

The neyjom and pao of Gaselo and their rituals: A case study on ritual specialists in rural western Bhutan

Overview

The primary aim of this thesis was to contribute thorough and dependable ethnographic documentation of one wide-spread type of ritual specialist dedicated to rites for mundane goals in contemporary Bhutan. To date, relatively few studies on this topic have been available, and most are brief, limited in scope, and of variable reliability. The promise of this study is to provide a solid basis which can be used by other scholars for comparative purposes, and to assess future transformations within the region. I chose to document *neyjom* [W. *rnal 'byorm*] and *pao* [W. *dpa' bo*] mediums in Dzongkha-speaking western Bhutan. The study aims to be more holistic by contextualizing their roles and practices in relation to other inhabitants in their villages, compatibility of their roles as ritual practitioners with their daily routines as farmers, and to reflect on their place within a society which is strongly influenced by conventional¹ Drukpa Kagyu Buddhism as a state religion. An additional purpose was to record practices of *neyjom* and *pao* for future generations of the local society itself. My informants themselves expressed fear that there will be no successors to continue their role as mediators between humans and the spirits that inhabit the environment in a society that has already experienced several decades of rapid transformation, and in which the demand for ritual specialists has decreased.

The setting of my research enabled me to collect rich material as it was conducted as a long-term project, with an aim to cover all different aspects concerning the practices of *neyjom* and *pao*. This ethnographic research considers the life circumstances of the research subjects, including geographical and environmental conditions, and the influence of modernizing Bhutanese society with its rapidly developing infrastructure and service sector. My case study of the area of Gaselo (Wangdue Phodrang) concentrates on a rural micro-cosmos, with the inhabitants' social roles being structured around their village community and families. The selection of a group of five main research subjects, as compared with the individual ritual specialist of most existing studies, offers different insights. It not only enlarges the number of biographical accounts that reflect a broad scope of possible experiences during the initiatory phase and training for the role, but also represents a network of interactions between five specialists who subsist in a teacher-disciple relationship, reflecting status, dependency, friendship, cooperation and the transmission – and sometimes transformation – of knowledge. For each ritual described in my results, I was able to observe, record and gain explanations for them several times, and thus increase the reliability of the findings and discern what differences may exist between performances. Together, all the rituals demonstrate the extent to which non-human agents and the ritual specialists who deal with them were intertwined with the daily and seasonal routines of a local, rural community in Bhutan at the time of my field study. Another significant feature of the research was an analysis of local ritual language used by *neyjom* and *pao* in their ritual chants, something that most studies have avoided or passed over briefly. It demonstrates not only the individual character of Bhutanese culture in contrast to other Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples in the region, but also the strong influence of conventional Buddhism upon the practices of *neyjom* and *pao*.

The result revealed that *neyjom* and *pao* are important contact persons for their village community members. They offer a wide range of both calendric rituals and rites on demand, serving by community

¹ I adopt the use of this term like Anna Balikci has defined it: "I chose the word 'conventional' rather than the more common term 'orthodox' as I am referring to the villagers' perception of orthodox Buddhism which is different as they usually have a very limited understanding of the latter." (Balikci 2008, p. 30)

and individual needs. The practices are directed to maintaining or restoring the equilibrium between humans and spirits, and this is considered to be the most important precondition of leading a peaceful and prosperous life. The rituals cover most areas of mundane life, with a focus on agriculture and domestic issues. Extensive rituals that attract many spectators also have the sociological effect of (re)uniting neighbors from a greater surrounding area, or family members from distant places. On the other hand, it has to be mentioned that the increasing number of other types of service providers who also deal with mundane affairs (e.g. human and animal health, agricultural services, etc.) attract some clients of *neyjom* and *pao* away from them, especially in cases of illness or acute problems that would require spontaneous rituals if *neyjom* and *pao* were consulted. The recent advent of access to multiple specialists within rural Bhutan certainly offers a creative plurality of potential solutions and options for local communities to chose from. Nevertheless, my results demonstrate that village communities in my research area are far from abandoning *neyjom* and *pao*, especially for seasonal calendric rituals considered mandatory to prevent harm at specific times of the year.