

Bhutanese Food Culture in Kunzang Choden's *the Circle of Karma*

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Abstract

The Circle of Karma (2005) is the first English novel by Kunzang Choden, a Bhutani writer that narrates the life story of Tsomo, an uneducated female whose life goes through turmoil and hardships. The narrative, at its core, holds Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist way of life, predestination and karma. The novel throws light upon the religiosity of people, their beliefs, superstitions and traditions of people in Bhutan. It also brings out multiple migrations, spaces, places, locations and cultural hybridity through food, drinks and offerings made at altars and for pleading the spirits and deities. The food, drinks and offerings made to deities and spirits remarkably make the narrative idiosyncratically different. Food becomes one of the prominent markers of culture. Family is elementary social unit that provides space for gathering, sharing and eating catering space for communal dining. Similarly, communal dining is also evident when field workers work in each other's field cooperatively. Rice is the main body of most Bhutanese meals accompanied by one or two side dishes consisting of meat or vegetables. Pork, beef and chicken are the meats that are eaten most often. Vegetables like spinach, pumpkins, turnips, radishes, tomatoes, river weed, onions and green beans are commonly eaten. Grains such as rice, buckwheat and barley are used in food. Drinking of ara is common as it is made in every house.

The paper, thus attempts to throw light upon the Bhutanese culture of food and drink in day to day Bhutanese life evident through rituals, familial and social gatherings and offerings. It attempts to bring to light how Kunzang Choden uses food, drinks and offerings in her narrative during gatherings, religious rituals and offerings to spirits and deities of Bhutan.

KEYWORDS: Food, drink, offering, rituals

The Circle of Karma (2005) is the first English novel by Kunzang Choden, a Bhutani writer that narrates the life story of Tsomo, an uneducated female whose life goes through turmoil and hardships. The novel portrays the life of common Bhutanese in the mid-twentieth century through the protagonist who is the first daughter of a family of twelve in Wangleng, a small village in Bhutan. By the time Tsomo turns 15, only seven of her siblings remain. Her father is a gomchen, a lay monk whose outlook on life is deeply influenced by the concept of predestination and karma; who marries a girl of Tsomo's age after the death of his wife in childbirth within a year. The narrative, at its core, holds Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist way of life, predestination and karma. The novel throws light upon the religiosity of people, their beliefs, superstitions, traditions and rituals. It also brings out multiple migrations, spaces, places, locations and cultural hybridity through food, drinks and offerings. The food, drinks and offerings made to deities, spirits and rituals remarkably make the narrative distinctively different.

Pema Tsomo, known as Tsomo, born in a small village of Wangleng near Thimphu is the third child and the eldest daughter of her family who develops a good

bond with her mother. Her father is a gomchen who is always busy in his religious activities and rituals. This caters her an opportunity to observe the culture of food, cooking, offering and religious practices within the house closely. The novel documents culture, cooking, customs of food and drinks of Bhutanese in variant places. Wikipedia defines culture as an amalgamation of everything that encompasses human life. "Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts." (Wikipedia) Culture comprises of shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding learned by socialization. The present paper attempts to explore the traditions of food and drinks in Bhutan at familial, social and religious spaces, through communal dining and offerings made to spirits in Kunzang Choden's *The Circle of Karma*.

Cristina De Rossi defines "Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones, and a million other things." (Rossi Net) This definition is wider in its scope that insists more upon food, and religion. In *The Circle of Karma* Kunzang Choden exhibits the culture of Bhutanese through religion, food, clothing, language, marriage, beliefs, superstitions and traditions.

The dominant religious cult in Bhutan is that of the Red-Hat sect, a Tibetan lamaistic order of Mahayana Buddhism. The inherent idea is that purification of the body leads to the purification of the mind also. The practice of salutation, circumambulation, and offering of water; devotions are part of the Buddhist mode of worship. Often times, the offering is accompanied by ritual dances and dramatic representations. Whenever a domestic or public rite of greater importance is to be performed, lamas, expert in ritual are invited to prepare the altar and appropriate accessories and to conduct the elaborate worship. An indispensable part of all such ritual performances is the torma, figures made of dough and butter, shaped to symbolize deities and spirits and presented to the deities invoked in order to worship the deities.

The Circle of Karma is about the Bhutanese philosophy of life, rebirth and karma. It is about the masculine supremacy and feminine sufferings and subjugation. Kunzang Choden makes it clear in the early pages of her narrative when Tsomo's mother tells her, "You poor girl, you will not have riches. Your horoscope said material prosperity would elude you but if you practise religion you will be reborn as a man in your next life." (Choden 2) This throws light upon how women are subjugated in Bhutanese culture and men are privileged because they are men. Choden develops the novel around the female subjects who are either subjugated or marginalised. For instance, Tsomo's mother is referred as Mother that signifies her role of conceiving, delivering and rearing children. She does not have a name. Throughout the novel, she is referred as Mother without her personal identity. She delivers twelve children, and, in delivering her twelfth child, she dies. In her last delivery, she is so feeble that she fails to deliver the baby and both the Mother and the baby die. Her death is significant, as she does not die as a woman, but as a mother while delivering the baby with the unborn baby inside her womb.

Mother is always at home working throughout the day. Her prime duty is to take care of her husband who is a monk and take care of her children. Her husband is so busy in religious practices that the entire burden of farming is on Mother. "Tsomo

never heard Mother complain. She was big strong and brave woman and she did not complain about anything.” (Choden 6) The writer shows how women have to keep working like bonded labours in homes accepting the supremacy of men in the parochial social milieu. Also, Tsomo’s Mother teaches the culture of household and responsibilities of women in the family. She trains her, ‘You are the oldest girl, you have to learn to take the responsibilities of the household.’ (Choden 8)

Food becomes one of the prominent markers of the Bhutanese culture in the narrative. It is interesting to see how the Bhutanese enjoy their food in their familial spaces. Family is elementary social unit that provides space for gathering, sharing and eating. It also caters space for communal dining, the practice is centred on food and sharing time with the people who come together in order to share the meal and conversation. Rice is the main body of most Bhutanese meals accompanied by one or two side dishes consisting of meat or vegetables. Pork, beef and chicken are the meats that are eaten most often. Vegetables like spinach, pumpkins, turnips, radishes, tomatoes, river weed, onions and green beans are commonly eaten. Grains such as rice, buckwheat and barley are also used in the main course.

The text shows how the rural Bhutanese eat with hands. The family members sit on the floor in a circle and the mother serves the food. Most of the Bhutanese use traditional plates made of wood called dapa/dam/dolom and bamboo bangchungs. Before eating they toss some morsels of rice in the air as offering to the deities and spirits. Generally, the offering is made by the father. In *The Circle of Karma* communal dining takes place in home wherein the place of the father in the family has a special significance. Also, he is served first as he is the head of the family. As he is a lama, he makes long and elaborate offerings of food to all the deities and all his lamas. The rest of the members in the family wait for his permission to begin eating their food. This food culture highlights the Bhutanese familial communal dining. Choden narrates:

He would sit on his mat at the head of the semicircle of family members and Mother always served him first. Father made long and elaborate offerings of food to all the deities and all his lamas, both dead and alive. The family members could start eating only after he had tossed some bit of food into the air as a final gesture of offering. Tsomo had eaten meals with her friends in their homes where the atmosphere was more relaxed, everybody laughed and chatted as they ate. In her home, meals were serious rituals. (Choden 8)

Kunzang Choden showcases the culture of offering food to the deities and spirits in Wangleng, a small village in Bhutan. The person who makes such offerings in the village holds special status, as he/she is considered as an expert in preparing and offering the specific food and drinks to specific deities. Gradually, the persons who deal with such spirits are respected in the village. “The offerings are made to exorcise evil spirits and secure blessings or, allegorically speaking, to drive out bad luck and usher in the good year and good luck.” (Net) Aunt Dechen is recognised and respected in the village. The entire village keeps a rapport with her. Naturally, if somebody falls sick in the village she is called upon to help the person to free from spirits. Choden highlights the ritual with minutest details:

She was often called upon to help when somebody fell sick in the village. She would cook special food, for each spirit had to be given a specific food and drink and these had to be served in a particular way in special containers and

dishes. Then she would lay out the food in the prescribed manner and talk to the invisible spirits as if they were actually there. She wasn't a medium or an oracle, but people said, that although there were other people who could perform the rituals, only Aunt Dechen's food satisfied the hungry spirits immediately... She would put on a serious face, fill the empty cups and pile the cooked meat on the baskets of rice...Aunt Dechen usually greeted the spirits, then apologized, coaxed and cajoled them to go away and leave the sick person alone. (Choden 10-11)

The rural pockets of Bhutan showcase a concord between humans and nature. Every area has a deity and a spirit. These deities and spirits are offered food when a human being is sick. The writer comments how the expert in performing the rituals and making offerings to the spirits establishes a dialogue. Further, the ritual continues in a serious manner wherein Aunt Dechen speaks with the invisible spirits while offering the food and drink. These offerings are of rice, yak meat, Tibetan brick tea and ara. Ara is made from any grain cultivated in the region, rice, wheat or barley. In traditional feasts an unusual snack is offered. Butter is heated with egg and Ara is poured over the whole offering. She says:

'You have come and we did not know, please forgive us. We have prepared these foods for you. Here is high quality rice from the warm sub-tropics with good yak meat from the high pastures. Here is tea made from the best brick tea from Tibet, and ara which has been freshly distilled for you. Eat, for you must be hungry. Drink, for you must be thirsty. After you have eaten and drunk, please leave quietly... But the spirits often cooperated and the patient got better. Sometimes, though, Aunt Dechen had to scold and threaten them when they refused to leave, 'We've given you your favourite food and drink. Now, please go, and do not embarrass us.'(Choden 11)

Subsequently, the entire village knows what the spirits are and which house they belong to. The expert uses her different skills of threatening and abusing the spirits. Hence, the entire village lives under the belief of spirits. Offerings food and ara to spirits works like a medicine for the sick person. Kunzang Choden records the anger of Aunt Dechen as she insults the spirits when sometimes, despite feeding the spirits again and again, if the patient gets no relief, she would get very angry and say:

'I know who you are, you Lowly Gray Ones,' a derogatory reference. 'If you don't release my patient, I will come and pour all this food in your water container and shame on you. Now begone before I burn pepper and chillies to chase you off in disgrace.' Everyone in the village knew which house each spirit belonged to. So if even this threat did not work, it was assumed that there were several spirits involved, and their identities had got confused. So in the confusion, if the main spirit got left out of the feeding, there were problems. (Choden 11-12)

Further, Kunzang Choden throws light upon the concept of communal dining as a part of food culture of the Bhutanese, especially, in the rural pockets where villagers work in each other's fields for cooperation. During such agricultural meets and hard work, food performs strong a link between them. Delicious food becomes a centre of attraction and connection for the villagers who share the work in fields. For instance, Aunt Dechen and Wangmo, Tsomo's cousin are good cooks; and people know that the food and drinks prepared by these two is more tasty. The food contains

mainly butter, cheese and meat. In such gatherings, the host serves the people with generosity and affectionate enforcement. Tsomo states:

Their food was always delicious. Aunt Dechen knew that. People come more eagerly for any kind of work if the food and drinks were good and plentiful. During a lull in the animated conversation, Aunt Dechen once again asserted that, 'If people wouldn't hold back on all the good things like butter, cheese and meat everybody would be a good cook...like me'...'Eat as much as you can, there is plenty of food. You mustn't go hungry.' (Choden 30)

Drinking alcohol forms a major part of Bhutanese food culture. It is inseparable from public gatherings and food consumption. Especially, the field workers consume *Bangchang*, a homemade alcoholic drink while working cooperatively. Wikipedia defines, "Bangchang is a traditional undistilled alcoholic beverage brewed from wheat or maize corn, fermented with homemade yeast and mixed with hot water. It is stored and served in a woven bamboo container. Bangchang is believed to be safer than other alcoholic beverages due to its natural brewing process." (Wikipedia) Generally, it is in the post meal sessions, the field workers consume *bangchung*, a rice beer. The author explicates:

After the baskets were emptied and the pot was scraped, big ladles of warm *bangchung* were served. Its warmth spread through their bodies. Their feet became lighter. 'Now the banchang has reached right down to the tips of my toes. Let's go,'...Please take this with you, the workers will need this when they get thirsty,' and she handed her a large kettle of *singchang*."(Choden 31).

Generally, the food consists of buckwheat flour with chilli paste. They also use tender leaves of radish, onion leaves and coriander. For lunch the workers sit in a circle and the host or his representative serves the food. Kunzang elaborates the food items and the style of consumption by the Bhutanese villagers:

There was a huge bowl full of buckwheat flour mixed with water kneaded into a hard dough, and several small bowls with a runny chilli paste which Tsomo placed before the people. There were bundles of tender radish leaves that had been made to wilt in the sun and bundles of onion leaves too. After all the food was laid out, Tsomo sat in the circle of people waiting to eat...Everybody looked hungry and eagerly helped themselves to the dough and took the pieces of leaves and dipped them into the chilli paste...This was the typical meal for such occasions, so refreshing and cool on a warm and sunny day, especially when one was hot and hungry. Tsomo knew that soon she would have had enough, for this would be the standard lunch as long as the work continued over the next couple of months. (Choden 32-33)

The Circle of Karma also records the food culture of Bhutan through the consumption of *puta*, a type of traditional Bhutanese noodles that are a healthy alternative to the regular noodles, as they are made from buckwheat. They are generally served boiled, but can also be stir-fried in oil. They can be spiced up by adding different sauces and sautéed vegetables. Such dishes are eaten with tremendous noise of slurping and sucking the noodles. This is a specific community dining in the rural arenas of Bhutan. In addition to this, the host forces them to eat more and more. Majority of the times, such dinners end up with much wastage of food. This also underlines the natural and wilder ways of food culture of Bhutan:

The traditional dinner at such gatherings was always *puta*. The buckwheat noodles were tossed in mustard oil, spiced with chilli, acorn peppers and garnished with strips of fried egg and fresh onion leaves. The meal was eaten in a great fury and with tremendous noise. It was said that the noise coming from the home of a family eating noodles could frighten off even a wild animal. Listening to it, Tsomo was convinced that there was truth in the saying. The noise was tremendous and Tsomo was sure that no wild animal would dare come near the village! Everybody held their bowls close to their mouths and pushed the noodles into their mouths with their right forefingers, slurping and sucking, *harr...harr...horr...horr*.

As tradition dictated, Aunt Dechen was forcing people to eat more...Even if people covered their bowls with their hands, the noodles were poured on their hands. Much of the food went waste and the noodles lay littered like worms on the floor. The meal ended in a wrestling match. What fun it was for everybody!(Choden 35)

Further, Kunzang highlights the post dinner culture of Bhutan wherein merrymaking follows throughout the night. After the meal in the night, the workers feel energised by the meal, and they prefer to dance. They sing and dance until way past midnight. While they sing and dance, they drink *ara*. This *arais* served by the host family. Collective work in the fields results into collective dining, drinking, dancing and merrymaking. This culture holds the entire village as a single unit, a family. Even the villagers prefer to stay in the host family for the night and go back to their respective residences.

Further, Kunzang showcases Tibetan food culture also through her nomadic subjects. For instance, Tibetan food culture is evident when Tsomo observes Ani Decho preparing her food with the dough in her tiny cup. The author introduces *tsampa*:

Holding the cup in her left hand she mixed the flour in the tea with her right forefinger. Then she dug the tips of all her fingers into the cup and kneaded a small handful of dough. She did all this without dropping a bit of flour. 'Since I lived in Tibet so long I cannot do without *tsampa*,' she said as she began to break off small pieces of the dough and eat it, smacking her lips, like a baby tasting its first solid food. (Choden 75)

Gradually, the author introduces food of variant places as her protagonist visits and stays in different places during migration. Tsomo along with Dechen Choki visits Kalimpong, a part of Nepal and comes across the food culture of Kalimpong which is different from the Bhutanese food. The following extract highlights the difference between the Bhutanese and the Nepali food when for the first time they come across momos:

Soon the lady brought three steaming bowls of thin soup garnished with fresh coriander and onion leaves. She placed three plates with eight momos each in front of them. Then she brought a big bowl of red chilli paste saying, 'Bhutanese people eat too much chilli.' She had recognized them as Bhutanese from their clothes. The ground pork with ginger, onions and chilli, wrapped in a thick layer of wheat dough and steamed, was delicious. Tsomo has never had such good momos in her life again. 'Azi, what delicious food. Is this the food people eat here?' (Choden 141)

Tsomo and Dechen Choki work as stone breakers on roads where they maintain their Bhutanese food culture in their shelter. They use rice, garlic, chilli and coriander. After they reach Kalimpong and start weaving cloth and selling in the market, they earn their living, they maintain their food culture. Bhutanese food culture shows rice, ginger, garlic, chilli and coriander as common ingredients. Sometimes, they enjoy meat and pork. Thus, pork becomes a sign of luxury in their food. For instance, Dechen Choki says, “Abu, look what I bought for us, a kilo of pork. Let’s make a good lunch today,” (Choden 153) Thus, meat and pork are considered as the luxurious food items.

The Bhutanese drink suja, butter tea or ara, a locally made wine. Ara is made from any grain cultivated in the region, rice, wheat or Barley. Tsomo makes ara from rice and sometimes from barley. This ara she sells to make her earning when she lives with Lhatu, her second husband, who does not earn a single rupee to run the house. Subsequently, when she goes with him to see Rinpoche, the highly learned lama, the Rinpoche asks her to bring ara for him, as he knows that the Bhutanese women are good in making ara. Similarly, she makes ara and offers him the same whenever she goes to see him. The Rinpoche loves the ara and he drinks it in her presence.

Thus, to conclude, it can be said that *The Circle of Karma* touches upon the varied traditions of food and drink in Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet and India highlighting the food culture of the Bhutanese in the narrative. The familial and the public spaces show food and drink culture of the Bhutanese. In religious practices food and drink have immense importance. Similarly, in terms of beliefs and superstitions, the offerings made to the spirits and deities include food and drinks. In other words, food and drinks are inseparable part of every ritual in Bhutanese culture that keep the Bhutanese bound to each-other.

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