

## **Jo mo Kun mkhar: a pilgrimage to the abode of Ama Jo mo, the *yul lha* of the 'Brog pa of Eastern Bhutan**

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Known to the rest of the Bhutanese population as the Brokpas (*'brog pa*), the yak herding semi-nomads of Me rag and Sag steng in Eastern Bhutan (Trashigang district) occupy a special place in Bhutan. Literally the "Fire Burnt Valley" Me rag and the "Plain of Bamboos" Sag steng, has been the home of these semi-nomads of Tibeto-Burman stock, since their displacement from Tsona, of Tibet at a date which is still not identified but this displacement is attested in their myth of origin.

Living close to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Brokpas have for centuries endured the harsh life in the wilderness tending to yak and sheep for their livelihood. With settlements situated 3500 meters above sea level, agriculture is virtually impossible and non-existent, besides a few turnips. Bartering of yak meat, cheese, butter yak, tails and products of matted hair with their Tshangla counterparts (Eastern Bhutanese neighbours who engage in agriculture) for maize and paddy help sustain their living and add to their staple diet of cheese and milk.

Their uniqueness is reflected not only in their outlook appearances and their dress (which is made of yak and sheep hair and covered on top with animal skin) but also in their language and social norms. Polygyny and polyandry in the forms of fraternal and sororal marriage are accepted norms that keep the family property and units together.

The Brokpas have a profound sense of the intrinsic worth of their way of life and distinct identity. They maintain a homogenous socio-cultural entity with utmost concern for their tribal polity. Despite being strong adherents of the *dGe lugs pa* school of Buddhism – an oddity in itself in Bhutan – the earlier forms of original nature worship and animal sacrifice still feature in their way of life, and they refer to these practices as Bon. Their daily religious practice is made up of associated rituals such as fumigation (*bsang*), erecting prayer flags, consulting local shamans (\*Phramin) as well Buddhist priests.

The highlight of their religious calendar is the pilgrimage around Jomo Kuengkhar (Jo mo Kun mkhar) abode of their territorial deity, the *yul lha* Ama Jo mo sMan btsun Re ma ti. Therefore their territorial deity is a woman, a fact which is quite rare in the Tibetan world. Ama Jomo is revered as their leader who saved them from the impossible task of bringing down a mountain in order to build their king's palace and she secretly led them to their present habitat of Me rag and Sag steng.

This festival that lasts from the 1st day to the 30th day of the 7th month of the Bhutanese calendar is a festival with a pilgrimage to her mountain abode.

However, she is also worshipped by the neighbouring Tshangla population and *gsol kha* are offered to her, seeking her help and protection.

Therefore, I intend to present a paper focussing on the worship of the deity Ama Jomo sMan brtsun Re ma ti as well the festival in form of pilgrimage that is made to her and that I could witness in 2002.