

Alcohol in Religious Rituals

The distilled spirit *ara* (ཨ་ར་ག) is used in many religious rituals. From the use of *chang* or *ara* in daily rituals in *dzongs* and temples to its use in seasonal festivities, one can find profuse use of *ara* in the religious culture of Bhutan. Thus, we find terms such as *serkem-chang*, *tor-chang*, *tsok-chang*, *dutsi-chang*, *sangdzé-chang*, *jinsek-chang*, *yang-chang*, *ngö-chang*, *tsan-chang*, *tshe-chang*, and *khando-chang*, all of which has the word *chang* suffixed to a religious word.

1. Serkem-chang (ཤེར་ཀེམ་ཇང་)

Serkem-chang is an offering made to the local deities for protection. It is customary that people offer *serkem* or libation to the deities in the temple, especially when they are about to travel for an important purpose. Such libations are made for purpose of well-being in the present life and also in the next life.

2. Tor-chang (ཏོར་ཇང་)

Tor-chang is the alcohol which is offered while or after making *torma* or ritual objects from dough and butter sculpture. *Tormas* are regularly used in the majority of religious rituals in Bhutan. While *ara* may be mixed with dough to make *torma* in some cases, *tor-chang* normally refers to the alcohol offered to the priest who make the *torma* or to the alcohol which is offered with *torma*.

3. Tsok-chang (ཚོག་ཇང་)

Tsok-chang is offered during the *tsok-khor*, or tantric feast, ceremony. Alcohol is offered alongside *tsok* offering during such tantric rituals.

4. Dutsi-chang (དུའི་ཇང་)

Dutsi refers to the nectar of immortality. In many spiritual practices, the blessings of the Buddha and the ambrosia of immortality is represented by a cup of alcohol. At the end of the ritual, drops of *dutsi* are distributed to the people present in the ceremony. A skull container is often used for holding the *dutsi*.

5. Sangdzé-chang (སང་ཇང་)

Bhutanese make offerings of incense and smoke called *sang* and use a wide range of ingredients for the *sang* substance. The ingredients are collectively called *sangdzé* and one of the ingredients is *ara*.

6. Jinsek-chang (ཇིན་སེག་ཇང་)

A common ritual performed for wellbeing is a fire ceremony called *jinsek*. With the visualizing of fire as a deity, various substances are poured into the fire as offering. Among the substances, it is common to find alcohol as an item of offering.

7. Yang-chang (ལམ་ཆང་)

Bhutanese perform rituals for increasing wealth, especially propitiating wealth gods to enhance the essence of wealth or *yang*. For this purpose specially brewed *ara*, called *yang chang* is prepared and served during the ritual.

8. Ngö-chang (འགྲོ་ཆང་)

Ngö-chang is alcohol served during dedication prayers. Prayers are said to dedicate benefits of good deeds for the welfare of sentient beings. A jar of *ara* is sometimes offered to the lama, who recites *ngöwa* prayers. The alcohol is then served to the people who are present.

9. Tsan-chang (བཙན་ཆང་)

Tsan, a type of non-human spirit, is believed to dwell in the mountains. It is also believed that every human has a *tsan* spirit as his/her protecting deity. It is a responsibility of an individual to make offerings to it. Specially prepared alcohol for this purpose is called *tsan-chang*. It is offered annually or when someone falls ill and the cause may be the displeasure of the *tsan* spirit.

10. Tshe-chang (ཚེ་ཆང་)

Tshe is life and people pray for long life. In rituals for long life, alcohol called *tshe-chang* is offered along with other items of offering.

11. Khandro-chang (མཁའ་འགྲོ་ཆང་)

Khandro chang is a ritual drink related to an individual horoscope. It is believed that every person is associated with a *khandro* figure and it is the responsibility of each individual to remember and perform rituals dedicated to the *khandro*. Alcohol brewed for this purpose is called *khandro chang*, which is offered during the associated ritual.

12. Tagtu Dewai-chang (ཏག་ཏུ་བདེ་བའི་ཆང་)

It is common during the recitation of the religious texts such as the Buddhist canon to serve alcohol when the priests complete a section or a chapter of the text. The priest claps or makes a noise by tapping the small table placed before him. It is a signal for the host to serve a drink, which is called *tagtu dewai-chang*.

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