

The Culture of Tibetan Tulma, Tsampa, and Tea

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(Translated from the Tibetan by Kelsang Lhamo)

Editor's note: This article represents an exemplary discussion of Tibetan foodways by a scholar writing in the Tibetan scholarly tradition. Readers are advised that some of the norms regarding dating, citations, and etymologies, among other conventions, differ between the Tibetan and Western scholarly traditions. We at *Yeshe* are committed to supporting research in the Tibetan scholarly tradition with minimalistic editorial interference.

Abstract: In the traditional culture of Tibetan nomads, there is a substance called “tulma (ਤੁਲਮਾ),” which is also known by many other names, including “jasue (ਯਸু),” “jadur (ਯদুৰ),” “kyoma (କ୍ୟୋମା),” and “garla (ଗରଲା).” The article discusses the processes required to ground and churn barley into tulma, and how it is mixed with tsampa. After one cooks the barley grain, one must also mix it with wheat, lentils, or corn. Moreover, one also needs tea.

The article offers quotes from many different ancient texts showing the origins and benefits of tulma, tsampa, and tea culture in Tibet.

Keywords: tulma, tsampa, tea, Tibetan foodways, tea culture

Tibetan Tulma (西藏茶) Culture

In the nomadic regions of Amdo, on the northeastern border of Tibet, my homeland, there is a substance called “tulma (西藏茶),” which in some areas is also customarily referred to as “jasue (藏茶).” Tulma and jasue are synonymous, two names that convey the same meaning. I have heard that in western Tibet regions they also called it “jadur (藏茶),” “kyoma (藏茶),” “garla (藏茶),” and even by other names. It is a small amount of tsampa (or a similar substance) scattered or sprinkled onto another material. For example, the *Great Tibetan Dictionary* (藏文大词典) describes it as follows: “Sprinkle powdered medicine onto a remedy. Sprinkle roasted barley flour into tea.” According to the dictionary definitions, the term “tulma” refers to either roasted barley flour, dried cheese (藏茶), and butter being sprinkled on top of tea, or to these three ingredients being mixed together in a bowl, over which tea is then poured and stirred. Both methods are known as “tulma.” Tulma is a unique and essential staple in my homeland, the nomadic region of Amdo. It is an indispensable part of morning tea. As a local Amdo saying goes: “Morning tea must have good tulma, just as a spiritual mentor must have a good lama.” Tulma is often referred to in local sayings, as seen in this folk proverb. However, people usually say “tulma dhak” to describe chewing tulma.

In our tradition, morning tulma is considered a supreme nourishing remedy, almost like a medicinal elixir for the body. If there is an elderly or frail person in the household, it is customary to prepare them tulma early in the morning, even before they rise from bed, so it is

ready and warming by their bedside when they wake. According to ancient tradition, Tibetans living on the high plateau followed a daily dietary rhythm: “In the morning, prepare tulma. In the afternoon, eat tsampa. In the evening, drink tsamku (tsampa soup).”¹ This ancient wisdom reflects a balanced way of life shaped by the high-altitude environment. It also sheds light on why Tibetans were historically known as “Black-Headed Barley-Eaters”.

In summary, the ancient dietary customs of our snow land, which centered around consuming tsampa and drinking butter tea, were not borrowed or influenced by neighboring Han or other cultures. Rather, these traditions represent an indigenous Tibetan way of life that has thrived naturally on the Plateau for thousands of years. Moreover, since tsampa and tea are indispensable when having tulma, I would also like to briefly discuss tsampa and tea as well.

The Culture of Tibetan Tsampa (藏族糌粑)

The Nature and Classification of Tsampa

Tsampa is the staple food of the Tibetans who created the ancient sustenance of the entire snowy land of Tibet. It is a unique part of Tibet’s culinary heritage, passed down since ancient times, even dating back to the era of ancestral oral traditions. Tsampa is made from roasted barley flour, one of the “Five Grains.” Also called “barley tsampa,” it is made by roasting barley, one of the five sacred grains, in a pan or copper pot, then grinding it into flour using a stone hand mill, water mill, self-grinder, or any type of grinder. However, depending on regional customs

¹ This is according to the Amdo farmer Rabten Gyal. Gyal, Rabten. Interview by Geshe Tri Yungdrung, 2022.

Mentions of Tsampa in Ancient Scriptures

From the *Four Medical Treatises*: “Barley tsampa, though cooling in nature, strengthens vitality and calms excessive digestive heat. A soup prepared from green, unripe ears of grain and barley flour helps alleviate persistent imbalances. It is easy to digest, gentle on the stomach, and promotes warm, masculine energy (149).” The same source

says, “*ya baksha ra* (ཡ་བಕ୍ଷା ར) generates heat, cures tumors, and purifies disease. White powder (ସ୍ଵାର୍ତ୍ତା) removes decay and softens tsampa. Yellow sulfur dispels harmful influences and dries pus and blood (149).” Thus, it is said that tsampa enhances physical strength, yellow sulfur eliminates illness, and together they help dry excess bodily fluids such as pus and blood, promoting overall health. Likewise, according to the *Black Hundred Cures*: “When the head spins and both body and mind feel heavy, there is excessive mucus, low internal heat, poor appetite, and physical weakness. Pain arises in the kidneys and lower back, and the body becomes swollen. Vomiting and diarrhea occur, accompanied by tsampa and phlegm. The blood drawn during bloodletting appears reddish-white and sticky (Thar, *Four Medical Treatises*, 202).” From the same text: “Use myrobalan (arura), nutmeg (jati), or duralabha (ସ୍ରୀକ୍ଷେତ୍ର). Keep the body warm and induce sweating, then remove half the wool covering. Barley porridge and a broth made from tsam pa help dispel excess wind energy. For conditions involving fever, bile heat, sweating, and residual body hair, it is better to avoid bloodletting; the most effective treatment is to induce perspiration (271).”

The same text continues: “Indigestion leads to a sallow complexion and abdominal bloating. A mixture of five pomegranates, rock salt, and white rock-sugar is recommended. If vomiting occurs, apply a warm, oily poultice to the stomach. If the vomit is watery, administer a decoction made from radish. Giving only a small amount of tsampa makes it easier to digest (398).” Later, it reads, “Fourth, a discussion of whether food and behavior are beneficial or harmful for general wounds: During the early stages of a wound, bleeding and swelling occur. Therefore, broth and tsampa should be consumed (398).”

The term “tsampa” appears frequently in the *Four Medical Treatises* and other classical texts. However, it is necessary to examine whether the term “tsampa” in these contexts refers specifically to tsampa as ground grain flour, or whether it has other meanings. As the saying goes, one must “distinguish similar sounds with different meanings.”

The Origin of Tsampa

The ancient people of Tibet are credited with compiling the *Four Medical Treatises*, which document numerous medicinal ingredients derived from native Tibetan plants and minerals. These ingredients played an essential role in the daily life and healthcare practices of ancient Tibetans.

According to tradition, this foundational medical text was composed by Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, the founder of the Bon religion in Tibet, around 16017 B.CE. It is widely accepted among traditional historians that he was born near Mount Kailash, the sacred mountain revered in both Tibet and the ancient kingdom of Zhangzhung. The frequent appearance of the term “tsampa” in Tibet’s ancient texts suggests that it is one of the oldest indigenous Tibetan terms. While some argue that tsampa evolved from the Zhangzhung word *bong nge* (ບོང་ངེ), classical texts occasionally interpret *bong nge* as referring to ritual offerings (དྲྙྩྰ), communal gatherings, or even sacred visions (Yasuhiko and Karmay, *A Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo Terms*, 162). This makes it difficult to definitively establish a direct linguistic connection.

It is certain that tsampa is undeniably an archaic Tibetan term originating from the country's own historical records, not a food that spread later from India or China.

The Benefits of Tsampa

The Four Medical Tantras describe how tsampa treats various diseases and its beneficial effects. “According to modern scientific research, barley contains substances that can destroy cancer cells and other harmful cells (as in the case of “low-calorie sweeteners”) and as such are highly beneficial in preventing diseases like leprosy. Additionally, there is a dietary substance called “dietary fiber” (សន្តសកនីខេះឆ្លុ), which neutralizes pathogenic factors causing male genital and urinary tract diseases. Not only does it also prevent stomach and intestinal cancer, but it also reduces bile fluid that is contained in the blood, thereby helping prevent heart disease. Its health benefits are described as extremely significant.

Thus, the great medical master Yuthok Yonten Gonpo (សម្បិន្យា·
ឃុំធម្មោន្ត·, 1126-1201) stated that, “the supreme food is tsampa,” and further affirmed that “aged barley tsampa” is classified among the medicinal grains, offering significant benefits for the urogenital system, including conditions such as diabetes (Dondrup, *100-Word Essay*, 118-120). Similarly, in the Tibetan folk tradition, there is a saying: “When you have the flu, chew tulma.” It is believed that consuming tsampa helps alleviate symptoms of colds and flu. For example, when elderly individuals experience wind disease, tsampa is not only often eaten

mixed with butter but also used in warm compresses or massages on the upper back. This is considered essential for restoring balance and aiding recovery. Another method involves finely mincing meat, boiling it with tsampa to make tsampa broth, and drinking it to relieve wind disorder. These practices demonstrate how tsampa has long been relied upon in Tibetan culture to treat various ailments, reflecting a profound traditional wisdom rooted in empirical knowledge and passed down through generations. Indeed, such methods embody a sophisticated medical heritage worthy of deep respect.

Tibetan Tea Culture

The First Conversation Regarding Tea (𩷶)

When discussing the tea mixed with tsampa or barley flour mentioned above, it is essential to focus on the tea as well as the tsampa. As it is said, “Tea and *chang* are the thirst-quenching drinks.” Tea culture has existed in Tibet for thousands of years. It was first encountered by Master Thonmi who discovered it on his way to Zhangzhung after he could not find it in India and other places. The autobiography of Shenrab Miwo recounts:

Tea is perfect in every way.

Peaceful and gentle, the essence of excellence.

As long as beings are guided by compassion,

I prostrate to the Lord Shenlha. (*Nyingpo, Drime Ziji*, 247)

Upon examining the etymology of the word, it is evident that it existed at least as early as the 7th century. When discussing its benefits, this tea is not only a beverage for quenching thirst but also a medicinal

extract capable of combating various diseases. Clear tea is required for medicinal decoctions. The origins of the tea, benefits, and advantages of this traditional practice are well-documented in ancient Tibetan medical texts such as the *Four Medical Tantras* and *Ziji* among others. Below is a detailed explanation based on these authoritative sources.

Tea Terminology in Ancient Writings

Firstly, from the *Four Medical Treatises*: “Combine the three heating ingredients in a medicinal mixture to be taken as tea, morning and evening (Thar, *Four Medical Treatises*, 56).” Later, the same text states: “For chronic heat disorders, [use] fresh cooling meats, non-greasy broths, cooled tea, and water or milk, along with foods like yogurt, provided they are balanced at the appropriate temperature (72).” And again, from the same source: “For [illnesses of] the ears and throat, use beef or *dri* (female yak) milk, beans, tea and boiled cold water, especially when catarrh and fever are severe. If *chang* (barley beer) is unsuitable, drink boiled *chang* diluted with water, using a straw to make it drinkable. If the tea is unsuitable, add a pinch of salt in urine and drink it. If the yogurt is unsuitable, drink buttermilk instead (211).”

The *Four Medical Treatises* continues: “Because drinks such as yogurt, butter, and tea are not consumed, the clear fluids lose their pathways, and the body’s elements become unwilling to circulate (Thar, 233).” In this case, “Cold foods and drinks like dandelion, yogurt, buttermilk, boiled cold water, and tea, and so forth, should be consumed (380),” along with “beef, antelope, blue sheep, and fresh deer meat. *Bötuk* (a type of *thukpa* with ginger and peppercorn), tea, and cold water can also be served (522).” Thus, it is clear from ancient medical texts that

the culture of tea drinking has existed in Tibet since ancient times, and it also has benefits such as destroying diseases.

Similarly, from the autobiography of Shenrab Miwoche called the *Drime Ziji*: “Make offerings of flour and the flax plant in a secret feast. Adorn them with pure *torma* of various grains. Nourish them with tea, beer, milk, and libations (Vol. 8, 38).” Again, from the same source: “[Eat] white sweets, grains, nutrients, and nourishing foods, and for thirst take tea, alcohol, and other drinks (Vol. 5, 258).” Again, from the same source: “Offer the three whites and the three sweets, essential herbs, moisture, various divine cakes and drinks, cooked, roasted, raw, and so on. Offer tea, beer and the finest offering water (Vol. 6, 78).” The *Drime Ziji* continues:

Drinks include tea, and chang (*yu ti*).

The faults of beer are as stated above.

Tea comes from the substance of a growing tree.

Generally, when cutting a living tree
or using cut flowers and dried leaves,
use materials that are lifeless and inanimate.

Moreover, when it comes to plants and crops,
if the green part dries up at the root, it causes harm.

Similarly, historical flowers and ripening fruits
gradually diminish.

When the season ends and no further growth occurs,
the leaves, flowers, and fruits fall off naturally.

Know that there is no fault in this.

When a tree bears a hundred fruits,
cutting off even one branch is a serious offense.

Therefore, cutting the trunk at the root
renders it lifeless and without breath.
Earth lords, nagas, and spirits of the soil:
Their dwelling place and source of life
arises from the body of a golden tortoise.
Upon it, living beings and sentient creatures thrive.
The tree's goddess claims it as her own.
Therefore, for forests and flowers...
avoid cutting down trees.
In particular, as for the tea called "Yongmar tea":
"Yong" comes from the "Yongdu tree."
Butter is more precious than refined gold.
Tea quenches thirst, hence "tea."
Therefore, it is called "Yongmar tea." (Vol. 11, 207)

The text also discusses the origins of the term "tea," as well as well as its meaning and benefits.

The Story of the Origin of Tea

The origin of tea is also mentioned in the eleventh volume of the detailed biography of Tonpa Shenrab, the *Ziji*:

The Origin Story:
On triple-tiered Mount Meru's peak,
dwells the perpetually intoxicated Kumara.
Amrita's essence fell on grains, fruits and herbs,
creating threefold bliss—intoxication, ecstasy and joy.
From this ambrosial brew they drank without restraint,

quenching thirst, yet bringing drunkenness and haze,
till even the gods of Triple Heaven's realm,
provoked by nectar's power, began to fight.

Though the gods' children knew no natural birth,
Now they coupled, conceiving demon spawn -
the *māra* parasites that live as one,
one soul enduring while the other kills.

The pure gods, outraged by this disgrace,
saw heaven's purity defiled with filth.

Then the elder *māra*, Long-Armed Demon Lord,
before the triple world's great assembly hall,
with humble plea to Lady Namchi Gonggyal,
offered submission at the cosmic tree's abode.

"You are the mother of all sentient beings in existence,
great in kindness to all living creatures.

We, the twins, harmful spirit deities,
dwell on the third terrace of Mount Meru.

The perpetually intoxicated Kumara dwells there,
having blessed the fruit of the nine grains' essence
with amrita nectar,
and consuming milk and chang beer.

Through drunkenness, intoxication, and coarseness,
conflict arose among the twins.

Wherever fermentation occurred,
the gods lost their shame and modesty,
and the pure divine races became disturbed in mind.

The shadow of the divine realm being polluted and defiled
falls upon human beings.

Gods and humans have fallen to lower status,

demons and rakshasas have risen in rank.

Regarding this, may the Lady consider in her wisdom:

That the defilement of the divine realm be purified,

that the human realm flourish and prosper,

that the intoxication of the body be cleared,

that conflicts with the *asuras* not arise.

We request a method for peace and equality.”

Then Jomo said: “Listen, God of the *yaksha* king!

I will fulfill all your wishes as I desire.

You are also a tree that supports living beings.

On the trunk of the all-gathering tree,

with the magic of demons and ogres,

where the poisonous worms do not arise,

hold the precious stick,

guard from the peak of existence.

But if the venomous worms should appear,

The king wielding the stick must deliver their punishment.”

Having spoken thus, she gave her command.

Then Lady Namchi Gonggyal,

at the top of the all-encompassing tree where the three realms converge,

with hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes mixed,

and saliva from the tongue,

she made aspirations for nectar and medicine.

From that, a nectar tree grew.

From the tree, five branches split.

The trunk pierced the divine tree.

The branches split into five directions:

east, south, west, north, and center.

In the east arose white conch leaves and Sur Bu.
In the south, turquoise leaves and blue juniper.
In the west, copper leaves and red neem.
In the north, golden leaves and yellow birch.
In the center, a green Mule Drum tree.
From that, nine types of incense plants arose.
From the plants, eighteen incense trees came into being.
There, nectar and incense leaves were cut...
Using a mixture of roast barley flour and butter,
on the peaks of the seven golden mountains,
with the swift presence of eighteen men and horses,
thirteen Sipa Bonpos
and thirteen Bon Bird messengers
cleanse the defilements with a blue changeless.
“By offering the mixture of roast barley flour and butter,
cleanse the defilements of the celestial realm,
so that all beings may have happiness and well-being!
From the nectar, the incense trees,
and the fruits scattered across the four continents of the human
realm,
may trees bearing nectar come into being!
The method of pure intoxication, Kumaradza,
and the fruits of the Mule Drum tree—
may they grow on the first of the seven golden mountains
and upon the third terrace!”
It exists in a Mule Drum tree grove.
The grove is the source of the Drum tree’s essence.
Various desirable things come from the tree.
The leaves provide coolness and shade.

The flowers are wonderful to behold.
The fruits provide nourishment and food.
The heartwood becomes precious ornaments.
The bark becomes silk and covering.
The sap becomes essence and nectar.
The trunk becomes a place to live.
By the blessings of the Lady Namchi Gonggyal,
by the perfection of generosity,
the *druma* tree is the enjoyment of humans.
The fortunate ones use it as a place of enjoyment,
while the unfortunate ones are nowhere to be found.
The poor cannot see what to do.
On the third terrace, a garden was created,
From Yongmar, tea plants emerged.
Their colors are divided into six types:
white, green, red, blue, dark, and yellow.
Leaves, flowers, fruits,
fragrance, and the six excellent tastes are present.
The cause is from the divine tree,
and it belongs to the *druma* tree family.
By the blessings of the Lady Namchi Gonggyal,
the nectar of the healing tree,
the method of pure intoxication, Kumaradza,
the twin monsters are cruel and calm.
At that time, Lady Namchi Gonggyal,
with its leaves, flowers, and fruits
scattered across the four continents of the human realm,
made the aspiration of nectar and nourishment.
This is the origin of tea.

It is the best of all drinks,
coming from a tree, it bears few faults.
It should be taken in moderation.
Drinking immoderately enhances youth
and becomes the cause of increasing splendor.
Because it is the essence of the nectar tree,
a strong body and attachment arise from it.
Craving becomes the cause of the loss of *bindu*.
Therefore, moderate thirst relief is sufficient.
The severity of the offense
beyond that is like cutting the roots of a tree that grows from a
sprout.
It is generated from the element's cause,
purified by the ritual of the Wheel of Time.
Otherwise, flourishing, expanding,
and declining are progressively lesser offenses.
It is taught as a cause for drinking.
Moreover, except for the six times,
it becomes a transgression at inappropriate times.
Therefore, one should not be attached to untimely food and the
warmth of the evening. (Vol. 11, 207-209)

This statement is said to be the earliest historical document of the origin of tea. Thus, based on these words spoken by the ancestor Shenrab Tonpa regarding the culture of tea and its origin and history, it can be proven that the origin of tea has a history of at least four-thousand years.

According to other major Tibetan and Chinese historical records, around the 7th century (approximately 680 CE), when the Tibetan emperor

Dusong Mangpoje (or Lungnam Trulgyi Gyalpo) had a serious illness, a beautiful bird brought a wooden leaf in its mouth, which was offered to the king to quench his thirst, and it was then that the tradition of drinking wooden leaf tea first became popular in Tibet (Zangpo, *The Tibetan and Chinese Historical Records of Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo*, 172-176).² Moreover, it is said that during the reign of Emperor Songtsen Gampo, the great minister Tonmi Sambhota discovered the letters *ca*, *cha*, and *ja* in the upper regions, thus giving rise to the term *ja* (tea). However, upon closer examination, these accounts appear to be fabricated, more like forced insertions into the historical narrative. On this point, the scholar Zamtsa Tsering Dondrup has also written an article titled “The History of the Spread of Tea,” in which he refutes these claims (47-48).

How to Make Tea and Its Benefits

There are various methods according to the customs of different regions. In my hometown of Amdo, Qinghai, the most common tea is called “black tea” or popularly known as “wild black tea.” It seems almost identical to what is called black tea in central regions. The method of brewing it is: Put a small amount of black tea or mixed tea in water, boil it in a pan, copper pot, or pot, and drink it when the tea turns reddish-brown. It is said that black tea is warm in nature, so drinking it is good for the stomach and helps with indigestion. In particular, it is said to be very effective in warming the body. Stirred tea is commonly made in central Tibet and Kham. It is also called “butter tea” or “churned tea” because black tea extract, butter, and salt water are poured into a churn

2 According to the Tibetan and Chinese historical records of Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo, tea appeared in Tibet during the time of Dus-srong Mang-rje. Likewise, many people have quoted that saying when talking about the history of tea. If that is taken as the initial origin of tea, then it seems that the history of tea in Tibet is very short. See Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo, *The Tibetan and Chinese Historical Records of Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo*, 240-244.

or a cylindrical container and repeatedly stirred or churned.

There are traditionally said to be nine benefits of butter tea or churned tea. It is said that modern scientists have proven through research that it helps in: 1. Replenishing energy, 2. Brain health, 3. Improving digestion, 4. Burning fat, 5. Preventing altitude sickness, 6. Benefiting skin diseases, 7. Benefiting heart health, 8. Preventing diabetes, and 9. Boosting immunity. In addition to black tea, there is also white tea, milk tea, sweet tea, bone tea, and tsampa tea.

Various Synonyms for Tea

From the history of how tea appeared in Tibet, it is mentioned that there are sixteen types of tea (Zangpo, *The Tibetan and Chinese Historical Records*, 240):

1. Phuma (ཕོ་ມ)
2. Dhama (ဓାମା)
3. Charma (କର୍ମା)
4. Chuma (ଚୁମା)
5. Shingsar (ଶିଙ୍ଗଶର)
6. Shingrnying (ଶିଙ୍ଗର୍ଣ୍ଣିଙ୍)
7. Shangma (ଶଙ୍ଗମା)
8. Jima (ଜିମା)
9. Luchan (ଲୁଚାନ)
10. Luhme (ଲୁହମେ)

11. Tseja (རྩྚ)
12. Barja (བརྩྚ)
13. Tshadul (ཚྲଦྦྚྱ)
14. Drangdul (ඤྲଦྦྚྱ)
15. Minpa (ମିନ୍ପା)
16. Maminpa (ମାମିନ୍ପା)

Each of these has differences in the thickness of their stems, the color of their leaves, their taste and aroma, as well as their benefits for specific physical ailments. These details are extensively explained in “The Ocean of Nectar: A Treatise on Examining the Quality of Chinese Tea,” a section within *The Great Chinese-Tibetan Encyclopedia* composed by Tagtsang Paljor Zangpo. This text elaborates on the varieties of tea, their distinct characteristics, and their benefits (240-244).

According to *The Stainless Crystal Mirror*, the Tibetan etymology of the word for tea (ja) is said to be derived from a partial pronunciation of the Chinese character 茶 (chá). However, the *Great Chinese Dictionary* published by the Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House states that the Chinese character 茶 emerged as a term during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty. Before that, the character 檳 (jiǎ) was used instead of 茶. Chinese scholars suggest that the pronunciation and usage of 檳 originated from the language of the people in the Sichuan-Yaknga region. Therefore, the reason why the pronunciation of “tea” used in the Sichuan Yaksha area is close to the pronunciation of the Tibetan word for “tea” is because the people in those areas are Tibetan. In the history of Gyalrong, Yaknga is said to be one of the eighteen Gyalrong

kingdoms, and in short, the Chinese word “cha” is also a derivative of the Tibetan word “ja”, as is established in the oral tradition of tea culture (Zimar, *On Tibetan Tea Culture*, 241-245).

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