

ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE MONPAS

The Monpas and their Origin

The Monpas have been pushed to the hinter-land of the remote Black Mountain forests today but historically, they were here before the founders of modern Bhutan built dzongs in the valleys of Paro, Bumthang and Thimphu [Dendup et al. 2001]. The Monpas kept themselves uninfluenced by the 2000 year old mainstream culture of Bhutan. The Monpas inhabit Mangdue and Wangdue valleys in central Bhutan and are often considered the first inhabitants of Bhutan. The term *Monpa* once meant little more than southern or western mountain dwelling of non-Indian non-Tibetan barbarians (Aris, Michael 1983). Language and some of the social institutions peculiar to them and their dependence on forest for livelihoods served to link them to the forest dwellers of Kumaun and Nepal, Nagas, Kukis and Mismis of North Eastern Himalaya [Pema Wangdi 2002].

Today, the Monpas occupy Wangling, Jangbi and Phumzur villages under Langthil geog in Trongsa Dzongkhag, and Rukha village (locally known as *Oalay* and hence *Oalaps*) in Adha geog in Wangdi Dzongkhag. The former villages of Wangling, Jangbi and Phumzur have a population of about 261 with 40 households and the Rukha village has a population of about 108 with 12 households. The two Monpa community groups are not in direct contact with each other. Other pockets of Monpa communities within Bhutan include: Reti, about 20 km. north of Nabjikorphu; Chungseng, about 10 km. from Surey; and Berti in Zhemgang, which is 15 km. from Tingtibi.

The whole of Berti village, which was once an absolute Monpa community, has evolved linguistically and culturally into *Kheng* community due to continued cross-marriages with the neighbouring *Khengpas*. Only old people can speak a few *Monkha* terms. Likewise, in Rukha, *Olekha* (original dialect) has become linguistically assimilated to Dzongkha for the same reason. Although *Olekha* and *Monkha* are similar in their grammatical structures, they differ vastly in their vocabularies and tones of speech. *Monkha* is identified as one of the three endangered languages of Bhutan, other two being *Lhokpu* and *Gongdhukha* [Pema Wangdi 2002].

In Reti, there is a high degree of language retention amongst the old people, but youngsters are getting used to speaking the *Mangari* dialect of the neighbouring *Lhotshampa* community. A few cases of cross-marriage have taken place between the two communities. There are only about seven households in Reti, however, the total population is over 55 persons which is due to the practice of joint-family system. It was narrated by the *Olaps* (Monpas of Wangdi dzongkhag) that they had to travel to Gaylegphug, halting a night on the way, to buy salt and other essential food items which are not locally available. It is believed that three Ole brothers had fled away from Wangdi Rukha to Reti because of difficult labour that they had to provide in carrying tea from Dewangiri during the time. This is evident from the fact that there is high level of similarity between the *Monkha* spoken in Reti and the *Olekha* spoken in Rukha. This is further substantiated by the fact that Aum Chodrom who lives in Rukha and Tandi who is in Reti are first cousins but they have seen each other only once in their entire lifetime because it takes a week to walk from Rukha to Reti [Pema Wangdi 2002].

The following excerpt is taken from Karma Ura's article, "The Origin of the Monpas":

Mythically, it is said that there were three lineages of Mon race namely, "Dung-za", "Tak-za" and "Sok-za", since the time of first millennium (Kel-pa Nga-dar) they lived on earth. However, at the end of that immemorial period there dawned nine brothers of sun with an intense heat that anything could be burned to ashes. This was followed by a heavy downpour of rain, the raindrops in the size of yoke. The drought and flood caused heavy environmental destruction. After these calamities only one each descendent of "Tak-za" and "Dung-za" mons survived. Why and how they survived from the grave disaster? It is quite interesting indeed. This was preordained by the Gods of Monpas (Mon-lha) to keep some lineages of Monpas. Perhaps, it must have been the game of the survival of fittest.

During the last calamity, amongst the plants nothing remained except an oak tree (Sisi), a peach tree (Kham), an Amla plant, an Artemesia plant (Kenpa) and a "Kir-ser-ma" plant. The flowers and leaves of the last plant open as sun rises and closes as the sun sets. This phenomenon is even today used to indicate the time by the people of Mons when the weather is gloomy and the sun is not visible.

When on the other hand as stated above, amongst the human race only a descendent each of "Tak-Za" and "Dung-Za" survived. How they survived was in fact apprehensible. The "Dung-za" mon had been safely hiding in the hollow stump of an oak tree closed by a piece of a flat stone from top. At the same time, the "Tak-za" mon was hiding on a trunk of a peach tree. As the latter's hideout was not very safe, he deceived the former to take his place forcibly. "Tak-za" mon was then the well-protected and very safe. "Dung-za" mon was though reluctant his counterpart did not pay any heed to whatsoever he said. As he could not resist the scorching heat and heavy torrent he prayed to god for help and flew away to heaven.

After seven days mon-takza pierced a big needle through the bark of the tree in which he was hiding and made a small hole to peep through. To his great delight he found that the sun and rain had played their parts

and the landscape was rendered invisible firstly heated up by the sun then washed away by the violent rainwater. The sky was so clear then.

Thereafter, the only descendant of "Mon-gued" left on earth was "Tak-za". He had nothing to eat then, one fine day as he was desperately wandering around for food, he spotted a bird (known as Trimola) on the "Kir-ser-ma" plant. He made a bow and arrow out of Artemesia plant (Khen-pa-shing) and shot down the harmless creature. As he dissected its body he found out three grains of "Rey Zang-kala" (a type of cereal). On a trial basis he had sown this grain firstly on a plot size of an area that could be occupied by a sleeping pheasant. Next time he planted on an area that could be occupied by a sleeping deer. The successive year he had sown on an area that could be occupied by a sleeping reindeer. Gradually, he cleared the forest areas to make more space for cultivation. Those days he lived on nothing other than flesh and blood of wild animals for food.

One day on his return from hunting he found that in the vicinity of his field a small plot of land was being burned for use. Again the next day he went hunting in the same direction and during his absence some more area had been burned and a portion was even dug for sowing seeds. He thought it is a mystery to be solved. So he purposely planned to go again the next day and see for himself who does all this. He hid at one end of the field and watched vigilantly when he saw many ethereal ladies (fairies) with wings alighting from the sky on his plot. Some started burning the forest while others were digging the soil. He chased them all to heaven but one was left behind, an elderly one with her wings struck on a bough of a tree. He took her to his home and married her. Her wings were amputated and hidden somewhere. Soon they had a daughter and a son. One day the father had gone somewhere in search of food while the mother was busy weaving (ayuerey). The two children were so hungry and grumbled at their mother for food. Mother felt so disturbed and irritated that she took her weaving stick and hit them. The two kids were hurt so hard that they went crying astray. On their way, they reached to a place where their father had hidden their mother's wings but they were unaware of this.

Suddenly, they spotted the wings and picked them up, but out of astonishment they ran to their mother to show what they had found.

Mother knew that they were her own body-parts and so she decided to fix her wings. Thereafter, she flew away to heaven, her native place. When the father came back from his work and inquired his children about their mother, they told the truth about her disappearance. Accepting the fact, the father decided to go in search of the mother.

He told his children "If I win I will get her along. But if I lose I will make a cry "A-tsace" (utter painful cry) and come back". Having consoled them he further instructed them to look after the valley where he had planted a special grain. Finally he told them "Bury me if I happen to come back with the second condition". Thus he left for a distant destiny.

One day a cry of 'A-tsace' was heard and the children saw their father's body descending to earth with knife wounds all over his body. The wounds were bleeding only to spell the destiny of their father's death. The little children were so adamant that they too flew to heaven to demand compensation for their father's life. Only compensation granted from heaven was a hunting dog and a rotary mill. So they went back with the compensation. Thus the use of the rotary to grind flour has been originated from them, so even today this mechanism is available in Bhutan.

The two children were then abandoned and deserted, there was nobody to care for them. They took their hunting dog and went wandering southward. There they met three relatives of similar race and together with them they returned home (considered to be the area above Gelephu, Sarpang and Deoseri). On their way back, they halted at "Namsinphug" a cave nearby Gelephu hot spring. There they experienced mysterious darkness for complete 9 days. On the last day, a bird was heard singing "Junchi..... Junchill". They understood the words so clearly that it is a message informing them to pray to "Juenlha" (A mon-god). So in darkness they first built a fire by rubbing two pieces of "Namphel" plant and with the help of bamboo sticks. As they prayed to "Juen Lha"

suddenly morning dawned upon them. They then again continued their journey home wards.

At "mon-guel" the three relatives who came from south settled there, while the brother and sister had left for heaven along with their hunting dog. It is therefore, believed that the Monpas are the descendants of God's family. However, since the departure of these two children of "Tak-za mon" to heaven not a single godly descendent was left on earth. The only race of Mon left on earth then was the Mons of the "Dung-za". Amongst them the reverent Kudrak Ponpo Maara Pel was the most prosperous and capable one. When Guru Rimpoche first came to Bhutan he had halted a night at Ponpo's place. Even today we can find the holy impressions and many impressive sacred places of the great Guru at Kudrak and Phumsur.

On his holiness' mission to Bumtha, at Phumsur, Guru met many Monpas on the way. Rimpoche had asked them "Where are you all going?" They replied, "We are going to hunt for bees". Rimpoche was so touched, out of compassion for the poor bees, he told them "please don't kill them, in turn you all can take this". Guru offered them a washing vase reiterating them not to repeat such an evil act. Guru also assured them that this vase should be well cared as it will be very useful to them. Not long after the great teacher departed, they exchanged the sacred vase with "local banchang" to a rich man the reverent Kudrak Ponpo. They thus breached the sacred vows of Guru and once again they followed usual practice of bee hunting. Breaching such a sacred vow meant being unloyal and the wrong-doer become unfortunate.

On the other hand for Kudrak Ponpo it was a boon and a fortunate having procured the holy vase. Since the day he owned this vase his fortune grew more splendidly that this land and even the nearby agricultural land began to give very high yield.

After the first harvest they had excessive grains that they need to sow seeds for the next round. The crops grew naturally. His granary was over filled and he didn't know where to put the surplus product.

When Guru came on his second visit he requested him to give a solution to his problem. Guru blindly refused and instead told him to go throw alms. He tried to do, but yield had increased doubly. Again for the second time, he prayed to Guru for his help to bring down yield of his land. This time Guru was different and told him "If you really want to reduce, sit near me on my mat and keep your cup on the table near mine". He did so as ordered. The consequences then dawned on his fortune.

Thereafter, day-by-day his harvest reduced from meager to nothingness. Finally, as a usual practice for the reverent people, when Ponpo's soul was wandering in "Nelkhiam"(samsara) some of the Monpas, before he came to his life again, burned his body. Hence, even today, the Monpas how hard they work, they are always poor and destitute. This is due to the fact that their ancestors breached the vows of Guru Rimpoche and for not being loyal to his sacred principles. They are always unfortunate.

Oral History of the Monpas

Sampa Taula is an elderly Monpa who lives in Jangbi village. He is a clergyman and the most learned person in the village. Although he could not avail modern education, he went through monastic schooling and can read and write dzongkha. He narrated the oral history of the Monpas in June 1999 to the author.

"It was when the earth was uninhabited by anyone except some of the ancestors of the Monpas, the nine Monpas came from Dewangiri and reached Surey in Gaylephu. It was dawn, and darkness gradually engulfed them. The nine ancestral Monpas found a cave to rest for the night. However, sun did not shine the next morning and they remained in darkness for a period of nine days. Finally, an eagle (chichikin) sounded to them 'Junchil...Junchil'. The Mons realized that they were told to pray to 'Juenlha'. So the Mons started to pray.

They cut a small bamboo (hou), filled it with water and covered it with banana leaves. They also put some rice on another banana leaf, covered it and hung both bamboo and rice together on a tree. They continued to

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pray. After the prayer was over, to their amazement, the sun began to shine again. Following this, six out of nine Mons came to Trongsa. The remaining three Mons returned back to their original place.

These six Mons walked for days and arrived near a lake in the Black Mountains. This lake can be seen from Phumzur even today. It was here that the six Mons discussed and declared the three Mon castes – Takza, Dungza, and Shokza. The six Mons separated and selected their own areas to reside. Takzas lived near Black Mountains, Shokzas lived in Ziripa, and Dungzas lived in Jisidunglapen. Dungza lineage has become extinct now.



Sampa Taula, a learned clergyman from Jangbi

The Monpas of Jangbi, Wangling and Phumzur

The Monpas reside in Trongsa, Wangdi and Zhemgang Dzongkhags. This study is focused on the Monpas of Jangbi, Wangling and Phumzur under Trongsa dzongkhag. The three Monpa villages fall within the buffer zone of Black Mountain National Park. The highest peak of the Black Mountains, Mount *Jodushingphu*, is believed as a sacred mountain by the Monpas. The Black Mountain, locally known as *Jowo Dhurshing* is sacred to *Lama Mani Nakpo* or *Mahakala*. There are 40 households of Monpa families today in these three villages of Trongsa. The Monpas are a very close-knit community and inter-marriage between brothers' and sisters' children is a common practice in these three villages. They speak *Monkha*, a distinct dialect.

There are three prominent castes in Wangling, Jangbi and Phumzur. They are: *Shokza*, *Takza*, and *Dhungza*. However, they have a single place of worship, *Jhodushingphu*, for the whole Monpa community, which they believe to be the central portion of the Earth and that it provides them with everything in their lives. The Monpas of Wangling, Jangbi and Phumzur claim that they are direct descendants of the god *Lhayi Juepa*. The caste system, they believe, has resulted out of this. Marriages are determined by this caste system. They also believe that they are poor because their ancestors have broken the vow to Guru Rimpoche who commanded them not to kill animals [Dendup et al. 2001].

It is believed that the ancestors of the present generation Monpas lived by hunting wild animals, which were found in abundance in and around their home. Although this practice has changed, the Monpas' livelihood still remains very much dependent on forest resources. Almost all of their daily needs

are met from the neighbouring forests. This section of the Bhutanese population are least educated and are among the poorest. Whilst poor in terms of economy, the Monpas have a rich reservoir of natural resources as well as a wealth of traditional knowledge which has been developed and passed on from generation to generation. Though the RGOB is bringing them into the national mainstream, the Monpas' survival as an indigenous community would be meaningful and possible only if we allow it to grow with its own intrinsic worth.

Monkha: One of the Three Rare Gems of Bhutan

The Black Mountains are a southern spur of the Himalayas, which run from north to south over a distance of some 200 km., separating western and central Bhutan. The range was so named by the British because of its dense forest cover and its formidable and precipitous dark escarpments. The Black Mountains are home to many species which are endangered or extinct elsewhere.

In the Black Mountains resides a small aboriginal Monpa group speaking an archaic Bodish language locally known as *Monkha*. It appears that the *Monkha* of Black Mountains is an East Bodish language because its core lexicon is largely East Bodish. This would make the major languages spoken in central and northeastern Bhutan and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh the closest linguistic relatives of the *Monkha* of Black Mountain. This is the only East Bodish language to preserve the Tibeto-Burman biactantial verbal agreement system, and in view of the geography and history, the *Monkha* of Black Mountain is the original of the East Bodish languages, being the one which has undergone the least influence from Central and South Bodish forms of speech, such as Tibetan and

Dzongkha. There are three dialects of the *Monkha* of Black Mountains - Ole dialect spoken in Reti and Rukha, and Southern dialect spoken in Chung seng and Berti, and a Northern dialect spoken in the villages of Wangling, Jangbi and Phumzur which has retained the highest degree of *Monkha* [Driem 2004].

Ugyen Guru Rimpoche's Visit to Mangdue and Founding of Buddhism in Bhutan

Bhutan emerged from *Bonism* to Buddhism after the 6th century A.D. following the visit of Guru Rimpoche and later by several Tibetan saints propagating Buddhism throughout the country.

The Guru Rimpoche is said to have visited Bumthang during the 8th century. On the way, he passed through Mangdue as he found out that the place was infested with malicious spirits. When he made attempts to subdue the spirits, they retaliated by transforming themselves into a huge boulder. The Guru is then said to have probed the boulder as effortlessly as though one were probing mud, with his *Phurba* and subdued the spirits. The present day Phumzur is the place where this incident took place. There are cliffs and rocks near Phumzur where Guru spread the teachings of Buddha among the people. The place is now known as *Ugyen Drak*. This place is said to have Guru's bodyprint on the rocks, including his hat which was used only while giving religious sermons.

During the same period, there were several kings who used to wage ceaseless war among themselves. Guru, realizing that the battle between the two kings Sindhu Raja and Naoche was taking its toll on too many lives, decided to mediate between the two kings. The place where the two kings decided to come

to a truce was in Mangdue. There is a huge boulder in the Knabe Lhakhang bearing handprints of the two kings, a monument of the ceasefire. It was around this time that Guru also blessed the village of Mangdue and it was predestined that Mangdue would be the place where Mahayana Buddhism would flourish, and that it would be the ruling centre of Bhutan and also that *Lho Mon Kha Zhi* would be unified under the *Palden Drukpa*. In recognition of the central importance of the region, hereditary monarchs can only make their way to the Golden Throne after they have been appointed the Trongsa Penlop (Lhendup 2004).



Trongsa dzong: The seat of Trongsa Penlop