

Emo Chilé: A Brokpa Song

Emo Chilé (ཨོ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས) is a sacred song sung by the Brokpa ethnic groups of Merak and Sakteng in eastern Bhutan. People believe the song was composed and initially sung by their guardian deity, Ama Jomo (ཨ་མ་རྫོང་མོ་མོ་). Ama Jomo is the tutelary deity of the pastoral communities of Merak and Sakteng though most of eastern Bhutan pays homage to her. She is believed to be a manifestation of Jomo Remati (རྫོང་མོ་རེ་མ་ཏི་), a form of Palden Lhamo (པདལ་ལྷན་ལྷ་མོ་). Born out of the state of emptiness and adorned with the glory of the universe, her face is like that of a young goddess. She wears a garland of white scarves and ornaments of turquoise and jewels. Immeasurable rays are said to radiate from her body. She rides a white horse with wings of wind and her right hand holds an arrow adorned with scarves. On her left she carries a skull filled with various ornaments. She is believed to appear in this manifestation and many other manifestations such as *nagas* and maidens in order to help sentient beings.

The people of Merak and Sakteng have their ancestral roots in the Tsona region of southern Tibet. They are said to have lived there under a wicked chieftain, who ordered his subjects to cut down a mountain that was obstructing the sun from shining on his palace. The people toiled for years to demolish the mountain but were not able to do so after much effort, when one day, a lady known as Ama Jomo suggested that it is easier to cut off the head of a person than to cut off a mountain. Thus, the people rebelled and beheaded the chieftain during one of the festivals. Following this, the people fled from Tshona with all their belongings, scriptures, yaks and sheep. Ama Jomo led the people southward looking for a new home. After travelling for several months, crossing snow-capped mountains, rivers and dense forests, they arrived at the foothill of a very high mountain pass.

The weaker group, who could not cross the Ngachung Pass (ཉག་རྒྱུང་པ་), settled in a beautiful wide valley covered with bamboo forests. This place is now called Sakteng or “upland covered with bamboo”. Ama Jomo and the stronger ones along with the animals managed to climb over the Ngachung Pass and settled in a beautiful valley with shrubs and rhododendrons. They set the shrubs on fire and made space for their new homes, and the place is now called Merak, meaning “set on fire”. Ama Jomo resided on Kukhar Mountain (ལྷོ་མ་ལའ་), which is about seven hours’ walk from Merak village.

The Emo Chilé song is sung only once a year, and then exclusively by women during Jomo Lhasöl (རྫོང་མོ་གསེས་ལའ་), an annual ritual to propitiate Ama Jomo. On the 21st day of the seventh Bhutanese lunar month, the people of Merak and Sakteng set off on a pilgrimage to Ama Jomo’s citadel, the sacred mountain called Jomo Kukhar or Jomo Phodrang (རྫོང་མོ་ལྷོ་མ་ལའ་/རྫོང་མོ་ཕོ་བྲང་) to seek blessings. The visitors who enter the area should consume neither meat or garlic to avoid polluting the sanctity of the deity, as the deity

cannot stand *drip* (ཐྱིབ) or defilement. They conduct the ritual in honor of the deity for two days. On the first day, men conduct horseraces, which are held at a place called Serkim La (གསེར་སྐྱེམ་ལ). There is no tradition of awarding prizes to the winners but any man who falls off the horse has to drink *ara* (ཇ་རག) or local alcohol.

On the second day, a ritual is held at the foot of the Jomo Kukhar Mountain. The men climb to the peak and chant prayers. The women are not allowed to set foot on the main part of the mountain due to the perception they will contaminate the abode of the deity. On the return journey, the women sing Emo Chilé in honor of the goddess Ama Jomo. While people propitiate Ama Jomo through seasonal rituals, Ama Jomo in turn keeps evils and misfortunes away from Merak-Sakteng. Emo Chilé is a hymn to Ama Jomo and the herders do not sing the song lightly. It is said that the song was composed when Ama Jomo parted from the herders.

ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །ལ་མོ་ནི་གཅིག་བརྒྱུ་གཉིས་བརྒྱུ་ལ། །
ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །སྐོར་སྐོར་ལ་མོ་བརྒྱུ་ཡོད་ལ། །ཞེ་མོ་གཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
Crossing one mountain pass and another,
I have crossed the Gorgor pass
How wonderful and auspicious!

ཞེ་མོ་གཅིག་ལས། །ལ་མོ་ནི་སྐོར་སྐོར་ལ་མོ་ལ། །
ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །རྟ་པོ་མེ་འགྲོ་གསུང་གི་ལ། །ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
At the Gorgor pass
The stallion says it does not want to cross.
How wonderful and auspicious!

ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །རྟ་འདི་ནི་དཀར་པོའི་ལོག་ལ། །
ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །གཡེར་ག་མིར་མིར་བརྟགས་ཡོད་ལ། །ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
On the white stallion
Hang the jingling bells
How wonderful and auspicious!

ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །འཇམ་གསུམ་མུ་ལ་བརྒྱགས་བའི་ལ། །
ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །འཇམ་གསུམ་བཟང་ལ་མཚོ་མོ་ལ། །ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
The one who resides on the three peaks,
The healthy Ama Jomo
How wonderful and auspicious!

ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །གཡེས་ལ་དབང་པོ་བརྒྱགས་ཡོད་ལ། །
ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །གཡོན་ལ་ནི་དབང་མོ་བརྒྱགས་ཡོད་ལ། །ཞེ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
On your right are valiant Pawos,
On your left are valiant Pamos

How wonderful and auspicious!

ཨོ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །བསྐྱོར་ར་གཡས་ལ་བསྐྱོར་ན་ལ། །
ཨོ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །གཡས་ཀྱི་སྐྱོབ་པ་དག་ཡོད་ལ། །ཨོ་མོ་གཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
If one circumambulates clockwise,
Defilements of the right side are cleansed.
How wonderful and auspicious!

ཨོ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །བསྐྱོར་ར་གཡོན་ལ་བསྐྱོར་ན་ལ། །
ཨོ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །གཡོན་ཀྱི་སྐྱོབ་པ་དག་ཡོད་ལ། །ཨོ་མོ་གཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
If circumambulates counter-clockwise,
Defilements of the left side are cleansed.
How wonderful and auspicious!

ཨོ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །བསྐྱོར་ར་གཡས་གཡོན་བསྐྱོར་ན་ལ། །
ཨོ་མོ་ཅིག་ལས། །ལུས་ཀྱི་སྐྱོབ་པ་དག་ཡོད་ལ། །ཨོ་མོ་གཅིག་ལས། །

How wonderful and auspicious!
The clockwise and anticlockwise circumambulations
Cleans the defilements of the body.
How wonderful and auspicious!

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