

Putting the Festival Participants Back into the Festival: Rethinking Communal Identity Formation in Buddhist Cham Festivals in Bhutan

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the practice of communal festivals in Bhutan results in forming communal identity, with a focus on Vajrayana Buddhist cham¹ festivals. It seeks to close the gap between scholarly publications that address the formal content of festivals, and arguments for identity formation as an outcome of festival practices by centring the festival participants between these two positions. Drawing on the results of my long-term case study of the Korphu Drub, a cham festival performed by the Korphu community in Trongsa District, the paper shows how social actors carry out festival action in relation to their status and knowledge as community members throughout time. I trace the different age grades and genders in their lives coming along with specific social statuses, and connect these to the changing ascribed / achieved positions and works taken up during the festivals throughout one lifetime. This is to show how communal identity evolves as an ongoing process of reflexivity between the individual festival participant and his/her community. Last, I relate my observations to the concept of rites of passage and propose that the Korphu Drub can be understood as a substitute

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¹ Where necessary Dzongkha and Classical Tibetan terms are transcribed by using the Wylie transliteration system and given in brackets. These terms have additionally been transcribed into phonetics by using the THL's Online Tibetan Phonetic Converter (See link in References) for better readability. Khengkha terms, the vernacular oral language of Korphu community, are transcribed in phonetics and indicated by KH.

for missing rites of passage in Korphu, which additionally fosters identification with one's community.

Keywords: *age grades, agency, Bhutan, cham, communal identity, community, festival, liturgical rituals, rite of passage, status, Vajrayana Buddhism*

Introduction

Pema Dorji glances over the excited crowds. All members of his community have gathered in front of the temple ready to carry out their annual festival. Pema has been performing the main jester of the *Korphu Drub* (*skor phug sgrub*), Dawa Dragpa, for already twenty years in a row now. It is already getting dark when he enters the courtyard. While fixing the wooden mask of the deity in front of his face, he cannot decide where to look first. The first blazes of the bonfire light up the faces, giving the whole scene a magic touch. A glowing moon in the sky adds to it. To his left, he spots his nephew Wangdi T. wearing a blue *kapné* (*bkab ne*: ceremonial scarf). Why had nobody told him that boy got a promotion? His sight gets caught by a row of maiden beauties in their best attires, giggling loudly, moving their young bodies lasciviously, and getting ready for their first singing and dancing performance. He remembers them all as children not long ago. Time has passed fast. Only his niece P. Wangmo sitting with her newly married husband Pema P. and their new-born on the lap, is not dancing this year. Supporting the construction of a new house for them has cost him a small fortune. But someone had to step in for his recently deceased younger brother. Pema admires the in-laws of Tenzin, his wife's younger brother, through the small carved out eyes of the mask. Grandmothers and grandfathers happily chat after reuniting with their grandchildren mostly living in the capital. The whole family, dressed up in colourful new clothes, laughing and joking to each other, is attracting attention. Has the youngest daughter of the family who is married to a rich businessman from western Bhutan purchased the new clothes? Or were the new clothes

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bought with the income from cardamom? He sees the venerable *lama* (*bla ma*: monk priest, spiritual teacher) on his decorated throne. He has come from a faraway place and him conducting the rituals will be of extraordinary blessing for the community. Monks in red robes surround the *lama*, wearing new ceremonial hats. Each hat was sponsored by one civil servant from Thimphu. Dawa Dragpa is pleased to observe that the high *lama* has enough drinks in front of him. He overhears his lifelong friend Sonam and the other men audibly swaggering, by now drunken as always, jointly arranging the firewood. All at once he senses his colleague, the other *atsara* (*a tsa ra*), already in the middle of the events ironically commenting on everything, playing and competing for attention with many other actors on the stage. Atsara Dawa Dragpa jumps down the three stone stairs, hoicking up his arms and swinging the wooden phallus. He is also laughing. The wooden mask with the frozen sardonic grin never stops laughing. But then, it starts giggling from behind the mask. The deity is supporting him as it ought to be. His mouth opens on its own and filthy jokes flow out without effort. His show has begun. All the world's a stage. In this way or another, the first evening of the yearly celebration of the grand *Korphu Drub* and the *atsara*'s first run-out begin.

As can be understood from this ethnographic vignette², the people who carry out Buddhist *cham*³ (*'cham*) festivals like the

² This and the subsequent ethnographic vignettes were developed through long-term participant observation, household survey interviews in Korphu, as well as informal talks with the Korphupa, in between end of 2011-2019. I present the data as vignettes as they reflect my subjective reading of the observations I made. For the sake of anonymity, I have changed the names of the involved community members.

³ Although, *cham* festivals are the focus of my study here, the understanding of what *cham* dances are in particular is not of foremost importance for my approach. I adhere to the following brief explanation of *cham*: *Cham* are Tibetan Buddhist ritual dances, often using masks and other accoutrements like costumes and hand-held objects. They are performed by monks or lay men as parts of complex Buddhist festivals carried out annually at important dates of the liturgical calendar. The masks often represent deities of the

Korphu Drub, are social beings who relate to each other. This observation made me think about a potential correlation between the formal action festival participants perform and their intimate relationships as members of the same community. Communal festivals in Bhutan have attracted heightened attention recently, and various types of identity are ascribed to this practice as an outcome. My article offers one explanation how festival participants develop sentiments of communal identity by engaging in festival practice. Instead of relying on the formal contents, like liturgical action and mask dance performances (*'cham*), I propose that we need to look at the social lives of the actors to understand how festival practice fosters identification with one's community. In the following chapters I come up with a definition of identity useful for my inquiry, propose basic characteristics of *cham* festival participants in Bhutan and apply these to my case study of the *Korphu Drub*. Additionally, I relate my findings to the concept of rites of passage (v. Genep, 1960).

Increased interest in communal *cham* festivals as facilitators of identity

Bhutan is rich in communal festival traditions. The beauty of the Bhutanese festival-scape lies in its diversity. Every single festival is a unique representation of the coalescence of distinct regional contexts, localised historical backgrounds, religious affiliations, and beliefs⁴. During the last two decades, Bhutanese and international scholars have been increasingly engaged in research on communal festival traditions in

Tibetan Buddhist pantheon and the monk performers often engage in Tantric meditation practices while performing the masks. The masks itself are considered to be *kuten* (*sku rten*), 'body emanations' of the deities they depict.

⁴ For a challenge of this notion see Schrempf, 2018.

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Bhutan. Besides books (Dorji Gyeltshen 2011, Huber *in press*, Phuntsok Tashi, 2011) and articles (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2004' Dendup Chopel, 2009' Phurba, 2009; Pommaret, 2009; Schrempf, 2017, and many more), large-scale institutional endeavour has begun to document this rich and diverse festival-scape. Particularly the main inquiry of this article, Buddhist *cham* festivals, has caught much attention.⁵ UNESCO ascribed a dance called Drametse Nga Cham⁶ as part of the World Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2005 as the first ever entry from Bhutan or the Tibetan cultural world at large. National Library & Archives of Bhutan (NLAB) and the College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS) have been conducting documentation surveys of the (in)tangible cultural heritage of Bhutan under the auspices of UNESCO. The two projects are on-going and have so far resulted in several publications (NLAB, 2016, 2018; CLCS, 2016) and development of a website (Cultural Atlas of Bhutan) in April 2007, which devote a big space for *cham* festivals. With a mission to document ancient dance traditions all over the world, Core of Culture, a US-based NGO, has video-documented all *cham* performances of several festivals in Bhutan (2004-2006). The videos are now accessible at the New York Public Library website. The National Museum of Bhutan in Paro has organised a series of colloquiums on intangible cultural heritage and published a few books on the

⁵ The Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA), initiated by the Third King of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk in 1954, has already started to collect *cham* choreographies from all over Bhutan and train its performers in these since the 1960s. Two books have been written by Bhutanese scholars (Nagphel, 1971/72, Sithal Dorji, 2000) listing the main *cham* of Bhutan and explaining their meanings. These works are only partly relevant for my approach here, as they feature *cham* dances isolated from their communal context and the complex festivals, which they are part of.

⁶ The dance originated in Drametse village in Mongar, a district in eastern Bhutan, and it is performed during many festivals across Bhutan.

subject. The museum has reserved one section in the museum for displaying *cham* masks.

One prime reason this much effort is made to investigate and document the events, the quotes below show: *cham* dances and their festivals are regarded as facilitators bringing forth sentiments of various types of identity.

Today, the dance has evolved from a local event centred on a particular community into an art form, representing the identity of the Bhutanese nation as a whole (UNESCO website entry about the Drametse Nga Cham).

Mask dances also help to preserve and promote a unique culture and tradition by maintaining national identity (Phuntsok Tashi, 2011).

Preservation of environment and culture are two pillars of the 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH), a concept which today guides many government policies. The general national policy as outlined in the document Bhutan 2020 – a Vision for Peace Prosperity and Happiness which refers to the need to protect and promote cultural heritage and to adapt Bhutanese institutions in ways which promote cultural awareness, conserve national heritage and strengthen cultural identity (Pommaret, 2003).

These publications seem to portray *cham* dances and festivals predominantly as flagships of the country, representing Bhutan's national and/or cultural identity to the outside world and competing on the international stage for its singularity. Other publications take a more introverted perspective by stressing its potential benefits to communities internally rather than focusing on (symbolic) outward representation:

Bhutanese intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, constantly evolves and renews itself

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with the passage of time, thereby providing a community with a sense of identity and continuity (National Library & Archives of Bhutan, 2015).

A festival is an important state and community affair, the holding of which is not only believed to bring good health and prosperity but also to maintain community cohesion and identity. (National Library & Archives of Bhutan, 2018)

These processes of community-internal formation of identity are what I focus on in the following.

The *cham* studies already mentioned, whether it is a scholarly investigation or preservation effort, concentrate on the formal content and staging of festivals (action) rather than individual festival participants and their social lives.⁷ Despite the embeddedness in local contexts, common to all Vajrayana *cham* festivals is an underlying fundamental structure based on Buddhist *choga* (*cho ga*: Tibetan Buddhist liturgy or Sādhanā practice). The studies focus particularly on this ritual action of the festivals. They enumerate chronology and type of *choga*, coupled with associated *méwang* (*me dbang*: fire empowerment) and *chōpa* (*mchod pa*: offerings), and all kinds of apotropaic activities like *gektré* (*bgegs bskrad*: a rite to dispel obstructing forces), *drakpō jinsek* (*drag po'i sbyin sreg*: wrathful burnt fire offerings), or *torjab* (*gtor rgyag*: the hurling of a sacrificial object), to name a few. The texts describe the various *cham* choreographies, associated costumes, masks and other accoutrements, and explain their esoteric meanings.

⁷ In this context, I am deliberately excluding the studies that look at the Tantric practice of *cham*, which focus on the relationship between the Tantric practitioner and his tutelary deity (*yidam*) in question. The majority of lay *cham* dancers in the village communities of Bhutan do not carry out these highly advanced Tantric practices when performing *cham*.

They retell historical background stories of the localities, their *lhakhang*'s (*lha khang*: Buddhist temple), and religious lineages and authorities.

It makes sense to refer to the formal content of festivals by focusing on 'symbolic representation'⁸ to the outer world and highlight the uniqueness of these festivals to ascertain group identity (national and/or cultural identity). But this is not everything. Is a sense of community spirit aroused only because the dance and ritual performances are unique in the world? What is meant by communal identity when referring to Bhutanese festival practices, besides the community representing its unique culture to the outside world? A 'community' carrying out a festival is, in the end, a conglomerate of individual social actors.

These detailed contents do not tell us much about how individual festival participants affiliate themselves with the practice; how they negotiate their identity in relation to their social environment/community, which ultimately develops a feeling of communal identity, belonging or cohesion stated above. Where do we find the individual social actors' touch point to the formal festival content? The contents of festival action are after all not living entities by themselves, but need a human being to bring them to life. What is the manuscript containing a *Sādhanā* without the human acknowledging its worth, reciting it with musical accompaniment? What is a *cham* choreography, without the dancer performing it, bringing the *cham* masks and costumes to life, and observers watching

⁸ This could be for example one social group distinguishing itself from another one by donning distinctive dresses and ornaments representing myth, history and ideologies and thereby becoming external markers of *identity*. See for example Pandya, 2002.

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him? What are the lyrics of the folksongs without beautiful girls singing them and moving gracefully to the melodies?

But first, who are the festival participants? What determines who is carrying out what action? In the following, I present one aspect⁹ of how social actors, carrying out festival action, connect to the formal content of the festival to connect to their community and identify with it.

Communal Identity

I start with a definition of identity the way I want to use the term. Identity is a broadly used and debated concept by sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists (Jenkins, 2014), all taking different perspectives, with some arguing to abandon the term as a category of inquiry (Brubaker/Cooper 2000, Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011). Because the term serves as a key factor for justifying large-scale documentation practices, I feel the need to address it. I shall not be concerned with national or cultural identity or with more philosophical Buddhist concepts of individual self-identity¹⁰, but with identity negotiated community internal.

Despite his focus on Post-Modern Societies, Anthony Giddens' (1984, 1991) works and his Theory of Structuration are, in parts, very useful for my approach.¹¹ In an effort to subsume

⁹ In my PhD thesis I identify various additional aspects of how social actors construct sentiments of identity.

¹⁰ Barth (2010) described five aspects that constitute the individual's personality based on the religious and social context of Bhutan which are *so(k)*, *lungta*, *wangtang*, *la'* and *lū*.

¹¹ While writing this article, I am aware of the fact that the sociological concepts, I am referring to are predominantly ethnocentric European/US American concepts developed in specific historical and social contexts of the authors, often relating to the changes from pre-modern to modern to post-

the dichotomy of agency and structure *he defined (personal) identity as the permanent process of synchronising/aligning the individual (social) position in relation to the social (structure); that is, an ongoing process of reflexivity between the two* (Elliot, 2014). Who am I, who do I aim to be, in relation to my social environment? Who do the others think I am or should be? How am I identified according to the cultural and social context I am part of? Giddens approach mirrors mine as it caters to the individual festival participant as a member of a community who carries out formal festival action in relation his/her status/social position. When it comes to festival participation, the social actor oscillates between statuses/festival positions being ascribed to him/her by the community, and statuses/festival positions which he/she achieves out of self-interest, or a combination of both. Although Giddens talks about increased reflexivity due to modern communication media, my main point here is, that social statuses and festival positions are not static. Indeed, they are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated, changing over time in an interdependent process between the individual and his/her social structure.

Expanding the concept, I understand communal identity as the mutual and permanent process of synchronising/aligning individual (social) positions in relation to and as part of the social structure of the community in between the individual social actor and the members of his/her community.

modern societies in the global West. As Bhutan right now can be understood to be in a transitional period between a subsistence agricultural society towards a modern industrial market economy, it is not surprising that many of the sociologists I cite later on, can be rather associated with Western Modernity than Post-Modernity. Still, it is impossible to attach labels like Pre-Modern, Modern or Post-Modern society to Bhutan, because Bhutanese society at present, is none and all of these at the same time.

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In the following I explore, how we can view (the formal content of) festival practices as the intermediate between the individual social actor and the community in question as catalysts connecting the two and resulting in communal identity. That means, the festival participants identity is recognised by him/herself and the community by carrying out festival action in relation to his/her status, complying to the expectations and precepts of the community and/or according to his/her own achievements.

To trace the coming into being of communal identity through festival practice, I propose including the individual social actor as festival participant.

Taking the Festival Participants into Account

i. Three basic characteristics of *cham* festival participants: 'community', 'status' and 'knowledge' and their interrelationship

What can we ascertain about the properties of the social actors carrying out Buddhist *cham* festivals? First of all, to say the very obvious: all festivals are performed by groups of individual social actors, from dozens up to several hundreds. This assemblage of social actors carries out highly complex, highly diversified and specialised, as well as highly coordinated action simultaneously over the course of many hours or days, repeated annually over very long spans of time, in order to accomplish an event we call: festival. Three interrelated basic characteristics are important for our understanding of the social actors as well as the successful outcome of a festival, as we know it: community, status and knowledge.

Community: *Cham*-festival-performing-groups are not a random conglomerate of people. Most of the time, they bear intimate relationships to one another; as fellow monks of a monastic community; family members and neighbours in a village community, colleagues in a Dzong. Not only do they likely know each other personally, but are also commonly affiliated to a specific¹² place.¹³ I consider these groups of social actors carrying out *cham* festivals *communities* in the sense of Tönnies (1887, 2001)¹⁴ as *communities of place*¹⁵ (German: *Gemeinschaften des Ortes*), relating to people connected through a common affiliation to the same locality, and/or *communities of blood* (Ger.: *Gemeinschaften des Blutes*), relating to people affiliated with each other due to familiar relationships.

Status: Along with the communal type of social relationship that binds the festival participants to each other, the second characteristic of status is added.

¹² There is no space to explore the topic of community membership in relation to Communities of blood and place in this article in detail. I define these in my upcoming PhD thesis. According to my analysis, there are different reasons for affiliation to the community, which can be a combination of actual residency, origin, census registration and/or active involvement.

¹³ At a first glance this might seem taken for granted, but consider a western Rock Music festival, in contrast, in which the spectators as well as performers are almost never affiliated to the place of venue, the spectators do not know the performers personally and are also not blood related to the majority of other festival participants.

¹⁴ Thank you Andrea Rota for mentioning Tönnies to me.

¹⁵ This might change soon. As some village communities lack festival performers due to rural flight, they hire *cham* performers from outside the community. Also, one exceptional example of a *cham* festival carried out by a group of people who cannot be considered a community of place, is the in 2012 newly established Dochula Druk Wangyal Festival. See David, Samuel, 2016.

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Whatever action an individual social actor carries out (meaning, in which way he connects to the formal content of the festival) is, for one thing, determined by the quality of his or her relationships in the community. Another aspect is the quality of his/her knowledge-set, which will be discussed later. Put differently, festival action is carried out in relation to the social actors' status or social position he or she holds as member of a blood community or community of place. I am relying on Linton's (1936) classical structural definition of status, who described status hand in hand with role as an inseparable pair, in which status is referred to as a position in a social pattern, marking its rights and duties, while role stands for the 'dynamic aspect' of status, the associated and expected behaviours and actions. I am sticking here to the more simple and neutral concept of Linton, rather than the definition developed by others, such as Max Weber (2010), who understood status as the sum of one person's different social positions in society in combination with the amount of power and prestige attached to it. Rather than employing an understanding of status in a hierarchical stratification of the community, in this article¹⁶ I am interested in a more

¹⁶ One other type of social relationship in regard to a more hierarchical stratification of community is fundamental to all Bhutanese Buddhist festivals, known as *chöyön jinda* (*mchod yon sbyin bdag*). Bhutan inherited the principle from Tibet where it has been practiced for several hundred years. *Chöyön jinda* refers to the mutual relationship between Buddhist practitioners and lay sponsors, the *jinda* (*sbyin bdag*). As much as the 'professional' religious practitioners care for the mental well-being of the whole community (in the present and afterlife), the *jinda* look after the religious practitioners by 'feeding' and paying them for their service (*mchod yon*: remuneration of a priest for a religious service). All Bhutanese Buddhist *cham* festivals are built upon this underlying principle. We can observe three different types of communities carrying out *cham* festivals in Bhutan, in terms of type and number of social actors involved. These are lineage holder families of religious authorities or their beneficiaries (*chos rje* and *gdung*) performing festivals in their family-owned *lhakhang*, lay village and monastic communities staging festivals on village community level, involving one or

horizontal patterning and allocation of statuses which relate to gender and age grades¹⁷ (Bernardi, 1985).¹⁸ The term age grades labels the idea of an individual passing through different phases in life, which are associated with specific rights and obligations, strengths and needs, and therefore result in specific statuses and roles. Or to put it the other way round: a community (or society) is socially organised based on the different age grades of its members.

Knowledge: The third property of these social actors, holding specific statuses according to their age grades and gender in communities of blood and/or place, and performing a *cham* festival collaboratively, is *knowledge*.¹⁹ All festival participants need specific knowledge in order to being able to conduct the event together. This is implicit and explicit knowledge, explicitly learned tasks or knowledge acquired through socialisation in the community. This also refers to more theoretical or intellectual types of knowledge, for instance how to interpret rituals or knowing about the background information of the festival. At the same time different types of body knowledge are required, implicitly and explicitly. Body knowledge, such as how to move the body during the dances,

more village communities, and finally the festivals carried out on a stately governmental level by communities of the *dzongkhag* (district) in a Dzong. See Seyfort Ruegg (1997) for a detailed history of *mchod gnas* and *sbyin bdag* in Tibet.

¹⁷ I thank Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy for making me aware of that my ethnographic vignettes are all about age grades.

¹⁸ There are differences in power in-between the different statuses relating to different age grades, but power relations and structures are not the focus of this study.

¹⁹ I explore the topic of knowledge; the types of knowledge and the ways how it is transmitted throughout time in my PhD thesis.

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or skills/dexterity like moulding dough-made sacrificial objects.

Each social actor requires explicit and/or implicit knowledge types, although not all participants need to know the same in terms of amount, specialisation and kind. These distinct 'knowledge-sets' of the individual social actors are interlinked with each other, and partly overlap. The participants do not only need to know their own part, but have to know how to act in correlation/accordance with other participants. Leaving aside the 'experts', even an 'observing participant', solely watching the action, needs to know exactly when to appear at the festival ground, what to wear for which occasion, where to sit, facing which direction, and how to behave properly in general. Even if the participants have specialised knowledge and skills, a festival could not be performed, if the participants do not know how to act in relation to one another. It could not also be performed, if they knew which action to carry out in relation to each other (e.g. the chronological order of different actions), but lack the in-depths skills and knowledge to carry out something very.

To understand the linkage of status and knowledge in a community of blood and/or place, when it comes to festival participation, we need to come back to Linton, who distinguished between society ascribed statuses and individually achieved statuses. An ascribed status refers to a social position assigned by society, like gender or race, or positions ascribed in relation to age grades. An achieved status refers to a social position that a person occupies voluntarily by personal ability, achievement, virtues and choices. And, in fact, these two overlap when it comes to festival participation and the community members taking up festival positions.

I consider a festival position as the role taken up during the festival, combining the social actor's status (based on age grades and gender) and knowledge-set at varying ratio. These are the actions and works carried out by a specific social actor during the festival.

The age grade and gender of the community member (ascribed status/structure) determines which range of optional festival positions are potentially 'open' for him or her at a certain point in time. He/she opts for one specific festival position according to his or her abilities and achievements.²⁰

There are two types of festival positions. Some of the festival positions are statuses carried over from everyday non-festival time. The *tshogpa* (*tshogs pa*: elected village representative) and *maili ama* (KH; female head of household; DZ: *nang gi aum*), among others, will carry out formal festival action related to their status and role as a *tshogpa* and *maili ama* alike in daily routine, representing the community as a whole and the individual households. The group of ladies constituting the *mani amo* (KH; folk dance and song performers) in Korphu are also called into action whenever a high-ranking guest is visiting the village throughout the year. The monks and *gomchen* (*sgom chen*: a lay Buddhist priest in Bhutanese context) are part of the *chöpa* (*chos pa*: dharma practitioner), the liturgy

²⁰ This, in my opinion, leads to the toleration of (ritual) mistakes or action not carried out properly during a festival by a social actor. The higher the aspect of ascription, the higher the tolerance of the performer not carrying out action perfectly. For instance, a *lama*, who occupies an ascribed status as 'incarnate' *lama*, irrelevant of his abilities, has to occupy a certain festival position. Community members might not be happy, if the *lama* does not perform according to their expectations, but he still will be assigned the position and work. While the social actors who occupy festival positions, which involve less ascription and more personal achievement are more likely to be exchanged with someone who can do better, if they fail to perform well.

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performing group, and therefore also take up a festival position equal to their everyday life status and role.

The second type of festival positions are reserved for the festival time and not enacted during the rest of the year, although the social actor taking up the festival position does this in direct relation to his²¹ status and knowledge-set. These are the positions, like the *champa* ('*cham pa: cham* performer) or *atsara* (*a tsa ra:* jester-like characters, who are in Korphu considered emanations of their local deities) who represent the intangible community members, like the *yül lha* (*yul lha:* territorial local deities) of Korphu, or other intangible beings 'taking part' in the festivals, like the deities of the Buddhist pantheon. Other festival-only-positions, like the *lai'berpo* (KH), who carry out organisational works behind-the-scenes are also not enacted during the rest of the year.

All the positions during the *Korphu Drub* which are leading the different groups, like the *champon* ('*cham dpon: cham* dance master) and *chamjug* ('*cham mjug:* second dance master, lit. 'tail of dance', as the *champon* dances first in the row of all *champa*'s and the *chamjug* as the last one), *sedpem* (KH: female leader of the female folk dance and singing group), *la-tsap* (*bla tshab:* representative or officiating monk; in Korphu responsible person for the liturgy performing group), *Atsara Dawa Dragpa* (leading jester in Korphu) are achieved festival positions, needing a lot of personal commitment. One of the central characteristics of subsistence agricultural societies is all members have similar knowledge and skills in terms of type, in contrast to (post-)industrial societies in which task specialisation and diversification is in demand. Interestingly,

²¹ These are positions exclusively taken up by men.

we can see that the *Korphu Drub* festival positions support task specialisation.

To summarize, *cham* festivals are carried out by communities of blood and/or place. Each and every action carried out in a Bhutanese communal *cham* festival, is not carried out by a festival participant ‘accidentally’, but always in relation to the social actors’ status in combination with his or her knowledge-set.

Merging these three characteristics of festival participants, knowledge, community and status, in order to perform a festival, the social actors constitute a patterned-knowledge-community.²² Ascribed and achieved statuses are merged into festival positions.

**ii. Patterned-knowledge-communities throughout time:
Adding a diachronic perspective**

In order to fully understand how social actors, as members of patterned-knowledge-communities, connect to festivals, we need to add a diachronic perspective to our inquiry. Obviously, human beings change from year to year while walking through

²² We could even apply the concept anthropologists call a *Community of Practice* (Wenger, 1998). A Community of Practice can be basically defined as a group of people, who share a common interest and therefore informally (in contrast to formalised education) exchange and share knowledge about it; practically as well as intellectually. The main characteristics are, according to Wenger, (1) mutual engagement; (2) a joint enterprise; and (3) a shared repertoire. Although Community of Practice is a very useful concept in order to explain how knowledge is successfully transmitted and shared in a *cham* festival, further on I stick to my term of patterned-knowledge-communities, because in relation to Bhutanese community festival practice, the factors of a community of blood and/or community of space, as well as status in relation to age grades play a decisive role and have to be included.

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their life. Existing studies, which focus on the formal content of festivals, are rarely diachronic. While some studies mention concern over the changes that some festivals undergo (or have undergone in the recent past), the focus is largely on changing formal festival content, rather than changing (eg., aging, etc.) festival participants. A festival is figured as a unique set of actions, carried out in a specific chronological order. Presented this way, the annual performances of festivals seem to be a yearly replication of the same. I argue that the notion of annually repeated festival activity observed during community-based festivals, seemingly understood as identical ‘replication’, is a predominantly etic perspective. I propose that for the insiders (the local participants), although they might not be able to explicitly express this themselves, the reiteration of the festival is primarily a constant in relation to which actual individual evolution is made visible, rather than reoccurrence of the same. Even though the contents of festival action might not change from year to year, the humans carrying them out, do. To understand how the festival participants connect to the formal content, the festivals have to be seen as a series of connected events throughout time, rather than singular events.

For our understanding of statuses throughout lives, Merton’s (1968) concept of status-sequences is useful. Merton elaborated Linton’s concept of status and role by proposing that throughout one life or career a human pass through sequences of (ascribed and achieved) statuses, which he called status-sequences. Not only that humans constantly change their statuses²³ as they grow older but also specific statuses

²³ Merton also introduced the concepts of *status-set* and *role-sets*. A role-set is understood as the set of different behaviours ascribed to one role; like a medical doctor is expected to behave differently towards a patient, nurse or fellow doctor. By status-set the set of statuses one person possesses

come in a fixed order and are not reversible. A son becomes a father; a father becomes a grandfather; a grandfather becomes a great-grandfather.²⁴ This leads us again to the status-sequences which are connected to specific age-grades or age-classes (Bernadi, 1985): in relation to the age grade of a community member, specific statuses are ascribed.

Additionally, when considering status-sequences of 'professional careers', the knowledge-sets of social actors change throughout time. A pupil might become a student; a student might become a post-graduate; a post-graduate might become a professor, which relate grossly to achieved statuses. In relation to the knowledge-sets of the festival participants: many of the types of knowledge required, cannot be acquired in a short space of time, but need many years of practical training and intensive study, and are therefore cumulatively acquired.

An interested and eager-to-learn *cham* performer learns more dance steps and choreographies from year to year, and is entrusted with more difficult and significant dances gradually, for example *cham*'s representing the high-ranking deities of the Buddhist pantheon. Finally, he might acquire the position of the leading dance master, the *champon*.

Here we are back at the merging point of ascribed and achieved statuses which result in festival positions. While a festival participant walks through life and is ascribed specific statuses according to his/her age grade, at the same time he/she

simultaneously is understood; like being a mother, daughter, lecturer and wife at the same time.

²⁴ Of course not every son becomes a father, and not every father becomes a grandfather, but once a child or grandchild is born, these statuses are usually ascribed, and cannot be reversed.

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voluntarily achieves specific festival positions according to his/her individual interest and ability to build up a knowledge-set over a long span of time needed to carry out a specific position in the festival. In the style of Merton, I call the status-sequences of festival positions ‘festival-position-sequences’.

The case study: One Lifetime Narrated Through the *Korphu Drub*

To summarise and finally come to my case study: individual festival participants as members of patterned-knowledge-communities, take up festival positions and carry out action according to their status and knowledge-set. As social actors’ statuses and knowledge-sets successively change throughout time, the festival participants undergo festival-position-sequences.

The ethnographic data I refer to was gathered in the community of Korphu in Trongsa district. I have observed and participated in their festival four times over the course of eight years (2011-2019). The festival related terms I use are Korphu-specific terminology (the *Korphu Drub* is related to Tertön Pema Lingpa and Korphu community speaks Khengkha), which might be different in other communities that follow other Buddhist lineages, speak other local languages, and have other localised histories. However, I propose that the main underlying principles are the same. The *Korphu Drub* is performed annually for a period of five to seven days in the last month of the Bhutanese calendar (which falls roughly in between mid-December-mid-January in the Gregorian calendar). This is the time of the year when Korphupa²⁵ take a break from their agricultural obligations. Korphu community

²⁵ Korphupa is the demonym for community members originating from Korphu.

has roughly 300 registered members, of which many are not permanent residents of the village but only come back to the village for the festival once in a year.²⁶

A member of Korphu community will participate in the *Korphu Drub* multiple times throughout his lifetime, maybe even every year. The festival happens once a year as many years as a Korphupa lives from the beginning of his/her life until his/her death. As the Korphupa wanders through his or her life, changes and grows from one status into the next one(s), his or her festival positions change, as we will see in the following ethnographic vignettes.

Although I present the different age grades²⁷ in the following synchronically, my research took a diachronic perspective. I followed many community members' biographies over the course of eight years and could watch how they grew from one status and festival position into the next one. Additionally, during my household survey interviews, I inquired which festival positions my interviewees and their family members had taken up in the past throughout their lives.

²⁶ Korphu village was only reachable by foot until 2016 and is since then connected to the main road running from Trongsa in the North, via Zhemgang to Gelephu in the South. I could observe an increase in festival participation of non-resident Korphupa since the road up to the village was completed.

²⁷ The designation of the age grades I refer to in the following, are chosen by me, in order to roughly structure the stages in the lives of the community members. In reality, community members grow from one phase into the next fluently, and the timings of the transitions differ from individual to individual a great deal.

Childhood

Beginning of life. Entering the community

Jiga is almost one year old and it is her first *Korphu Drub*. In the morning she receives all the blessings of water sprinkled over her head. She is lifted high into the air so that her forehead is in contact with the huge *tongdröl* (*mthong grol*: lit. 'Liberation upon Seeing', an over-dimensional big *thangka*, religious scroll painting). Her mother percusses her whole body with sticky dough to get rid of all bad influences. Small pieces of sweet *tshog* (*tshogs*: purification practice that involves food offerings, which are distributed after completion and commonly called *tshog*) are crumbled into her toothless mouth. When the mask dancers perform, Jiga is held upright on the lap sitting in the first row of the observers absorbing the whirling colours in front of her, listening to the loud beats of the drums. Her uncle carries her underneath the burning wooden gate in the evening to get rid of potential harms awaiting her in the coming year. In the late night closely tied to her grandmothers back, she is swirled around when her grandmother sings, dances and drinks *ara* (*a rag*: locally distilled alcohol made of rice, maize, potato and/or barley) with the friends and neighbours coming to their house to celebrate. The small one is arriving in the community – in its centre.

Children participate in the festival right from the very beginning of their life. They are not excluded from any of the activities, but are taken everywhere the adults go, any time of the day without distinction. The families ensure that the small ones, the most vulnerable members of the community, receive all of the blessings. The festival is one of the first options to strengthen the bonds with the territorial, birth and protective deities for the course of one's whole life. In huge contrast to many Western families who try to shield away their babies from uproar, the *Korphu* families expose their offspring to all sensual stimulations happening during the *Drub*. Their whole

bodies get involved, they bodily connect to the community. The sensory stimuli the small ones are exposed to during the festival are without doubt much more extreme than what they experience during daily life. The several huge bonfires, the colourful mask dances, the loud activities happening during night time, emotionally impress the new mortals and likely remain part of their earliest childhood memories during their lives.

Entering the genders

The little boy and girl look like miniature versions of their parents. Hardly being able to walk by themselves, they are dolled up in shiny new traditional dresses for the first time in their short lives. The girl wears her mother's necklace, which looks over-dimensional considering her size and showcases a precious brooch of her grandmother above her handwoven precious *kira* (*dkyi ra*: traditional female Bhutanese wrap skirt) with flowery design. She is recognisable as a female now. The boy dons tiny hand-crafted boots with elaborate embroidery and a shiny bright silken *gho* (*bgo*: traditional Bhutanese male dress, knee-lengths robe, tied with a belt). He is recognisable as a male now.

The *Drub* is the one occasion in a year during which the community members purchase not only new and often expensive clothes to be worn during the festive days, but also strictly stick to formal Bhutanese attire. When the toddlers are between one and two years old, many of the parents make sure that they are also dressed up properly in traditional apparel. By putting the children in the official dress, wearing a *kira*, or respectively *gho*, their gender is exposed. The toddlers are publicly recognisable as females and males by their community, maybe for the first time in their lives.

Becoming visible. Entering the stage

Jigme is the son of the *champon*, the dance master, and around six years old. Together with some other small boys, he gathers experience on stage as one of the minor *atsara*, trying to imitate the jokes and habits, style of performance of the two senior *atsara*. Shielded by the small masks in front of their faces, they contest with each other trying to attract the attention of the audience. They fool around, the stage is a big playground to them. Jigme enjoys that all the villagers look and laugh at him. He has arrived in the consciousness of the community.

In-between the main programmes of the *Drub*, loud speakers are put up in the courtyard. Soon afterwards, modern Bhutanese tunes fill the compound. With great excitement the community observes the seven-years old daughter of Sonam Yangden getting ready for her showpiece. The little girl, perfectly dressed up, starts her play-back performance, copying modern singers and dancers who can be watched on a daily basis in several of the Bhutanese TV shows.

Little Karma is waiting for his friends to finish their performance. Meanwhile, he had sneaked into the room of the *lhakhang* where the colourful *tormas* (*gtor ma*: sacrificial object) are prepared. Not everyone is made to be on stage. He is unconsciously kneading the little chunk of red-tinted butter the *gomchen* had given him, carefully observing the subtle fingers of the *gomchen* moulding flowers, trying to copy the delicate shape. Next to him is his other friend having a high colour, ambitiously trying to get a sound out of the beautiful *jaling* (*rgya gling*: double-reed horn wind instrument, used for Buddhist liturgy) making cacophonous noise. Who would have thought that it is so difficult to play the instrument properly? Karma takes away the *jaling* from his friend to find out for himself.

Performing the role of a small *atsara* is the first chance to get on to the stage in front of the community. No fixed

choreographies are required, no discipline to be maintained, and no routine to be observed. One only requires the will and wish to perform and summon up the courage to present oneself in front of the crowds. The role of a kid *atsara* is an option to introduce the boys to the mask dances. Just like her male counterpart, the girl performs for the first time in front of the community by her own choice, and also encouraged by her parents without any obligations to follow. According to interest and talent, other kids are attracted to other festival works. The kids are lured into the responsibilities of adult life through game. The positions the children take during their childhood in daily life as well as during the *Korphu Drub* are identical. They are protected, are present in all action, and are playfully introduced to the rules and obligations of community life and participation in the festival their interests and talents are taken into account.

Youth. Teenage times

Assisting the maili ama, learning responsibility

A twelve-year-old Zangmo is always by the side of her mother. When her mother brews the special *ara* for the *Drub*, she fetches water in containers from outside. When it is their household's turn to offer lunch to the *chöpa* (*chos pa*) in the temple, she cuts vegetables and meat for hours in the morning. At lunchtime, she makes one round after the other, pouring out tea to all the ritual experts continually advised by her mother. She blushes when the elders jokingly teach her how to hold the tea pot properly or praise her for talking gently. Afterwards, she can be seen carrying dishes to the water tap for washing.

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Learning to be a performer, becoming responsible

The whole community starts cheering excitedly when Jigme enters the courtyard disguised in costume and mask as one of the ground cleaning deities, a *Ging (ging)*. Despite his face being hidden behind a mask, everybody recognises him. Around thirteen years old, he is the youngest of the *Korphu champas* and it is the first time he performs a *cham* publicly during the *Korphu Drub*. Every failed step is responded with laughter and every successful jump answered with exuberant applause from all. The community is happy to see their offspring join and continue their community tradition.

The teenage girl assisting her mother and the first-time dancer are entering the phase in their lives in which the community expects them to learn from adults, assist and help them with the physical heavy works and slowly being able to take over small responsibilities for their assigned works. Mistakes are mostly generously overlooked as long as active participation is fulfilled.

Being a performer, taking responsibility

Whooping screams resound through the dark and chilly air of the nights before the *Drub* starts. Yeshey and the other young men are rehearsing for the *cham* dances in the courtyard of the temple. The boys jump barefoot around the bonfire burning in the centre. Chasing each other, shouting the rhythm and sequence of steps in unison. Trying to outperform each other. It is difficult for the responsible *champon* and *chamjug* to instil discipline to show up in time at the dancing ground and rehearse with full concentration. Yeshey learns how to dance the mask dance performances step by step. Each year he is introduced to more complicated and complex choreographies and is entrusted to play more sacred characters. The next morning after having partied with his friends all night long, he has to be driven out of bed by his colleagues. The social pressure is high. Having been

a member of the *champa* group a couple of years, Yeshey cannot pull out without a reasonable excuse at this point. During the formal *cham* performances, the childish behaviours of the teenage boys suddenly disappear. Dressed up in their ceremonial attire, they turn into beautiful young men performing with serenity and dignity.

Sangay Yangzom is one of the female folk singers and dancers. Even as a student studying in India, she comes home to attend the *Korphu Drub* every year. She has learned under her mother's and grandmother's guidance to sing the old songs of the community. This year it is her family's turn to provide a female dancer for the festival. She is the one. She wears the most precious skirt owned by her family and moves lasciviously. Her ripe teenage body is attracting the young men of the community who are looking for a wife to start a family. They curiously observe her blushes when she is given a phallic cake that promises her fertility in the future. *Mani amo* is a demanding responsibility. The girls are the first ones of all to get up at night and gather at the guest *lama's* house to sing a wake-up song for him. And they accompany the *lama* back to his house late at night, singing a goodnight song.

Rinzin, 22 years old, also studies in India. Since childhood, he has been visiting his village only for the *Drub*, once in a year. He feels relieved. For a short time, he does not have to think about his studies. He feels at home. He is surrounded by fellow Bhutanese. He and his friends meet at the small shop, which only opens during festival time. They count their money and buy as many bottles of beer as they can get and hide away in a friend's house where surely none of the adults come by. They have exactly two hours' time before their festival duties as *dodampa* (KH), assistants of the organisers, start. Luckily, there is not much to do. Seeing, if all the girls for the folk dances arrive in time. Looking after the *champas* and fixing their costumes, if some piece comes loose during the performances. Carrying juniper tree sticks during the procession.

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Most of the *cham* dancers, *mani amo* and *dodampa*, are students in school or university, staying outside the village during the whole year. And often solely come back to their home place for the festival to perform. The teenage boys and girls are at the height of their bodily strength. The community is satisfied when the youthful dancer displays his bodily advantages and potency through skilful and energetic movement. His pubescent body and mind gives all his boisterous energy into the jumps, and into the powerful beating of the drums. Equal to the teenage boy as *champa*, the young woman displays her bodily features when performing in front of the community. They are not yet at the point to take over responsibility for others, but are expected to take full responsibility for their own performances during the *Drub*. Many years of teaching the skills have already been invested in them by their seniors. Their bodily strengths and beauty of the late youth is displayed in the most effective way, them being the physical centre piece of the performances of the *Drub* on stage. They are the public display of the community's health, vitality and future. Additionally, there are many works to be accomplished behind-the-scenes for the ones who do not want to present themselves in front of the public.

Young adulthood

Becoming an adult. Being responsible

Pema Wangdi is in his early 20's and has recently started his professional life as a teacher employed by the government. He is the son of the *gomchen* of Korphu. Pema has assisted and learned from his father everything needed to perform all *choga* of the *Drub* since he was a child. He knows how to properly recite the scriptures, he knows which ritual accoutrements are needed, how they are produced and at which stage during the rituals they are called into action. From year to year the senior *gomchen*

draws back from more of his duties during the *Drub* and his son takes over with confidence. Pema fulfils his tasks with a great sense of responsibility. From the communities side there is not even the smallest doubt that he accomplishes his works. The *gomchen*'s students, school boys, are now assigned to help Pema and follow him everywhere.

Cheche laughs while explaining the ritual with the phalli in which the *mani amo* participate. This year Cheche is not performing as a *mani amo* anymore. She gave birth to a baby. She is busy breastfeeding the little one at regular intervals. While her daughter is handed around the family when not nursed by her, Cheche substitutes her mother in all functions as *maili ama* with increasing frequency. As she has already done in the last couple of years, she takes over all works in the household which require bodily strengths. But now, she additionally joins in the discussion when the amount of the daily offerings is discussed publicly, she receives guests of the household by her own. Now, it is her who ties a rope of the cattle to the *lhakhang* window and asks the deities to look after the cows during the festive time in the name of their household. As a young mother Cheche is forced to take over responsibility not only for herself but also for others. While her mother technically still is the official head of household, ever more often representative works are transferred to Cheche.

The young adults, like Pema and Cheche, who have finished their formal education, having started their own families or professional life, are now bound to participate as full responsible members of the community. They have crossed the threshold from being solely responsible for themselves to being held responsible for others as well. Their focus of responsibility is expected to broaden, widen up from themselves to covering other family and community members. They have crossed the border of not only being taught and being students, but as well starting to be teachers themselves and transmitting knowledge to the next generation.

Adulthood

Representing the households. Being the community

Aum Rinchen is one of the *maili ama* of Korphu community. Self-confident, she sits in a row shoulder-to-shoulder with all the other *maili ama*, the offerings to the *lama* ready on their laps. They represent their households, together they represent the total community of Korphu. They are the *jinda*, the sponsors of the extensive and elaborate *Korphu Drub*. With head held high, they receive the final blessings. For their entrusted families, for their community. The last year's crop yield was bad and they are all praying for a better season to come. Just like during the year, now during the festival time, her concerns are with the household responsibility. Will the crops in the soon coming summer not again all be destroyed by wild boars and leave the household without enough staple food during the winter? Is everyone healthy? Will the medical treatment of her old father be of success? Will her son receive a government scholarship to continue his education in one of the elite colleges of Bhutan? Will they finally be able to get a new roof for their house? Will her daughter, pregnant in the seventh month, have a smooth delivery without any complications and a healthy baby? At the very end of the *Drub* the *maili ama*'s feel reassured. A positive relationship of the community with the deities, with Pema Lingpa and the Bhutanese state has been secured, and all evil has been warded off for another year to come.

The position of the head of household, the *maili ama*, is one of the centrepieces of the *Drub*. Formally, the *maili ama* as representatives as well as main responsible ones for the communities' households, as the smallest formal unit of the community, can be formally understood as the commissioners and at the same time beneficiaries of the whole ritual action. The age range of *maili ama* sitting in front of the community, varies considerably. While some of them – like Cheche – are only in their early 20's, some of them have crossed their 60's

birthday. Taking up the status and position as a *maili ama* is highly individual to the family situation as well as the preparedness and ability of the woman to occupy this responsible position.

Responsible years. Representing the community

Aum Sangay Wangmo's family is taking over the responsibility of the *pirpon* (KH; DZ: *spyi 'bod / spyir dpon*: village head, messenger) this year and this *Drub*. The *maili ama*, hand-in-hand with her *magpa* (*rmag pa*: husband, bridegroom) and eldest son are the responsible family of the community taking care of all provisions needed for the *Drub*. The living room has turned into a store room filled with sacks for different foods and the *maili ama* receives community members who arrive all the time delivering their donations. Her son notes down every income in a written sheet. Her *magpa* has discussed the height of this year's compulsory offerings with the other households and is now appointing tasks to other helpers supporting his family with the works.

Major Yonten is a civil servant employed by the Royal Bhutan Police in the capital Thimphu. He has not come to Korphu for twelve years in a row, for different reasons. Being stationed and trained all over the country throughout his career, he could not take vacations to come all the way up to Korphu. But now, he is back. He is wearing a blue *kapné* showcasing his rank. The Korphupa are proud. He is one of them and has made his career out of the small village. He is representing the village in the capital. This year, Korphupa have installed a colourful tent in the courtyard for the first time. Major Yonten and his wife are offered seats inside to observe the festival comfortably, served tea and snacks continuously. He is one of the non-resident Korphupa who has largely contributed to the acquisition of the new *tongdröl*.

Mastery. Passing on knowledge

Champon Sonam, in his late 40's, is mustering the boys of the village for the dance rehearsal in the dark courtyard of the *lhakhang*, issuing instructions for the upcoming rehearsal. By his judgement, the *champon* assigns participation in the different dances according to the abilities of the individual boys and their participation during the last years' festivals. With the drum in his hands, he sets the rhythm and calls out the sequence of the steps. Whenever needed he demonstrates complicated body rotations in slow motion associated with spoken instructions, how to move hands and feet, while all his students try to copy his elegant movements. Just before the rehearsal *champon* Sonam had inspected all masks and costumes, making a list of the pieces which had to be repaired or replaced by new ones. Sonam is holding the position of the *champon* of Korphu for more than a decade. Together with Rinzin, who is performing as the *chamjug*, they lead the group of the *champa*, the mask dancers. The *champon* has perfected his choreographies. He knows all the steps, every single dance choreography. Only he has the honour to wear and perform the most respected and venerated mask of the community, the *Rakhsha Lango* (Ox-headed deity of the intermediate realm between death and rebirth, symbolising justice.).

The adults in the middle of their lives, are at their best of carrying responsibility for the community - during everyday life as much as during the *Drub*. While the youth display the peak of physical strengths, the adults are displaying the summit of mental strengths in carrying out the most specialised and most responsible positions. Be it the leading of the different performing groups as *sedpem*, *champon*, leader of the *chöpa*, *the la-tsap*, or as *maili ama*. They are the main holder of the communities wisdom and knowledge and are continuously busy to make sure it is properly transmitted to the following generations and not lost in-between. They are the ones struggling, carrying the burden to decide whether to hold on to

procedures as their elders had taught to them, or adapt to the changes the younger ones bring into the community from outside. It is the responsibility on their shoulders to secure the continued existence of their community's tradition.

Late adulthood

Leaving the stage. Passing on responsibility

Aum Karma, in her 50's, sticks out when the community assembles in a circle for the joint folk dances. She is moving most gracefully, every step with absolute certainty and ease, gazing with a calm expression to the ground in front of her. Her clear voice is easy to be recognised above all the others, and often she is the leading voice of the singing group. Aum Karma held the position of the *sedpem* for many years in a row and has taught generations of young women how to sing and perform the traditional songs. When the community is asked to provide folk singers to the Dzong, Aum Karma is the one to be sent to represent the village. She holds the knowledge of many of the ancient lyrics that are otherwise already forgotten. When her successor as *sedpem* became pregnant, a couple of years ago, Aum Karma deputised for her and took up again the role of leading the *mani amo* during the *Drub* for one year. Her lifestyle fits the expectations towards a serious performer of the folk songs with an overall sacral meaning. She doesn't drink alcohol, as alcohol consume is said to affect vocal chords. Aum Karma is one of the most respected *maili ama* of Korphu community and her opinion is valued by all.

Ap Nyontey is sitting together with the *champon* and discussing the programme of this year's *Drub*. He is in his 60's and one of the most dedicated community members when it comes to the festival. In his life he has first served the community as a *champa* and later *champon*, took over any of the works in the group of the *chöpa* (*chos pa*) and held the responsibility as *kön-yer* (*dkon gnyer* / *sku gnyer*: caretaker of temple) for many years. And, if

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needed, he is still ready to sublimate any of the roles no-one likes to perform. This year he volunteers to take over the most unpopular role of *ganmo* (*rgan mo*: old woman), the horny old lady trying to seduce young men. He is there. Joking and rebuking the youth when needed, supporting the middle-aged whenever a helping hand is needed, finding solutions to all problems occurring during a weeklong highly complex festivity. Drinking with his friends and remembering the old days of performing with all the mishaps, being a real raconteur in supplying the community with stories of the last 50 years of *Drub*.

Behind the scenes. Advising. Counselling

The retired civil servant is sitting together with the household providing the *pirpon*. He has taken over the position of the senior *lai' berpo* to support the *pirpon's* family. He has stepped back from his exposed position in the public eye to the back rows. Next to his assignments in the Civil service in Thimphu he had been the elected *gup* (*rged po / rga po*) of Korphu *gewog* (*rged 'og*)²⁸ for some years in a row and been responsible for the instalment of the cemented water places throughout the inner community territory, making fluent water available for all community members to spare them the walk to the far away well above the village. His lifelong working experience is now needed. He is organising the festival behind the scenes. Through his good and far relations he could garner the high *lama* to come to Korphu and conduct the rituals at this year's *Drub*. For the acquirement of the new needed masks, he got in contact with the Korphupa staying as civil servants in Thimphu. He searched for a capable mask carver and made the civil servants discharge their duties and pay for the masks. As the main *lai' berpo*, he assists the family of the *pirpon* this year, coordinating all the workers,

²⁸ A *gewog* is an administrative unit in a Dzongkhag/district comprising of mostly three to five villages headed by a *gup*.

managing the collected foods allocating them for the various rites. Giving advice.

According to their knowledge and talents, the elders, who have travelled through many or nearly all positions in the *Drub* throughout their lives, and participated several dozen times in the *Drub*, have a broad understanding of the overall complex activities and organisation of the one-week long festival. They have experience. They know how to keep track. While they step back from being performers on stage, in the centre of attention, they work out their knowledge unseen, behind the scenes. They do not represent the community in the limelight physically and mentally like the youth and adults, but are the indispensable backbone of the community. Their lifelong commitment and dedication to the communal activities like the *Drub*, is reflected in the authority and respect they enjoy in the community.

Old age

Leaving responsibility. Enjoying and looking back

In the early morning the grandmother is the first one to get up. She puts on her best silken *kira*, sponsored by her grandson, and hides away two big bottles of *ara* in the front pocket of her *tego* (*stod bgo*: blouse like jacket). She has no responsibilities, anymore. Free. She opens the front door of her home to let in her best friends, a couple of other old ladies she knows since childhood. These days they are reunited for the *Drub*, since all of them stay scattered over the country with their children during the year. They sit together in a circle on the worn out wooden floor, place all the bottles in the middle. Taking out their wooden cups, they start chatting, laughing and drinking. In-between, out of the corner of her eyes, she observes her daughter, the current *maili ama*. In a split second, the grandmother is back to be the authoritative matriarch and ushers a rough command reprimanding her daughter how to prepare the offerings to the

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lama. When the *cham* start, the grandmother and her friends are the first ones appearing in the courtyard, occupying the seats in the front row, while alternately taking sips from their brought along *ara* and twirling their rosaries. When Dawa Dragpa enters the stage, the grandmother formally welcomes him with a white *khadar* (*kha dar / kha btags*: ceremonial, salutation silken scarf) and a flask of *ara*. As she has done for at least sixty years, since she had been a *sedpem* as young woman and the community had ascribed to her a special connection with Dawa Dragpa.

Preparing for Death. Leaving the community

Just after sunrise, the very aged man is the only one in the still deserted courtyard. Barely being able to walk, supported by a walking stick, he is surrounding the *lhakhang* while loudly shouting mantras. His penetrating voice resounds through the still quiet village. The man is preparing for death. He knows this time's festival might be the last one in his life. A last good opportunity for him to collect merit. The masks representing the deities and their movements are more than familiar to him. They have accompanied him all his life already inhabiting his first childhood memories. They give him a feeling of security. All the sacred action during the *Korphu Drub* is the eye of the hurricane of turmoil of his bygone life. It is pointing back deep into the past, connecting him with his spiritual ancestors. Now, when observing the deities of the Bardo (*bar do*: intermediate state between death and rebirth), it guides him towards his near future.

Like the children, the community does not expect the old members to take part in any function of the festival, but are let free and encouraged to engage in their religious practices to prepare for death. Throughout the festival, the old ones make up the biggest part of the onlookers as they are the only ones not being occupied with other works.

In summary, every phase, or age grade, in the biography of a member of Korphu community has its own status/es, which is/are reflected in positions during the festivals.²⁹ As much as each community member transits through a range of statuses, he/she also transits through (ascribed and achieved) positions during the festival, and therefore throughout the years carries out all different types of works and actions in the *Korphu Drub*. Although the formal festival content may stay the same, as perceived from an outsider's perspective, what the individual does and consequently how he/she connects to the festival, changes constantly and successively. As the different actions associated with the festival positions have to be carried out at different times and in different locations during the festival, (although there are certain festival actions when all community members are required to be in the same place at the same time), the immediate experience of the festival also varies in different phases of life.

Every age grade in life is characterised by certain duties/obligations and rights, and each phase in life holds strengths, as well as needs and challenges, bodily and mentally. The positions to be practiced in the festival take advantage of the strengths and cater to and address the challenges and context of each phase of life. By these means, carrying out formal festival action, the individual's identity is mirrored and even enhanced through festival performance.

As festival participants successively build upon knowledge and skills needed for the festival positions and extend these over

²⁹ One reason why certain everyday statuses are taken over as festival positions, and others not, is due to who is considered a *festival agent*. The festival agents are the entities in whose name festival action is carried out. There is no space in this article to address the topic properly, but I discuss it in detail in my PhD thesis.

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time, festival-position-sequences are not only essential to the sustainable success of a festival but also to the way an individual social actor connects to the festival. All expert positions during the *Korphu Drub*, like the *champon* and *chamjug*, *sedpem*, are without doubt achieved festival positions, requiring commitment and achievement. As one of the characteristics of subsistence agricultural societies usually is that all members have similar knowledge and skills in terms of type, in contrast to (post-)industrial societies in which specialisation and task diversification is in demand, we can see that the *Korphu Drub* actually supports task specialisation.

A festival position, either as a status taken over from everyday life or an exclusive position solely carried out during festival time, tells the other community members something about a person's age grade at a point in time, in combination with the agentive effort an individual makes, and the means by which he/she wants to present him/herself to the community.

The individual identities of festival participants are a fusion of agentive self-determination by the individual or ascription by the community. They are re-negotiated and constantly aligned in an act of reflexivity on both sides.

We can ask now: is, and how is a festival position, which is solely enacted once in a year, influencing or reflecting everyday life identities? Is a festival identity connected to daily life identity of the community members? According to my research, we can say, definitely, that it is. For instance, a community member in Korphu is identified in relation to his festival identity - when talked about Sonam, who was the *champon* over many years, everybody in the village would only refer to him as "Champon Sonam". And, Pema Dorji, performing the main *atsara*, would be called "Atsara Pema" by all.

Rites of Passage

Although transition from one phase in life into the next is (usually) fluent in Korphu community, the *Korphu Drub* seems to function as a visible marker by which the community recognises that a social actor has arrived in a certain phase of life in the next age grade. The notion of status changes (and associated change of identity) combined with external recognition of the same in the context of a rite or ritual, leads us to what van Gennep (1960) termed as rite de passage. In many societies of the world, the transition from one age grade to the next, is furthered and celebrated by an initiation or transition rite. Although we cannot find all three stages³⁰ of rites of passages van Gennep describes, we can employ the concept of rites of passages, in its broadest sense, as communal rites or rituals conducted to support or make visible the transition of a social actor from one age grade to the next in conjunction with the changing status and festival position. The individual festival participant, transiting from one age grade to the next, therefore not only changes the way he/she takes part in the festival, but also re-negotiates his/her identity actively and continuously throughout life.

Korphupa observe rites of passage³¹, in the sense of Gennep, related to two occasions in life - birth and death, both regarded as incidents when defilements, *drip*, (*sgrib*) occur which have to be purified. (Gennep has proposed that status changes are considered 'dangerous' phases in life.) These are the rites to be performed when a new community member is about to join the

³⁰ The three stages according to Gennep are: separation, liminality, and incorporation.

³¹ As said before, I apply the concept of rites of passage here in the widest sense, relating it to a rite which is performed by a community when a social actor transits from one status in life to the next.

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community, which are conception and birth,³² and finally when the community loses a member through death;³³ both clear-cut status changes.³⁴ The positions taken up during the *Korphu Drub* over the span of one lifetime cover all phases of life complementary to these two rites of passage observed. The rites of passage are only carried out for the states of being in which the concerned human being is not able to carry out action proactively by him/herself. The community has to act³⁵ on behalf of the newly born or deceased community member.

In the conclusion of his book Arnold van Gennep summarizes three characteristics of rites of passage, of which the last two can be applied to the *Korphu Drub*. Van Gennep's second characteristic is the *existence of transitional periods* (German: *Umwandlungsphasen*), for example novitiate or betrothal. He writes: 'It is in this concept of transition that provides an

³² When a woman recognises that she is pregnant a *mi kha* (*mi kha*: lit.: 'malicious mouth'; warding off malicious gossip from the pregnant woman and her un-born) ritual is conducted. Once the baby is born again a *mi kha* ritual is conducted as well as a *lhabsang* (*lha bsangs*: offerings of incense to the gods for purification) ritual to get rid of *drip* which has occurred due to giving birth.

³³ When a community member dies a whole series of rituals have to be conducted up to one year or even longer after the death, number and size of these contingent on the will and wealth of the family who commissions the rites.

³⁴ In winter 2018 I was a guest, for the first time, at a birthday party for a boy to which the closest family members in the village and the closest neighbours were invited. Celebrating a kid's birthday this way, is a recently introduced practice. I wonder whether the introduction of formal education in which *age grades* are fixed and formalised, as children have to be admitted according to age in terms of years and not social development (in contrast to informal age grades otherwise determining in village life) has to do with it.

³⁵ There are two minor exceptions: promotions are usually celebrated, although not furthered by a rite of passage, and newly introduced to the community, birthdays are celebrated. But otherwise, rites of passage very common in other cultures, like wedding ceremonies, the transition from Youth/childhood to adulthood et cetera, are not observed at all.

orientation for understanding the intricacies and the order of rites of preliminary to marriage.’, (for example, A/N). Korphu community members grow from one status/festival position into the next one. There will be the *Drub* when a former ‘daughter’, for the first time, takes over the position of the *maili ama* from her mother. While the becoming of *maili ama* is a foremost private household issue decided internally, once the new *maili ama* takes this position during the *Drub*, the change of status is publicly acknowledged by the community. The time in-between two *Drubs* (1 year) can be understood, as a transitional period.

In the very end of the festival, when all ritual action has been completed and the last *tashi monlam* (*bkra shis smon lam*: aspiration/supplication prayers for good luck) have been accomplished, the community gathers once more in the courtyard. It is time to talk about the *Drub* of the coming year. After the *Drub* is before the *Drub*. Some community members step forward carrying a white *khadar* and a barrel of *ara*. One by one, they announce publicly that they cannot continue their assigned duties during the *Drub* the following year and putting forth reasons. Each community member holding a *position* during the *Drub*, once they wish to resign, have to formally request the community to drop out. Successors are to be found and formally asked to step in. The community members stepping in for a new position in the following year, have one year time to prepare for the new task/assignment.

Gennep states one more significant aspect for rites of passage, as he writes: ‘Third, it seems important to me that the passage from one social position to another is identified with a *territorial passage*, such as the entrance into a village or a house, the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of streets and squares.’ We can observe three types of *territorial passages*, or *shifts in space*, when it comes to festival position transitions during the *Korphu Drub*. The first significant

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change in space over the course of one life from being 'off-stage' at the beginning of one's life, towards more prominence 'on-stage' during the central phases of life (in terms of chronology), and then slowly again leaving the stage when becoming older.

Again, when considering the festival positions 'on stage', we recognise that whenever a festival participant as a member of one of the performing groups, becomes the leader of the group, he/she changes the position in terms of space. The girl performing as *mani amo* becomes promoted to be the *sedpem* she takes up the centre position of the seven girls dancing in line. The former *champa* being the new leader of the group as *champon*, occupies the first leading position in the row of the *champa*. The young woman taking the position as *maili ama*, enters an exposed position in the sitting order of the festival. I will address the third change in space subsequently.

Interestingly, thinking of rites of passage, it seems like the festival can be understood as a negative image of the collection of rites of passage appearing in the community. The different functions at the festival do not depict the rite of passage as a specific/certain point in time when something is changing in the biography of a person, but is capturing the passages of time in between. That is, the rite that marks the shift from one stage in life to another, is absent, is left out. What is shown during the festival is the before and the afterwards. This makes sense regarding the assumed function of the festival of being an action that makes statements about the relationships of its community members.

While we cannot approve the *Korphu Drub* as such a rite of passage, as it does not proactively further transition from one status to the next, it nonetheless functions as a substitute for the not observed rites of passage during the lifetime of a

Korphupa in the community. As a point-in-time, its annual staging is yearly snapshots of the social composition of the community, for and perceived by, the insider, and indecipherable for a one-time outsider visitor to the festival. A look at who fulfils which festival position - in relation to the observed task as well as space placement - is an exact imprint of the whole picture, composition of the communities identities' at one instant. For the insider, the *Drub* is the opportunity to apprehend the total composition of the communities individual identities at a glance just by observing everyone in his or her festival position in space and in relation to each other. It is an update of community composition understood/perceived in its totality, rather than as constituted by its individuals. In a way, during certain moments during the *Drub*, when all community members are present inside the courtyard at once and positioned in space according to their social position, a real visible organigram is unfolding in front of everyone's eyes.

The *Drub* itself acts as an organigram - any insider can, by just seeing/observing the spatial positions in space an individual occupies during the *Drub*, understand the social position and phase of life the individual takes up at that moment.

Therefore, individual identity and communal identity of festival participants, can be understood as the individual being in relation to the other community members, and constantly aligning his/her position/status throughout time. Coming back to the third territorial passage. The festival is mainly taking part in the *lhakhang* and adjoined courtyard, both surrounded by a wall. When the community members enter the courtyard, a threshold is overstepped, behind which specific rules become effective regarding dress, behaviour and action of the festival participants. In other words, a magic threshold is overstepped when entering the courtyard.

Conclusion

Let me come back to my initial proposition, putting the festival participants as the pivotal centre part back into the festivals, to bridge the gap of formal festival content on one side and the evolvment of communal identity on the other side.

In this article I tried to show how individual social actors develop communal identity through the practice of communal Buddhist *cham* festivals. In order to understand how communal identity evolves, we need to look at the social lives of the festival participants. We need to understand who they are and how they relate to each other as social beings. In the case of the *Korphu Drub*, the festival participants, who are members of a blood/place community, connect to the structural and religious formal content of the festival, by taking up festival positions according to their age grade and gender in combination with individual agency (patterned-knowledge-communities). These festival positions constantly change and are re-negotiated across lifetimes (festival-position-sequences). The varying festival positions throughout a participant's life cater to and mirror every phase of life the participant is going through, in combination with his/her individual aspirations. Needs, weaknesses and fears connected to each phase in life are addressed and solutions are explored. Strengths, capacities and individual commitment are proudly exposed and highlighted. Ascribed and achieved statuses are melted together in individual festival positions, as are the diametrically opposed forces of individual agency and communal/cultural structure.

Recapitulating communal identity as an ongoing interdependent process of reflexivity between individual agency and social structure, and between the individual social actor

and his/her fellow community members, Buddhist *cham* communal festivals, like the *Korphu Drub*, can be said to act as a magnifying glass exposing the sum of community members identities in one moment of time, and throughout time. It is a two-sided business - the community members recognise and confirm identities, and individual identities are recognized³⁶ and confirmed by the community. Communal identity emerges. The individual identifies as constituent part of the community and is identified as part of it. Rather than carrying out individual rites of passage, in which one single social actor transits from one status and accompanying identity to the next, *cham* festival practice, at least in Korphu, can be understood as a substitute for rites of passage for the totality of community members. In the absence of rites of passages marking the transitions from one age grade to the next, the annual performance of the *Drub* is an urgent communal endeavour, which has to be enacted repeatedly, and with regularity, to keep track of the ever-changing human composition of the community and its ever changing composite identities. Following this, individual social actors' identities can only be perceived as component part of the entire community, always in relation to the others.

When I have interviewed festival participants of village communities across the genders and age groups over the course of my field study, I found that an overwhelming majority of the interviewees does not possess the explicit knowledge (and does not express the wish to possess this knowledge) about the esoteric meanings and background stories ascribed to a specific liturgy and *cham* performances. In each

³⁶ In this article I have focused on how feelings of communal identity are created at best. Without doubt, when the external expectations towards a social actor do not match his/her personal understanding of his/her status, sentiments of communal identity are at stake.

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community (especially village communities), there is usually only a handful of people who hold this kind of expert knowledge that we later find in publications about festivals. Understanding a festival participant to be foremost, a social being relating and connecting - above all - to the social side of a festival, we understand that most of the participants do not need expert knowledge (though they deliberately carry out such the festival position in which it is required). For me, a mismatch is apparent. While most scholarly publications about *cham* festivals focus on formal content and diversity ascribed meanings, which is in itself a crucial endeavour, most festival participants seem to rely largely on the social dimension of a festival which is equally legitimate. I think, if we aim to understand the relevance of the festivals for the social actors/participants and in an effort to preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage for them, let us not lose sight of the social actors who bring the festivals and rituals to life. What festival contents need to survive are functioning patterned-knowledge-communities advancing communal identity. As one of my Korphupa friends once exclaimed: 'This is OUR tradition.'

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