the flair of a professional troop. The spirit of Yakchoe continues undiminished.

But, for how long will this go on? The onslaught of socio-economic changes including consumerism and tourism will no doubt put Ura’s social integrity to the test. Ura’s battle to be and become, to keep the old and adopt the new, to strike a fine balance between the ancient and modern, the local and global, the personal and communal is far from over.

One thing however is certain. In the years to come, Ura will desperately need vision, patience, solidarity, and the dexterity and dedication of today’s senior villagers. Only then can the village be sure that the *Gadan Gathpo*’s prayers at the end of the festival - that the festival ‘next year be grander than this year, the year after the next be grander than next year’ (*daning wa namung jaiwa, namung wa di mung jai wa*) – will really come true.