

## Bönkor Festival of Haa Yangthang village



*Pawo and Neljorm throwing away Lue tor or ritual effigy*

Most communities in Haa District celebrate Bönkor (བོན་ཀོར་) once every three years. Different communities have slightly different ways of conducting Bönkor. Kibri Bönkor , Damchu Bönkor , Tshapel Bönkor and Kana Bönkor are held on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month of the Bhutanese calendar while Bali Bönkor is celebrated on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month of Bhutanese calendar.

Yangthang village is a three-kilometer drive from Haa town. There are fifty-two households in the village. Local people say that the Yangthang Bönkor celebration is linked to the war they fought with the Tibetans. It is believed that the people of Yangthang played a critical role in the battle with Tibetans as soldiers or *pazaps* (པཟམ་པ་). It is believed that Bönkor is a victory celebration. Yangthang Bönkor is held once in every three years. For this particular event, *pawo* (པའོ་) and *neljorm* (ནེལ་འཇོར་མོ་) shamans are invited from Paro. The household identified as the host for the *pawo* and *neljorm* has to travel to Paro and bring them to and from Paro. Each year's host is selected on a rotational basis among community members.

The elders account that the Bönkor was in practice from the time of Jigme Namgyal in the nineteenth century. Although there is no surviving documentation regarding its

origins, people believe that the residents of Yangthang received an order from high command to start holding the event. Bönkor starts in the evening and continues throughout the following day. Pawo and Neljorm shamans mediate in the *neykhang* (གནས་ཁང་) shrine from evening and spend the night there. *Pazap* warriors will also gather in the evening of the first day. From the first evening until the end of the event, the *pazaps* are not allowed to sleep with their wives. The actual proceedings of Bönkor begin by the *pazaps* and *neljorm* throwing the *lū tor* (ལུ་ཏོར་), or ritual effigy, in a designated place. However, the *pawo* would stay back in the *neykhang*. The following day, the proceedings begin with preparation to throw away another *lū*. This time both *pawo* and *neljorm* accompany the *lū*. All the *pazaps* are equipped the weapons that also accompany the *pawo* and *neljorm*.

The day would be filled with celebrations, such as dances, a debate between *pawo* and *neljorm*, and a *khadar* offering to *pawo* and *neljorm*. All the people gathered there will make *nyendar* (ལྷན་དར་) or token cash offerings and see what good and bad things the *pawo* and *neljorm* would predict for the coming year. On this day the *pawo* and *neljorm* will also predict what good and bad things may fall upon the community in that year. Based on the predictions, the community takes precautionary measures by performing remedial rituals (འཇམ་གྲོ་).

Sonam Chopel was a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation.