

Oral Tradition: The Life of Domley Sonam Wangyal

(Documented and translated from Dzongkha by Tenzin Dorji)

Abstract: Oral traditions play a vital role in the socio-cultural lives of the Bhutanese people. Among the various oral traditions prevalent across Bhutan—such as the lives of Gelong Sumdar Tashi and Pemai Tshewang Tashi—the life of Domley Sonam Wangyal stands out as unique to its kind. This oral tradition is said to be based on a true event, passed down from generation to generation as folklore in Taktse village in Trongsa District, Bhutan. However, the lack of written records and documentation has hindered its wider recognition and inclusion in oral history. Therefore, this study used a qualitative oral history approach, which involved interviews, recording oral accounts, and taking field notes. The analysis of the data reveals the social status of cowherds and their fear of local spirits. A written document of Wangyal's oral tale can preserve it for history and help disseminate the knowledge of this oral tradition, its significance and some details on the way of life of shepherds in the area.

Keywords: Folklore, oral tradition, cowherds, local spirits, historical record.

Summary of Domley Sonam Wangyal's Life

According to Ap Koto from Eusa village, the first expert, the oral poetry presenting the life story of Sonam Wangyal was transmitted orally from generation to generation. Since there were no public events where the story was narrated or performed, those who were willing to learn

had to personally request guidance from the experts. After the experts' agreement, learning primarily took place during the day while grazing cattle in the fields, and sometimes in the evening after dinner.

Ap Norbu from Taktse village, the second expert, said that although no one advised him, he developed an interest on his own and learned orally from two experts, Ap Koto and Karchung, when he was quite young. Further discussion with him indicates that there were no written documents nor multiple variants of the tale; the story was conveyed only through oral narration, which was either narrated melodiously, like singing a song, or delivered with normal speech.

He is concerned that this inheritance might disappear sooner or later because present generations are not showing a willingness even to listen to the story. However, I was fortunate to meet both experts and am grateful for their generosity in sharing their knowledge. The life story goes as follows:

Many years ago, there was an eight-year-old boy named Sonam Wangyal in Taktse village, Trongsa Dzongkhag in Bhutan. After the summer cultivation was completed, his parents prepared provisions and sent him to graze their cattle with their neighbors at the pastureland of Tunley pass, which is a day's walk from Taktse village. Around the ninth month of the Bhutanese lunar calendar, when it was time for the harvest in the village, Sonam and his neighbors started to drive the cattle back toward the village.

When they reached Domley Pang, a grassy meadow about a four-hour walk from Taktse village, they noticed that one helper from each

household in the neighborhood was waiting there to receive them, except for Sonam's family. As a result, he was left behind, waiting for his father while the others drove their cattle toward the village. Unfortunately, that night, it was believed that he was forcibly taken away by a local spirit, leading to his permanent departure from his family at a young age. The first time I heard this story, it made me feel a mixture of sadness and fear. Curious, I asked the storytellers about their experiences, and they explained that narrating it always evokes sorrow and fear in the audience. Many are brought to tears, and some even weep at the end.

Sonam Wangyal, being the main character in this story who was lost at Domley Pang, is commonly referred to as 'Domley Sonam Wangyal'. This story reflects not only the situation and environment of that time, but also social tradition, the love and affection between parents and children, the importance of cattle ownership, the fear of local spirits, the practice of child marriage, and the pain of being separated from one's family at a young age.

The Details of Domley Sonam Wangyal's Life

Many years ago, in Taktse village, Drakteng Gewog, Trongsa in Bhutan, there was a tradition of moving cattle to distant places after the summer cultivation to avoid damaging the crops.¹ That year,² as the neighbors were preparing to drive their cattle to graze at the Tungley pass,³ which is a day's walk from Taktse village, a cow named Lekpai

1 Nowadays, the tradition of shifting cattle residences has stopped. Some oxen and cows that are not milking are driven to distant forests after the summer cultivation.

2 According to the narrators, there is no confirmation of the year in which this event happened.

3 La means hill or pass, and Tungley is the name of the hill, which is a one-day walk from Taktse village in Trongsa District, Bhutan.

Yangley Zom⁴ was also excited about traveling to new places. She couldn't be controlled, even when tied with a rope.

The father of Sonam Wangyal, seeing the situation, said to his wife⁵:

In the three-month summer season,
When the artemisia flowers bloom,
And the scorching heat arrives,
In the fertile land of wheat,⁶
Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom signals
That she wants to roam the snowy mountain
And graze on fresh grass.
She refuses to drink water from a pond,
But a river that flows down from the snowy mountain.
She cannot be controlled, even when tied with a rope.
It is certain she won't stay here at any cost.
You, my beloved wife,
Prepare the provisions.
We must send our son, Wangyal,⁷ to drive the cattle into the
mountains.

When the father of Sonam Wangyal was occupied with other work at home and decided to send his son with the cattle, the wife said to her husband:

4 Ba means 'cow' in Dzongkha, she is a hybrid cow called ja tsham (ཇམ་མཚོ་) in Dzongkha, which was highly valued among the other cows, also played a vital role in this oral story.

5 The names of Sonam Wangyal's father and mother are not revealed in the oral account.

6 This land refers to the Zelong located between the houses of Aum Dolma and Aum Langa mo in Taktse village.

7 Sonam Wangyal was referred to as Wangyal for short.

You, as his father, have only one son,
I, as his mother, have only one son,
Our son is still too young,
He is only eight years old.
I will not send him, no matter what.
We can prepare provisions
And ask the neighbors for help in driving the cattle.

The husband replied upon hearing this:

As the saying goes, wealth should be kept with oneself,
While children should be kept with others.⁸
Prepare the provisions,
Wangyal must go, no matter what.”

The husband decided to send his son with the other cow herders and assured them that he would come to receive the cattle on the way when they returned. While she was making tea, warming the wine, packing the lunch, and preparing other provisions for her son, Wangyal witnessed some bad omens and said to himself:

When my mother was making tea on the stove,
It fell down.
When warming the wine,
It overflowed.

8 Dzongkha proverb: ལྷ་རྩེགས་དང་ཆ། རྩོལ་རང་དང་ཆ། is translated as: Children should be kept with others, while wealth should be kept with oneself. The meaning is that since children can be spoiled by taking advantage of their parents' deep love, it is better to keep them with others, such as relatives, whom they would not dare ask for anything they desire. Regarding wealth, it may not be returned if entrusted to others.

While packing the lunch,
It was overcooked and burnt.
Does this mean that Yangley Zom may get into trouble,
Or that I may fall ill?
Rather than Yangley facing trouble,
I would prefer to fall ill myself.
I have witnessed these bad omens.

Thinking about these possibilities, Wangyal fell into an unconscious state.

After regaining consciousness, feeling sad, he looked at Peldon, to whom he had been married according to the tradition of child marriage, and said:

Although my mother refused to send me,
My father won't let me stay, no matter what.
Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom indicates
That she wants to roam the snowy mountain,
Graze on fresh grass,
And drink from the river that flows down from the snowy mountain.
At the bottom of Tungley mountain,
Accompanied by other cowherders,
I must go, no matter what.
This is my duty,
Regardless of pleasure or disappointment.
Peldon, whom I met at a young age,
Take care of my mother,

Serve her well.

Talking to his mother, he said,

Until I return from the mountain,
Stay healthy, my mother.

After asking Peldon to take care of his mother, he carried a wool raincoat over his nape and a milk bucket in his right hand, hung the horn trumpet over his shoulder, and grabbed the provisions. He then walked to the wheat field, Zelong, which was about a minute's walk from his home, and released the cattle.

As he was driving the cattle, he looked at Lekpai Yangley Zom and said:

Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom,
We are heading toward the mountain.
Soon, we will graze on fresh grass
And drink from the mountain river.
Now, move—move in procession,
Lead us without distraction.

While Wangyal was walking behind the cattle, his heart was filled with sadness, which led him to think about the situation as follows:

Ba Lekpai Yanglek Zom is moving in front,
Khi (dog) Takar Tenzin is trailing behind,
I, Sonam Wangyal, am walking in the middle.
My upper body is wet from the rain,

And my lower body is stuck in the mud.
I am unable to carry the wool raincoat
My mother gave me over my nape.
The milk bucket is too heavy to carry in my hand,
And the golden trumpet hangs over my shoulder.
So, I am moving toward the mountain,
But when I look at the situation, I see that:
First, I have not yet grown strong enough,
Second, the sadness of leaving my parents weighs heavily on
me,
Third, there were bad omens before I left.
When I see all these difficulties together,
There is no way to avoid feeling disappointed.

When he reached Tangchen Pang, a plain area behind Taktse
Lakhang, he saw his mother looking at him as he turned to gaze at the
village. She stood there, watching him intently.

As I reached Tangchen Pang,
My beloved mother, in pain from being separated from her son,
Leaving work and duties aside,
Came up to the door leading to the upper terrace of the house,
Placed her right palm on her forehead,
And kept looking at me cautiously.

When he was moving from Tangchen Pang, he said:

Now, move and move in procession,
Through the way of Tangchen Pang.

When I reached Sangley Koem, the short rest stop,
I endeavored to blow the golden trumpet.⁹
I saw that upon hearing the horn, my mother felt unconscious,
So I couldn't continue it.
Aren't there relatives and neighbours?
Aren't there parents and children?
If you, parents and children, are there,
If there are relatives and neighbors,
I ask you to apply *zati*¹⁰ oil to her right hand and massage it,
And place her left hand over your shoulder.
Please wake my mother from her unconscious state,
Assist her to walk in the house,
Console her in her gloomy condition.
I pray to reunite with her without any illness or depression.

When Wangyal witnessed his mother fall into an unconscious state, he couldn't continue blowing the trumpet and asked his relatives to assist her. He then continued driving the cattle from there.

As he reached Le Pang, meadow, he said:

Rest and rest,
Ba Lekpai Yanglely Zom,
Now, take a rest
And graze on fresh grass.
Though I tried not to gaze at my mother,

⁹ It is called um (ུམ་) in local language. The narrator Ap Koto said that a trumpet is usually made from a buffalo's horn, so mentioning a golden trumpet is a poetic expression.

¹⁰ Zati (ཇའི་) is an oil-based medicine in Sanskrit that cures mania when applied to the external parts of the body.

I couldn't resist it.

So I must turn my face once toward the village.

Wangyal took a short rest there and gazed at his mother in the village.

He then said this when he was moving through Jade Drak (rock):

Move and move in procession,

Move through Jade Drak.

Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom,

Lead us without distraction, moving in front,

Khi Takar Tenzin is trailing behind,

I, Sonam Wangyal, am walking in the middle.

Again, my mother has fallen into an unconscious state.

Although I thought of returning a hundred or a thousand times,

I dared not go against my father's command.

Rather, I must move forward, even with a heavy heart of pain.

Although Wangyal repeatedly thought of returning to the village, he continued his journey, adhering to his father's instructions, and said this when he arrived at Gumdo Pang, meadow:

Rest and rest,

Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom,

At the center of the meadow, Serzhok.

Now, take a rest,

And graze on fresh grass.

Sit down, khi Takar Tenzin.

When I was supposed to have lunch, which was sent by my

mother,

I could not easily lose the knots of *tore*¹¹ in which the lunch was packed.

After loosening it, the first share of the lunch¹² is offered to the warrior deity,¹³

To whom our forefathers have taken refuge,

To the female deity,¹⁴ to whom our foremothers seek protection,

To the soul deity,¹⁵ who is protecting me,

And to the local guardian deities,¹⁶ who are living at these sites.

After the offering was done, when he was supposed to take the lunch, he was not in the mood due to the lingering pain of remembering his mother and said to the dog:

When I was making dough from cooked rice for lunch,

Due to the memory of my mother,

A mountain of pain was heaped upon me,

11 *Tore* (ལྗོངས་) is made from white cotton fabric and typically measures about 1 meter in length and width. It is used to hold meals such as rice and dough without soup and is also commonly used for packing lunch and dinner while traveling. Today, it is almost entirely replaced by plates and lunch packaging containers, except on some occasions.

12 Offering the first share of lunch is to *phue* (lto phud ལྗོ་ཕུད་), tea is *japhue* (ja phud ཇ་ཕུད་), and alcohol is *chang phue* (chang phud རང་ཕུད་) in Dzongkha. The first share of these is offered to divine beings through chanting and visualizing their divine qualities, such as protecting oneself from obstacles and evil spirits, as well as bringing prosperity.

13 The warrior deity is *dralha* (དར་ལྷ་) in Dzongkha, which refers to Dorji Dragtsan (rdo rje brag btsan རྩོམ་རྒྱལ་བཙན་).

14 The female deity is *molha* (མོ་ལྷ་) in Dzongkha, which refers to Tashi Wangzom (bkra shis dbang 'dzoms བཀ་ཤིས་དབང་འཛོམས་).

15 The soul deity is *sogtha* (srog lha སྟོག་ལྷ་) in Dzongkha.

16 The local guardian deities are *zhidag* (gzhi bdag གཞི་བདག་) in Dzongkha. These also refer to Dorji Dragtsan and Tashi Wangzom, who are venerated as birth deities by the villages of Taktse, Eusa, and Tashi Dingkha in Trongsa, Bhutan.

And the dough could not be eaten.

You, khi Takar Tenzin,

Take this dough for your lunch.

Saying this, Wangyal gave the packed lunch to the dog. As he was leaving Gumdo Pang, he said:

Move and move,

Move through Langley trail,

Ba Lekpai Yanglely Zom,

Gulp the water thrice,

That belongs to the aquatic deity¹⁷ at Gumdo Pang.

As he arrived at Pholha Dzong, the abode of the local Tutelary deity Dorji Dragtsan, he offered him the wine and sought protection with the following words:

The wine, sent by my mother,

Is the nectar that quenches thirst on the way.

I wish to offer its first share

To the warrior deity,

To whom our forefathers have taken refuge,

To the female deity, to whom our foremothers seek protection,

To the soul deity, who is protecting me.

I place my warrior deity at the center of my crown.

You, the local warrior deity, guide me on my way.

¹⁷ The aquatic deity is Tshomen mo (mtsho smen mo མཚོ་སྤྲོན་མོ་) in Dzongkha, which refers to Samdup Wangmo (bsam grub dbang mo བསམ་གྲུབ་དབང་མོ་). She is located in the lake at the Phuntsho Choeling Goenpa area, which is about one and a half kilometers from Gumdo Pang. Her abode is situated just above the lake.

You, the local warrior deity, abide on my pillow.
I am moving toward the mountain,
So you know my situation and look after me.

He then left Pholha Dzong and moved toward Tungle pass.
When he arrived at the bottom of Tungle pass, he said this to Yangley Zom and the other cattle:

In the three-month summer season,
As we came toward the mountain,
We arrived at the bottom of Tungle pass,
Where incense trees like small rhododendrons, miniature
rhododendron, and others are growing freshly,
And trees like firs and others are growing densely.
Different species of birds are seen,
Nutritious green grass is abundant,
And the pastoral areas are soft and wide for roaming.
Now, since we have arrived at the place with grass and water,
Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom and others,
Graze on the fresh grass,
Drink the cool water flowing from the mountain,
And be happy and relaxed here.

There, Sonam Wangyal set up a residence with his neighbors
and grazed the cattle for three months.

Finally, when harvest time arrived, he, along with the others,
drove the cattle to Domley Pang, where one helper from each house was
waiting to receive them, except for Sonam Wangyal. Wangyal's father

sent him a message saying that due to his busy schedule at home, he was unable to come today, but he would come to receive him the next morning as soon as the rooster crowed. Until then, Sonam was to wait there. As the neighbors packed their belongings, separated their cattle, and drove them towards Taktse village, Sonam was left behind alone. When the sun was about to set, he uttered the following lines unhappily.

With the passage of time and the changing seasons,
As three months came to an end,
Autumn arrived, the time to harvest the paddy.
Once busy with moving the cattle to a new residence,
Driving them in groups, we reached Domley Pang.
Helpers from the neighboring houses were there to receive them,
But I, Wangyal, was left with no one.
As they separated and drove the cattle,
I, Wangyal, was left behind, alone.
Every time I miss my mother,
I feel the same disappointment, again and again.
My father had promised to come for me,
Yet, even sun is about to sink behind the mountains,
And darkness is creeping in.
My father had not arrived.
This, I realized, was my father's trick.
He had said that wealth is meant to be kept with oneself,
A son should be entrusted to others.
Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom,
Could not be controlled, even when tied with a rope.
So I wanted to release her into the mountain,
And you should go and look after her.

When my mother was making tea on the stove, it fell.
When she warmed the wine,
It overflowed.
I analyzed these bad omens,
And knew that I, Sonam, would soon fall ill.
Though I appear as a human being,
I will soon become invisible, a spirit.”

Assuming he might be hunted by a local spirit at night, Wangyal asked the cow and dog for their protection:

All the cattle are tied, except for the calves,
You, Ba Lekpai Yanglely Zom,
Circle around and keep watch over me,
Do not stray away.
You, khi Lekpai Takar Tenzin,
Stay close to me,
And bark towards the outside.
For I, Wangyal, am alone and dare not stay here.

The following day, Wangyal’s father woke up as soon as the rooster crowed and hastily walked towards Domley Pang. When he arrived, he saw the mattress and bed where Wangyal had laid, but he didn’t find him. Upon witnessing the hoofprints of the cow around the bed, the father uttered these words:

The sleeping mattress is spread across the bed,
The warmth of my son’s body is still there.¹⁸

18 According to the narrator Ap Norbu, it is said that the cow and the dog tried to save Wangyal from the local spirit throughout the night, but the spirit finally took him away at dawn, just before his father arrived. As a result, the warmth of his son’s body was still present.

Ba Lekpai Yangley Zom has left repeated hoofprints
Around the bed.
It seems like a bad omen when I see this.
Where are you now,
My son, Sonam Wangyal?

The father was concerned that something might have happened to his son and searched for him in nearby places. When he called his name in a loud tone, the sound of a flute was heard from the base of Domley Cliff. Since Wangyal used to play the flute, the father thought he was at the base of the cliff. However, when the father went to check, the sound of the flute came from the top of the cliff. As he climbed up, the sound was heard again from the base.

In the meantime, it was 9 o'clock in the morning, the time to drive the cattle.¹⁹ The father said:

Now, we have to move, we have to move,
We must move out of this place.
As per the sun's rotation,
It is time to leave this place.
I have several reasons
Why I could not come yesterday for your reception.

¹⁹ The 9:00 AM time is not a precise or ritualistic time for moving the cattle. Instead, it works as a practical deadline. We must remember the historical context: people did not have modern facilities like torches or headlamps. If they left much later than 9:00 AM, they would risk being unable to finish the journey and reach the village before dark. The other reason relates to the local work habit. Even today, villagers normally go to their fields before or at 9:00 AM. This timing applies when they are hired by others for labor work. Therefore, getting late past 9:00 AM often means they must cancel other labor work commitments.

Even after this request, Wangyal didn't come, and the father said to himself:

Although I searched for Wangyal here and there,
I could not find him.

The father thought that Wangyal was upset for not coming to receive him yesterday, so he was avoiding him. However, he believed Wangyal would come later once he had recovered his mood. For the time being, there was no room for negotiation, and they could talk about it more precisely when they reached home. The father then picked up a milk bucket and drove the cattle toward Taktse village, with the dog following behind.

Around 4 p.m., when they were approaching Shiphug, which is not far from Taktse village, Wangyal's mother was looking at them from the main door of their home. She saw no one except Wangyal's father, the cattle, and the dog. The mother began to worry that something might have happened to her son, or perhaps he was following the cattle. She waited until they reached Tangchen Pang, and then it was confirmed that her son was not there. Overcome with anxiety about her son, she fainted from the tension.

When she recovered from fainting, she looked at Peldon and said:

When they were approaching Shiphug,
Wangyal was out of my view,
But I thought perhaps he was following the cattle.
I waited until they reached Tangchen Pang,

And then it was confirmed that Wangyal wasn't there.
A mountain of worry was heaped upon me.
When I saw this situation,
Drops of tears rolled down,
And I fainted once.
Peldon, who engaged with my son when he was too young,
Today might be early,
As the sun is about to sink behind the mountains,
And darkness is creeping in.
Tomorrow might be too late.
You and I should wake up at dawn
And go to search for Wangyal.

The mother continued, "I'm wondering whether Wangyal hasn't come home out of anger or if he has gotten lost somewhere. If there is fate, we will meet him again." Peldon also hoped to find Wangyal and bring him home. With this hope, they got up early and walked to Domley Pang.

When they reached the base of the fir tree,²⁰ which grew against the cliff in Domley Pang, although Wangyal had a deep love for Peldon, he couldn't appear before her, as he had already become a spirit. When Peldon went to the right side of the tree, Wangyal went to the left, and when Peldon moved to the left side, Wangyal moved to the right. Thus, they couldn't meet face to face. Peldon felt disappointed and said to Wangyal:

²⁰ The narrator Ap Yeshe said that the fir tree, believed to be Wangyal's soul-tree, collapsed long ago.

Wangyal, my spouse since our youth,
With the hope of meeting you,
I rose at dawn
And came here seeking you.
But you, a human being,
has already become a spirit.

To this, Wangyal replied:

Since it was my father's trick,
I have nothing to say to my mother.
From today, there is no beloved son to my mother,
Nor spouse to you, Peldon,
And no family to me.
The fate of being together
Has come to an end now.
Peldon, my spouse since our youth,
The decision to leave you
Has left me behind in the spirit realm.
Even then, if you need something to remember me by,
Then bring my ring from the right finger.

When Peldon heard his statement, pretending to hug the fir tree, she extended both arms and caught the thumb ring from his right hand. She knew that she had no other option but to bring the ring as a token of remembrance. It is said that Wangyal then disappeared, saying, "Now, our fate has come to an end." Peldon also returned to the village with her mother-in-law, bringing the thumb ring.