

## Bhutan Cultural Atlas Workshop Opening Remarks

“The oral history recounts that the Brela were the first humans who resided at Ngangla.” I quote Dr Françoise Pommaret from her article on Ngangla people in Kheng. “At that time, the king of demons, Rangwang Gyalpo, hunted there and did not allow the humans to live in peace. Sometimes he turned into a vulture and ate people. Other times he turned into an enormous snake and swallowed people. So people had a hard time living there. Two descendants of the gods, Khewa Dorji and Chagi Tempa, came with their sister Chingi Thagpa from a place called Urbayling in Bumthang to save them.”

Your Eminence, Minyak Rinpoche, distinguished guests and friends, I think it is not a mere chance that an event on the cultural practices in Kheng region has a person from Ura to give the opening remarks. There is strong karmic connection. Throughout history, the lamas of Bumthang in general and the Somthrang Choje of Ura has had honour of presiding over major cultural events in the region of Kheng. The people Ura and Kheng had a strong bond as the origin myth of Ngangla which we just heard indicates. Thus, in taking this honour, I am only repeating history and reliving a cultural experience. Thank you for the honour.

However, the main reason for accepting to be part of this event is not historical, but a cultural one. As a cultural student and researcher, I have remained deeply encouraged by the works of the Bhutan Cultural Atlas which took up documentation of cultures, particularly intangible cultures, among the students. It is all the more encouraging that work is being done now on the rich cultural heritage of the remote district of Kheng.

The district of Kheng, or Zhemgang as we call it now is **cultural bonanza** for researchers. Even the name Kheng is intriguing. Some locals argue that it means “to be filled with”; that the region is filled with natural resources. Its neighbours use the nickname “prakheng”, monkey khengpas sometimes pejoratively to imply the rustic nature of Khengpas but the locals interpret the nickname “monkey-Khengpas” to indicate being forest-smart and wise in the wild. Unfortunately, the toponym Kheng is today suffering a slow death at the hands of the state administrative mechanism, which calls the whole district of Kheng Zhemgang, after its capital town. Topographic and cultural concepts of inner, outer or upper/lower Kheng cannot be applied any longer.

(By the way, this is also true with the entire Zhongar being called Mongor, Kurtoe being called Lhuntse, Dungsam - Pemagatsel, Shar-Wangdiphodrang, Thed-Punakha, Mangde -Trongsa). Very soon, the cultures, beliefs and stories associated with the original toponyms will become a thing of the past.

From the little I know about Kheng, it stands out as district rich in its cultures and traditions in all seven domains: oral traditions, religious practices, cultural events, arts and crafts, folk knowledge and customs, games and sports, and languages and dialects. In oral traditions, the songs in local vernacular such as Bumeyla Karmai Wangzom about cotton cultivation and Amai Ugyen Pelzom about spirituality stand out.

Kheng still has and is perhaps one of the last districts to have animistic and shamanistic practices, going on hand in hand with the vibrant Buddhist culture. It has many cultural events including Berti Nagchoed, Shingkar Kharphud, Wamling Kharphud, Goshing Chodpa, Buli Chopa, Ngangla Chopa and numerous others. The Ngangla Chopa, in which a Buddhist lama, a bonpo shaman and a pawo oracle has distinct roles to play is a unique example of the syncretic development of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist practices.

The Kheng landscape is not only known for its natural richness. In spite of its remoteness, in our recent research on Padmasambhava, we discovered over 20 holy sites in Kheng associated with Guru Rinpoche including - Shingkar Tingkhara Ney, Khomshar Humchendrak, Womling Dungkhardrak, Buli Latsho, etc.

It also has a rich culture of arts and crafts as we know specially in the area of bamboo and cane works. It was the main district where cotton works existed but this sadly has ceased. It also has the only distinct vernacular architecture in the form of its bamboo *bachim*. For admirers of folk architecture, the Trong village in Zhemgang is exceptional sight.

In folk knowledge and customs, Kheng perhaps surpasses all other districts in its uniqueness. Only in Kheng would a male suitor be put to test for three years on the fields and forests before they win the hand of a girl. While this practice may be vanishing and no longer relevant (sorry girls), the community organisation systems in places such as Ngangla Trong is a refined and highly developed social organisation schemes which we can learn from and adopt for contemporary times. The temple in Ngangla Trong is run in rotation by households in the Brela, Lhamenpa

and Byarpa clans. Such community organization and mobilization strategies can be useful and needed in our new urban settlements.

Above all, the ethnobotanical knowledge of Kheng is unsurpassed in Bhutan. The number of wild fruits, mushrooms, herb, tubers which the Khengpas know to harvest and use, and the seeds from which they extract oil.

Kheng is a district or rich cultural practices. However, this is not obvious as in our discourses and programmes of culture, we tend to look at mostly the ceremonial high cultures of the state and overlook the day to day folk cultures of the people, we tend to look at the obvious tangible cultures and overlook the hidden intangible cultures which inform the tangible cultures. Even today, easily over 90% of budget for culture goes towards Dzong construction and not towards the cultural practices.

Tangible and high cultures are just a mere ice berg of the vast and complex intangible cultures which run our lives. We need to better appreciate the diversity, complexity, efficacy of these cultures under seven domains. We need to better appreciate the cultural practices which are vital for personality, character, identity formation on the individual level, are social cement to bind the society and maintain it harmoniously at the community level, and gives us identity on the national level. More importantly, it is important to realize that, in a highly globalising world, there are many aspects of our cultural traditions which are relevant and beneficial to the world as a whole. Tangible cultures such as Khengpa food, music and intangible cultures such as mindfulness, loving kindness, and concept of interdependences have a global reach and appeal.

Thus, to leverage the richness and the strength of cultural traditions, it is important for us to:

1. Undertake extensive survey and create an inventory what we have and what we have lost. Through combined efforts among stakeholders we have identified over 1600 elements so far but the list will continue to grow.
2. We must document the vanishing cultures. Cultural doyens and elders are in a small minority and dying fast.
3. We must engage the cultural experts and practitioners in our cultural discourses and programmes.
4. We must rethink our way of assessing and evaluating the contribution cultural practices make to the general welfare and development of the nation, such as how a village support system minimizes alcoholism and reduces the health costs for the state, or

how a lama's sermon or religious ritual minimizes crime in society and thereby the costs for policing and legal battles.

5. We must reappropriate and reformulate cultures to keep it dynamic and relevant to the contemporary times. We must make them attractive and appealing to the youth and let our culture evolve without losing its core values and purposes.

We are today gathered here to celebrate such an initiative by Bhutan Cultural Atlas team at College of Language and Cultural Studies. It is wonderful that many organisations have come together to discuss cultures.

Such initiatives and interventions, as we say, "phyi dran ma tog ha mi dra", if not late, are never too early.

Thank you for the initiative, and let's wish ourselves a fruitful workshop.