

## ***Losar* celebration: the significance of food in a noble and religious family of Central Bhutan**

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The paper is an active participant observer's account of *losar* (lo gsar: new year according to the Tibetan lunar calendar) as it happened in the home of a noble family in the late 1950's in Bumthang in the central part of Bhutan.

Through the description of the preparations for and the actual celebration of the new year by the family in Ogyen Choling (O rgyan chos gling), the meaning and significance of food in the society of central Bhutan will be explored.

The house of Ogyen Choling village is situated on top of a hillock in the upper part of Tang (sTang) valley in Bumthang. The *naktsang* (large manor like house) is surrounded by twenty village houses whose inhabitants were originally the tenants of Ogyen Choling. The family's claim to their ancestry to the religious master Dorji Lingpa (rDo rje gling pa: 1346–1405) placed them in the class of nobility of the lama *choe ju* (*chos rgyud*). The lama *choe ju* like the other aristocratic families in Bhutan yielded considerable economic power besides being respected by the general public for the lineage.

For the family in Ogyen Choling, the celebration of *losar* did not merely consist of the feasting and the revelry but it was the celebration of a time honoured family tradition which entailed a certain set of observances to be carried out meticulously. By celebrating *losar* the family members were upholding their duties as the *lama choeju* of the region, and they aspired, like the generations before them to make it as grand as the previous ones if not better. According to tradition at least one member from each household of all the villages of Tang valley who had any connection to Ogyen Choling were invited for the grand celebration. More than *losar* simply being a gesture of *noblesse oblige* it was a time for sharing the auspiciousness of the new year, renewing loyalties and fostering goodwill. About 180–200 people would gather for *losar* and these included the family members and relatives, the lay priests, the servants, weavers, cooks, servers water carriers, cow herders yak herders, horse attendants, swine feeders firewood carriers and the daily workers whose services were essential to make the feudal system viable.

The family had to prepare for the *losar* celebration throughout the year. Over the entire year goods were collected and set aside for *losar*. Locally produced vegetables, fruits were preserved and stored. Rice, pulses, fruits and vegetables were brought from the family's estates from the subtropical region of Kurtoe (sKur stod) located to the east of Bumthang. The family's merchants would go to the trade fairs in Lho Talung and Jampaling in Tibet to get other materials and foods needed specifically for *losar* as well as for everyday use. Fine brick tea, rock salt, borax, sheepskins and whole legs of mutton,

wind dried and preserved, were traded against rice, chili, brown sugar, hand made Bhutanese paper, madder and hand woven fabrics. Candies and biscuits from India added variety to the foods served on *losar*.

The *losar* celebration, in essence, gives an insight into all aspects of food and its relationship to society in terms of the history, hierarchical legitimacy, religion and ritual, economics and politics.