

Düncheng of Merak and Sakteng



Düncheng (མདུན་ཆང་) is a drinking ceremony. Drinking alcohol with friends is a common phenomenon in the villages of Merak and Sakteng though tea can also be served. The *Düncheng* (མདུན་ཆང་), roughly meaning alcohol party, is a custom that has been preserved for many years in the nomadic communities of Merak and Sakteng.

Düncheng (མདུན་ཆང་) is a typical highlander festival celebrated when friends and family members meet each other after a long time. They usually celebrate when they migrate their cows and yaks from one *tsamdro* (རྩ་འབྲོག) or grazing field to another. The nomads spend two or three months in their own individual pastures in different mountains with their cattle and they return to their homes in winter.

In Düncheng, alcohol and tea are used for bonding and socializing. Putting together a pitcher of *ara* (ཨ་རལ), irrespective of whether one drinks alcohol or tea, people congregate in one house and share the drinks. In the end, they bid farewell to each other in a more celebratory than emotional manner. After a few rounds of servings, the Brokpa people sing the song *Kesangla* (ཀེས་གཤེན་ལཱ་), filling the atmosphere with merriment and music. They usually sing and dance until midnight or the party can go quite late. By then, most of the participants become drunk, some to the extent of not being able to find their ways home.

Düncheng is to reinforce bounds between families, relatives and friends. For some it is also an occasion to find their partners for life. It is said that the custom of celebrating Düncheng might have originated from Tibet. The Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (ཚོས་རྒྱལ་ལོང་བཙན་གླམ་པེ) appointed his minister Gar Tongtsen (མགར་རྫོན་ལྷོང་བཙན) as matchmaker to go to China and find him a bride. Therefore, the title of matchmakers, Garpa Dongsu (གཤར་པ་གཤོང་བསུ), in Merak and Sakteng might have come from the minister's name Gar Tongtsen. Garpa Dongsu will confer with astrologer and fix the ceremony day for drinks of acceptance, also known as Düncheng.

Today the celebration of Düncheng is declining because the children in Merak and Sakteng are exposed to education and the number of women attending Düncheng is dwindling. On some occasions, the Düncheng celebration has also ended up in a fight among nomads. Due to such incidences, many people do not attend Düncheng.

Sonam Chopel is a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research.