

# **Khar: The Oral Tradition of Game of Riddles in Tshanglakha Speaking Community of Eastern Bhutan**

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## **Abstract**

*Khar, which literally means 'house', is an age old oral tradition of riddle games in Tshanglakha (Sharchopkha) speaking communities of eastern Bhutan. This paper attempts to explain the terminology khar for the game of riddles. The preliminary survey of its presence in other dialectic groups of eastern Bhutan, explanation of the terminology for the game, comparison amongst the riddles in different dialectic communities and the way of playing the riddles as well the occasions during which it is played will be discussed. An attempt has been made to find similar oral traditions within other linguistic and dialectic communities in other parts of the country. A modest attempt of finding its prevalence in neighboring and other states of India is made, and comparison is drawn between that of Bhutan and those of other states so as to prove its importance as an age old tradition spread all over the region. This paper also attempts to put forward the importance of khar, as an oral tradition, to lives of rural communities and the causes of its diminishing popularity in present times.*

## **Introduction**

This is not a scholarly paper but a layman's attempt to record the prevalence of riddles, their significance in the lives of the communities, the possible causes of their vanishing trends amongst the younger generations, and their prevalence in other parts of the world. An attempt to explain the possible origins of different terminologies for the riddles in different dialectic and linguistic groups is also being made as an appetizer for further studies by researchers in this field. The way of riddling or playing the game of riddles in different

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communities has been given to show its richness and widespread prevalence. A comparative study with a few examples of riddles from different dialects has been given so as to help in grouping the riddles into different groups with respect to the subject matter. It is to be noted here that there is no such classification but it is a simple attempt by the author to show the range of subjects the people touched on while riddling, and also to bring out the similarity amongst riddles in different places and communities.

The methodology of study was personal communication by the author and also by friends from different parts of eastern Bhutan. The author also based most of the findings on personal communications with students and friends of Nangkor higher secondary school in Pemagatshel.

### **Oral tradition**

Oral tradition is one of the oldest forms of art in any society on the earth. A. Steven Evans writes, “Large numbers of the world’s population are oral communicators. They learn best through communication that is not tied to or dependent on print.”<sup>1</sup> He mentions that, “it is estimated that more than two-thirds of the world’s population, or over four billion people, are oral communicators by necessity or preference.”<sup>2</sup> Evans further writes that, “Primarily through story, proverb, poetry, drama and song, oral communicators house their knowledge, information, teachings, concepts, lists, and ideas in narrative presentations that can be easily understood, remembered, and reproduced.”<sup>3</sup>

In Bhutan oral communication includes “*srung* (folktales), *dpe gtam* or *dpye gtam* (proverb), *gtam rgyud* (legend), *blo ze* (ballad), *tsang mo* (equivalent of quatrain?), *gab tshig* (riddle),

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, A. Steven (2006), “Promoting Happiness through Oral Traditions,” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 15:115-132, p.117.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.117.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and *dgod bra* (joke)”, as per Dorji Penjore.<sup>4</sup> And he further writes, “Bhutan is still an oral society... Modern education was introduced only in late 1950s, and before that, the monastic system that provided Buddhist education was accessible only to a few privileged families. Modern education may succeed in turning man into an efficient machine for the market, but in creating value-based, socially responsible individuals, oral tradition plays an important role.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Different languages and dialects in Bhutan**

Bhutan, though a small landlocked nation, has about twenty dialects as per DDA.<sup>6</sup> Bhutan has one native language that is being spoken by the common people, viz., Dzongkha, the national language and mother tongue of the majority of people in Paro, Haa, Thimphu, Punakha and Wangdiphodrang dzongkhags, while Lhotshampakha (Nepali) is the language spoken by Lhotshampas, people of southern Bhutan (Sarpang, Samtse and Tsirang dzongkhags and some parts of Samdrup Jongkhar, Dagana, Chukha dzongkhags) who have immigrated from Nepal and neighbouring states of India. They also speak other dialects of different castes like Tamang, Gurung, Sherpa, etc. English is a foreign language that has made its way into Bhutanese daily life some time back as a medium of modern education and the language of communication with other countries.

Tshanglalo (as called by the native speakers) or Tshanglakha or Sharchopkha (in Dzongkha) is the most popular dialect spoken by majority of the people of eastern Bhutan (comprised of Lhuntse, Mongar, Trashigang, Trashiyangtse,

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<sup>4</sup> Penjore, Dorji (2007), “Role of Bhutanese Folktales in Value Transmission,” in *Rethinking Development: Proceedings of Second International Conference on Gross National Happiness*, Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies, 258-277, p.262.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 261.

<sup>6</sup> DDA (Dzongkha Development Authority) as quoted in Gyeltshen, Tshering (2006), “Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People,” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 15:1-39, p. 9.

Pemagatshel and Samdrup Jongkhar districts), while other major dialects in Bhutan would be Bumthangkha, Khengkha and Kurmedkha (Chocha Ngacha) considering the number of speakers and the size of the area the communities speaking the dialects occupy.

In eastern Bhutan besides Tshanglakha, there are other dialects like Kurmedkha, Zhakat, Zalakha, Khengkha, Chalipikha, Bumthangkha, Gondupikha, Brahmi, Brokat, and Dakpakha.<sup>7</sup>

### **Overview of origin of riddles in Bhutan and the terminology *khar***

*sNyen ngag*, which literally may mean ‘words that please ears’ (*snyen*: ‘nice/sweet to hear’ and *ngag* ‘words’), is one of the *rig ney chung wa nga* (five smaller or lower *rig ney*).<sup>8</sup> *sNyen ngag* has three parts, of which *gab tshig* is the second chapter in the third part. The literal translation of its definition is, “In the midst of gathering of people, when played or begun to plan the game to play so to make (others) laugh. And the meanings of the words that are not to be made known by all that have gathered and have to be hidden are done so by other words and uttered making the other people puzzled, thus making it difficult to understand instantly the intended meaning of the message. Such appropriate words that are the ornaments of *snyen ngag* are called ornaments of *gab tshig*.”<sup>9</sup> Further it is said that ‘though it is called *gab tshig*, in olden language (*bdā nying*) of the three *bon* (bonism), *drung* (legends) and *deau*, it is the *deau*. But then, it is (i.e., *gab tshig*) the sentences with appropriate wording (*nyam tshar dang den pey*) that belong to *snyen ngag* which is similar to popularly known (i.e., in Tibet) *kha tshar* or *khed*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Rig ney chung wa nga: snyen ngag, ngen jade, deb jur, dhoe gar and kart shi’ as in 2007 reprint of Dzongkha Dictionary edited by Lam Chechong, Thimphu: DDA, p. 909.

<sup>9</sup> Pelden, Setshang Lobzang (2004), *Tshangsey bzhed pey drayang*, Delhi: Tibetan Cultural & Religious Publication Centre, pp. 866-867.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 866.

Dorji Penjor mentions *gab tshig* as one of the oral traditions of Bhutan and translates it as riddle. In dzongkha *gab tshig* is explained as ‘*gu thom drewa*’,<sup>11</sup> which would literally mean ‘a puzzling question’. The terminology *gab tshig* could not have been the original dzongkha term for riddles which was an oral tradition in almost all parts of Bhutan. Even in Tibet it originated, later than the popular terminology *kha tshar*<sup>12</sup> or *khed*<sup>13</sup>, as mentioned above, once Buddhism had spread through various Indian and Tibetan masters, and translators.<sup>14</sup> *Kha tshar* or *khed* had in turn originated later than the *deau*.<sup>15</sup>

In Bhutan riddle could have originated from Tibet as part of Bon culture or later from *kha tshar* or *khed* or it could have originated in Bhutan independent of these two traditions of Tibet. It looks likely the second assumption is nearer to the mark since the Dongkha has the word *kha tshar*, but this terminology could have easily got into Dongkha by contact with Tibetan. While in the east, riddle could have originated independently or by any of the assumptions put above and the words *kha tshar* might have got abbreviated as *khar* or the word *khed* could have got modified into *khar* over a period of time.

The abbreviation of the words and change in meaning is evident from the way of asking the riddle by Tshangla communities in Narphung<sup>16</sup> and Kurmedpa communities of Kurtoe and Trashiyangtse.<sup>17</sup> People in Narphung ask the

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<sup>11</sup> *English Dzongkha Dictionary*, Thimphu: DDA, p. 868.

<sup>12</sup> *Dzongkha Dictionary* (2007), Thimphu: DDA, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Khed* is synonym for *gab tshig* as in *Advanced Dzongkha Dictionary* (2004), Thimphu: KMT Publisher, p.132.

<sup>14</sup> Refer *Tshangsey bzhed pey drayang* (2004) by Setshang Lobzang Pelden, p. 1-20.

<sup>15</sup> *Deau* is explained as one of the caste in Tibet in *Advanced Dzongkha Dictionary* (2004), Thimphu: KMT Publisher, p. 869.

<sup>16</sup> Author’s personal recollection.

<sup>17</sup> As collected by Bodpa Ngedup, teacher, Tangmachu Middle Secondary School, Lhuntshe.

riddle as, “*Wang bu la phur lus pa, hang kharbey? Khar phay, khar phay*” and it would translate as, “When hole is taken the pole is left, what is it/what it means?” *Hang* means ‘what’ and *kharbey* has come to mean ‘it means or is it’, when it is used during the game, but will make no sense if used casually in normal communication. The word is clearly formed from *khar phay* as evident from way of asking it in other places and even in Narphung by some other people. For instance, in Nangkor it is asked as, “*Wang bu la phur lus pa, hang?*” While in Khandudung, it is asked as, “*Wang bu la phur lus pa, hang? Khar phay, khar phay.*” In Kurmedkha the word *sholong* has come to mean ‘what is it / what it means’ though it is the terminology used for the riddle. For instance, they would ask the riddle as, “*Ama bong ring ku chig ka rey log chig pa ghenma, sholong?*”<sup>18</sup> When asked, common Kurmedkha speakers do not know the meaning or origin of the terminology.

The third assumption that it might have originated independently in Bhutan could also be argued from the view point of change in terminology for the riddles in Tibet. With the change in time and influence of Sanskrit literature, the original terminologies have become overshadowed by the new terminology *gab tshig*, which is a written form of literature mainly used or written by elite groups of Indians and Tibetans, particularly masters and royals,<sup>19</sup> while the oral traditions have become a thing of the past as one could decipher by reading in between the lines that define *gab tshig* as cited above. The point is the riddles might have been there in Bhutan but the terminology might have been imported from Tibet, most probably looking at the similarities in essence of the riddles played orally and that of the written form as noted above for the origin of *gab tshig*. Thus, *khed* or *kha tshar* could have come to eastern Bhutan either from western Bhutan or directly from Tibet and became *khar*.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Refer *sNyen ngag gi tenchey chenpo melong la jhug pey shaed jar danyidhiye gong jan zhe jawa zhug so* (1999) by Mephram Geyleg Namgyal.

There is a second very strong argument with regard to independent origin of riddles in eastern Bhutan looking at the terminology *khar*. *Khar* literally means 'house' to common people of a Tshangla community, while the dictionary meaning of it in Dzongkha is a 'fortress'. The terminology *Khar* could have come from the bet the respondent has to give if he or she fails to give the correct answer. In different parts of eastern Bhutan, the bet is either a dzong, monastery or house. For instance, in Shongphu<sup>20</sup> under Trashigang district it is monasteries, in Gomdar under Samdrup Jongkhar it is predominantly houses, in Bikhar<sup>21</sup> under Samkhar gewog of Trashigang it is house and in Trashiyangtse it is dzong.<sup>22</sup> The initial meaning of the word *khar* could have been 'dzong' which later began to be used for comparatively bigger state or government houses (also called *nagtshang*) that served as residence cum office for the local chieftain, or *drungpa*, in the locality and then began to be used equivalently for the ordinary houses. The argument is further supported by the terminology used by Lhotshampa people of Bhutan who call the riddle *gaun khani katha*<sup>23</sup> which literally means 'story for eating village' and the bet given is a village.

### **Different ways of riddling**

With regard to storytelling, Tandin Dorji writes, "The art of narration is not limited to the use of beautiful expressions, figures of speech and ritualistic formulas but it is also equally animated and made lively through gestures and varying intonation of the voice of the narrator."<sup>24</sup> In playing riddles Bhutanese are inventive, and different villages have developed their own way of riddling. The following are a few ways of

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<sup>20</sup> As recollected by Tshering Wangdi, Office assistant, NHSS.

<sup>21</sup> As recollected by Choki Wangmo, author's wife.

<sup>22</sup> As recollected by Lopen Ngawang Phuntsho, NHSS, and I owe him for telling me, for the first time, the term 'sholong' for riddle game in Kurmedkha.

<sup>23</sup> As recollected by D.C. Khatiwara, teacher, NHSS, and I thank him for this and the examples of *gaun khani katha*.

<sup>24</sup> Dorji, Tandin (2002), "Folktale Narration: A Retreating Tradition," *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 6:5-23, p. 10.

playing *khar* that I have come across during my work and these are certainly not the conclusive representatives of playing it in other Tshangla communities of eastern Bhutan.

People in Narphung play it by asking the riddle followed by the word *kharbey*. “*Sa phrakha dengtsi/tsigpa gapha hang kharbey? Khar phay, khar phay or phey phay phey phay.*”<sup>25</sup> ‘What is the wall beneath the soil? Give house, give house,’ the questioner would demand.

And the respondent would try very hard to answer and he or she gets enough time and chance to answer, but with incessant, “*khar phay, khar phay*” by the questioner. It goes on until the respondent gives up and asks, “*Ei bi gha phey chas pey?*” ‘Whose house do you want?’

The respondent would suggest an array of houses belonging to their village and the questioner would not agree unless he or she gets the best house of the village. Then it is the turn for the respondent to question and pester for the house. He or she will not accept the house already given to the first person.

In Nangkor, once the respondent fails to answer the riddle, he or she asks whether the questioner wants *ser* or *sa dzong* or *ngey* or *nam dzong*. The giving of the bet itself is a riddle where *ser/sa dzong* means a latrine, while *ngey/nam dzong* means proper house or dzong. Here the colour of the stool or soil is compared with the gold and since the latrines hold stool it is therefore called *ser/sa dzong*.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately the players would be counting the houses, monasteries or dzongs they got in the course of the game and would be the champion for the moment.

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<sup>25</sup> Author’s personal recollection.

<sup>26</sup> As recollected by Lopen Kelzang Lhendup, NHSS and I sincerely thank him for his contribution on sending away the *khar* by people in Nangkor.



### **Ending the game of riddle and beliefs associated with it**

As there are so many ways of ending storytelling sessions by Bhutanese storytellers<sup>27</sup>, there are also numerous ways of ending the riddles in eastern Bhutan. The common ground of concluding the riddles is sending off the *khar*, which in Tshanglakha is called *khar abi nung mey*. The riddle is personified as *khar abi* (*abi* means 'grandma' or 'old lady', *khar abi* could mean 'grandma of the house') in the end of the game. The personification could have come from the general belief that ladies are more intelligent than man and riddles definitely require intelligence.

In Gomdar people send off the *khar abi* by providing her with all the necessary items for food and drink, and then hurling her over a cliff with thunderous *growa* 'crash' as in the following:

*"Bogpi cho thur, kharang lamshu thur, khu khau thur, ara palang thur, khomin tshik thur, phagpa sha gudey thur, solo nam gnang thur, eincha par thur, melong brag key dong growu."*<sup>28</sup>

In Bikhari people send off the *khar abi* along with three essential equipments required for weaving which are all hurled over the bridges of the major rivers in their locality as given in the following:

*"Thagchung toam thur, brung toam thur, sepir toam thur Thungthiri zam pye dong growa ken, Samkhar ri zampye dong growa ken, Gamri zampye dong growa ken."*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Dorji, Tandin (2002), "Folktale Narration: A Retreating Tradition," *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 6:5-23, p.12-17.

<sup>28</sup> Translation for the sending off of *khar* in Gomdar as recollected by author, 'Two fistful of flour, a container full of *kharang*, a container full of rice, a bottle of wine, an internode of sugarcane, a pair of sliced pork, a pod of chilly, a fistful of salt, crash over the cliff of *melong*.' (Containers mentioned are standard measuring containers used in rural Bhutan).

<sup>29</sup> As recollected by Abi Daza, grandmother of author's wife and

In Samdrupcholing<sup>30</sup>, under Samdrup Jongkhar, *khar* is sent off along with the household items as done by people in Narphung but they are hurled over the bridges as done by people in Bikhar.

In Khanduphung<sup>31</sup>, Serthi Gewog under Samdrup Jongkhar, the sending off of *khar* is unique from other places and it is as below.

One of the participants will say, “*Yap ley doan*” and the rest will say in respond “*doo!*” and will continue with “*ray ngan ley doan, doo!, phynang ley doon, doo!, medharang ley doan*”, and conclude with, “*kho petang ley doan, doo!*”

In Nangkor and other villages of Pemagatshel it is done quite elaborately and dramatically and a transliteration of it is given below.

*Abi khar tam gyelmo nung ma khab. Lap ka za ley yaenang tshas pey dang. Lap ka ja may lam chang tshas pey dang. Khamong na may thagcha tshas pey dang.*

*Dang dang dangshing. Ba ba badhey. Thag thag thagchung, ne ne neyshing. Why why whyshing. Li li lizu. Sho sho shogodong. Phu phu phunpalang. Phun phun phundum. Kho kho khom thur. Si si sipchurung. Bu bu bumphegtsham. Bi bi bitan.*

*Abi labka ku wo gyeba kab. Brung ga warong nang ka ara*

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translation is, ‘A bundle of sword, a bundle of bamboo rods and a bundle of pattern pick crash over the bridges of thungthi, Samkhar and Gamri rivers.’ (Translation for the items used in traditional handloom in Bhutan is from “*From the Land of the Thunder Dragon: Textile Arts of Bhutan*” (1994) (eds) by Myers, D.K & Bean, S.S, pp.44-45).

<sup>30</sup> As recollected by Aum Sangay Wangmo, wife of a BPC employee at Nangkor.

<sup>31</sup> As recollected by Pema Rinzin, lab assistant, NHSS. An English translation of sending off *Khar* in Khandudung is: Evil in the loft. Doo! Evil on the ladder. Doo! Evil in the house. Doo! Evil in the hearth. Doo! Evil on the doorstep. Doo!.

*zhey. Abi labka threul nang langpa kab. Mencha warong nang ka ara zhey.*

*Nadang chilo baka sheg pa kab. Ye nang to rey chi lo phag ney zhey.*

*Nadang zemo baka sheg pa kab. Ye nang to rey ze mo phag ney zhey.*

*Ley shing tshong gu sheg pa la la li li ma ghig cho.*

*Buy nang shing ga ra gu sheg pa ba ba bi bi ma ghig cho.*

*Zor khon zor khon shegpa za ra zo ro ma ghig pen daey na. Abi auo auo!*<sup>32</sup>

The people of Narphung, Bikhari and Nangkor believe that the contestants will have bad dreams if the *khar* is not sent off, while people in Samdrupcholing believe that the contestants will suffer from stomach ache. Though there are no concrete reasons for sending off the *khar abi*, one can say that people are trying to send away the evil forces from their houses and lives. It is evident from the way they throw away the *khar abi* down the cliff or bridges so as to make her unable to return. It is more evident from the way people of Khandudung send off the *khar* where the very powerful word *doo*<sup>33</sup> is used to

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<sup>32</sup> As recollected by Lopen Kelzang Lhendup. An English translation of it is: When grandma *khar tam Gyelmo* is sent off demands pack lunch and drinks for the journey, and demands for the equipments for handloom. *Thag thag* the sword. *Ne ne* the heddle rod (ground warp). *Why why* the closing rod. *Li li* the temple. *Sho sho* the shed rod. *Phu phu* the shuttle case. *Phun phun* the yarn winding rod. *Kho kho* the breast beam. *Si si* the supplementary –warp-pattern heddle rod(?) *Bu bu* the leash (coil) rod. *Bi bi* the foot brace (source same as that of 28.) Grandma, when tired on the way drink the *ara* from the horn of buffalo (containers made of horn of buffalo and mithun). Grandma, when sad on the way drink the *ara* (locally brewed alcohol) from the horn of mithun. When reached at bigger resting places eat the bigger pack lunches. When reached at smaller resting places take the smaller pack lunches. When reached near the clusters of banana plants utter not *la la li li*. When reached near the oak trees utter not *ba ba bi bi*. When reached at hilly areas go without uttering *za ra zo ro*. Grandma, *auo auo!*

<sup>33</sup> *Doo* is a tantric incantation used by religious persons to drive away evil forces.

drive away all possible evil spirits (*doan*) residing at different parts of the house after being named one after another by one of the contestants. Sending off and beliefs associated with it warrant further study.

### **Presence of the riddles in other dialectic groups in eastern Bhutan**

People in Trashiyangtse and Lhuntshe have various dialectic groups of which the majority speaks Kurmedkha (Chocha ngacha). The Kurmedkha speaking people in different parts of Lhuntshe and Trashiyangtse call the game of riddle by various names like *sholong*, *ngachi si si long long*, *ngae mi chi long long* or *mi si long long*.<sup>34</sup> The original meaning of the word *sholong* is not known by the people, as mentioned earlier, but it is author's assumption that it could have meant 'raising the game of dice' or 'wake up to play the dice' (*sho* 'dice' or 'game of dice', *long* –'wake up' or 'raise') or 'look for dice' (*long* also means 'look amongst things' in Dzongkha and Chocha ngacha). This assumption is drawn from the usage of the words "sholong sholong do sholong" by the people of Trashiyangtse before the riddle. Another possibility could be that the word could have simply meant 'come on wake up' in the beginning, since these two words' plain literary meanings are the following: *sho* is 'come' or 'come on' in Chocha ngacha and *long* is 'wake up' in both Dzongkha and Chocha ngacha. This conclusion is drawn from one of the reasons cited by a person from Trashiyangtse for playing the riddle.<sup>35</sup> The reason was to keep awake while working overnight or guarding fields against wild animals during the night.

There is another strong but simple possibility for origin of the word *sholong* as it is supported by the name and meaning of the terminology for the riddle in Dungkar village in Lhuntshe. In Dungkar it is called *sholo* and Tashi Dungkar<sup>36</sup> of Dungkar village it translates as 'coming', but the probable reason for

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<sup>34</sup> Collected by Bodpa Ngedup.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> As told to Rinchen Khandu, teacher, NHSS by Tashi Dungkar, a 38 year old man of Dungkar village, Lhuntshe on 16/10/2007.

the usage of the terminology for the riddle game could not be provided. The word *sholong* could have probably come from the word *sholo* and over time changed to *sholong* and the people might have lost the trace of the word's original meaning.

The bet they keep is *dzong*. The way of playing it in Kurtoe (Lhuntse) is similar to that in other parts of eastern Bhutan but the respondent will give the choice between “Ser Dzong and Nge Dzong”, which literally means ‘Golden fortress and Silver Fortress’. The questioner would ask for “silver fortress” for the simple reason that the golden dzong is the Lhuntse Dzong, and the word ‘golden’ is accorded to the dzong to mean worthlessness. While, on the other hand, ‘silver dzong’ would mean any other dzongs which are supposed to be of greater value than the Lhuntse Dzong. It is similar to asking *ser* or *sa dzong* or *nge* or *ngaam dzong* by people in Nangkor and equating the gold to stool because of the similar colour.

In Khoma, another village in Lhuntshe district, where the dialect is *Zalakha*, the riddle is called *meg pa chop chop*.<sup>37</sup> The way they play it is similar to that of other places in Lhuntse. In Dungkar, another village in Lhuntse, the riddle is called *sholo* and the questioner gives *dzong* to the respondent if given the right answer. There, the loser in the end of the riddle game has to sing *tshangmo*, a genre of traditional songs, while in schools the students make the losers do frog jump and other activities.<sup>38</sup>

The way of playing *sholong* and *meg pa chop chop* is different from that of *khar* in the way the questioner begins the riddle. *Sholong* is begun with “*sholong sholong do sholong*” in Trashiyangtse and in Dungkar only “*sholong sholong*”. The riddle is asked after this as, “*Sholong sholong do sholong. Tho ra ngan ma che ring ri nga ring ri ja khan sholong?*” While, *meg*

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<sup>37</sup> Collected by Bodpa Ngedup.

<sup>38</sup> As recollected by Sonam Deki, Student, Class VI, Dungkar Primary School and collected by Rinchen Khandu.

*pa chop chop* is begun “*nga ku meg pa chop chop*” where again “*chop chop*” is further repeated for some time as, “*Nga ku meg pa chop chop chop ... Yig peye ri sum tsi kha phab peye jamtsho ting nga zi lo ya?*”<sup>39</sup>

### **Subjects for the riddles: A comparative study**

A comparative study of riddles asked in different places of eastern Bhutan reveals that the riddles were mainly based on common household items, crops grown in their fields, wild and domestic animals around them, their daily activities, commonly seen heavenly objects, Buddhist cultural artifacts, parts of the body, etc.

Following are a few examples of the riddles, in native dialect along with their English translation, played by Kurmed people living in Lhuntse district, where they call it *ngae michi long long*.<sup>40</sup> Of the five examples, the first two are the vegetables grown by them, next two are the parts of a tree they come across daily and the last is the heavenly body they happen to see almost daily in the blue nights of Bhutan.

1. Sa yi nang gi relmo dung do : Yu mang.  
Beating of cymbals beneath the soil: Turnip.
2. Sa yi nang gi dhung phu do: Cha ru.  
Blowing of blow horn beneath the soil: Raddish.
3. Nam tho khi ma mu tum ten ma: Dhong phu kung.  
Showing of feast from the sky above: Cone of pine.
4. Nam tho khi ma khab ten ma: Dhong phu tra.  
Showing needle from the sky above: Pine needle.
5. Chu phi ru ghang kei yang chab do: Karma.  
Cup of water spread everywhere: Stars

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<sup>39</sup> Collected by Bodpa Ngedup. Translation is given along with the transliteration in the appendix.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

The answer to the riddle number 3 will be given as inflorescence of banana by the people living in lower altitudes where bananas grow, as no or a few pine trees grow in those areas.

A few examples of riddles narrated by a Kurmedkha-speaking person from Trashiyangtse are also given and divided into the above mentioned groups for comparison.

1. Ama bong ring ku chig ka rey log chig pa ghenma sholong?: Dhar shing.

A tall lady wearing belt (*kera* in Dzongkha) on one side. What is it?: Prayer flag.

2. Ama bong ring ku la chig nam pa tag gu yed pa sholong?: Trayka

A tall lady having nine pouches. What is it?: Ladder.<sup>41</sup>

3. Mi bong thung ku la chi mig kha drang med pa sholong?: Phrugpa.

A short man with uncountable eyes. What is it?: Bamboo basket.

4. Nam mey tshig pa tang ma sholong?: Chala.

A wall built in the sky. What is it? : Banana.

5. Za tshey kha gi za, ju thsey lok kie ghung ma sholong?: Rung thag.

Eaten through mouth but comes out through waist. What is it?: Grinding stone.

6. Dar phu chig gi nang dren po per gang yed pa sholong?: So.

A handful of guests present in a cave. What is it? : Teeth.

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<sup>41</sup> A pouch called *khanang* in Sharchop that is formed when gho (traditional dress of Bhutanese man) is put on. It is used in reference to rungs of a ladder which is suppose to have nine rungs ,and ladder is used to climb up to the loft of a house by all Bhutanese households.

These examples also reveal that the subject matters are related mainly to the above mentioned broad topics like the religious artifacts, household items, body parts, agricultural produces, etc.

A few examples of riddles played by Tshangla communities are also given below to reveal the similar trend with regard to subject matter.

1. Phur bula wang lus pa hang kharbey?: Muley.  
When pole is taken the hole is left. What is it?: Radish.
2. Wang bu la phur lus pa hang kahrbey?: Phur gey lan phag pa.  
When hole is taken the pole is left. What is it?: Untying rope from peg.<sup>42</sup>
3. Sa phra kha langder shug pa hang kharbey?: Langley  
The snake gliding underneath the earth. What is it?: Plough.
4. Tsho nyig tshing rum la rum la dag pa phu thur gi tok pa hang kharbey?: Ming nyig tshing cham ka nawong.  
Two seas are about to merge but blocked by a mountain. What is it?: Two eyes with nose in between.
5. Ama dagsey la za bi sam hang kahrbey?: Ara zang dang nang kho.  
A short mother with three-legged son. What is it?: Cauldron and pot.<sup>43</sup>

Examples of riddles from other parts of Bhutan as well from Kerala in India have striking resemblances and the examples with the English translations are given in the appendix for

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<sup>42</sup> A knot is made at the end of a tether and instead of untying it the knot is slipped off from the peg.

<sup>43</sup> A tall cauldron in which the fermented rice or maize is kept and boiled with a condenser pot on its top. Inside the cauldron is kept usually an earthen pot in olden days but an aluminium or copper pot now a days on a wooden tripod to collect alcohol.



further emphasis and reference.

### **Prevalence of riddles in other language speaking communities in Bhutan**

When enquired informally, many people from western Bhutan whose mother tongue is Dzongkha affirmed that there is a tradition of playing riddles mainly by older people in the communities but they were not in a position to tell the exact terminology for the game. Luckily a person<sup>44</sup> from Doteng village under Paro Dzongkhag recalled it being played by older generations when he was young and the people over there call it *shetho kheb*, which literally means ‘expert in gossip’ (*shetho* ‘gossip’, *kheb* ‘learned’ or ‘expert’). In order to know and trace the original terminology or terminologies for the riddle in Dzongkha-speaking communities one may have to do thorough research amongst the village elders before it is too late. The *gab tshig* cited as one of the oral tradition in Bhutan is quite doubtful whether it was the original or right terminology for the oral form of riddles in Dzongkha. Some of the examples of the riddles in Dzongkha are given in the appendix to illustrate its similarity with riddles in other parts of Bhutan.

In the southern dzongkhags, where majority of the people are Lotshampas and speak Lhotshampakha, the riddle is called *gaun khani katha* as mentioned earlier and the bet they give for the riddle is a village. A person<sup>45</sup> from Pemathang village in Samdrupcholing, Samdrup Jongkhar district recounts the acceptance of the bet as follows: “Whatever good, expensive things like houses, fertile lands, productive and useful domestic animals, and beautiful or handsome girls or boys are there in the village belongs to me. All useless things such as unfertile land, lame and unproductive domestic animals, latrines, ugly boys or girls of the village belong to you.” Then only the questioner gives the answer for the riddle. It is somewhat similar to the way the house is accepted by people

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<sup>44</sup> Rinchen Khandu.

<sup>45</sup> D. C. Khatiwara. (Examples are given in the appendix).

in Nangkor where the good things in the house are taken by the questioner and unwanted and filthy things forced upon the respondent. The subject matters of the riddles both in Dzongkha and Lhotshampakha are similar to that of other dialectic groups in Bhutan. But the study on the prevalence of riddles, ultimately aimed at preserving and promoting it, in the other major dialectic groups is wanting at present.

### **Prevalence of oral form of riddles in other parts of the world**

Riddles have been a rich oral tradition, without doubt, throughout the world. Every society plays it in present time, though riddles have become more complicated with the advent of writing. Examples of English riddles seen in books reveal how written forms of communication has given rise to new riddles. For instance, the riddle “What is common in front of a woman and behind a cow?” for which the answer is ‘w’ clearly shows that it is word play.

As mentioned above, riddles had been prevalent in Tibet a long time before Buddhism reached and the literary form of riddle, *gab tshig* came from India and overshadowed the oral tradition. In India, the presence of literary form of riddles which were used for philosophical discourse, and also as a part of literary prowess among the elite, is evident from the references made by Tibetan literary works and writers and also by studying Sanskrit literature. Upon informal enquiry people from different parts of India also agree that the oral form of riddles are there in their communities. In Kerala it is called *kadamkhatha*<sup>46</sup>, which means ‘story of debt’ (*kadam* ‘debt’, *katha* ‘story’) and a few examples of it are given below.

1. Kala kidakkum. Kay arodum: Mathanga.

Cow will sleep. Rope will roam: Pumkin.

2. Muttathe cheppin adappilla: Kinar.

A small lidless container in front of the house: Well.

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<sup>46</sup> As recollected by Somarajan K.S, teacher, NHSS.

3. Adum kuthira. Chadum kuthira. Vellam kandal. Nilkum kuthira: Cherippu.

Running horse, jumping horse. On seeing water the horse stops: Shoe.

### ***Khar* and its significance in the lives of the people**

According to Tandin Dorji (2002), "It is important to know that approximately 79% of the Bhutanese population dwell in the villages and some of which are as far as three days walk from the motor road point. The modern amenities like electricity and entertainment gadgets such as video, television, cinema and many others are not available. Tucked away thus, one may think that they lack even the basic entertainment amenities but a closer understanding of the rural community would reveal that they dwell in the state of secret enchantment. One of the sources of enchantment is the storytelling sessions that replace the modern entertainment gadgets of the urban population."<sup>47</sup> *Khar* is another important source of this secret enchantment and the smiles the question brought upon my students and colleagues, and their eagerness to share their experiences when asked about *khar* truly revealed the role *khar* had played in their youthful ages.

*Khar* is usually played by people to entertain themselves during long winter nights (even summer nights are quite long for villagers who go to sleep at about 6-7 pm) as they remain awake in their beds. Of course it also helps gauge the intelligence of the people gathered in different places on different occasions. It can as well sharpen the intelligence of a person. Common occasions are losars (Bhutanese New Year), annual puja (*lhasey*), monthly tshechus and marriage ceremonies. When boys are gathered in the cattle ranches away from villages or sleeping in makeshift huts (*khaye* in Sharchopkha) during winter, they enjoy the dirtier riddles. Same is the case with girls when they are gathered in

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<sup>47</sup> Dorji, Tandin (2002), "Folktale Narration: A Retreating Tradition," *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 6:5-23, p.17.

someone's house to weave together or just to enjoy the youthful glee of sleeping together at friends' places.

It also has a very practical use when it is played by people who keep guard of the fields from wild boars and other animals: it helps them to remain awake. Playing *khar* also helps the young to remember the village households as well the people living in them and their relation to those living in the houses, since they have to either name the chief of the house or someone of the house to give it away as bet. At times the contestants would have to wrack their brains to recollect whose house still remained. This would also make the children know the social standings of different households as they would try to get the house of the richest household for themselves.<sup>48</sup> It also would help younger generations learn about their surroundings like plants and crops grown in the fields, common plants and animals available in their locality. Also, they would learn about the daily household items, agricultural tools and their body parts. The giving of dzongs and monasteries would also make the contestants aware about the historic buildings and their significance.

Anthropologists could use *khar* to trace the origin of the communities, migration patterns and as well as to study social settings. For instance, sending off of *khar* reveals the importance one placed on weaving or agricultural activities, and also the subject matter of the riddles easily reveals the household items, crops, animals, religious practices, etc. that the people are familiar with. The study of *khar* can also reveal the extent of social interactions amongst communities living nearby.

### **Causes for its diminishing popularity**

Modern education has become a necessity for survival in the present day world and its penetration into the lives of the rural population is a boon. But it has also proved to be a cause for the diminishing trend of oral traditions not only in

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<sup>48</sup> From author's personal experience as a youth.

rural communities but more so in recently evolved urban communities of Bhutan. Students in rural areas still play *khar* but not so much as it was played few years back. Even then they are aware of it and know few of them, while a Sharchopkha-speaking student from urban Bhutan is asked about it he or she will be at a complete loss. Even storytelling and other beautiful customs of the past are looked upon by our younger generations as outdated because of their distorted and ill-informed idea of modernisation. These are of course the ultimate result of wrong usage of modern amenities like television, video, etc. since these modern amenities along with modern education can do wonders in reviving, preserving and promoting oral traditions, including *khar*, if used in a proper manner. A friend<sup>49</sup> of mine recalled hearing BBS airing *khar* once and it would do much good in promoting and preserving *khar*.

Another main cause of diminishing *khar* and other oral traditions amongst the urban population is the foolish pride our younger generations and their modern parents harbour when they say that they have never been to their native villages. This attitude is making our urban populace lose their ancestral root and ultimately the fading of oral traditions. If a child or a student is asked to share a riddle he or she will definitely wrack his or her brain to come up with a riddle of an English origin. It illustrates the loss of their original root and the finding of a new root. Further, some educated lots discourage children from playing riddles in their native villages and look upon it as wastage of time on foolish adventure of village simpletons.<sup>50</sup> This results from the lack of understanding by our people of the importance of the oral traditions to the intricacies of social webs of our country, especially the rural communities.

The other cause is the lack of proper documentation of *khar*

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<sup>49</sup> Pema Rinzin.

<sup>50</sup> Lopen Passang, NHSS shared his experiences at his native village Kokokhar, block Bjena in Wangdiphodrang district.

as it is an oral tradition, and besides it is overshadowed by written forms of riddles at the present time. The lack of any organised competition of riddling in the villages could have been a reason for its diminishing trend and also its lesser popularity compared to storytelling. This has led to documentation of storytelling as a rich oral tradition of Bhutan by many Bhutanese as well by foreigners, but not riddles, though they are prevalent through out the country.

### **Conclusion**

This paper, as mentioned, is a sincere attempt to record the prevalence of *khar* amongst the Tshangla communities and the prevalence of oral form of riddles in other dialectic and linguistic groups of Bhutan, as well as its prevalence in some of the states of India. The wide spread prevalence of the oral form of riddles became evident from this study. Striking similarities in the subject matter of riddles between that in Bhutan and Kerala shows it's the simplicity and down to earth nature of the oral form of riddles, unlike that of English literary riddles and *gab tshig*.

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### **Appendix: Some common examples of riddle in different parts of Bhutan.**

#### *I. Examples of ngae michi long long:*

1. sa yi nang gi relmo dung do- yu mang  
Beating of cymbal beneath the soil- turnip

2. sa yi nang gi dhung phu do-cha ru  
Blowing of trumpet beneath the soil- radish

3. chu phi ru ghang kei yang chab do- kar ma  
Cup of water spread everywhere-stars

4. nam tho khi ma mu tum ten ma-dhong phu kung  
Showing of feast from the sky above-cone of pine (People living in lower altitude give the bud of banana as the answer to the question)

5. nam tho khi ma khab ten ma-pine needle  
Showing needle from the sky above- pine needle

*(Recollected by: Amgay Yeshe Peldon of Tangmachu, Lhuntse and collected by Bodpa Ngedup.)*

#### *II. Examples of sholong sholong do sholong:*

1. a ma bong ring ku chig ka rey log chig pa ghenma sholong-dhar shing  
A lady of tall height wearing kera (belt) on one side-prayer flag

2. a ma bong ring ku la chig nam pa tag guy ed pa sholong-tray ka

A lady of tall height having nine pockets (khanang - pouch resulting when gho is put on)-ladder (suppose to have nine rungs)

3. mi bong thung ku la chi mig kha drang med pa sholong-phrugpa

A man of short height having uncountable eyes- bamboo basket

4. nam mey tshig pa tang ma sholong- cha la

A wall built in the sky -Banana

5. za tshey kha gi za ju thsey lok kie ghung ma sholong- rung dhag

Eaten through mouth coming (passing) through waist-grinding stone

6. bar phu chig gi nang dren po per gang yed pa sholong- so

Handful of guests present in a cave-teeth

7. na pa nga songma nga songma zey tshe phin sa dhen da phen ma sholong-kam

Says 'I will go fast, go fast' but reaches destiny at the same time- legs

8. tho ra ngan ma che ring ri nga ring ri ja khan sholong-leyu dur

Early in the morning that says 'you are taller. I am taller'.-pounding stick

9. lang gud po la chig thag zhi gi tag tey yed pa sholong-tshan ta

An old ox tied by four ropes- shelf (traditional shelf made of poles and tied at four corners and hung from ceiling just above the oven)



10. Lung nhi phrat to phrat to zer tshe gang chig gi dhog pa sholong- mig to  
As two oxen are about to fight, it is blocked by a hill-eye.

*(Recollected by Ugyen Wangchuk, cook, Tangmachu MSS, and he is from Trashiyangtse, and collected by Bodpa Ngedup on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2007).*

**III. Examples of meg pa chop chop:**

1. Nga ku meg pa chop chop....Mi ringku la thag gey pey log thag la thag gyen ney zi lo ya?: Dar cho shing.  
Nga ku meg pa chop chop..... A tall man wearing gho only on one side of the body. What is it?: Prayer flag.

2. Nga ku meg pa chop chop....Yig peye ri sum tsi kha phab peye jamtsho ting nga zi lo ya?: Sho sho ma.  
When lifted is at the tip of the ri sum (three mountains) but when lowered is at bottom of the ocean. What is it?: Churning stick (Churning stick used traditionally in Bhutan and other places in Himalayan region)

3. Nga ku meg pa chop chop.....Pang thang zed rang chig puye shig phab tang thag lu ney zi lu ya?: Lem.  
When whole meadow is burnt a strip is left. What is it?: Path.

4. Nga ku meg pa chop chop... nob tey achu chu nab tey achu chu zi lo ya?: Jo.  
In the evening it says achu chu and in the morning also it says achu chu. What is it?  
Ladle made of a gourd. *(Achu chu are words uttered when some feels cold).*

5. Nga ku meg pa chop chop ..... gay long ku kha nang nga kang go la dray tsheud ney zi lo ya?: Yaar.  
Inside monk's pocket there is a pebble. What is it?: Black pepper.

*(As recollected by Gembo Dorji, student of class X, Tangmachu MSS and collected by Bodpa Ngedup.)*

**IV. Examples of Sholo in Dungkar:**

1. Sa la dar dir nam la phur phur: Toham.  
On the land it makes dar dir sound while in the sky (air) it makes phur phur sound: Pounding stick. (*Traditional instrument to pound rice and other grains in Bhutan*).

2. Bari zon chepta chepta re thag gi gugpaey na: Me ni ri.  
When two bulls are about to fight it is blocked by a hill: Eyes and nose.

*(Collected by Rinchen Khandu and recollected by Sonam Deki)*

**V. Examples of khar:**

1. Pako tsa lo nang ka bitang temken cho wa hang?: Solo.  
A red pocket filled with coins. What is it?: Chilli. (*Bitang is old Bhutanese coins*)

2. Ser khag tang thur gadang gi tshung mey mar ba hang?: Khe.  
A lump of gold that cannot be touched by hand. What is it?: Stool.

3. To nowang guy za la khi tharkhang guy woo wa hang?: Rang thang.  
Food is eaten by mouth and stool is passed through waist. What is it?: Grinding stone.

4. Lung thunka shing lik pa shing thungka lung ligpa lung thungka shing shing thung ka soo lik pa hang?: Rnag thang.  
On stone a tree is grown, on the tree a stone, on the stone a tree and on the tree a bamboo. What is it?: Grinding stone. (*Traditional grinding stone in Bhutan has a circular lower stone joined with a wooden pivot to the upper circular stone which has a wooden handle covered with a hollow bamboo pipe.*)

5. Phashi phag pa thur gi ja dang bay ta ka hang?: Lam.  
A strip of cane that reaches all over India and Tibet. What is it?: Path.

*(Recollection of author.)*

**VI. Examples of shetho kheb:**

1. Mi chi lu migto lesha yed mi ga chi mo?: Tsheu.  
A person with numerous eyes. What is it?: Bamboo basket.

2. Lha khang karp chi nang gomchen serp chi yed mi ga chi mo?: Gong do.  
Inside a white monastery there is a yellow monk. What is it?: Egg.

3. Ma rey ma rey zer the rey mi rey rey zer the mi rey ga chi mo?: Kha.  
When said don't touch don't touch it touches and when said touch touch it does not touch. What is it?: Mouth (*Lips of mouth does not touch each other while uttering rey rey but touches when said ma rey ma rey*).

**VII. Examples of gaun khani katha:**

1. Ghar tira zhada ban tira muk. Ban tira zhanda ghar tira muk. Kay ho?: Bancharo.  
While going towards home the face is towards forest, while going towards forest the face is towards home. What is it?: Axe. (*It is being carried on the shoulder with the handle towards front of the person.*)

2. Tsha pani, tshaina pani, bhaya pani chaidaina. Kay ho?: Bhuychalo.  
It is there, it is not there. Even if it is there, it is not needed. What is it?: Earthquake. (*If you say earthquake is there then you cannot see it. But if you say it is not there yet it happens.*)

3. Thallo ghar ko kuwa ko pani suktha, mathlo ghar ko rithay lato marcha. Kay ho?: Dhipri.  
If the pool of water in the ground floor dries up the silly chap in the first floor will die. What is it?: Kerosine lamp.

4. Auta goru ko sayawora jura. Kay ho?: Karala.  
One ox having hundred humps. What is it?: Bitter gourd.

5. Tin mukoy janatu achamby hunago, chaway jura chan tara. Bokcha duy janalai saaj biyana kat khancha hai kar kara. Kay ho?: Chula.

Creature with three mouths and six humps carries two persons every dawn and dusk, and eats firewood. What is it?: Oven.

*(Collected by author and recollected by D. C. Khatiwara. He recounts narrating the fifth riddle in the example in a rhythmic manner in his youthful age).*