

# Flow of Liquor across Time in Bhutan: Culture and Consumption of Liquor

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## **Abstract:**

In this article, we focus on the consumption of alcohol, known as *ara* in Bhutan, and how this is embedded in the everyday lives of Bhutanese. *Ara* plays a significant role in the Bhutanese way of life, from the past to the present. This article attempts to locate the significance of *ara* in a context in which industrially manufactured alcohol abounds. Further, the article pays close attention to the presence of *ara* in social gatherings, cultural practices and rituals for various purposes. This is done by drawing on fieldwork accounts and making a case about the significance of *ara* in the present. We aim to shed light on how *ara* has been intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life for the Bhutanese people throughout history.

**Keywords:** Ara, Alcohol, Indigenous, Bhutan, Himalaya, Highland

## **Introduction**

Alcohol consumption is prevalent across the globe, with notable practices among communities residing in the Himalayan region. In Bhutan, the act of consuming and offering alcohol is intertwined with human interactions, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral connections. Its role in the cultural fabric of society extends beyond mere historical significance, deeply influencing various aspects of daily life. Alcohol production and consumption are integral to local breweries, cultural traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and funerary practices. This context prompts an examination of the contemporary landscape, characterized by globalization and commercialization, and invites an exploration of how traditional alcohol practices adapt to these evolving dynamics. This article seeks to elucidate the importance of alcohol within Bhutanese

society, culture, and religious practices, while also addressing the challenges and opportunities for preserving its social, ritualistic, and cultural dimensions.

Brewing and consumption of alcohol are deeply embedded in people's lives, especially among indigenous peoples. They are expressed in their cultures, rituals, and social cohesion. These aspects are related to the writing of Geertz (1973, p.8) on culture where he wrote that "... culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”)—for the governing of behavior...man is precisely the animal most desperately dependent upon such extra-genetic, outside-the-skin control mechanisms, such cultural programs, for ordering his behavior.”

From Geertz's (1973) accounts, alcohol serves its function in communities of Bhutan by rendering meaning to social and ritual aspects. Hall (1997) explained that the members of the community share culture in ways how the world is being interpreted similarly in their thoughts and actions, making the culture conducive to every member. Taking these writings into consideration, it is clear that they are embedded in the cultural aspects of alcohol in Bhutan. Through this article, we aim to present how the consumption of alcohol, its significance, and its meanings are the outcomes of a social and cultural process passed down from the past.

## **The Embodied Ethnography of Alcohol**

Coming to the methodology on which this article is based: embodied ethnography was used in conducting this research study in various places, including Thimphu, Punakha, Bumthang, and Trashigang. Embodied ethnography allows immersion both at bodily and psychological levels. Hickey and Smith (2020) note that the self itself is at the heart of embodied ethnography where they point out that the embodiment influences ethnographer and ethnographic writing. Ethnography has now evolved into active participation and meaning-making, with a situated involvement in the processes in the field (Turner, 2000). Tracing the development of embodied ethnography, Monaghan (2006, as cited in Hickey & Smith, 2020, p.4) wrote that embodied ethnography emergence takes place by considering the role of

the body in ethnography and problematising its presence in the field and production of ethnographic writing. Quaranta (2021) adds that in the 1990s, there was a focus on cultural practices as a site for embodied practices for immediate consideration, and sensory perception was incorporated. Problematising of embodiment is also raised by Quaranta (2021, p.282) on “the very role the researcher’s body plays in the process of social participation and negotiation of meanings.”

Embodied ethnography goes beyond participation and treats participation as leading to examining the relationship between ethnography and embodiment and aims to derive meaning from the ethnographic data generated through such participation (Quaranta, 2021). Embodied ethnography is helpful in examining and understanding the processes tied to *ara* through bodily participation in the field, in Thimphu, Trashigang, and Bumthang of Bhutan. Fieldwork was conducted in June, July, August and September of 2023 in the identified places. Participation was actively employed, and 24 interviews were conducted in addition to several conversations. The anonymity of respondents is maintained in this article to protect their privacy and uphold confidentiality. This article examined the cultural significance of *ara* in the present, and traditional liquor preferences among the younger generation and whether the younger generation continues to drink *ara*, *chang*, or other drinks. As part of this article, fieldwork was conducted in Bumthang and Trashigang, considering the popularity of *ara*. Thimphu is another focus area to bring out the significance of *ara* in the lives of its inhabitants.

## **Lifting alcohol for drinking and offering**

"When a man lifts a cup, it is not only the kind of drink that is in it, the amount he is likely to take, and the circumstances under which he will do the drinking that are- specified in advance for him, but also whether the contents of the cup will cheer or stupefy, whether they will induce affection or aggression, guilt or unalloyed pleasure. These and many other cultural definitions attach to the drink even before it touches the lips"

These words by Mandelbaum shed light on varied meanings and cultural values attached to alcohol. Similarly, alcohol carries specific cultural connotations in Bhutan. In this regard, it is crucial to trace the form of alcohol in the past, which, as per the literature, informs that it was in place during the pre-Buddhist Bon religion in its usage for appeasing deities. Later, these practices were carried into Vajrayana Buddhism, where alcohol use is found in Buddhist rituals as an offering to deities (Dorji, 2007). Further, alcohol is considered to be nurturing, having healing properties; the problems attached to it lie with the abuse of it, or the abuser (Dorji, 2007). Consumption of alcohol is widespread in Bhutan, and its prevalence is considered to be very high (Jamtsho & Wangdi, 2019). It is socially and culturally accepted among Bhutanese to consume alcohol.

*Ara* and *bangchang* are home based, produced for consumption within family or for guests, but they are also commercialised, despite prohibition by the state. Commercialised alcohols of this form are cheaper, which is prevalent among low-income groups (Namgyel, 2005). In Bhutan, alcohol also has significance in people's social and cultural lives. It is said that alcohol is present in the form of offerings in rituals, during celebrations and festivals, and in fostering social ties (Jamtsho & Wangdi, 2019; Schrempf, 2015).

Our ethnographic fieldwork in Bumthang attested to these accounts of alcohol use for offering and drinking during the annual festivals observed in Ura, Shingkhari, and Tangsibi. These places have annual festivals- the *Ura Yakchoed*, observed annually in the third lunar month by the Ura community; the *Shingkhari Rabney*, celebrated annually in the eleventh lunar month in Shingkhari; and Tangsibi Mani, observed in Tangsibi, annually in the first lunar month. For various offerings during these festivals, such as *duetse*, *tshokchang* and catered to the participants, including the *lama*, monks, *gomchen* (lay ritualists/practitioners) and mask dancers and other participants, including the spectators, the community people contribute the alcohol or the grains used to prepare the alcohol, which usually takes place a month ahead of the actual festival. Additionally, our conversations with our host in Tangsibi revealed a unique and interesting social event called *changkor* that takes place over the course of the festival. This event entails *lama*, mask dancers and *gomchen* journeying from house to house singing, dancing, and drinking alcohol and other

beverages. According to the locals, this event will sometimes continue until daybreak. While alcohol use during rituals such as *loche* (annual ritual) and festivals is still intact in the communities, our conversations with the locals indicated that its use has declined compared to the past. This change is neatly captured in our conversation with 84-year-old, Dorji from Ura:

“During the *loche* in the past, we had customary of various offerings of alcohol to *gomchens* starting from the morning till the evening. We had practices of offering *zheychang* (alcohol served after breakfast), *bjachang* (served after tea), then before lunch, there was this practice of offering *tohchang* (served before lunch/meals) and after lunch, we used to offer *sheychang* (alcohol served after lunch). We also had practice of offering *tshokchang* (alcohol served when making *tshok*-feast offering). When the *loche* wind up, we had to then offer *deychang* (alcohol served after ritual is ended). Now we do not have most of these offerings during *loche*. In fact, our *lama* has been vocal against these offerings and told us that he will not attend the rituals if still these practices of offering. Except for the *tshokchang* and *marchang*, we do not usually see many offerings these days.”

Likewise, *chang* in Bhutan is also used for daily offerings to deities, welcoming guests, building social ties, and for occasional events and religious ceremonies (Miyamoto, 2020). It is common for *ara* to be used in rituals associated with making offerings. *Ara* is a key component in various types of *chang* that are linked to spiritual activities, such as "*Serkem-chang, Tor-chang, Tshog-chang, Dutsi-chang, Sangdze-chang, Jinsek-chang, Yang-chang, Ngo chang, Tsan-chang, Tshe-chang, Khando-chang*" (Namgyel, 2005, p.57). Taking note of the importance of alcohol in Bhutan, here, the writings of Dorji (2007: 65-66) captured the significance of alcohol in the history and rituals of Bhutan. He wrote,

“Specifically in Bhutan, historical texts refer to offering alcohol as *duetsi* during religious ceremonies as early as the seventh century, during the time of Guru Padmasambhava, and in the seventeenth century, during the era of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. This tradition is followed even today. Alcohol offering

is essentially made in two forms; one is rather more subtle, as *duetsi* during ritualistic religious rites while the other is more socialized, as Marching, during ceremonies to evoke deities' blessings when embarking on any new ventures. Duetsi is the sweetened Ara (home-distilled spirit) offered in a human skull cup; at the ceremony end, the *duetsi*, which is believed to have acquired divine blessings, is distributed to worshippers. Marchang ceremonies meanwhile are more commonplace, brief, less complex and usually performed by lay people. Freshly brewed wine from grains is offered symbolically to deities and important people such as members of the Royal Family during the Marchang ceremony held before important social functions."

*Ara* holds a long tradition in Bhutanese life in varied aspects including historical and religious aspects. According to Dorji (2011), offerings of alcohol for deities were in place before Buddhism came to the country. Further, alcohol was mentioned in various historical events, including of Drukpa Kuenlay (Namgyel, 2005; Dorji, 2011). This historical basis informs the Bhutanese way of life. Alcohol has a presence in ritualistic and symbolic functions in the lives of Bhutanese in pleasing deities and averting any illness and evils (Dorji, 2011). Taking note of this, the writings by Namgyel (2005) bring forth the importance of *ara* culture in Bhutan. The preparation, consumption, and cultural significance of *ara* are an integral part of Bhutanese life. To this aspect, Namgyel treats *ara* as an intangible culture of Bhutan as *ara* preparation and drinking patterns evolve over time.

In Bhutan, *ara* and its drinking tradition are prevalent in eastern and central Bhutan. However, *chang* is found in western Bhutan (Dorji, 2011). The people of Bhutan, particularly in the eastern and central regions, are known to consume more *ara*. *Chang* as mentioned by Dorji (2011), is an important component in the observation of *Marchang*, a ceremony for hosting guests with a goodwill message for longevity and well-being. A similar form is present in offering *tshogchang* to extend hospitality to official guests. Namgyel (2005) emphasises about Eastern Bhutan where *ara* plays an important role in the popular cultures of *tshogchang* and *dunchang*. They are traditional Bhutanese social gatherings for relatives, friends, and neighbours, and *ara* is the main alcoholic beverage that facilitates these interactions. In certain customs in

Eastern Bhutan, Namgyel (2005) wrote that there is a tradition where one person holds another person's hands while pouring *arak*, a traditional alcoholic beverage, into their mouth, all while singing a traditional song.

The production of alcohol is carried out mainly through the process of fermentation. Rice is the main product used in this process of alcohol production apart from fruits (Singh & Singh, 2006; Johnstone, 2002, p. 48; Allen, 1905, p. 62; Elwin, 1959, p. 20; Hodson, 1911, p. 60). Behura and Panigraha (2006, p. 128) argue that the basis for the type of raw materials used in liquor production depends on the availability of raw materials in a particular area, especially among tribal communities. This was attested to by our respondents. As shared by a 78-year-old respondent from Shingkar, Bumthang:

“the residents here largely engaged in brewing *ara* and the raw materials used are also grown and available in the locality. Cereals such as *kar* (wheat) *na* (barley), *jo* (bitter buckwheat) and *grai* (sweetbuckwheat) are commonly used raw materials. Similarly, the *pham* (yeast) used during the fermentation process can also be found here. It is called *phabshing*, however, people now used the readily available imported yeast”.

Additionally, the series of interviews from Ura and Tangsibi in Bumthang revealed that locals use similar cereals, such as wheat, to prepare and brew *ara*.

In Bhutan, rural communities produce *ara* from cereals and grains. They have been brewed for many generations and till today (Jamtsho & Wangdi, 2019). . Ingredients in making alcohol are instrumental to the quality of it, *ara* produced from red rice and wheat, known as *changsum*, is considered top quality, followed by *ara* made from white rice, and wheat as third grade. Those *ara* made from maize is considered the lowest quality (Namgyel, 2005). *Bangchang* is a high-calorie fermented liquor, while *Singchang* is typically made from rice brew. Namgyel (2005) presented that rice, maize, wheat, millet, buckwheat and barley are commonly used for brewing alcohol.

In addition to ingredients for making *ara*, the process involved in making *ara* is an ingrained knowledge present among Bhutanese. There are two processes in making *ara*: grain (called *lum* or *yu dama*) is fermented and then distilled (Namgyel, 2005). A

good proportion of grains and yeast plays an important role in yielding the quality and strength of drinks in addition to optimal temperature and the length of fermentation. Sometimes, red sandalwood is added to *ara* for colour and flavour; they are often labelled as special *ara*. In the name of medicinal value in *ara*, there are instances in which people add wasp of pupae, bone marrow of cow, fish, egg, etc. (Dorji, 2007; Namgyel, 2005). The typical duration for the *ara* distillation process to begin is after two to three weeks of fermentation. The brew is then mixed with water and distilled using heat to allow volatile spirits to evaporate, condense, and collect (Namgyel, 2005). In Trashigang, the people primarily use maize, sometimes mixed with wheat, barley, or rice to brew *ara*. As Wangmo, 55 year old, states during our fieldwork,

“In our village, we exclusively used locally produced maize as the primary resource for brewing. Preparation begins with grinding the grains. The ground grains are then boiled in water until they are fully cooked. After cooking, the mixture is cooled on a clean surface. The fermentation process starts by adding local yeast to the cooled mixture. It is then covered with blankets. The fermentation period can vary significantly, ranging from 3 days to 3 months. For distillation, traditional equipment is used, including the *arazang* (a long vessel), *khataw* (steel bowls), and *khang-sum* (three sticks). The setup is carefully sealed to prevent air from entering. During the distillation process, the water is changed 5-6 times.”

However, during distillation, it is imperative to avoid any air intake, as this would compromise the *ara*'s quality, rendering it akin to plain water with a diminished taste as stated by Yeshe Choden during our fieldwork.

*Ara* in Bhutan is consumed by men and women in eastern Bhutan, where intoxication is common (Schrempf, 2015). In addition to this, alcohol in Bhutan is considered to elevate one's mood or, in other instances, for relaxation (Dorji, 2007). This significance does not end here, as alcohol is also counted as an important food item and a good social drink (Dorji, 2007). In other writings on alcohol, Gefou-Madianou (1992) notes that drinking is accompanied by food in many societies; similarly, in the account of Mandelbaum (1965), alcohol is treated as food, not as a stimulant when taken during



meals. The tradition surrounding alcohol is steeped in Bhutanese society, where sharing of alcohol marks the meeting and departing moments (Dorji, 2011). Moreover, alcohol consumption in Bhutan is not attached to stigma; rather, alcohol is widely accepted, and it plays an integral role in everyday lives surrounding social gatherings, leading to the fostering of community bonds (Dorji, 2007).

The drinking of *ara* is an important part of the culture for farmers, during the day or particularly after a hard day's work (Namgyel, 2005). It is seen as a way to relax and recharge after working in the fields, helping the men feel both physically and mentally rejuvenated. *Ara* is commonly consumed after various labor-intensive activities such as house construction, gathering firewood and bamboo, transporting manure, carrying heavy loads, and harvesting crops (Namgyel, 2005.) In Trashigang, *ara* is not only viewed as a social drink but also as a traditional medicine with specific health benefits. *Ara* is commonly used to lessen physical discomfort after a day of hard work. It's believed to help relax muscles and reduce overall body pain. As Sonam Norbu explicitly states during fieldwork, "We view *ara* as a form of medicine, as it effectively alleviates our pain and helps relieve tiredness after a day of heavy workload." Yeshe Choden corroborated this: "Within the village, *ara* consumption is prevalent, particularly among those who have had a tiring day and find solace and relaxation in this traditional beverage."

On the role of alcohol in the life of Bhutanese, Dorji (2007) wrote that they are usually exposed to alcohol after they are born during the celebration for newborns wherein '*chhangkhoy*', rice-based alcohol is served to the guests and mother. The offering of alcohol to the mother is intended to alleviate pain and increase strength (Dorji, 2011). This marks the start of alcohol in the life stages of Bhutanese in socialisation, cultural, and ritual aspects. When the life stage comes to an end during the time of the funeral, the mourning moment is constituted of alcohol brought by relatives, friends, and well-wishers. The alcohol present in such a moment signifies offering condolence to the grieving family who are mourning death in their family (Dorji, 2007). Dorji (2011) also wrote that alcohol acts as a consolation in times of bereavement, in addition to providing relaxation and pleasure during festivals, and marks the hospitality aspect and during disputes as a reconciliatory factor. Showing how *ara* is integral in the Bhutanese way of life, Namgyel (2005) presented how the national game of archery begins with a ritual called "*chang phu*," which involves offering a traditional alcoholic

drink called *chang* to the local deity, for protection and safety for the players. During the game, players often bring a bottle of arak to warm up, especially when they are not performing well. In villages, when men play archery, their wives often come to watch the game and bring a barrel of arak (Namgyel, 2005). *Ara* is served to players, spectators, and well-wishers during the game.

Alcohol is also used in other traditional games like *khuru* and *dego* (a traditional game that involves throwing a pair of flat round stones to stick driven into the ground). In the archery game contest called *Chogda* played at village, *geogs* (block consisting groups of villages) or district levels, which lasts from three to seven days, *arak* is the main drink used almost daily (Namgyel, 2005). Using embodied ethnography, one of the authors attended archery matches many times at Royal Thimphu College, Thimphu, in 2023. The author, though did not participate in archery, he did participate in alcohol consumption, was present by observing the archery match. Regarding the alcohol aspect, which was served during the archery matches, he noticed that *ara* was not served in all the archery matches he attended. Instead, it was the factory-manufactured alcoholic beers which were present in the archery game. This represents the changing trend in urban places like Thimphu where alcohols manufactured from the factory are increasingly favoured over traditional drinks like *ara*. However, using embodied ethnography, the author partook in drinking beer at the archery match to get a sense of the participants' mood and passion. He sensed that beer drinking alleviated the interest and zeal of participants at the archery game. This has been the case since before when *ara* was exclusively served at an archery match. The application of embodied ethnography helped the author to go beyond understanding the perspectives around *ara* and immersed into the state of intoxication experienced by participants. This allowed the author to experience socialisation, bonding, and humour properly shared among the participants.

*Ara* is also an essential part of many celebrations, including *Losar* (New Year), *Thru*e (Blessed Rainy Day), *Nyenpa Guzom* (Gathering of Nine Evils), and other events like marriage, baby showers, and *rimdro*. One of the authors, using embodied ethnography, attended various ceremonies in Thimphu, Punakha, and Bumthang in *rimdro* ritual, baby shower, blessed rainy day, and social gatherings where *ara* was served extensively. The author immersed with the host and guests in drinking *ara* in these gatherings. In doing so, it allowed the author to locate the notions and be in the

moment with people sharing *ara*. Through this embodied ethnography, there are various factors that were experienced and perceived, which otherwise would not have been possible without immersing in drinking *ara*. The socialisation aspect became more pronounced as to how drinking *ara* with people led to easing interaction and striking conversations in an unrestrained manner. For instance, in one of the gatherings in Thimphu, one camaraderie with Phuntsho Dorji was in the form of making conversation about personal life on whether the author is married or not; this conversation was not possible in a sober state with Phuntsho Dorji with whom the author shares cordial interface. This account emphasised how *ara* drinking owing to rapport, has the scope to go deeper into personal accounts using embodied ethnography.

*Ara*, in gatherings during celebrations, festivals and other events, acts as a lubricant for socialisation. The author's experiences during the period of research study clearly demonstrated how *ara* plays a significant role in socialisation factors. From one of the authors' observations during the research period, the generosity factor is another important one that came out strongly in any gathering, be it during a festival, social gathering, rituals, etc. This is attached to *ara* during these gatherings. From one of the authors' observation, *ara* in these gatherings in Thimphu, Punakha, and Bumthang flows freely into the bowl being served for relishing *ara*. The host continued to pour *ara* continuously until one's tipsiness hit way beyond the limit. The act here was seen it to be a part of the generosity feature attached to the Bhutanese way of life. During the period of our research study, there was an opportunity to engage in a conversation with one of the hosts, Tenzin Norbu from Punakha, about the prevalence of *ara* in social gatherings. According to him, *ara* is typically produced in large quantities. He added that this is consistent with the longstanding traditions of Bhutanese societies. Furthermore, he emphasised that having a limited *ara* supply at any gathering is highly unusual. Moreover, the degree of sharing *ara* is also what Namgyel (2005) wrote about the accounts of excessive drinking *ara* in Eastern Bhutan.

The application of embodied ethnography helped the author to understand and experience the intoxicated world of alcohol-induced social and cultural lives. On reflection, this comes with a set of challenges. One of them is the exposure to the ill effects of alcohol consumption, where *ara* serving is done in a generous manner, which is cultural, and a refusal to take the serving is discouraged. In such a scenario,

using embodied ethnography can invite the harmful effects of alcohol consumption when consumed in large quantities. The other challenge is that understanding and experiencing the intoxicated world of alcohol-induced social and cultural lives can be relative for researchers as the capacity to comprehend from a state of intoxication is very subjective. The writing by Quaranta (2021) finds relevance here on the researcher's role on their participation and construction of meanings as to how these are subjective. Taking note of these challenges, embodied ethnography, as much as it allows scope for holistic understanding, has its own limitations.

## **Drinking alcohol on Weekends**

In various anthropological literature, it is noted that the concept of responsible drinking has been deeply ingrained in various societies. Researchers such as Garine (2001), Douglas (2002), Chatwin (2001), Palafox (2001), and Subbo (2001) have all noted that while problem drinking is relatively uncommon, mild intoxication and drunkenness are regularly observed within certain limits. Douglas (2002) further emphasises that drunkenness is often tied to acts of celebration and social interactions within specific cultural contexts. Subbo (2001) also highlights the role of alcohol consumption as a socializing agent. Moreover, Gefou-Madianou (1992) observes that different societies exhibit diverse responses to alcohol, ranging from celebrating its consumption to completely prohibiting it. Similarly, Mandelbaum (1965) viewed alcohol as a cultural artefact and argued that, like other artefacts, cultures shape the form and significance of alcohol consumption.

The commonly held notion of alcohol addiction in Bhutan is attached to Karma, leading towards irresponsible behaviour through acquired negative karma. Thus, leading to unhealthiness at the individual level and with surroundings. Dorji (2011) associates the variation of Buddhist practices for accommodating alcohol consumption with responsibility yet with caution of bad karma. These accounts convey the importance of cultural aspects of alcohol in Bhutan and its continuity of *ara* in the present, where globalisation and consumerism abound. This raises a question about the relevance of cultural practices tied to alcohol in the present and how the communities of Bhutan strive to preserve and protect them.

The state takes note of the importance of alcohol in Bhutan, considering its popularity

and significance in the Bhutanese way of life. The state regulates the sale and consumption of alcohol in Bhutan. The Army Welfare Project (AWP) produces and sells alcoholic beverages to generate revenue for the welfare of army personnel. They are counted as industrial alcoholic beverages. Industrially produced alcoholic beverages encompass a wide variety of options. These include beer, primarily made from malt barley, and wine, which includes vermouth, fortified wine, blended wine, and sparkling wine. In addition, there are distilled spirits such as whisky, rum, and brandies. Established in 1976 under the Companies Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, AWP aims to contribute to economic growth and development (Dorji, 2011). However, at present, there is a prevalence of various imported drinks, the likes of Korean and Japanese drinks in the form of soju, sake, or even breezer (fruit-flavoured beverage with mild alcoholic content) from India. These were observed extensively during the fieldwork period. On a blessed rainy day in Bumthang, one host informed that breezer drink is gaining a foothold these days in contrast to how *ara* was popular on special occasions. This is one trend which is becoming common across the country, especially when it comes to choices for drinking alcoholic beverages.

Among popular alcoholic drinks, *ara* and other homemade alcohol are considered the most popular drinks in the country. Common homemade wine varieties - used traditionally as food beverages- such as *bangchang*, *sinchang* and *tongba* - have an alcohol content of less than five percent. *Ara*, the distilled alcohol has a higher alcohol content but was used only for special purposes (Dorji, 2007). However, in the present, industrially produced alcoholic beverages are gaining a foothold in their popularity, dating their production in the country from the early 1970s. According to the Bhutan Living Standard Survey (BLSS, 2003 & 2007 as cited in Dorji, 2011), homebased alcohols such as *ara* (distilled from grains), *bangchang* (fermented and extracted from grains), *singchang* (extracted from grains), *tongba*, and *chang-kyod* are reported to be the main alcoholic drinks consumed in Bhutan. Of them, *ara* is the strongest alcohol (Namgyel, 2005). According to Bhutan Living Standard Surveys (NSB, BLSS 2003 and 2007) data, *ara* and *bangchang* were the most popular drinks in Bhutan; however, they are considered illegal for sale. The DRC conducts field inspections on the illegal production and sale of local brews three times a year without prior notice, in addition to investigating complaints (Dorji, 2011, p.97).

As part of this research, we attempted to incorporate tourism to examine whether the

commercialisation of alcohol, especially *ara*, is also influenced by tourists in the country. We take note of tourist establishments in the town that showcase *ara* as a cultural attraction, particularly in designated tourist spots. In Thimphu, *ara* is now being bottled and sold in select licenses, marking a significant departure from its traditional context where it was primarily brewed and shared within communities. One of us visited the commercial establishment in Thimphu to inquire about the sale of *ara* and its customers. This interaction informs us that the bottled *ara* in Thimphu caters to both tourists and older generations who use *ara* for rituals and other ceremonies. The commercialisation here upholds the cultural aspects of *ara* yet it also caters to draw the attention of tourists in terms of representing Bhutanese culture. However, Thimphu's local bars and restaurants predominantly stock factory-manufactured alcohols and *ara* finds less presence. This emerging dual identity of *ara*—both a commercialised cultural product for tourists and a traditional beverage for ceremonies and rituals—reflects the broader changes in Bhutanese society as it manoeuvres between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to modern commercial pressures.

In Bhutanese society, drinking patterns are witnessing an intersection between the traditional use of alcoholic drinks in rural communities and the growing commercial influence that is expanding the availability of alcohol and drinking establishments into new social settings (Dorji, 2011). Taking note of the shift in drinking patterns in places like Thimphu and Paro where commercialisation is widespread in terms of the popularity of factory manufactured alcohols and the mushrooming of several bars, cafeterias, restaurants and the sale of bottled *ara* in one franchise in Thimphu, and the drinking gathering on weekends, we carried this understanding on the shift in drinking patterns in Thimphu and Paro to our fieldwork in Bumthang.

At Bumthang, we noticed a few shops and bars with factory-manufactured alcohols like beer, whiskey, rum, etc. The bar in Bumthang is akin to *Joujonmei kai* (a house where alcohol is served) of Rongmei Naga of Manipur (Kamei & Majumder, 2019), cantinas of Mexico (Palafox, 2001), and the case of Abagusii of Western Kenya where women use their household spaces as private bars (Subbo, 2001). We asked around for *ara* in these shops and at the bar with the purpose of buying them for our consumption. We failed to find any, though we were aware that *ara* is available in abundance. We are also aware that the state regulates selling of *ara*. As we continued

our visits to the bar, we were served *ara* on a few occasions. We inquired to procure them to buy it for our personal consumption. This was unsuccessful. We managed to get into a conversation about this and were informed that people brew *ara* strictly for serving guests, besides its other purposes for family, festivals, and rituals. This conversation highlighted the deep cultural significance of *ara* in Bumthang. Subsequent interviews and observations in Bumthang, Tansgibi, Ura, Shingkar, Chamkar, and Trashigang confirmed that *ara* plays a significant role in the social fabric of these communities. It became evident that the socialisation aspect of *ara* remains strong in Bumthang and Trashigang, with the emphasis placed on its cultural and communal significance rather than its commercialisation.

In places like Thimphu and Paro, the degree of brewing *ara* is less compared to eastern Bhutan. However, they are still utilised in rituals. When it comes to consumption purposes in gatherings and festivals, the consumption of *ara* is becoming lesser compared to the eastern and central parts of the country. This is informed strongly by our interviews in Thimphu, Bumthang and Trashigang. Moreover, with the new culture of social gatherings and partying on weekends among the younger generation, the preference for factory-manufactured alcohol has become a trend. The commercial entertainment sections, fueled by profit motives, are reshaping the social landscape of drinking. Furthermore, a shift is taking place in Bhutan's contemporary lifestyle, influencing identity, lifestyle, and alcohol consumption patterns (Dorji, 2011). Wealthier individuals tend to lean towards higher quality local brews, beer, wine, and other popular drinks, while those from less affluent backgrounds appear to consume those that are affordable to them. As industrial alcoholic beverages become more widely available, even in the most remote areas of the country, it is likely that rural residents will increasingly spend on these products (Dorji, 2011).

In Trashigang, imported alcoholic beverages are increasingly favoured over traditional *ara*. As Norzangmo shares about this pattern during interview, "Nowadays, it is common to see people predominantly consuming beer, rockbee, coke, and other such beverages." Similarly, Yeshi Choden nods during fieldwork, "The people appear less inclined towards our local *ara*, mainly because they have been exposed to foreign liquors and find them more appealing." The observation in Tansgibi, Bumthang attested to this account from Trashigang. The night we arrived

at Tangsibi, we went to one of the shops in the village accompanied by our host family. We observed that the shop was filled with industrially produced alcohol and beverages such as beer, breezer, whiskey and other fizzy drinks. Our conversations with the locals who came to the shop to drink and relax after a day-long hard labour also revealed that industrial alcoholic beverages are popular among residents and youths in particular. One reason that came out strongly for the preference of industrial alcoholic beverages alcohol among the youth based on our interviews in Thimphu is that they associate these drinks with a "cool" factor, in contrast to traditional beverages.

The Royal Government came up with an effort to boost domestic revenue with regulations on the sale and pricing of bar licenses in 1999. As a result, there is now one bar for every 250 Bhutanese citizens, with an estimated 10 bottles of alcohol per year for every man, woman, and child in Bhutan (Dorji, 2007). Data shows that 50 per cent of the population prefers homemade alcohol, and around 20 per cent consume an average of five bottles per week. Many people carry the perception that homemade alcohol is less harmful to health than commercial varieties. Studies have found that homemade and cheaper alcohol is more damaging to the liver due to its higher aldehyde content. Heavy drinkers often consume cheap alcohol due to economic reasons (Dorji, 2007). Alcohol can harm nearly every organ and system in the body, contributing to over 60 diseases, including liver cirrhosis, heart disease, and cancer. Taking note of this perception, our interview with respondents shared what they make of commercial and homemade alcohol. Most of our respondents from Bumthang and Trashigang shared that they find traditional alcoholic beverages safer than industrially manufactured alcohols. They also hinted that the rising cases of alcohol-related illness are attributed to beer, whiskey, rum, etc.

## **Conclusion**

Alcohol carries with it various meanings and values to Bhutanese from the past and how they are articulated in the present. This article shows that alcohol plays a significant role in the life of Bhutan. The pattern of drinking and cultural practices attached to alcohol are responding to changes taking place in the country. The article implies that alcohol and cultural aspects are sustained, yet people adapt and incorporate new elements into their daily lives. The popularity of industrial-



manufactured alcohols like beer, rum, whiskey, vodka and even imported ones like soju, breezer, etc., suggests the shift in the pattern of drinking, lifestyle, and re-orientation in cultural practices. This was seen conspicuously in urban places like Thimphu, Paro and Punakha; this pattern is also observed and shared with us in Bumthang and Trashigang, yet people in these places still consume more *ara* in comparison to urban places. However, in rural places like Bumthang and Trashigang, based on our field data and secondary data for eastern Bhutan, the cultural practices attached to *ara* are mostly intact. Yet, they are present in urban places, too, in special events like baby showers, festivals, rituals, archery, etc. The significance of *ara* is strong in the country overall, however, a shift is already taking place and people are taking note of changes and incorporating them into their lives while adapting to changes and sustaining cultural aspects present in *ara* and other traditional drinks.

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