

Lhabön Festival in Chendebji

The people of Chendebji have a strong Bön tradition, which has been incorporated into Buddhism. The Lhabön (ལྷ་བོན་) or Lha Bö (ལྷ་བོད་) means 'the divine Bön' or 'calling the gods' respectively and is a three-day annual event for the people of Chendebji in Trongsa district. Lhabön is basically a ritual performed on the tenth month of the lunar calendar in order to dispel evil and misfortunes. It also is believed to cultivate blessings from the local deities in order to establish peace, harmony and a good harvest for the entire community.

The Lhabön festival is celebrated in honor of the local deity. In preparation, the village residents construct a bamboo hut called the *lhachim* (ལྷ་ཁྱིམ་). One of the specificities of the Lhabön is that all preparations including the ritual cakes, the banners, and the erection of the temporary altar have to be completed on the same day; advance preparations are forbidden. Therefore people remain busy from dawn to dusk in order to meet the deadline.

Day One

On the evening of the first day, an elaborate shrine is made inside the lhachim. Early the next morning, the local deity is formally received from its abode in the mountain via a procession of villagers, who are dancing and singing. The line is headed by the Bönpo, and he leads them to the temporary shrine in the lhachim, which will serve as the deity's abode for the duration of the three-day festival. Once the deity arrives in the temporary dwelling, the ritual begins.

The festival is hosted annually by two hosts from the village, who are chosen on a rotational basis during the preceding Lhabön. The two hosts welcome the procession with plenty of alcohol, tea and snacks. They offer *bangchang* (an alcoholic drink) to the Lhé Wangpo Gyajin (ལྷའི་དབང་པོ་བརྒྱུ་ཕྱིན་) and start to drink. Everyone then sings a song at the lhachim before they visit every local residence, singing and drinking. They eventually visit all the households, except those of the two hosts. Once the singing and drinking are over, everyone disperses home.

Day Two

Next day, in the morning, everyone gathers at the lhachim again. Two wooden phalluses are made and placed among the *torma* sculptures in the lhachim during the early hours of the 2nd day. Later, these phalluses are strung on a rope and gradually hoisted up to the roof of the lhachim. Although the distance between from the ground to the roof of the lhachim is just over two meters, it takes about an hour to hoist them. Elderly chant masters sing and dance amidst a circle of men. After every verse, the men dance and sing a refrain. Later in the day, the phalluses are taken down in a similar manner, and

takes about the same time. Once removed, these phalluses become the toys of two clowns or atsara who uses them to amuse everyone throughout the day. Atsara or clowns are part of the religious dance performed on the 2nd day of the Lhabön festival.

Day Three

On the last day, to mark the successful ending of the festival, the deity is taken back to its mountain abode. Women entertain the audience with songs while men perform a drum dance. All the dancers are offered scarves and money by the people. Lhabön festival ends with singing and dancing throughout the day. Two days of archery games follow the Lhabön celebration.

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