

Gathpo: Not Just a Joker

The comical *gathpo* (གཞུ་པོ་) is a prevalent character in the festivals of Central Bhutan, particularly in Bumthang district. *Gathpo*, which literally means the elder or old man, holds an august position in some festivals. The *gathpo* figure is not only the leading clown who entertains the crowd but he is also the master of ceremonies who manages the entire festival programme. As a character who combines the sacred and profane, the *gathpo* is considered a powerful cultural figure and treated with respect and a deep sense of affection.

Gathpo usually wear wooden masks etched with deep wrinkles, often dark in countenance to indicate a weather-beaten face. They often don heavy long-sleeved Tibetan tunics tied with a silken sash at the waist. Around his neck is a short woolen mantle sewn in the shape of *dorjé gong* (རྡོ་རྗེ་གོང་) or *vajra* shoulder cover. His face evokes a sense of mystery, antiquity, mischief and conviviality, all at once. Wisps of white hair hangs on his forehead to remind people of his age and wisdom. Most *gathpo* characters wield a large phallus to symbolize masculinity and fertility and some carry a pre-Buddhist ritual implement called *chalang* (ཇ་ལང་) with its clapper in the shape of a tiny penis.

The *gathpo* of Ura Yakchö festival is known as Gaden Gathpo, as the character comes from Gaden temple along with the lama and the main relic of the temple, which is a statue of Buddha Vajrapani. The *gathpo* character represents the human patron of the lama and relic. Thus, he comes at the beginning of the festival and parts at its end with the lama and the relic from Gaden. The *gathpo* character of the Shingkhari Rabné festival in the adjacent valley of Shingkhari is called Chath Gathpo and has a wrinkly cream-coloured face. The *gathpos* of Chokhor valley including those of Jampé Lhakhang and Tamzhang are known by the names of their locality. The masks are attributed with some divine power and said to even protect the temple and its properties. There are also *gathpo* characters in Mongar and Kheng areas, most likely imitation or replication of the *gathpo* characters of the festivals in Bumthang as the religious and cultural life of these regions were initiated or inspired by religious figures from Bumthang.

The *gathpo* figures, inferring from their dress and hand implements, may have a pre-Buddhist origin although through ages, their character and role have been heavily influenced by Buddhist elements. There are no written records, except for the *shepa* (བཤེད་པ་) or recitations they chant during the festivals. A common chant is the humorous praise, some of it in local languages, of the phallus they carry. *Gathpos* are generally prevalent in central Bhutanese valleys unlike the *atsara* clowns, which are universal in Bhutanese festivals. Where there is a *gathpo* character, the red-faced *atsaras* play only a secondary role as clowns during a festival. The *gathpa* character is often accompanied by a *ganmo* or old woman and several other characters who represent his children and family members. In some festivals such as the Ura Yakchö, the first dance is a piece by the *gathpo*, *ganmo* and his retinue known as Sridpa Phomoi Cham (སྲིད་པ་ཕོ་མོའི་འཆམ་) or Dance of the Worldly Man and Woman. The dance involves bawdy movements and paradoxical chants which are meant to cause laughter as well as undo conventional taboos and hang ups.

The following sample verse from the chants of Gaden Gathpo of Ura Yakchö gives a hint of the paradoxical hymns of a *gathpo*.

ལྷོ་གངས་དཀར་རྩེ་ལས་ང་བབ་ཚེ། བསང་གཏང་མི་ལས་ལྔ་ཡོད། ལུང་པ་གཅིག་ཡང་མིག་མ་མཐོང་། །
 ལྷོ་གངས་དཀར་རྩེ་ལས་ང་བབ་ཚེ། ལྷན་རྒྱུང་ལས་ལྔའི་བདག་པོ་མིན། ལག་ཉལ་ལྔ་དང་རང་གཅིག་རེ་མེད། །

When I descended from the summit of the White Peak, a hundred people offered incense, but I saw not a single wisp of smoke.

When I descended from the summit of the White Peak, a hundred damsels waited on me, but I had no company at night.

The *gathpos* have many duties during a festival like Ura Yakchö. From waking up the priests in the morning for prayers and leading lamas for ritual rounds in the morning, through performing pranks and jokes to entertain the crowd and guiding and supporting mask dancers during the day to ending the prayers in the evening, the *gathpo* plays a major role in the festival. Some festivals begin with a performance by the *gathpo* and ends with the prayers for auspiciousness by the *gathpo*. The *gathpo* must also do divination to foretell the wellbeing of the village for a year and do several parodies of rituals to both entertain the crowd and ward off malicious gossip. The *gathpo* figure is thus not just the chief clown but a crucial character in the festival to moderate its proceedings as well as enliven the spirit of the people. Above all, the *gathpo* character epitomizes the robust sense of humour among the men and women in the central valleys of Bhutan.

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