

# The Death Ritual of the Lhop Community and the Challenge of Modernization

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## Abstract

*The Lhop is one of the unique communities in Bhutan billed as indigenous, aboriginal inhabitants little known even in Bhutan. They follow a unique way of life and belief system which to this present day remains comparatively little influenced by forces of change.*

*This paper focuses on their death ritual, one of the most important ritual practices unique to their community. Like in any other society or community, the Lhop Community considers death a great loss. Very elaborate ceremonies are followed to appease the spirit of the dead so that it does not cause any harm to the surviving family members, and to prepare the spirit for the life after death. It is the spiritual aspect of their culture and their concept of life after death that markedly differentiates the Lhop from Bhutanese mainstream society.*

*The paper also reflects on how this unique tradition is challenged in the face of change and development. The Lhop Community is basically very close-knit and the death ritual continues to be performed as has always been done. However, the education of their children as well as increased exposure to mainstream culture will severely impact Lhop customs and traditions, particularly the death ritual. In view of this, research is being carried out to safeguard knowledge of the detailed aspects of this unique traditional practice of death ritual for posterity.*

**Keywords:** *Bhutan, Lhop, death ritual, dead body, burial, sacrifice, belief, animal, rombu, community, religion, monument, challenge, modernization, migration.*

## 1. General Introduction

In Bhutan, there are different ethnic groups, and no one group constitutes a majority of the Bhutanese population. The Bhutanese population comprises four main ethnic groups, which themselves are not necessarily exclusive: the *Ngalop*<sup>2</sup> of western and northern Bhutan; the *Sharchop*<sup>3</sup> of eastern Bhutan; the *Lhotshampa*<sup>4</sup> concentrated in southern Bhutan; and tribal and aboriginal peoples<sup>5</sup> living in villages scattered throughout Bhutan. Their ethno-geographical and cultural descriptions are very interesting and provide a lot of clues to the

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<sup>1</sup> Yonten Dargye is Chief Research Officer at the National Library and Archives of Bhutan. Although the present work was intended to give a fuller picture of the process of death ritual of the Lhop community touching upon almost all aspects of the socio-religious life of the people it has its own limitations also. In-depth studies on several areas of social and cultural life related to death could not be made adequately due to having to carry out pressing assignments simultaneously although it could have been carried out by making due participative observation in the field for a longer period of time. I might have left many important aspects surrounding the death undocumented and misinterpreted. I hoped that the future generation of educated Lhops will further work on the subject, and correct and improve upon this work where incorrect interpretations have occurred, for no amount of in-depth work can substitute the way people think about their own culture and values.

<sup>2</sup> A term thought to mean the earliest risen or first converted; they are concentrated in western and northern districts.

<sup>3</sup> An Indo-Mongoloid people who are thought to have migrated from Assam or possibly Burma during the past millennium. They comprise most of the population of eastern Bhutan and dominate the eastern areas.

<sup>4</sup> Bhutanese of Nepali origin who live in the South.

<sup>5</sup> This group refers to *lhop* (doya), *monpa* and nomadic communities.

way they would have lived in the past: marriage, living style, diet patterns, their death ritual practices and so on.

While death ritual practices of Ngalong and Sharchop are the same with minor variations, the death rituals of the Lhotshampa and tribal groups [i.e. Brokpa (Merak-Sakteng), Monpa, Lepcha and Lhop (Doyas)] are unique which would be fascinating to study and document. Of all, the most interesting and unique, perhaps, is the death ritual of the Lhop community.

In general, there are six different methods for disposing of a dead body, including:

1. Cremation, the most widely practised method;
2. Sky burial, where the body is placed at a particular spot (i.e. on a high mountain top) for natural disposal through natural predation;
3. Water burial, where the body is immersed in water to be "washed away";
4. Ground burial, where the body is put under the ground in a specially dug pit;
5. Surface burial, where the body is put under the stacked stone above the ground; and
6. Cave burial, where the body is deposited or hidden in a cave on a cliff face.

One of these six methods is followed to dispose of dead bodies in any society in the world. The method followed by the Lhop Community to dispose of dead bodies is surface burial (and a few do water burial in the case of children) which is unique in its own way. This traditional method has been in practice for a long time and even those Nepali immigrants who have been a major force for change in the Lhop culture in recent times have not influenced this custom much.

### **1.1. Aim and Scope of the Research**

The research on the Death Ritual of the Lhop Community and the Challenge of Modernization is conducted with the support of the SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo, Sri Lanka. The main aim is to study and research the process of death rituals of the Lhop Community as performed until now, the nature and scope of Lhop knowledge and practices, their attitude and belief towards this practice, and the possible challenges for its survival in the face of modernization, and to bring out a comprehensive research paper on the topic so as to provide an essential source on the death rituals of the Lhop Community for the future researchers. The research also aims to secure and strengthen understanding of the Lhop death rituals by the younger generation so that their significance does not fade away in the face of modernization.

In general, and as a consequence of the project, it is expected to be realized the study of:

- The historical background of the Lhop community;
- Traditional knowledge and values of the country in general and the Lhop community in particular;
- Cross-comparative analysis of available information on the death rituals of different villages of the Lhop;
- People's knowledge about the cultural practice and expression;

In addition, the research also aims to produce a baseline reference required by future researches and academicians in the field of study of death rituals.

## **1.2. Methodology Adopted**

After making review of literature available on the Lhop community, it is found that only two authors, one Bhutanese author Dr. Jagar Dorji and the other Indian author Mr. B. Deben Sharma had done research on the culture and tradition of Lhop community as a whole. Except a brief outline, both the authors had not done detail study on the death rituals of the Lhop community. So, in the absence any written records, the present researcher solely depended on the oral sources to carry out this research project, following the qualitative approach.

Before undertaking the trip to the research site, the villages of the Lhop Community to be visited and surveyed were determined according to their accessibility, after discussions with the District Cultural Officer (DCO) of Samtse. At the district level, preliminary discussions were held with the DCO as well as with some knowledgeable people based in Samtse and Phuentsholing, in order to gain an overall picture of the Lhop Community. Within the limits of this first information gathered, the research questionnaires were framed in order to obtain appropriate information or data that is required within a limited period of time while in the field. On this note, the three parts of questionnaires related to community, customary practice and practitioners of death rituals, and the threats and safeguarding measures were framed as follows:

### ***Questionnaires related to Community***

- Tell about the history of the origin of the Lhop community? Is there any oral tradition that tells and supports the history of the origin of the Lhop Community?
- Which ethnic group do you belong to? Which local area?
- Which other ethnic groups are you related to?
- What is the unique cultural identity of your community?

### ***Questionnaires related to Customary Practice and Practitioners (of death rituals)***

- Why is it important to perform rituals (*Ngan-shiya Dos-ni*) after the death of a person?
- Who are involved in the performance of death rituals?
- Who is more knowledgeable/ experienced who could tell about the detail process of death rituals?
- Who taught you the art? How did you learn?
- How many generations have practiced this heritage? How did your ancestors acquire the knowledge of it?
- What are the ancient values of the heritage?
- Is animal sacrifice a good practice to appease the spirit of the dead?
- How and to whom is the death ritual knowledge transmitted?

### ***Questionnaires related to threat and safeguarding***

- Do you think it's good to preserve the practice of death rituals?
- How does the new socio-economic model affect the practice?
- How does your new life affect the practice?
- Do educated children in the village support the practice? Why?
- Is there any policy/regulation by the Government that affects the practice?
- Do migration and resettlement have negative effects on the practice?
- What are the financial and other resources to organize the practice? From where/whom?

- Are there any factors that indirectly affect the practice?
- Does your community have any measures to safeguard the element?
- Do the local authorities have any measures to safeguard the element?

Thus, with these questionnaires, being accompanied by two research assistants three separate field trips were undertaken to different villages, of the Lhop community, from 08 to 25 December 2013 to Taba-Dramtey<sup>6</sup>, from 04 to 22 February 2014 to Loto-kuchu<sup>7</sup> and from 15 to 28 September 2014 to Taba-Dramtey and Loto-kuchu. A guide appointed by the village Tshogpa<sup>8</sup> in each village accompanied research team throughout the visits, acting as an interpreter and introducing us to village people. I must mention here the competence and dedication of the guides, from which I greatly benefited, thanks to messages sent in advance from Dasho Dzongda<sup>9</sup> to Gups<sup>10</sup>, Gewog ADMs<sup>11</sup> and Tshogpas.

The field trip was undertaken by car, but mostly on foot as the Lhop Community villages are located in far-flung areas, inaccessible by car with overnight stays in the villages and several hours' walks in the daytime, in order to broaden the scope of research. Heartfelt thanks are due to the Gups, Tshogpas, Gewog ADMs for having provided every possible support – lodging, guide, etc. – during the period of the visits.

The researchers met community members of different age groups ranging from young, middle-aged to elderly, choosing villages/areas where a certain number of members could be met simultaneously and, to a certain extent, having to restrict visits to only the more easily accessible villages. In some cases, only experienced and knowledgeable village men and women were called to a specific house, at a certain time, for the interviews. In total, more than 37 different community members were met at seven different locations and collected the data through various informal talks and interviews but mainly through directive interviews with those who had practical experience of handling and disposing of dead bodies.

Some of the community members interviewed in Loto-kuchu village are:

- Dangkachen, 81 years (male);
- Serta, 88 years (male);
- Kunti, 55 years (female);
- Kopi Lham, 49 years (female);
- A Pawo (medium) or Lhop Shaman;
- Jabcho, village Tshogpa (male);
- Ap Tempa from Jigme village (male);
- Karma Dorje Lhop, 18 years (male) – class XII passed out, who acted as a guide; and interpreter during whole of my visit.

And some of the community members interviewed in Taba-dramtey village are:

- Lobzang, 66 years (male), Ex-Tshogpa of Taba village;

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<sup>6</sup> The Taba-dramtey group of Lhop comprise of settlements areas of Taba, Tading, Dramtey/Ramtey, Dhakto, Bhumakar (Dhiju), Memmakar, Gaiti, Zignor, etc.

<sup>7</sup> The Loto-kuchu group of Lhop comprise of five contiguous settlement areas namely: Satakha, Sanglung, upper and lower Loto-kuchu (now named as Jigme, Singye and Wangchuck)

<sup>8</sup> Village cluster representative.

<sup>9</sup> District Magistrate or Governor.

<sup>10</sup> Head of a block.

<sup>11</sup> Block administration officers.

- Dawa Tshering, 48 years, (male), Ex-Tshogpa;
- Ajay, 68 years (male);
- Jechung, 55 years (male);
- Bakhum, 53 years, (female);
- Chimi Wangmo, 58 years (female);
- Tsheringla, 45 years (male);
- Pasang, 38 years (female);
- Diley, 22 years (male), class five dropped out who acted as guide and interpreter/translator
- Karma Dema, 19 years (female), class five dropped out.

One can point out that as a general rule, in the case of oral traditions directive interviews are quite problematical, in the sense that most people will face difficulties in describing somewhat abstractly events and phenomena out of their proper context. My time and travel constraints did not allow me to stay long enough in villages and make participative observation of the ritual proceedings myself. (However, my last visit to the Lhop Community fortunately coincided with the holding of *Gewa*<sup>12</sup>, the final feast proceedings, in Singye village of Loto-kuchu, enabling me to make participative observation). It was therefore very difficult to evaluate the exact social situation in which the villages were practising their ritual. Far more time would have been needed to make full participative observation. So, in some cases, information gathered might have been biased by having to rely on interpreters, especially when they were not fluent in Dzongkha.

### **1.3. Cultural Significance of Death in South Asia**

South Asia is rich in cultural diversity, with multiple ethnic groups, cultures, religions, castes and colours. This multiplicity finds further reflection in the region's many customs, rituals and beliefs surrounding death. As is universal to the human condition, death in South Asia is considered a great loss, and those who have passed are provided a means of passage in accord with their particular beliefs, be it cremation, interment or water burial.

In general, the behaviours and practices associated with death are closely related to religious beliefs and tenets. As with most major rites of passage, death rituals strongly reflect the core values that each community considers sacred and necessary. However, in all societies, death also brings into focus certain fundamental cultural values and expressions. The various rituals and ceremonies performed strongly reflect peoples' beliefs and faith as well as pan-cultural concerns, such as care in the afterlife.

A primary concern of funeral rites is to ensure the safe and comfortable passage of the soul or consciousness from life into death. Deaths often trigger a mixture of emotional responses, but the range of 'acceptable' emotions and the extent to which mourners express grief and sorrow often depends on the customs and values of each society. Hence, many funeral ceremonies will conclude with a feast or some sort of communal meal, the grandeur of which can vary according to the age and social status of the deceased.

In some cultures the emotional tenor at funerals is rather low-key on the whole. While it is quite permissible for mourners to cry at funerals, the excessive display of grief in public could be viewed as an embarrassment for both the bereaved and the comforter. In contrast, in other cultures, strong public displays of emotion at funerals is not merely tolerated but is

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<sup>12</sup> Literally "Virtue or virtue-making", in Lhop sense referring to the ritual feast or ceremony held for the death person.

customarily required, and at predetermined moments during the ceremony, the entire group of mourners may burst into loud and piercing cries.

A detailed description of death's significance in each South Asian country will not be possible under the present scope of the research<sup>13</sup>. Instead, a brief outline of practices and beliefs related to death according to major religious traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Muslim and Christianity) is given below so as the readers can be introduced to general South Asian beliefs concerning death and the afterlife.

### **2.1. Buddhist Beliefs and Practices<sup>14</sup>:**

- ❖ Buddhists believe every being lives a succession of lives. This endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth in various states (e.g. human, animal, etc.) is known as *samsara*. The cycle of *samsara* continues until the practitioner attains an enlightened state of permanent, lasting happiness known as *nirvana*, which is the ultimate goal of all Buddhist practice.
- ❖ Death is merely a prelude to existence in another state. One's next rebirth is determined by their individual karma, which is accumulated through wholesome and unwholesome actions performed in both current and previous lives.
- ❖ Dead bodies are usually cremated in conjunction with the recitation of elaborate prayers, and rites are presided over by monks.
- ❖ Buddhist thought maintains that everything is impermanent and no state lasts forever, apart from nirvana, also known as Enlightenment.
- ❖ Mourners direct their efforts towards smoothing the passage of the deceased into his/her next existence.
- ❖ Buddhists place great importance on the state of mind at the moment of death.
- ❖ Merit transferring ceremonies may be held regularly on significant dates, such as on the anniversary of the death.

### **2.2. Hindu Beliefs and Practices<sup>15</sup>:**

- ❖ In Hindu custom, dead bodies are usually cremated within 24 hours of death. The corpse is often wrapped in a cloth and placed in a coffin, which may then be covered in flowers.
- ❖ By tradition, the eldest son should set the funeral pyre alight, or press the button if a crematorium is used.
- ❖ Hindus believe in reincarnation and that at death the soul sheds its body. It will then take on another bodily form—not necessarily human—in a cycle of re-birth until it reaches release, or *moksha*, in which one unites with the godhead.
- ❖ The eldest son and other close male relatives shave their heads as a sign of bereavement and cleansing.
- ❖ Friends and relatives keep the bereaved company, share grief and offer support.
- ❖ On the eleventh or thirteenth day after a death, loved ones gather to offer a blessing to the deceased in order to show gratitude for acts of kindness that they received during his/her lifetime.
- ❖ Memory of the deceased is preserved in the family's daily prayers (*puja*).

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<sup>13</sup> This is only a very general summary, and there are considerable variations in belief and custom (as well as regional variations) within each of the faiths (all of which have various sub-sects, or schools) outlined below.

<sup>14</sup> Not all Buddhist traditions follow the same practices, and there are variations. For example, followers of Vajrayana Buddhist traditions perform specific, elaborate rites and rituals that may not be found in other Buddhist traditions.

<sup>15</sup> Hinduism is a broad term covering a diversity of practices and beliefs, and is subject to many regional variations.

### 3.3. *Muslim Beliefs and Practices:*

- ❖ Muslims believe that there is one God, known as Allah, and Muhammad was the prophet of Allah.
- ❖ Muslims believe humans have only one life. In the future, there will be a day of judgement when each soul is judged according to their deeds on earth.
- ❖ Extravagant expressions of grief are against the will of Allah.
- ❖ Mourning is demonstrated by reading from their sacred book, the *Koran*.
- ❖ The corpse is washed and wrapped in a simple white cotton sheet or shroud. All Muslims dress alike to symbolise their equality before God.
- ❖ Bodies are buried with their heads pointing towards Mecca, their most sacred site.
- ❖ After annual *Eid* celebrations, family members will visit the cemetery to say prayers at their family grave. This is a reminder that even in the middle of happy celebrations, life is temporary and that it is important to live correctly to ensure eternal life with Allah.

### 3.4. *Christian Beliefs and Practices:*

- ❖ Christians believe in one God, and in Jesus Christ of Nazareth in whom God assumed human form and that God is present today through the work of the Holy Spirit and evident in the actions of believers.
- ❖ Christians believe that Jesus died and was resurrected in order to cleanse Christians of all sin.
- ❖ Human beings are in a continuing fellowship with God throughout life and death.
- ❖ A person lives only one physical life.
- ❖ Personal identity is retained after death.
- ❖ Roman Catholics believe in a state called purgatory – a place where a soul is purified in preparation for entry into heaven.
- ❖ Christians maintain a clear belief in heaven and hell, and that actions on earth determine where one goes after death. The righteous go to Heaven and the sinners go to Hell.
- ❖ Following a memorial service, bodies may be cremated or buried according to an individual's preference, or the beliefs of a particular Christian sect. If the body is cremated, the family may keep the ashes in an urn or else scatter them in woodland or somewhere they associate with the deceased.

## 2. The Lhop

### 2.1. The Origin of the Lhop<sup>16</sup>

The exact origins of the Lhop community are undocumented, with substantive evidence surviving in neither oral nor textual forms. However, through the use of documented historical incidents, it is possible to extrapolate some possibilities about their origins.

Literally, “Lhop” means “southerners”, a term principally used by the people of the Paro and Haa valleys when referencing members of the Lhop community. The use of this term may originate with the early Tibetan references to Bhutan as “**Lhoyul**”, meaning the country to the south of Tibet, and its inhabitants as Lhop. Chakravarti (1978) maintains that the Lhop

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<sup>16</sup> Another name for the Lhop is Doya, derived from the Nepali word *daya*, meaning “kind”. When Nepalese immigrants arrived in modern Lhop settlement areas, they came into close contact with the indigenous Lhop community already living in the region. The people of the Lhop community welcomed the newcomers rather kindly, actions that included allowing the recent arrivals to till their ancestral lands in exchange for gifts of *chang* (local wine). The settlers called their hosts “*daya*” as a gesture of gratitude. Over time, this phrase became corrupted into Doya. The term Doya has been so widely used that even many of the Lhops themselves use it commonly, and throughout modern Bhutan, people know this community as Doya.

people were a semi-nomadic group who took care of the cattle that belonged to the permanent settlers of Haa and Paro. Aris (1979) refers to the Lhop as early settlers of Bhutan who may have later been pushed to the territorial margins by the more influential and culturally advanced people settling in the northern and central regions of Bhutan. In his view, as the population moved southward, the term “Lhop” may have been applied to them.

The Lhop are a lesser-known group based in southwest Bhutan. Also known as the Lhopu, or Lhokpu, their dialect belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. According to the Bhutanese, Lhop are considered the earliest inhabitants of the country. Some believe that Lhops—as well as other groups such as the **Monpa and the Mangdeps**—may be descendants of the so-called **Ri-drakpa, or ‘people of the mountainous terrain’**, who are described as short and sturdy native peoples. Elsewhere, Lhops are equated with the Kiranti people who were presumably the original inhabitants of the Himalayan foothills, but who over time later subdivided themselves into separate and unique subcultures due to physical isolation. The country’s rough terrain and the dominance of a subsistence-based valley economy likely contributed to this isolation.

Dr. Jagar Dorji (2003) has studied the Lhop community in their settlements along the Amochu valley. Dr. Dorji informs us that most Lhops, especially in Satakha village, believe that they have long been linked with Paro and Haa in particular. The Lhops of Satakha worship a deity named Talang, with a reputed origin in Paro’s Dop Shari village. It is believed that there is a rock in Dop village that is worshipped as an image of Talang, who has an appearance that is simultaneously horse-like and ox-like). However, after conducting research on this in Paro Dop Shari, no evidence of such deity worship could be found. However, the Lhops’ belief in this deity, and their subsequent connections to Paro and Haa ought not be dismissed. Taking into account the comparative proximity of modern Lhop settlements, the existence of such a connection is within the realm of possibility.

According to Dr. Dorji, whether supporting evidence ever emerges or not, at present the origin of the Lhop community remains a mystery. Lhop folk tales and oral traditions cannot be historically verified, and in fact their oral traditions are not very strong. But the longstanding connection between Lhops and the Amochu valley is difficult to describe away. It is believed that at one time, the region surrounding the Amochu valley was filled with a burgeoning Lhop population. Their tribe apparently lived as far as the Jaldakha Valley further west (modern Bara-Tendu), but was wiped out; perhaps by disease or war. Different stories are told as to the reason why the Lhop community is small today, one of which Dr. Dorji relates in his book as follows:

*“Once, the entire Lhop population was believed to have disappeared due to some deadly diseases. Only a pair of young cousins had survived, a boy and a girl. In course of time the two children grew into adults. There were no other people around them. One day they saw two grasshoppers stuck together (mating). Sometime later they saw several younger grasshoppers hopping around. The boy and the girl then realized that if they did as the grasshoppers, there would be younger people like themselves and they would no longer be lonely. So they did what they thought should be done to spread their own kind. They were consequently rewarded with many children. This was the beginning of another kalpa (eon) for the Lhops.”*

While interviewing some elderly people of the community, some of them could vaguely recall their grandparents recounting how in the old days some people were driven into hiding



in deep forest valleys due to conflicts between different Lhop subgroups. Later, once the war subsided, they came out of their hiding places and regrouped. This is another hypothesis behind the existence of the small Lhop community of today.

## 2.2. The Lhop Community



Lhop in their traditional dress

Lhops in general tend toward a short and stocky appearance. Dr. Dorji posits that their small stature may be the result of their tradition of intra-community marriage, a custom that continues to this day. He also suggests that a lack of iodine in their diet could be a contributing factor. Their comparative isolation engendered a stronger than usual connection to nature, living close to the forests surrounding their community. Modernity has only recently appeared in the region, most notably in the farm roads, electricity grid and mobile phone services that are now available on their ancestral lands.

Though modernity has begun to influence their **living environment**, Lhops continue to live closely together and marry within their own community, often between cousins. Due to their intra-community marriage, all Lhops are somehow related to one

another. **Marriage** outside their community is generally discouraged because it goes against ancestral traditions, but with the arrival of modern influences as well as outside settlers in their land, some Lhops are slowly tending toward marriage outside of the community. Otherwise, Lhops maintain sound relationships with one other within the village and maintain strong family ties.

Loyalty and commitment are very important among the Lhops, to the point that they may even sacrifice their lives for the community's well-being. In general, Lhops do not keep their children in school, despite the availability of government schools and outreach efforts to encourage the Lhop to educate the younger generation. However, in recent years the school drop out rate has been falling.



Traditional house of Lhop

## 2.3. Ritual Practices and Belief Systems

Given their comparative and long-standing isolation from the rest of Bhutan, the Lhops have developed their own customs and traditions, including their own rituals and belief systems. It seems that there is not much of a Buddhist influence in their belief system, perhaps due to the comparative lack of access to Buddhist teachers and rituals. However, the Lhop are aware of and have faith in Zhabdrung Rinpoche as a leader, although not as a religious master. They even sing songs extolling the Zhabdrung's virtues and fame. But after questioning them further, their knowledge of the Zhabdrung is underdeveloped.

Embedded as they are in the natural environment, the Lhop community carries with it a number of superstitions. Their day-to-day lives are thought to be under the influence of local deities called *Zhibda-Nedag*. This is the general term for the protective deities of the villages and of a particular place, comprised specifically of water deities, forest deities, wood deities,

earth deities, and so forth. The Lhop believe that their very lives are due to the protections these deities extend, and if the deities aren't appeased regularly, misfortune will befall them. Appeasement rituals often include sacrifices of pigs, chickens, or sometimes oxen, all of which are carried out with the hope of averting any possible misfortunes that could befall them. Roosters are offered specifically to *Genyen*<sup>17</sup> and pigs to the local deities known as *zhidag*. Appeasing the deities with animal sacrifices is a long-standing tradition that is carried out by the head of the family, who takes the lead role in the rituals.

Lhop death rituals differ markedly mainstream Bhutanese tradition in that there are no cremations. Instead, the Lhop bury their dead, which is a unique tradition and the origins of which are unknown. It is tempting to consider that it might be due to the lack of access to Buddhist ritual ceremonies and Buddhist teachers that compelled the Lhop to follow a burial tradition rather than cremation to dispose of their dead. Lhop death rituals are the focus of the present research, and their death rituals will be discussed in detail below.

### 3. Death Ritual Processes

The following are the processes of death ritual as practice today, resulted mainly from the oral interview conducted at Loto-kuchu and Taba-dramtey.<sup>18</sup>

#### 3.1. Wrapping the Dead Body

About one and a half hour after a person breathed his or her last, the family members of the death person get themselves ready to wrap the death body. First a set of daily used crockery of the death person which includes, a set of crockery such as a plate, a pot, a bowl, a pan, a plate, a ladle (*kulik*), and other articles are separated and kept outside the house containing in a *drowak* (basket).<sup>19</sup> A fire place is made in front of the house near the *tidhog* (stairs) to cook food for the death. In the past in Loto-kuchu, if a woman dies these things used to be kept inside the house and cooking was also used to be done inside the same house by her own kin but not belonging to her household. These persons can be the deceased's sisters, sons, daughters who are already separated from the household. But these days, it is said that whether male or female, the same practice is followed.

One of the close male family members should get ready to touch or carry the dead body. There should be *nguldra* (cane rope), but if this is not available, a bark of a tree called *saplik* would do to bind the dead body. Then there should be a *pala* (bamboo container) to contain water and *sekleb* (leaves)<sup>20</sup> to wash the dead body. A *pala* must be filled with water and be heated over a fire made near the *tidhog*. All the dead person's clothes are removed and the dead body is washed with lukewarm water (*uti*)<sup>21</sup> from the *pala* (*ubuk*)<sup>22</sup> and by rubbing with

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<sup>17</sup> Known as Genyen Dorji Dradul, he is revered as Ap Genyen Jagpa Milen or simply Ap Genyen. He is a principal deity in Thimphu Valley, where he is considered a *dra lha*, or war deity, who commands a deep respect among his followers. However, being from the class of *dralha*, Ap Genyen can be very troublesome to his enemies. He is also revered as the *keylh,a* or birth deity, for children born in upper Thimphu.

<sup>18</sup> The study was concentrated among Loto-kuchu and Taba-dramtey groups which are the main settlement of the Lhop community. Variations exist in certain aspects among Loto-kuchu village and Taba-dramtey village. Though the present researcher could not make detail study of variations by comparing each and every element of practices and beliefs and present them separately, those variations appeared to be not major, and whatever variations exist seemed to have crept into over the years owing to these two large villages lying apart without much contact.

<sup>19</sup> *Drowak* (in Taba-dramtey dialect) is the term used for the basket of dead person while the normal term for basket in their language is *wak*.

<sup>20</sup> Leaves of *seksing* (name of a tree in their language), a kind of a tree grown in their area.

<sup>21</sup> *Uti* is the term used for the water to wash the dead body (in Taba-dramtey).

*sekleb*<sup>23</sup> by the bearer of the dead body, being assisted at least by four male family members.<sup>24</sup>

Once the deceased has been completely washed clean, the body is dressed with a new set of their dress – *paki* (white dress for man), *kabney* (scarf), *pali* (male headgear) for man and *guigeb* (white dress for woman) and *pukung* (female headgear) for woman. However, both the *paki* and *guigeb* are folded and worn opposite in manner to how the normal living person would wear them. For a man, a *pata* (traditional big knife) is hung from his left side and a small knife is inserted into his *paki* on the left side; and for a woman, a *phlengpyer* (sickle)<sup>25</sup> is hung from her left side. A streak of *zumar* (butter) is drawn from the crown of the head to the foreheadline and the back neckline and another streak of *zumar* is drawn from the crown of the head to the right and the left temple regions, forming butter cross on the head.

A *bakhup* (purse) is made and stuffed with money<sup>26</sup> and a match box. This bag is hung from the neck of the deceased. A *betrang* (old coin) is put in the mouth but if this is not available conventional coins can also be used. A ball of white thread is placed on the mid breast region and covered with a cup. A needle tucked with thread is strapped to the *paki/guigeb*, signifying that the relationship between the deceased and the living person will be inseparable like the needle and thread even in the next rebirth.

A *lho* (a bamboo mat) is spread on which spread a large white cloth called *tepgyem*. The body is then laid on the *tepgyem* with head directed towards the east and is folded in foetal position with hands crossed against the chest and knees against the abdomen and wrapped with *tepgyem*. Folding of the body in this manner reduces the length of the body less than 4 ft in any case. While wrapping, the *tepgyem* must be folded from lower part of the body with upper fold resting on the lower fold and from two sides. The folds are stitched together with the help of a bamboo needle called *lung* at three regions in the inside fold (first fold) and another at three regions in the outside fold of the two sides. Then the body wrapped in *tepgyem* is again wrapped in a *lho* in a similar manner like the *tepgyem* and then tied round by three strong ropes of cane or *saplik* running parallel at the three regions – one at the head region, another at the mid body region and the other at the lower body region.

The *pala* used for heating the water earlier must be cut into two equal parts (longitudinally) and the dead body is then laid on these two bamboo sticks with head directed towards the east as stated earlier. Before placing the body on these two bamboo sticks, it must now be lifted or swung three times by two people, one holding one from the lower end and the other from the upper part chanting:

*Mahangway matiway, michoshika; dangchokorlahana chashi jaykam nyomlay ngatsarsa gaysa rabna mitsarsa sinpu nyana.*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ubuk* is the term used for the container of the dead person (in Taba-dramtey).

<sup>23</sup> It is believed that a dead person does not accept soap to wash his/her body, so in place of that, *sekleb* are used to wash dead body since from the past.

<sup>24</sup> While washing, since one person cannot handle the death body, help from others is also accepted in handling or holding the body.

<sup>25</sup> *Phlengpyer* is the term used for the sickle of the dead person.

<sup>26</sup> The money offered to the deceased especially by close relatives is marked with symbol and then put into the purse as offering/gift.

<sup>27</sup> This is a chanting practice done in Taba-dramtey.

Translation: *Do not be afraid, do not be sad; fish must die in the net and human beings must go through this cycle of death.*

The dead body placed on the bamboo sticks must be laid on the floor in the front room near the main door. It must be curtained off with a sheet of cloth to prevent it from being seen by others. Three *zerzos* (crossed bamboo sticks) is placed, one in the middle, one each from two sides of the body to protect it from the harm of evils (in *Taba-dramtey*). It is kept here for three days and two nights. During these three days it is constantly kept watch over round the clock, usually by men in turnwise, including the person who touched and wrapped the dead body and who would also take the body to the burial site.

And also it is said that in the past in *Loto-kuchu*, dead body of a woman is kept inside the inner room of the house while that of a man who is often the residential husband is kept in the entrance room of the house. Funeral rites of a married man are normally carried out at the wife's house but this can also be done at his own birth house. A woman's funeral must be carried out only at the birth household. She must also take her eternal rest in the ancestral land. But now-a-days, this custom is not strictly followed and is being carried out depending on family's convenience.

In any case, in both customs (*Taba-dramtey* and *Loto-kuchu*), three meals are offered as normal during these three days. They treat the dead body in most respectful manner as though the deceased would take grudge against the survivors for allowing the death to come.

### **3.2. Serving Meal for the Deceased**

As already mentioned above, to prepare food for the dead, a fire place must be made near the *tidhog* by erecting *jikpu* (three support stones) upright around the cooking fire. Food is prepared in a small pot resting on top of these three stones. [In *Loto-kuchu*, a hanging fireplace arrangement, known as *tridhug* is set on an earthen base held within an open basket on *jikpu* near the *tidhog*]. Once the food is cooked, *jikpu* is removed from the fire enclosure and laid flat until the next meal is required to be cooked.

The menu for the dead should include *ralma* (fish), *gyem* (honey), *drangbol* (wild potato),<sup>28</sup> *bulyuk* (fermented local drink called *bangchang*), *tsemping* (pancake made from millet or *lung-am/Ja-am*) and *tsakto* (food made from foxtail millet or *tsak-am/tsaku*).<sup>29</sup> The chicken, pork and rice also form part of the menu for the dead. However, the spirits of dead are believed not to like chilies.

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<sup>28</sup> The three items: *ralma*, *gyem* and *drangbol* are served only on the day of *Tsangka* or *Layii*, the 6th day feast or *gewa*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ja-am/Lung-am* (millet) and *Tsak-am/Tsaku* (foxtail millet) are popular food grains, and *Tsak-am* is even more essential and indispensable food item in the life of Lhop community and their rituals. Even before they slaughter animals for the dead, they throw *tsak-am* three times on the animal to indicate that the animal is earmarked for the dead person. The first cereal that originated or grown in their area is believed to be *tsak-am* and that is why they use it in every ritual process as a mark of auspiciousness.



Food made of foxtail millet



Bangchang, the local drink



Pancake made of millet

One of the close relatives of the deceased will be the cook to cook food for the deceased and he/she serves as a cook until the final day of the ritual ceremony. The food for the dead is cooked putting all ingredients/items such as chicken, rice, salt, etc. together in one pot. One meal should contain three pieces/chunks of chicken – a rooster for a deceased man, or a hen for a deceased woman. While the body is kept at home for three days, it is said that earlier (in Taba-dramtey), meal is offered to the deceased by dropping on the head side of the body which is already wrapped inside the bamboo mat, but today it is served in a plate or a *traa* (a flat winnowing basket called *bichap*) and placing in front of the head side of the death body. Only the left hand is used to offer food for the dead and is offered or served in an outward direction. After placing the plate or *traa* containing food in front of the body by the left hand, the spirit of the dead is summoned by hitting the rim of the plate or *traa* three times with tea churner stick (*ja thrug*) to come for the meal and then instruct:

*Adhu-a tsaye, tsedhu-a tsaye, kurdhu-a tsaye, dhongdhu-a tsaye!*

(Please take food after washing clean whatever dirt your hands and legs may have!)

When the food is offered all the close family members gather together. Then the food is offered amidst sympathizing wails and chanting – pleading the deceased to accept the food good or bad for that is what they could offer to him/her. The deceased is also pleaded not to mind or take any grudge on anybody. Some words of pleading recorded during interview at Taba-dramtey read:

*Na tsa ma renka tsa lahana  
Dung ma renka dung lahana  
Na tokna sib bunna kam lahana  
Saputka putnyang elimi mingpo ka  
Chutnyang elimi e-tsa e-tunga enau  
Lamchod zochod taah katway.*

The loose translation: “All items for eating and drinking are placed before you; please eat and drink to your satisfaction, and then go happily finding your own way forward. It is not only you to leave the world. We all have to follow you behind one or the other day to the world of dead ones.” So, they say in chorus.

The pleading and sympathizing words recorded in Loto-kuchu village read:

*Nata leha tshe-ya leha see-ya  
Hey pa-yu-o ta  
Dimba-dimba lai do-shay yu-la  
Lag toeb po-ha ma-ta ha*

*Nata see ya hey pa-yu-o*  
*Nata kong-lam na te-o*  
*Deju-ha ma lab bhu-ja-ha ma gol wey*  
*Kong-lam na te wee*  
*Wog lam na ma toe wee*  
*Hey pa-yu-o shimphu che ji ka*  
*Che jai la kat-ka ha*  
*Dhey log ang sho-va*  
*Kai-log pa nu cha ko cha ma-pa wee*  
*Kai tam yang yachay pot ka-jut bha wai*  
*Shimphu che-ji kha-hu che-jai la kat wee*

The above lines could be translated as follows:

*You are dead, what can we do,*  
*You are dead because it was in your destiny;*  
*No amount of pleas to the deity worked,*  
*It is time you have to die and the deity has taken you;*  
*Do not curse or blame us and our property, livestock and children,*  
*We are giving you your share of the grains, properties, livestock,*  
*Take those and make offerings to the deities for the safe journey of your soul.*  
*Do not trouble us anymore; we are giving you your share.<sup>30</sup>*



Serving meal for the dead

On the third day or the burial day, the first meal of the day must be served to the dead early in the morning at around 4 or 5 a.m.<sup>31</sup> The second meal is served at around 8 or 9 a.m. and the third meal just before the body is being taken to the *rombu*, the burial monument after 12 noon. No meal is served at the *rombu* according to Taba-dramtey practice. But according to Loto-kuchu practice, one more meal is served at the *rombu* after completing all the burial process.

### 3.3. Arrangement for building Rombu – the Burial Monument

On the second day after the death of a person, some people go to the forest to cut and saw planks from the trunk of a type of tree called *Leh-shing* (moraceae-morus levigata; *Tsendhe shing* in Dzongkha). The elders do not remember why this particular tree is chosen, but if this tree is not available, there must at least be a piece of its wood or a bark along with the planks of another tree which could substitute for the *Leh-shing*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The original Lhop language recording of chanting for the dead was made during the writer's recent research visit to a Lhop community settlement, while the English translation is largely taken from that given in Dr. Jagar's book.

<sup>31</sup> While interviewing, some interviewees gave contradicting information with regard to timing for serving the first meal of the day. They say that the food must be served in the early morning before the first sound of the rooster, as it is believed that if the food is served after the rooster first crows, then the spirit of the dead will be taken over by the evil spirit who took his/her life and the dead won't get to eat the food which has been offered. This needs further confirmation.

<sup>32</sup> When they go to the forest to cut the planks, they carry seeds of cereal called *tsak-am/tsaku* (foxtail millet) and before felling the tree, they cast the seeds on the tree three times to indicate that the tree is for the dead person and let it be cut easily.



It is said that five planks<sup>33</sup> must be made from a single piece of wood each measuring the length of a normal human being. There must be six persons – five persons to carry the planks and one person to carry the tools. The *pirla* leaves<sup>34</sup> must be collected for the purpose of roofing the hut of the dead, the *rombu*. Some people engage themselves in collecting stones from all around the fields surrounding the house. A site that lies at least 30 metres away from the house toward the north direction<sup>35</sup> within their registered land is normally selected but an area next to the earlier burial is also preferred.

### 3.4. Building Rombu

On the third day or the burial day, preparation starts early in the morning at the selected site. A day earlier, some people would have already fetched enough planks for box from a freshly cut *leh-shing*, *pirla* leaves and stones.

At the selected site, the ground is cleared and a horizontal stone foundation is laid to raise the area about six inches from the normal ground level as the base of a circular tomb. On this plinth of stone foundation, the planks which are cut to standard sizes are arranged to form a cubical box measuring 3x2x4 ft. Around this arrangement, stones are piled up to cover the planks in position to form a coffin in place. While the stone level around the box comes up to the height of the box, others erect small hut to house the whole stone mount that would finally come up.

For the hut, six supporting poles around five feet high cut from a tree locally known as *gyekshing* are erected in a close row around the site and is roofed with *pirla* leaves. The bark of the poles is peeled off on its three different parts to indicate that it is the hut for the dead person. And the *pirla* leaves are laid with back side up when roofing the *rombu* and for other normal uses the leaves must be placed with back side down. The gaps and holes between planks are filled with gray clay called *toka* especially collected from along the side of a stream. This is done to make it airtight to prevent any insects inside the box where the disease would lie. [It is said that according to Taba-dramtey practice, a small hole is kept in the lower right of the box as an outlet for passing stool and urine]. Once these preparations are complete, it is time to bring the body to the site.

### 3.5. Moving the Dead Body to the Rombu

After the last meal is served, the body wrapped in the bamboo mat is taken out from the house by the one who handled the death body only after 12 noon and in Taba-dramtey it must be taken out from a door created below the existing main door to indicate that the dead has no permission and ability to use the door that living people use. In this regard, the Lhop has a saying, *Dhoepai ney machi, jowai lam machi*, meaning “The dead person does not share living space and walking paths with the living person”. It is carried on the back with rope harness supported by his forehead and shoulders. No one else should help him. He should complete to carry at one go and not in stages.

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<sup>33</sup> A term used for planks for the dead is *pil* in Taba-dramtey dialect.

<sup>34</sup> A kind of bush/shrub with broad leaves grown in their area.

<sup>35</sup> They normally select a site lying towards the north or northwest direction from their house. Some elderly Lhops say that they prefer to select a site lying towards Thimphu Trashy Chhodzong or towards Punakha Dzong where the supreme ruler Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel is believed to be reigning. They can only lay the deceased person to rest within their registered land not far away from their house.

When they take out the body, they pleadingly instruct the deceased as follows:

*Nata semchen leyha siya*  
*Na suwa kitsu datsuka gayang*  
*simpu puranga kitnyang*  
*Simpu purang kita katlahana*  
*Lamchod zochod ta ah katway*

The translation reads: “Beings are born because of its karma and also die because of its karma. You are not killed by hitting with dagger and arrow but died because of your own karma. Now go finding your own way to the lord of death who takes care of dead ones. You will be peaceful there and you will be happy there.”



Rombu, the burial monument

If the dead person is a male, there must be someone in the front carrying a bow and three arrows who will lead the procession taking the body to its *rombu*. [In Loto-

kuchu, an unmarried daughter of the matrilineage carrying a basket containing crockery, knife, and other articles of day to day use of the deceased, leads the procession to the burial site]. The next in line will be the person who cooks the meals for the deceased, who will carry his/her belongings in a basket. He will hold a *jobsey* (bitter gourd shell) containing seeds of foxtail millet and cotton in his hands, and scatter pieces of cotton and the seeds as he walks along on the way to ward off evils and clear the path. The body of the deceased will be third in line and the accompanying entourage will brandish knives and make noise to drive away the evil spirits. If the dead person is female, there is no need for the man with the bow and arrows.

### 3.6. Sealing the Rombu

On reaching the site of the *rombu*, the entourage must circumambulate the *rombu* three times in clockwise direction. The people help the bearer of the death body to lift the body above the box and the body is swung up and down three times over the burial box and then lowered into the box for the final rest with the head to the north and the face looking up ward. In Tabadramtey, the head is positioned in the eastern direction as it is believed that the spirit will go to the east for rebirth. Once it has been laid in the box, the bamboo mat that has been tied up with rope is untied opened, and now the body is let rest with *tepgyem* only. Then *pirla* leaves – five pairs for male and six pairs for female – are laid with back side up on the body and then one *sang* (weight roughly equivalent of 333 gms.) measure of seeds of foxtail millet are put on the body.



All the personal belongings of the dead person especially valuable items such as money, ornaments, clothes, knife, cups, plates, etc. are kept beside the body in the box.<sup>36</sup> The relatives and friends also offer money for the dead by placing it in the box. While placing the personal belongings in the box, the deceased is vocally informed that nothing of him or her is being held back by anybody and he or she should not get attached to the household and the family in whatsoever.<sup>37</sup>

After this, the box is then covered with a *leh-shing* plank called *malkib*<sup>38</sup> and it must be completely sealed with the same clay – *toka* from both within and outside of the box to ensure that the interior is made airtight and there will be no smell as the body decays in the box.<sup>39</sup> The person who carried the dead body does the filling work. Next, many hands come together to stack stones over and around the box. Finally, it takes the shape of a pyramidal stone mound inside which the body is encased in an airtight box. Around the hut, at the feet of the fencing poles the girl who led the procession earlier scatters seeds of foxtail millet and cotton (this is only practised in Loto-kuchu village) in three circumambulations around the hut.

A triangular shaped stone is placed on the top of the mound under the hut. The personal belongings of the dead person such as baskets, pots, pans, bamboo containers and so on are then either placed on top of the mound or hung against the poles of the hut. When the triangular stone is placed, the deceased is vocally informed of the following words:

*Pirha zosi yanu ika tenglay zongway waarkong binu ika gulay trah way.*

The translation reads: “If wild animals (tigers, wild elephants) attack you, please take shelter on the top of this rock. If wind and rain beat you, please take shelter under this rock.”

From the right side of the *rombu*, the person who cooked and carried the dead person’s belongings, holding wood ember and *jobsey* together in his hand, blows it three times and breaks the *jobsey* by hitting on the triangular shaped stone placed on top of the mound and ask the spirit of the dead to come and eat food from him after three nights.

After all procedures of burial works are completed, fencing is erected all around the *rombu*. And the fencing is done by poles measuring around 4 to 5 feet pegging into the ground. Long cane ropes running three times around bind the fencing. And then the roof of the hut is also bound by running three ropes across from side-to-side over the roof of the hut and tied to the fencing poles.<sup>40</sup> Four *zerzo* are placed at the four corners of the *rombu* to protect harm from evils [this is done only in Taba-dramtey].

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<sup>36</sup> It is said that in the past the Lhops used to keep expensive ornaments and valuable belongings of the dead person in the grave. Their strong belief in the dead spirits lingering attachment to the material property is probably the main reason behind this tradition. All that belonged to older generations has been buried along with the corpse. But this tradition has now changed. These days they only lay in the grave a few coins or bank notes of small denomination, besides the old clothes, tools, pots and plates.

<sup>37</sup> If the deceased used to love the flute, the instrument is played to give comfort to the soul of the departed. The instrument is also then buried with the dead body.

<sup>38</sup> The plank used to cover the box is called *malkib* in Taba-dramtey dialect.

<sup>39</sup> They believe that if the deceased is not given a proper burial or if a sanctified tombstone is not placed on the grave, then the soul of the deceased will wander to the four corners of the world and weep and wail and return to disturb the relatives.

<sup>40</sup> *Mani* scripts printed on white cloth (flag) is also hoisted on the roof of the hut of *rombu*, but this apparently seems a new feature added in recent years, as is done by only a few.

After all burial processes are completed, first the family members of the deceased along with bearer of the dead body offer the last meal (consist of *tsakto*, *jato*, and *banchang*) of the day to the dead near the *rombu*.<sup>41</sup> After this, all those who came for the funeral gather at a site, a little away from the *rombu* and are entertained with feast of food and drinks. The leftover food (if one is not able to eat all that has been served) should not be thrown away.<sup>42</sup> It should be taken home and consumed. After the food and drinks, people go home after paying condolences leaving behind the bereaved family near the *rombu*. It is said that in earlier time in Loto-kuchu, after the death of a person until the time of the *Layii*, the 6<sup>th</sup> day *Gewa*, the food is eaten in a different manner than other times. People cannot eat the food with bare hand. The food has to be picked with the help of a piece of leaf and thrown it into the mouth without touching the lips. The drink is taken as usual in bowls or leaves pouches. And also if any relative of the family stays back on this day, he or she has to stay continuously for another three days at the deceased home. But these are no longer in practice.

### 3.7. Final Feast for the Dead

The final feast (ritual) for a man is held on the 18<sup>th</sup> day after the 6<sup>th</sup> day *Gewa* while for woman is held on the 15<sup>th</sup> day after the 6<sup>th</sup> day *Gewa* (see chart below), which in their language (in Loto-kuchu) is expressed as ‘*skyes pa drug gsum bco brgyad, za mo lnga gsum bco lnga*’ (6x3=18 for male; 5x3=15 for female). There is variation in animal sacrifices among Lhop village. In Taba-dramtey, either a male pig for man or a female pig for woman is sacrificed for the final feast while in Loto-kuchu, an ox for man or a cow for woman is sacrificed.

During my research visit to Loto-kuchu (from 4<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2014), I had the opportunity to attend a *Gewa* held for a deceased woman 65 years of age which was held in the open field near the bereaved family’s house facing the *rombu*. More than 95 people (relatives, neighbours and friends) from nearby villages gathered for the final *Gewa*. A cow



Final feast for the dead

was sacrificed for the *Gewa* of the deceased woman. After slaughtering the cow, different parts of its mortal remains – bones, flesh, ribs, heart, lung, intestines, skin, legs, tail, head, horns, etc. – were set apart from each other. Of these, those parts to be served to the gatherings (who came for the feast) were started to cook while those to be served to the dead were kept aside.

After the cooking process was completed, first the spirit of the dead was served. The food items for the

dead included the half cooked large chunk of right and left ribs, chunks of meat from different parts of the corpse, *tsakto*, *jato* and *bangchang* and they were served placing on a winnowing basket. Only the close relatives served the food for the dead with the left hand in an outward direction; while making the offering, they repeatedly plead the spirit amidst wails and chant that they have given to her entire share and that they have not kept back anything belonging to her. The spirit of the dead is then asked to leave the surviving family members

<sup>41</sup> In Taba-dramtey, a meal is not served to the dead at the *rombu* after having served at home before bringing it to the *rombu*.

<sup>42</sup> If one throws away the food served during funeral, it is believed that the deceased will not feel happy and will resent because of which his or her peaceful movement in life after death will be disturbed.

alone and not cause any harm. The spirit is told that although the death is premature for her, it was not they who killed but her own *zandray* (killer ghost) who took her life. Therefore, the spirit was pleaded not feel bad towards her relatives and should not harm them. Instead, the spirit must take the good path and endeavor not to be reborn as an animal, but rather as good and prosperous human being.

While the close relatives continue serving the spirit of the dead, simultaneously the gatherings were entertained with feast of food and drinks which include different meat



Entertaining the gathering with feast

items, *tsakto*, *jato*, rice, and above all *banchang* was served in large amount. They ate and drank as much as they could, and the left over foods were not thrown but taken home well packed in their containers to be consumed later.

Feast offerings made to the spirit of the dead included even tail, and udder (uncooked), and a symbolic milk churner called *odong zhodong* (in their language). At the end of the ritual, the tail, udder and *odong zhodong* were taken to the *rombu* and hung on the pole of the *rombu*.

### 3.8. Death Rituals for Children

An individual below age of 12 is considered a child in Loto-kuchu while in Taba-dramtey an individual below age of 8 is only considered a child. Whatever it may be, when a child dies, his or her death body is wrapped in cloth and tied as is done for older people and buried in a *rombu* near their house without giving a ceremonial expression to the feelings of the parents and other family members. So, no formal ritual process, like sacrificing animals, held for the death of children. However, for dead children over 12 years of age *Gewa* is held, with the sacrificing of an ox in case of a male and a cow in case of a female in Loto-kuchu village and a male pig in case of male and a female pig for a female in Taba-dramtey village.

Sometimes a woman does die in labour without delivering the child. At that time her husband cuts open the womb in an effort to save the child. If the child is found alive, the father and close family members take responsibility to bring up the child and if the child is found dead inside the womb, the foetus is taken out and buried separately without any funeral ceremony. On the other hand, mother's dead body receives elaborate funeral rites.

According to the researcher's informant, a few Lhops especially in Loto-kuchu do lay their dead children on the riverbank so that the water will take them away or they will decay into natural elements where they have been placed.

### 3.9. After Death

As in any other community or society, death is considered a great loss in the Lhop Community. Death is taken as the end of the present physical life. They believe in the transmigration of the *sehok* (spirit) or consciousness just as do the Buddhists. They believe

that the death person does not know whether he or she is death until the time of the sixth day *gewa*. Until that time he or she feels as if a normal living person and hovers around within the residential territory. The *sehok* is finally believed to be leaving the body and household on the final day of the *Gewa* and thereafter it is believed to be roaming about in the jungles and streams to join another world of the death (*simpu*).

But if due funeral process is not carried out, due to attachment to material properties the spirit of the dead person is believed to be lingering around the household, hungry, thirsty, tired and asking for food and drinks.<sup>43</sup> As the living family members cannot see the visitor and fail to fulfil the desires, the frustrated spirit often resorts to harming the living family members.<sup>44</sup> At that time, the witch doctor is consulted and the doctor helps them identify the particular *sehok* through oracles. So they offer food and drink to the haunting *sehok* with the request not to harm or curse any of the poor living family members and express their helplessness in preventing the *sehok* from leaving the body and lament that it was in his/her fate that such misfortune befell him or her. While offering, they instruct the spirit to accept whatsoever they could manage to offer to him or her and stay happy and contented wherever he or she is. Such practices may have prevailed in other parts of Bhutan prior to the advent of Buddhism in the seventh century (CE).

The Lhops have a belief that if one does good, one will go “up” (refers to Heaven) and if one does bad, one will go “down” (refers to Hell). That means they have some understanding or idea that good action bringing good result will lead one to be born into higher realm and bad action bringing bad result will lead one to be born into lower realm. But judging by the theme of the prayer that they make during funeral for the death person, their most preferred rebirth seems to be human birth. The prayer reads as:

*Na bamochen lihik lay ma chi way,*  
*Langmo chen lihik lay ma trung way,*  
*Zimrib sapa lihik lay ma chi way,*  
*Mi lue rinchen lihik lay trung way.*

The translation reads:

*May you not take the rebirth of a cow,*  
*May you not take the rebirth of an ox,*  
*May you not take the rebirth of insects such as an ant,*  
*May you take the rebirth of precious human being).*

From the above prayers, it is to be understood that, like in any religion, in the belief of the Lhop community, an essential part of an individual’s identity or soul or consciousness continues to exist after his or her death whether it may be some partial element, or the entire soul or spirit, of an individual, which carries with it and confers personal identity. Some religion hold that the dead go to a specific plane of existence after death, as determined by a god, gods, or other divine judgment, based on their actions or beliefs during life. In contrast, in Lhop belief system, like in Buddhist tradition, the nature of the continued existence seems

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<sup>43</sup> Lack of access to religious services involving lams might have perhaps led them to the appeasing of the soul, as it is believed that the unguided and wandering spirit keeps coming back to the family hoping to get food and shelter.

<sup>44</sup> People believe that most of the common sickness and illnesses are caused by one of these *sehoks* of the death persons who may have been neglected or disregarded.

to be determined directly by the actions of the individual during his or her life, rather than through the decision of supernatural agent.

## **4. Practices and Beliefs related to Death**

### **4.1. Unnatural Death**

In Lhop community, the unnatural death caused by accidents, such as falling from a tree, cliff or an encounter with wild animals is specially feared and taken seriously. Such death is often believed to have been caused by some evil spirits or bad spells from somebody or by having caused humiliations to local deities. The spirit of the unnatural death is most feared. In case of such unnatural death, the *spirit* of the death person is believed to trouble the living family members and relatives more than the spirit of the natural death with its resentment believed to direct more to those who believed to have caused the death. The bereaved family members seem to mind their protecting deities for not preventing the untimely death. So they appease the deities with rituals and appeal the spirit with food and drinks at their best possible means not to cause troubles to the surviving kinsmen.

The unnatural death mostly takes place outdoors. According to their custom, even if death takes place outdoors, the dead body must be brought inside the house and prepared for funeral rites in the same way as that of death that took place at home. This forms one of their unique customs and goes to prove the high respect that they show to the dead body.

### **4.2. Condolences and Volunteer Support**

As soon as death has occurred, the relatives, friends and neighbours gather at the house of the bereaved family with packets of fermented millets and uncooked cereals to console them. The third day is the day the dead body is to be finally laid at the burial site, and on that day also all the relatives comprising almost the whole of residential territory come with gifts of unprocessed fermented millet, uncooked cereals (such as foxtail millet) packed in *gyekshing* leaves<sup>45</sup>, food and *chang* (local wine) for the deceased. They also come with *bangchang* made from millet and offer to the bereaved family.

Relatives and neighbours help the bereaved family in collecting raw materials such as firewood, planks for the coffin, bamboo, and stones, and in building the *rombu*, etc. required for the dead. They also get engaged in cooking and other household chores. Being a closely knit community, they help in whatever possible way they can until the end of the final ritual.

### **4.3. Astrological Consultation not made**

In mainstream Bhutanese tradition, when a person dies an astrologer is called upon to provide a death-horoscope (*shin rtsis*), in order to ascertain the requisite ages and birth years of those persons who may approach and touch the dead body, and also to provide necessary particulars concerning date and mode of cremation, and the conducting of virtuous ritual performance for the deceased (*gshin don dge rtsa*) and remedial rituals for the living relatives (*gson don rim 'gro*).

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<sup>45</sup> The gifts brought for the deceased is called *bohotong* in Taba-dramtey and must be packed in *gyekshing* leaves indicating that they are for the deceased person.



But in the Lhop tradition, they do not have the custom of consulting an astrologer when a person dies; neither do they use the services of astrologers in their culture at all. As in mainstream Bhutanese culture, they do not have particulars concerning date and mode of cremation, and the conducting of a ritual ceremony for the deceased. Their tradition requires the dead body should be buried after three nights have elapsed since the death and that final rituals should be conducted on the 15<sup>th</sup> day (for female) and on the 18<sup>th</sup> day (for male) respectively, without having to consult an astrologer or horoscope.

#### 4.4. Death Anniversary

The Lhop community does not have any special way of observing the death anniversary. However, traditionally it is observed for three years (only in Loto-kuchu). On the anniversary day food is cooked near the *tidhog* like at the time of the actual death, and then the spirit of the dead is called and offered food.

Also, during harvest season they offer food grains: maize during maize harvest season, millet during millet harvest season, and fox-tail millet during harvest season of fox-tail millet, to the spirits of the dead.

According to Ex-Tshogpa Ap Lobzang Taba village, although the tradition of observing death anniversary existed in Taba and dramtey villages in the past, now except a few, most have stopped observing it.

#### 4.5. Animal Sacrifice

As a usual practice, on the first day of the death, a rooster for a deceased man and hen for a deceased woman is sacrificed. In Taba-dramtey, the rooster or hen is killed by the person who cooks for the deceased by banging its head on the *tidhog* three times with the left hand. After cooking, it is offered to the dead by the cook himself. On the third day or the day of burial, a male pig for a deceased man and a female pig for a deceased woman is sacrificed. And on the 6<sup>th</sup> day *Gewa* and the Final Day *Gewa*, a male pig for a deceased man and a female pig for a deceased woman each is sacrificed. In Loto-kuchu, an ox for a deceased man and a cow for a deceased woman are sacrificed on the Final Day *Gewa*. The reason they gave for sacrificing animals is that the spirits of the dead need companions and since no humans can be sacrificed for such purpose, they send the soul of an animal along with the soul of the dead person. They believe that if they don't sacrifice an animal for the dead person, then the dead person's spirit will haunt the living persons and will never let live peacefully.

It is said that in the past, like in Loto-kuchu, a cow and an ox used to be sacrificed for the final day of the feast in Tab-dramtey also, but they say that today this practice has been stopped; instead a male or a female pig is sacrificed on the day. A poor family who are not able to afford sacrificing animal on each day as shown in the chart below, they settled with one pig for the entire process of the death ritual.



Cow sacrifice for the final feast

The person who cooked for the dead kill the pig for the feast with his left hand, by

piercing the pig from the left side of the ribs with a sharp dagger. First the dagger must be pointed two times to the direction of the heart of the pig saying: “*Zuway Zuway Zuway*” (Give way, give way, give way) and the third pointing must pierce the heart of the pig. A garland of portions taken from all parts of the pig’s body including eye, limbs, tail, and tongue are taken to the *rombu*, the burial site and hung on the pole of right side of the *rombu* and the spirit of the deceased must be told that it is his/her share to enjoy. The *pak* (pork strip) for the dead is three ribs taken from the left side of the killed pig. The rest parts of the body of the pig is cooked and offered to the dead and the relatives and friends who came to attend the feast.

***The chart showing the days when animals are sacrificed:***

Day	Animal Sacrifice		Purpose
	Taba-dramtey	Loto-kuchu	
On the day of death (1 <sup>st</sup> day)	Rooster or hen	Rooster or hen	For the deceased
On the day of burial (the 3 <sup>rd</sup> day)	Male or female pig		For the deceased and those who came to attend the funeral
On the first Gewa Day (the 6 <sup>th</sup> day)	Male or female pig		For the deceased and those who came to attend the feast
On final Gewa Day (the 15 <sup>th</sup> day for the female and the 18 <sup>th</sup> day for the male)	Male or female pig	Cow or Ox	For the deceased and those who came to attend the feast

**4.6. Restrictions<sup>46</sup>**

The people of Loto-kuchu observe restrictions more strictly than Taba-dramtey even today. Not everyone can touch the dead body. Only a close male relative can touch the dead body. In Loto-kuchu, the person who touched and wrapped the dead body is not allowed to leave the body except for nature calls. His head is covered by a piece of cloth identifying that he is the one who handles the dead body and he stays in isolation from other resident or non-resident people. He also cannot enter the neighbouring houses for three years. He also cannot eat the food with bare hand until the time of the *Layii*, the 6<sup>th</sup> day *Gewa*. At that point, the

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<sup>46</sup> In order to make readers understand beliefs related to death rituals, I have here included mainstream Bhutanese beliefs pertaining to death. It is considered inappropriate to do agricultural or other field works in a village where a dead body is lying un-cremated. Moreover, if the dead body has to be taken across large rivers, it is considered inappropriate to take it over a bridge. It is believed that the dead body’s contamination would affect the ‘bridge deity’ and thereby upset the protecting deities. Hence, the dead body is slid along rope or cables stretched across the river. It is also said that the dead body must not be taken out through the main outer gates of the large mansions of high lamas and noble families. Rather, it should be taken out through a side or back gate. As the Door Deity (*sgo lha*) resides in the main doorway of the house, it is considered inappropriate to take the body out through it. Since there are numerous similar formalities and customs to be observed, it is highly recommended that an astrologer be consulted and his instructions followed accordingly.

In some communities custom has it that whoever carried out the dead body cannot enter the neighbouring houses until the next solstice. In some villages the body-bearer cannot enter others’ houses until the 21st day of the rites and cannot do any household chores or touch household items until then.

food has to be picked with the help of a piece of leaf and thrown it into the mouth without touching the lips. The drink is taken as usual in bowls or leaves pouches.

There are customs to follow after the death of a spouse. When a husband dies, the bereaved wife has to observe austerity for a period of three years during which she cannot enter other people’s house and also remarry before three years have passed.<sup>47</sup> And if a wife dies, the bereaved husband has to observe austerity for a period of three years if he has fathered kids to look after or otherwise for one year if he has not fathered any children. Some males do not cut hair as a sign of mourning for their dead spouse for the austerity period as a sign of mourning. So, it is very easy to find out a widower in a village by looking at the long hair, he keeps. The bereaved husband also cannot offer food to the deceased wife because they believe that the deceased wife does not accept food from the hands of her husband. And similarly, when a husband dies, the bereaved wife cannot offer food to the deceased husband. The resident husband also observes restrictions with some degree of relaxation when death occurs in his wife’s household. During this mourning period, relatives help in cooking and doing all the household chores. While everyone is busily engaged in preparing food, the bereaved husband or wife remains isolated from the kitchen area.

The other bereaved members of the household also cannot touch any household utensils and do any other work. And also they cannot enter other people’s houses during the time of mourning (until the final ritual has taken place). The belief is that they carry with them evils and sorrows, which could be transferred to other families/household. And if anybody is found doing so she is hit with dead charcoal and residue of fermented grain drink. So hitting with charcoal and residue of fermented grain drink is to ward off or neutralise and a way of showing the disapproval to the defaulter.<sup>48</sup> They must also refrain from consuming salt and fried food.<sup>49</sup> The house in which a death occurs does not worship any deities for one year and also does not celebrate *Loh* (New Year) in a grand manner with singing and dancing like other family for the following austerity period of 3 years.

#### 4.7. Working and Non Working Days between the Living and Dead

After the death of a person, the Lhops have certain practices to be followed with regard to daily activities. After every two days of routine chores, they take one day off from work as a mark of mourning until the final death ritual. There are some variations between practice followed in Loto-kuchu and Taba-dramtey. The following chart will show its details:

##### Loto-kuchu tradition<sup>50</sup>

Actual no. of days	New Day counted	<i>Elhni</i> (Bereaved Family’s Day)	<i>Arhni</i> (Death Person’s Day)
Day 1			Death occurs. Family members go

<sup>47</sup> It is said that as a mark of respect and to show one’s faithfulness to a deceased spouse, the living spouse and those who had sexual interaction/relationship with the person who died must refrain from eating meat for at least one year (otherwise private parts will rot with maggots and die).

<sup>48</sup> It is said that some settled with mere scolding to the defaulter and while others take it seriously to the extent of asking the defaulter to take the risk if anything bad happens to the family and to pay the fine.

<sup>49</sup> On interview, some elderly people expressed their view that this – refraining from consuming salt and fried food –is not their original custom of mourning. They believe, this must have an influence from the Nepali tradition.

<sup>50</sup> The information was recorded based on the interview given by the present Tshokpa of the village of Loto-kuchu, named Jabcho; hence it may not be authoritative since it was based on one person’s interview, and it merits further consultation.



			around making necessary arrangement for the dead body to be buried.
Day 2		The first half day of the second day is living family's day and is considered good day for the family and continue their daily chores.	The second half (i.e. afternoon) of the second day is death person's day. The family members refrain from daily (usual) chores and mourn.
<b>Day 3</b>			<b>The death body is taken to Rombu for burial. The family cannot do household chores and mourn the day.</b>
Day 4		Normal working days for the bereaved family members.	
Day 5		The first day of the 5 <sup>th</sup> day is living family's day and is considered good day for the family to do daily chores.	The second half (i.e. afternoon) of the 5 <sup>th</sup> day is death person's day. The family members refrain from routine chores and mourn.
<b>Day 6</b>			<b>The day is called Layii, and the spirit of the death is summoned and special offering of honey, fish and wild potato along with other items are served to the death twice a day at the burial site. The family members and neighbours gather to pay respect to the deceased person.</b>
Day 7 & 8	Day 1&2 (new counting starts from the 7 <sup>th</sup> day)	Normal working days for the bereaved family members	
Day 9	Day 3		Non working day for the bereaved family. They would sit and mourn the day.
Day 10 & 11	Day 4 & 5	Normal working days for the bereaved family	
Day 12	Day 6		Non working day for the bereaved family.
Day 13&14	Day 7 & 8	Normal working days for the family members	
Day 15	Day 9		Non working day for the bereaved family.
Day 16 & 17	Day 10 & 11	Normal working days for the family members	
Day 18	Day 12		Non working day for the bereaved family.
Day 19 & 20	Day 13 & 14	Normal working days for the bereaved family	
<b>Day 21</b>	<b>Day 15</b>		<b>Final Feast or Gewa for the death of a female. An elaborate feasting and offering is made to the deceased. A cow is slaughtered.</b>
Day 22 & 23	Day 16 & 17	Normal working days for the bereaved family	
<b>Day 24</b>	<b>Day 18</b>		<b>Final Feast or Gewa for the death of</b>

			<b>a male. An elaborate feasting and offering is made to the deceased. An ox is slaughtered.</b>
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### Taba-dramtey Tradition<sup>51</sup>

Actual No. of Days	New day counted	<i>Elhni</i> (Bereaved Family's Day)	<i>Shakney</i> (Death Person's Day)
Day 1 & 2			Death occurs. The family members go around making necessary arrangement for the funeral or dead body to be buried.
<b>Day 3</b>			<b>Death body is taken to Rombu after 12:00 noon.</b>
Day 4 & 5		The bereaved family can do routine household chores and field work.	
<b>Day 6</b>			<b>The day is known as <i>tsangka</i>, and the bereaved family and relatives gather and offer special offering of honey, fish and wild potato along with other items to the death person for which a pig is slaughtered. They cannot do the routine work, and sit and mourn the day.</b>
Day 7 & 8	Day 1 & 2 (new counting starts from the 7 <sup>th</sup> day)	Normal working days for the bereaved family. A new day is counted from the 7 <sup>th</sup> day for conducting ritual for the death person.	
Day 9	Day 3		Non working day for the bereaved family. They sit and mourn the day.
Day 10 & 11	Day 4 & 5	Normal working days for the bereaved family	
Day 12	Day 6		Non working day for the bereaved family. They sit and mourn the day.
Day 13 & 14	Day 7 & 8	Normal working days for the bereaved family.	
Day 15	Day 9		Non working day for the bereaved family. They sit and mourn the day.
Day 16 & 17	Day 10 & 11	Normal working days for the bereaved family.	
Day 18	Day 12		Non working day for the bereaved family. They sit and mourn the day.

<sup>51</sup> The information is based on the interviewed given by Ex-Tshogpa of Taba village, named Lobzang.

Day 19 & 20	Day 13 & 14	Normal working days for the bereaved family.	
<b>Day 21</b>	<b>Day 15</b>		<b>Final Feast or Gewa for the death of a female. Known the day by <i>segney</i>, an elaborate feasting and offering is made to the deceased for which a pig is slaughtered. The family members and relatives to pay final respect the deceased.</b>
Day 22 & 23	Day 16 & 17	Normal working days for the bereaved family.	
<b>Day 24</b>	<b>Day 18</b>		<b>Final Feast or Gewa for the death of a male. Known the day by <i>segney</i>, an elaborate feasting and offering is made to the deceased for which a pig is slaughtered. The family members and relatives gather to pay final respect to the deceased.</b>

In both Loto-kuchu and Taba-dramtey villages, new day is counted starting from the 7<sup>th</sup> day until the final ritual according to which the final feast or *gewa* takes place on the **15<sup>th</sup> day for female** and on the **18<sup>th</sup> day for male** while according to continuous counting of days from the day of death, the final feast or *gewa* takes place on the **21<sup>st</sup> day in case of a female** and on the **24<sup>th</sup> day in case of a male**. In both villages, dead body is buried on the third day after the death, *Layii/Tsangka* is held on the 6<sup>th</sup> day the final feast is held on the 15<sup>th</sup> day (21<sup>st</sup> day) for female and 18<sup>th</sup> day (24<sup>th</sup> day) for male. In total, the living family members has 12 days as working days and 9 days as non working days in case of the death of a female and 14 days as working days and 10 days as non working days in case of the death of a male until the completion of final feast.

#### 4.8. Raw Materials and Equipments

As in any other society, carrying out a death ritual requires a variety of tools and equipment, without which the rituals will be incomplete or will not be successful. The most important raw materials required for the death ritual of the Lhop are ox, cow, pig, rooster and hen.

The other things required are: *tsendhe-shing* for planks, *gyek shing* for pole, cane for tying up the dead body, *pirla* leaves for roofing, stones for building the *rombu*, *li-shing* (bamboo), *toka* (gray clay), *tridhug* for fire place, *jobsey* (*bitter gourd shell*), *zumar* (butter), coins, *gospi* (sickle), *chabu* (patang or sword), *karso* (knife), bamboo needles, needle, thread, clothes, bow, arrows, quiver, pots, *traa* (flat winnowing basket), basket, *paki* (white dress for man), *guigep* (white kira), spades, crowbar, plates, mugs, ladles, *lho* (bamboo mat) for wrapping dead body, cotton wool, cereals, etc.

#### 4.9. Mode of Transmission of the Knowledge of Death Ritual

The knowledge of death rituals is transmitted through oral tradition – from parents to children through practice and learning during actual performances. The community comes together

during the death of a person and the rituals are learned naturally through observation and practical demonstration by the elders.

The death ceremonies and rituals are carried out by family members without the involvement of any spiritual professionals such as monks and pandits. The children and members of the family learn about the rituals from their elders by watching them during the ritual performances and listening to the prayers and chants. In this way, the knowledge and skills of death ritual is transmitted for posterity.

#### **4.10. Expenses Involved**

Like in any other society, the disruption caused by death of a person takes several days of mourning, restricted activities and heavy drain on resources in terms of labour, cash and in kind, all of which are made possible with cooperation of several relatives and neighbours, to finally restore things into normal order. The elderly people informed us that in the past the death rituals/funerals were simple and not very expensive, and that they used to carry out the entire death ritual proceedings with whatever materials were locally available. The highest expenses that they might incur were for ox/cow or pig for sacrificial purpose, and then only if the family did not have one. Otherwise they could comfortably carry out the death rituals with a cash outlay ranging from Nu. 3000 to Nu. 5000.

Now with change of time and outside influence, some families make the proceedings a little more elaborate, though not entirely deviating from the Lhop cultural norms, and this obviously means more expenses for the family. Since the sacrificing of an ox, cow or pig is a must for the dead, if a family does not have one, one has to buy from another family, and a cow would cost around Nu. 13,000 to 14,000 while an ox would cost around Nu.17,000 to 18,000. If one cannot afford to buy, it must be borrowed and then must be replaced at a later stage. In addition to locally available crops like millet, maize, fox-tail millet, they also have to buy other prerequisites such as rice, oil, salt and other essential things thus incurring more expenses. The expenses are also augmented by the current market prices of commodities. Today, the total outlay for a death ritual [i.e. excluding price of an ox or a cow) is estimated to be around Nu. 20,000 to Nu. 25,000.

#### **4.11. Animal Sacrifice for the Dead – is it really necessary?**

Animal sacrifice is the killing of an animal and the offering of it to divine beings as act of propitiation or worship to maintain favour with a deity or divine agency. It also has a social or economic function in those cultures where the meat portions of the animal are distributed among those attending the sacrifice for their consumption. Such forms of sacrifice are practised within South Asian countries and also in the wider world and have appeared historically in almost all cultures.

In the past in Bhutan, besides the Lhop Community, animal sacrifice to appease the local gods and deities (but not for the death of a person) was widespread, having its origins in animist beliefs and Bon rituals. But the practice has slowly been brought to an end through the efforts of highly accomplished Buddhist masters in ritually binding/or subduing the deities with their teachings. However, there are a few pockets across the country where animal sacrifice still takes place during annual rites and rituals.

Just as in some communities elsewhere in South Asia, the Lhop community of Bhutan has been regularly practising animal sacrifice, be it for the spirit of the dead or for local deities, for the wellbeing of the community, since the inception of their settlement. Animal sacrifice is one of their sacred customs without which any other rites and rituals are meaningless according to their belief system. While projecting their own cultural characteristics, this also clearly reflects practices of other communities elsewhere in pre-Buddhist Bhutan. Animals sacrificed in general include ox, cow, pig, cock, hen and goat, which are sacrificed to appease several worldly deities/gods – *tenglha*, *zhibdag*, *nedag* which are believed to have control over Lhop lives, properties, fertility and the natural environment. Ox, cow, pig, cock and hen are sacrificed to appease the spirits of the dead while cock, hen and pig are sacrificed to appease the deities.

The present researcher, while appreciating the continuity of the Lhop community's unique customs and traditional practices, finds animal sacrifice in particular for the death of a person both deplorable from the animal rights point of view, and also illogical from the point of view of human reasoning. After having had an opportunity to witness the ritual slaughtering a cow on the final feast honouring the death of a woman in Loto-kuchu village during my research visit, (a bizarre scene, especially for this researcher) many questions came to my mind: Is slaughtering an animal a real necessity? How does this help the dead person's peaceful transition of consciousness through the state of life after death? Is the animal really being slaughtered for consumption or feasting for the deceased's families and those gathered for the occasion, under the pretext of slaughtering it to appease the spirit of the deceased? Are they following this practice because it has been their custom inherited from their ancestors? Can't they stop the ancient way of practice according to time and situation? Can't this type of traditional practice which goes against the rights of other beings be replaced by symbolic sacrifice of animal effigies if it is thought necessary to continue with such a ritual at all? To assess the relevance of animal sacrifice, one needs to answer these and several similar questions. In order to find an answer to these questions, we do not have to go to anthropologists or sociologists. If we apply our reasoning faculties and also look around us we get the answer.

I interviewed some of the elderly as well as younger people gathered during the feast as to why an animal is sacrificed following the death of a person. They told me that animal sacrifice has been the custom and they are simply following the custom. And when I asked whether there is any looming harm to the living family members if an animal is not sacrificed, they replied that there is no real harm as such but since the spirits of the dead need companions, and so they send the soul of an animal as no humans can be sacrificed for such purpose. But on the other hand they also say that killing animals for no reason brings trouble to the soul. If a man kills any animal, the soul of that animal waits till the man dies, taking revenge when the man's soul leaves his human body. The first reason they gave sounds absurd not only from my superficial understanding but from a common sense point of view, while the latter reason sounds logical in relation to cause-effect laws of Buddhism as well as from a scientific viewpoint – “every action has equal and opposite reaction.”

Every religion advises us to love and care for our fellow human beings. Some even teach us to love our fellow human beings more if they follow the same religion. But Buddhism is supreme in that it teaches us to show equal care and compassion for each and every creature in the universe. The destruction of any creature represents a disturbance of the Universal Order.

During the time of the Buddha, many kinds of sacrifices were practised by Brahmins who were the priests of the Vedic religion professed by the upper castes of contemporary Indian society. The Buddha criticized these bloody rituals as being "wasteful, ineffective and cruel" He did not see any value in these sacrifices, primarily because they were entirely external rites. If one could speak of a 'right sacrifice', it had to be something that was internal or spiritual.

Slaughtering an ox or cow and sending its soul as company for the spirit of a dead person is a superstitious belief. If the soul of an animal which is dumb, innocent and without faculty of reasoning, can give company, then surely the soul of a human being, living on a higher level of existence and possessing instinctive powers of reasoning and understanding, would please the spirit of a dead person even more. So why don't the bereaved sacrifice a human life? It is sheer act of cruelty and deprivation of their natural rights they being on the disadvantage side. Animals are like us when it comes to suffering pain and the prospect of the deprivation of life. It is this very sympathy with the suffering of animals and other sentient beings that is at the core of Buddhist compassion or loving kindness. The Dhammapada, the most popular of Buddhist texts mentions:

*All beings tremble at punishment  
All beings fear death,  
Likening others to oneself,  
One should neither kill nor cause to kill.*

Some Lhops claim that animals were created by someone for men; if animals were created for men then it could follow that men were also created for animals since there are some animals which eat human flesh. It is not right for us to take away the life of any living being since every living being has a right to exist. Animals experience feelings of fear and pain, just as humans do. We should not misuse our intelligence and strength to destroy animals. It is unjust for us to deprive them of the right to life, for every living being is contributing something to maintain this world.

## **5. Challenges to Survival of Lhop Culture**

The Lhop community has remained isolated from other parts of Bhutan since the beginning of their settlement. With the Tegola mountain range as a natural barrier between the Lhops and the rest of the country, the Lhops had limited communication with the rest of the communities in Bhutan, and thus would have nurtured a unique culture and tradition of their own. Their isolation, being more of geographical reasons than historical or political, for many years has probably been a major factor in preserving their culture. Passed down from generation to generation until today almost intact, and still being followed and practiced by the community itself, the Lhop culture can be considered national treasure however small it may be, for it represents much of the way of life of our ancestors in other parts of Bhutan, specific details of which are perhaps lost to us forever.

Even though the elderly section of Lhop community does not want their culture and tradition to be tainted by outside culture, as modernization creeps in, the Lhop culture and tradition including the element of death rituals is beginning to feel the effect of change. This sends a strong message to the younger generation of Lhops to take care in understanding their ancestral tradition in whatever forms it has come down to them today. Although the royal government of Bhutan has good policies for maintaining and preserving our age-old cultural

heritage and values, change has become inevitable in the face of the increasing impact of modernization. Some of the challenges to the survival of Lhop culture now and foreseen ahead are:

### **5.1. Education**

The Lhop community is very close-knit and the dead are accorded traditional rituals as they have always done. However, with children going to school these days, the rituals and festivals are beginning to lose their original place of importance and priority in the minds of the younger generation; some of the children and even some grown-ups show disinterest in their own customs and traditions such as death rituals. This being the case, there is a real threat to their transmission within the community as educated youth will drift away from the villages to the urban centres for employment, thus losing the touch with the Lhop community and its cultural practices.

The government policy of universal primary education may in the near future hinder Lhop communities in preserving and promoting their culture, including death rituals. While on the one hand education among Lhops is found to positively impact their quality of life, although the degree of impact differs among them, on the other hand it also brings negative impact in terms of respect and appreciation of their own culture and tradition. As the educated Lhops live outside their community, employed and settled in different parts of the dzongkhags across Bhutan, they become influenced by the way of life in the towns and villages where they settle. The core values and the essence of the Lhops – values of honesty, fidelity, moral integrity, moral rectitude, moral coherence, reciprocal affection, gratitude, filial piety, etc. are now beginning to see signs of change in the face of modernization.

There is a general tendency for people to envy and value what others possess and to overlook the value of what they have already have themselves; similar is the case not only with youth in general today but also with Lhop young people, who admire what they observe of the culture of others and try to ape that. If this remains the trend among Lhop youth, then the age-old tradition which, to this day, is considered to be unique in Bhutan, will diminish. It is only the Lhop elders who vehemently support upholding and promotion of their own culture and tradition these days, but some day, not too far off, the elders will die, making way for the next generation, and by that time it will be too late.

### **5.2. Socio-economic Development**

Due to rapid socio-economic development in Bhutan, the Lhop community is increasingly exposed to modern ways and amenities, thereby threatening the authentic core practices of their customs and traditions, particularly the death rituals. With the changing times and attitudes in the community towards materialism, the traditional Lhop character and way of thinking is also changing. It is to be noted that there has been a dramatic change in their way of living. Many of the Lhops are doing well with better houses, and hopefully will set good examples as role models for others.

Unlike in the past, Lhops no more live in isolation. Modernization and the government policy of regional balanced socio-economic development have led the Lhop to abandon the self-imposed isolation they had followed for more than a century. Modern amenities such as farm roads, electricity, cell-phone connectivity, and the introduction of public health facilities, clean drinking water and sanitation, gewog administration centres and modern education have

brought about remarkable changes in the lives and livelihood of the Lhop community. Now, without any trouble, people can effortlessly access and explore the rest of the district.

In the past, poverty prevalence was a natural phenomenon among Lhop, but with the recent government initiatives of socio-economic development, irrespective of population and geographical size, have helped alleviate the incidence of poverty through infrastructure development and employment opportunities. Lhops are now employed in different sectors across the country and are exposed to a modern way of living. The health and hygiene of people have improved since development initiatives were introduced. However, while these initiatives have had a positive impact on the way of life, at the same time, there have emerged social and cultural challenges arising from rapid developmental activities. Lhops are now driven by modern thoughts and over time, their age-old culture and traditions will be threatened.

### **5.3. Migration and Marriage with the Non-Lhop**

In general, the rural-urban migration phenomena is posing a great threat to the culture and tradition of communities across Bhutan, and has started to seriously undermine the essence, practice and the seriousness of the rituals. The migration movement is felt by the Lhop community too. The people from other communities, especially Nepali origin communities from southern Bhutan have forced their way in their locality and settled in and around Lhop-inhabited areas like Dorokha, Tading, Denchukha, etc., making Lhop culture and tradition vulnerable to the influence of the habits, customs and manners and the language of the migrating groups. It is feared that in near future they may be dominated by the migrating group and that an ethnic conflict between the communities may ensue in the region.

A wide range of influence brought in by migrating groups could be noticed in almost all facets of Lhop living styles. For example, a new feature which has infiltrated into the Lhop custom, whereby during the death rituals for a person the bereaved family refrains from taking salt and fried items as part of mourning, is actually a custom followed in the Nepali community. Another new feature, probably borrowed from mainstream Bhutanese tradition, is that sometimes a flag could be seen hoisted on top of the rombu or burial monument as well as on top of the mourning family's house.

More than anything else, Nepali migration has impacted on the Lhop language. Almost every Lhop could speak Nepali and the Lhop use Nepali words and terms even when speaking in their own native language. The educated Lhops prefer to speak Nepali rather than their own language, thereby posing great threat to their own language. With the passage of time there will be only elderly people who speak their native dialect and when those people are gone, replaced by the next generation, only few Lhops will remain who could speak their language. These and many other alien cultural elements could be noticed to have crept into the Lhop culture, if one stays in the Lhop community for a longer period of time and observes closely, and the taking up of the alien cultural elements may contribute to adaption to the culture of the migrants.

Another major factor that would perhaps challenge the survival of the Lhop culture is intermarriage between Lhop girls and men from Nepali and other communities of Bhutan. Since early times, inter-marriages among Lhops is the most preferred as it upholds the family bond and the Lhop cultural identity. Hence, the tradition demands marriages to take place within the Lhop community, but fate and circumstance do not favour what is demanded by the community. It is fate that brings Lhops of different walks of lives to meet their soul



mates, as employed Lhops reside and work outside the Lhop boundary and district. If this trend continues, it will contribute to displacement of age-old family unity among the Lhop and lead to dilution of Lhop cultural essence. As when a Lhop marries a non-Lhop it is inevitable that the culture and religion of the non-Lhop partner will also be introduced into the relationship.

#### **5.4. Conversion to New Faith**

With the influence of modernism, some Lhops are no longer traditionalists. They are open-minded and can adjust to different situations. They send their sons to join the monkhood in the Buddhist monasteries and temples across the country. Like any other monks, they would learn and study what is being taught, and would absorb the precepts of the Buddhist belief system.

Freedom of religion as per our constitution allows people to follow the religion of their choice. In this connection, some Lhop community members are mentioned to have adopted Christianity although the number is not known exactly. Besides, marriage with Nepali community also paves way to adoption of Hinduism in some cases. Thus adoption of other faiths and being influenced by other cultures threaten the continuity of the practice of the Lhop traditional death ritual, which may come under modification to suit the new faiths and influences.

#### **5.5. Oral Tradition**

The customs and traditions of the Lhop including their death rituals are based on oral tradition and do not exist in written form to this day. At present they exist purely in oral form and thus stand the risk of extinction with the passage of time and the passing away of the elderly people who are the keepers of the traditions. Already, the present generation seems to have lost a great deal of the past due to lack of any written documents. The shy nature of the Lhops and the influence of other cultures that spread around them in recent years have already led to a substantial degeneration of their oral tradition. Their language, and even the names and terms used for the different things have begun to take on different characteristics, thus posing challenges to the survival of the Lhop culture in general and more specifically, the cultural practices involved in the death ritual.

### **6. Recommendation**

The Lhop community does not have a designated selected burial site or cremation ground as is common in other communities or societies. Their tradition requires the dead body to be buried within one's registered land, not far away from one's family house, within a radius of around one hundred metres. The burial site or the *rombu* should not be disturbed or dismantled at any cost, but must remain there for years to come (until it breaks down naturally by itself). It is believed that if one disturbs it, the spirit of the dead will come to haunt and not let one live in peace.

Today, one can see many circular structured stone mounds, or *rombu* within the vicinity of every household. One visitor has even reported that when reaching a Lhop community one is first welcomed by *rombu*; those who are unfamiliar with the Lhop living environment may initially feel uneasy about this sight, but as one accommodates to the Lhop living style, such feelings disappear.



Cultivable land occupied by Rombu

With the Lhop tradition of not allowing the *rombu* to be dismantled, it is found that more and more of the cultivable land around their houses is taken up with *rombu*. Though this being their tradition passed down from generation to generation, the practice is not advisable considering that arable land is scarce and precious in their community, nor is it hygienic to keep the decaying remains of the dead in structures above ground so close to the houses of the living. Furthermore, some community members report that with the coffin being placed on the raised ground encircled by stone slabs it gives off foul-smelling odours to the surrounding area if the holes and cracks in the coffin are not made airtight. So, the practice is not friendly even from an environmental point of view.<sup>52</sup>

In view of the above, the researcher suggests that consideration be given to the setting aside of some government land for burial purposes for each village, to provide a choice between a common burial place and their traditional practice, without hurting their sentiments concerning the death ritual. The setting aside of burial land would provide an alternative arrangement which would both stem encroachment of the dead upon the arable land of the household, and also provide a more hygienic living environment for members of the community.

And also for hygienic and economic reasons, it is advisable to cremate. When the population in the community increase and if they continue to have dead bodies occupying valuable land, then one day all their remaining available land will be occupied by the dead and the living will have no place to live. On interviewing some of the elders and younger ones as well, they express their unwillingness to accept the practice of cremation of dead bodies. They say that

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<sup>52</sup> The most widely practised and preferred method of disposing of dead bodies in Bhutan is cremation. In Bhutanese tradition, cremating the dead bodies is supposed to be the best from a spiritual as well as from an environmental point of view. Cremating or burning the dead bodies is a very natural process and it is also something closest to nature to do. As we all know, our body is composed of four elements – earth, water, fire and air. The process of cremation is the quick process of naturally allowing the four elements of the dead body to return to their natural form. Thus, the earth component of the body is reduced to ashes, the water component gets reduced to vapour, the fire component gets converted to heat energy and the air component gets released as the smoke gases which are released into the atmosphere.

Environmentally speaking, the cremation method is a very non-destructive and friendly way of offering the dead body back to the mother earth. All the four elements that constituted the body return to their natural form or state. The earth becomes earth, the water becomes the water and the fire becomes heat and the wind becomes air. After cremation, the remains such as the ashes are thrown into the river or ocean. Even this practice is very environment friendly way of disposal. The finely particled ash remains are easily assimilated by the river.

cremation is against their custom, in the same way they have expressed their unwillingness to stop animal sacrifice during the funeral. It will take some time for them to accept the change and understand that cremation is much more appropriate and effective than burial.

Another suggestion or recommendation from the researcher is with regard to animal sacrifice. In the past, in some parts of Bhutan during the celebration of a festival, an animal would be sacrificed in accordance with Bon practice to appease local deities. Later, with the spread of the Buddhist faith, animal sacrifice was viewed as being at odds with Buddhist values, hence sacrifice of a live animal was replaced by the symbolic sacrifice of an animal effigy. Though in the beginning the people did not welcome the idea due to their ingrained belief in the need for a live animal sacrifice, as the years passed they adapted to the ritual of symbolic sacrifice and the symbolic sacrifice ritual has worked well without any setback until the present day. Similarly, regarding animal sacrifice as part of the death ritual in the Lhop community, it would be a good idea if the Lhop community could be encouraged to accept replacing live animal sacrifice with symbolic sacrifice of an animal effigy as part of their death ritual. This would not only spare the lives of innocent animals but would also be in line with the desirability of preserving the natural order of the environment.

## **7. Conclusions**

The ethnological research undertaken on Lhop community by B. Deben Sharma and Dr. Jagar Dorji reveals that for many years the Lhops have been almost on their own with little outside contact, and thus have developed their own unique customs and traditions. According to research, the minimal contact between the Lhop and people in other parts of Bhutan as well as outside the country over a long period of time, due mainly to the remote location of the community, has probably been a principal factor in preserving what remains of the culture of the small Lhop community. The people in the other parts of Bhutan will definitely appreciate a community that has been able to hold true to its traditional culture and withstand the changes of time. Whatever the Lhop have been able to preserve till today in the form of farming, housing and living styles, their death rituals give insight into practices which were probably widespread in Bhutan in earlier times. That is why Lhop death rituals have drawn the attention of both mainstream Bhutanese researchers and researchers from outside the country.

The Royal Government of Bhutan has policies in place to protect and promote our age-old culture and traditions. But however sound and healthy the government policies are, with an ever increasing population and the growing influence of globalization and consequent trend for assimilation of cultures and traditions, the successful promotion and preservation of traditional spiritual values is a mammoth and challenging task for the government. As the country enters into the mainstream of development with other nations, ways of thinking are gradually changing in response to the new challenges. Exposure to foreign cultures can have a positive impact where livelihood issues are concerned, but can also have a negative impact already existing traditions. Every developing nation or community is faced with this problem, for which a common solution must be sought in order to avoid the pitfall of uncritically embracing the new at the expense of traditional practices which have evolved over a long period of time. Not all the new is good: not all the old is bad.

It is not only other larger communities which started tasting the flavour of modernisation more than ten years ago, but also even smaller communities such as the Lhop (hitherto cocooned in the deep mountain forest for centuries) which are now impacted by the effect of

changes taking place around the country and the world at large. In particular, prolonged socio-cultural intercourse of the people with the dominated national culture and the influence of the Nepali culture in their immediate environment seem to have affected changes in their traditional ways, thus threatening to dilute the originality and essence of genuine Lhop culture which is looked up to as “unique” by the rest of the Bhutanese. Even the process of death ritual, especially in terms of beliefs and restrictions has not escaped influence and changes over the years.

Although beliefs and restrictions with regard to death used to be stringent in the earlier days, it has been observed that now they are somewhat relaxed particularly in Taba-dramtey, which is believed to be on account of frequent interaction with the commercial hub of Phuentsholing, and consequent widening the outlook and exposure of the community, thus making way to lift the veil of cultural stigma and taboo. For example, in the past like in Lotokuchu, the one who touched or carried a dead body cannot enter another person’s house for three year. But nowadays, this is no longer followed strictly in Taba-dramtey, and other traditional cultural practices have also been foregone. If directed by government order, people are even ready to adopt cremation of the dead instead of adhering to their tradition of burial.

It is difficult to justify and suggest attempts at protection and preservation of this small community. On the one hand Lhop must be allowed to enjoy the benefits of economic development and change. On the other hand the Lhop cultural heritage must be preserved. This dilemma has to be left for the educated Lhop to resolve — whether to preserve their culture and be proud of their Lhop identity or whether to accept alien cultural hegemony at the cost of losing their own cultural identity. No society or community can remain rooted in its traditional practices. A middle path must be sought by the educated Lhop, in making use of the new opportunities presented in the modern world while at the same time not losing touch with the traditions which give identity and bind Lhop together as a community.

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