Village *Tshechu* Under Depopulation: Ritual Remittance and the Moral Economy of Merit in Eastern Bhutan

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Abstract: This article examines how village *tshechu* in eastern Bhutan are being reshaped in the context of migration and depopulation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bartsham *gewog* between 2022 and 2024, it analyses how declining populations affect the organization, participation, and meaning of these festivals. The study highlights a reduction in key actors—such as *tsawa* (organizer) and *tshechupa* (guests)—which undermines the social and spiritual foundations of village *tshechu*. While financial support from out-migrants has increased, this "ritual remittance" cannot fully compensate for the loss of local participation. The article argues that depopulation disrupts the moral economy of merit that sustains ritual life, transforming both the practice of Buddhism and community cohesion. Ultimately, the decline of village *tshechu* represents not only cultural loss but an existential challenge for rural Bhutanese communities.

Keywords: Tshechu, Buddhism, migration, community, rituals, remittances

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Introduction

Village *tshechu*—village-level festivals collectively performed by rural residents—constitute a central pillar of social and religious life in Bhutan. In recent decades, however, these practices have come under increasing strain as rural communities confront significant demographic and socio-economic change. This article examines how village *tshechu* in eastern Bhutan are being reshaped in the context of migration and depopulation.

Bhutan, situated along the southern slopes of the Himalayas, adopted Buddhism as early as the seventh century and today remains predominantly Mahayana Buddhist. Although Buddhism is constitutionally recognised as the nation's spiritual heritage, its significance extends far beyond formal acknowledgement: Buddhist values and ritual landscapes continue to shape the everyday lives of Bhutanese people.

Since the introduction of the First Five-Year Plan in 1961, Bhutan has undergone rapid socio-economic development and officially graduated from the Least Developed Countries category in 2023. This transformation, while remarkable, has simultaneously intensified regional disparities. Rural areas have experienced sustained out-migration to urban centres and abroad, resulting in labour shortages, empty houses, and abandoned farmland. Beyond such material impacts, population decline increasingly threatens cultural and religious practices embedded in rural life. These issues are particularly acute in eastern Bhutan, the region most affected by out-migration (cf. Jamyang Choda 2012; Gosai and Sulewski 2014, 2020, 2023; Sangay Wangchuk 2023). Bhutan's internal migration rate is 32.51%, the highest among South Asian countries (Srivastava and Pandey 2017, 29), with

especially high outflows from eastern to western Bhutan (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan 2018a, 2018b; Gosai and Sulewski 2020).

Research in Khaling *gewog* (an administrative unit), Trashigang, indicates that approximately half of the population registered in household records resides outside the *gewog* (Jamyang Choda 2012). The outflow of the working-age population has resulted in severe labour shortages and farmland abandonment. Similarly, research conducted in the same *gewog* by Akamatsu (2016) revealed through interviews that farmland abandonment emerged in Dawzor village and neighbouring settlements from the late 1990s onward. He identified two primary drivers of farmland abandonment: labour shortages and decreasing reliance on household food production. Moreover, studies highlight an increasingly complex relationship between depopulation and human–wildlife conflict, with each accelerating the other (Sangay Wangchuk 2023). Research on wildlife damage and the effectiveness of electric fencing in Bartsham *gewog*, Trashigang, reports that 74% of 110 interviewed households identified wildlife damage as the primary cause of farmland abandonment (Jamyang Choda et al. 2022, 317). Furthermore, their findings indicate that the extent of wildlife damage in Bartsham *gewog* is not associated with farm size or crop type, but is significantly shaped by proximity to forest areas (Jamyang Choda et al. 2022, 319).

As outlined above, previous research has primarily examined the impacts of migration and depopulation on rural livelihoods and agriculture. Yet, the sustainability of local cultural and religious practices constitutes an equally urgent concern. This article therefore investigates migration as one factor that reshapes the cultural and spiritual foundations of rural Bhutanese life.
Bhutanese media coverage since 2010 has repeatedly underscored these concerns, including the shortage of mask dancers, declining *gomchen* (a lay Buddhist priest) participation, and difficulties maintaining religious heritage

sites in depopulating villages (*Kuensel* 2013; Tempa Wangdi 2013; Tashi Phuntsho 2014; Tshering Wangdi 2015; Tshering Tashi 2016; *BBS* 2017; Kelzang Wangchuk 2019; Tshering Namgyal 2020; Thinley Dorji 2024). Local festivals and rituals have historically functioned not only as religious gatherings but also as key sites for the transmission of local history, the reinforcement of community values, and the maintenance of inter-village networks (cf. Durkheim 1912). Yet as populations dwindle, these events have become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Unlike *tshechu* organised and funded by the state or monastic institutions, village *tshechu* are entirely community-managed, with residents responsible for all aspects of organisation—from the venue and offerings to the invitation of ritual specialists. However, migration has altered the demographic composition of villages, creating empty houses and abandoned settlements, and thereby increasing the vulnerability of village *tshechu* to discontinuation. To analyse how village *tshechu* adapt under such changing conditions, this study employs the framework of practical religion, which emphasises the lived dimensions of Buddhist practice as experienced by laypeople within specific social and historical contexts (Leach 1968; Tanabe 1993). This approach enables attention to how values such as *gewa* (virtuous deeds) and *sönam* (merit) are constituted and enacted within the local setting of eastern Bhutan.

Within the Tibetan Buddhist cultural sphere, von Fürer-Haimendorf (1962, 1967) emphasised the pursuit of merit as a dominant moral orientation among Himalayan communities. Later critiques, however, caution against reducing lay Buddhism to karmic calculations alone, noting the influence of worldly concerns and relationships with local deities and spirits (Lichter and Epstein 1983). Complementary arguments emerge from studies of practical religion in Southeast Asia, which call for understanding local religious worlds through

their historically constituted regional contexts (Hayashi 2000). This perspective also resonates with scholarship on the decline of local cult festivals in Bhutan due to shifting socio-economic conditions (Huber 2020).

This articl examines how depopulation disrupts the moral economy of merit that sustains village *tshechu*. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Bartsham, this study argues that the decrease in *tsawa* (organisers), *tshechupa* (guests), and *manipa* (reciters) undermines both the social and spiritual foundations of village *tshechu*. Furthermore, it introduces the concept of ritual remittance to describe how out-migrants contribute to sustaining rituals through financial support grounded in Buddhist values—even as local opportunities for merit-making diminish. In doing so, this article reveals that the decline of village *tshechu* constitutes not only a cultural loss but an existential challenge for rural communities who continue to orient their lives around Buddhist practice.

Methodology

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bartsham *gewog*, Trashigang, between 2022 and 2024. The research combined participant observation and semi-structured interviews, supplemented by locally authored documents in Dzongkha and Choekey (Classical Tibetan) concerning village *tshechu*. Interviews were conducted in Tshangla and Chocangachakha, both widely spoken in Bartsham today.

Figure 1. Location of Bartsham

Bartsham is located on the northern slopes of the Gamri valley in Trashigang, within a temperate forest zone at elevations ranging from 800 to 2,800 m. It lies approximately one hour's drive from Trashigang Town along a paved district road leading to the *gewog* administration office. As of 2025, Bartsham encompasses 35.1 sq km and consists of five *chiwogs* (sub-county administrative unit) and 30 villages.

According to records from the Department of Local Government, Bartsham had 477 households in 2019, of which 151 (31.7%) were reported as *gungtong* (empty households). Only five of Bhutan's 205 *gewogs* recorded a *gungtong* rate exceeding 30%. However, the category lacks a standardised definition, limiting the precision and comparability of such figures (Sangay Wangchuk 2023, 82, 108). Whether a household is recorded as *gungtong* depends substantially on the judgement of surveyors and *gewog* officials at a given

point in time. It is therefore unclear which households were included in Bartsham's reported rate of 31.7%. Subsequent information posted at the Bartsham *Gewog* Office stated that in 2021 Bartsham had 522 households and a *gungtong* rate of 25.1%, although the criteria used to define *gungtong* remained unclear. Moreover, during my fieldwork, a surveyor responsible for recording crops and livestock across all households in Bartsham reported that 272 of the 522 registered households were not currently residing there.

Overall, the definitional ambiguity surrounding *gungtong* makes it difficult to determine both the number of households residing in Bartsham and the extent of depopulation. What is clear, however, is that population decline has already reshaped household structures, livelihoods, and land use practices among those who remain. How, then, do residents themselves interpret these changes in their everyday lives and in the surrounding landscape? To address this question, the following analysis foregrounds the narratives of people living in Bartsham, rather than relying solely on numerical indicators.

Village *Tshechu* in *Tshechu* Studies

This article focuses on *tshechu*, one of the most prominent religious practices in Bhutan, performed collectively by Buddhist communities across the country in diverse scales and forms.

Defining *tshechu* is challenging. Etymologically, the term combines *tshe* (day) and *chu* (ten), signifying "the tenth day." According to the Dzongkha Advanced Dictionary (Dzongkha Development Commission 2021, 1150), *tshechu* carries four principal meanings: (1) the birthday of Guru Rinpoche, (2) *cham* (masked dances) performed annually on the tenth day of the lunar month at *lhakhangs* (Buddhist temple) or *dzongs*, (3) the series of rituals

conducted on that day, and (4) the tenth day of the month itself. This ritual emphasis reflects several major life events of Guru Rinpoche that are believed to have occurred on the tenth day (Nagahashi and Imaeda 1994, 148).

As the second definition indicates, *cham* constitutes a central component of *tshechu* (Nagahashi and Imaeda 1994, 144). *Tshechu* featuring *cham* are held in *dzongs* as well as major *lhakhangs* and monasteries across Bhutan. With the rise of tourism, they have become significant public attractions. Because *cham* performances dominate, much existing scholarship on *tshechu* has focused primarily on *cham*: for example, studies of its relationship with Buddhist cosmology (Motobayashi 2006), its role as a medium of information transmission (Pommaret 2006), organisational structures of dancers (Miyamoto 2011), the symbolism of musical accompaniment (Dodson 2011), costumes (Pommaret 2015), historical development (Dasho Sithel Dorji 2001; Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi 2011), tourism impacts (Suntikul and Ugyen Dorji 2015; Suntikul 2018), and identity formation through participation (Wulff 2019).

Karma Phuntsho (2016) notes that while *tshechu* literally means "the tenth day," the term now functions more broadly as a general designation for festivals, largely due to the prominence of tenth day celebrations. In light of this semantic flexibility, it is important to clarify terminology and specify how this article uses the term *tshechu*.

In Bhutanese religious practice, astrologically determined auspicious days are known as *düzang* or *düchen*. *Düzang* combines *dü* (time) and *zang* (auspicious) and refers to dates such as the 8th, 10th, 15th, 25th, and 30th days of each lunar month. *Düchen*, composed of *dü* and *chen* (great, important), denotes particularly significant auspicious days. The tenth day associated with Guru Rinpoche—*tshechu* in the literal sense—is thus regarded as both *düzang* and

düchen. Notably, festivals such as *Drugpa Tseshi* and *Lhabab Düchen* are *düchen* but not the tenth day of the month, yet they are still commonly referred to as *tshechu*. Accordingly, this article adopts a broad definition of *tshechu* as collectively performed religious practices held primarily on *düzang* or *düchen*. The scale of *tshechu* in Bhutan can be broadly categorised into three types. First, large-scale *tshechu* organised by the government and the Central Monastic Body (*Zhung Dratshang*), usually held at *dzongs*. Examples include Paro *Tshechu* and Trashigang *Tshechu*, multi-day events featuring *cham* that attract domestic and international visitors.

Second, regional *tshechu* organised by *gewogs* or medium-sized monasteries, typically named after their locality (e.g., Bartsham *Tshechu*, Yongphu *Tshechu*, Chorten Kora *Tshechu*). These also feature *cham* and last one to three days, drawing participants primarily from within the district. Both types carry institutional significance, with public offices and schools often closed during their observance, and are officially registered as *Düche Bumde* or *Düche Tshechu* (cf. Dendup Chophel 2020). Finally, small-scale *tshechu* organised at the household or village level, typically held in local temples, private homes, or temporary structures. These are generally one-day events without *cham*, named after the *chiwog*, village, or organiser.

This article focuses on the third category, referred to here as "village *tshechu*." Embedded within highly localised communities, these events represent collabourative spaces where monastic specialists, as custodians of ritual knowledge, and laypeople, as practitioners of everyday religion, jointly sustain Buddhist practice at the grassroots level.

The condition of local communities directly shapes both the form and sustainability of village *tshechu*. Unlike large-scale *tshechu* organised by the state or monastic institutions, village *tshechu* are particularly vulnerable to

discontinuation. This vulnerability stems from depopulation, which has led to shortages of organisers, participants, and sponsors, thereby jeopardising the continuity of these festivals. These challenges demonstrate that depopulation is not only transforming the socio-economic fabric of rural Bhutan but also reshaping how religious practices are sustained and transmitted. In this context, examining transformations in village *tshechu* offers critical insight into the relationship between demographic change and the lived practice of Buddhism at the village level.

History of Village *Tshechu* in Bartsham

The origins of village *tshechu* in Bartsham reveal how local communities have initiated and sustained religious practices in the modern period. According to oral history, after the statue of Chana Dorji, regarded as a *ter* (sacred hidden treasure), was brought to Bartsham by Yangkhar *Khoche* nobility (cf. Choeten Norbu 2003; Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi 2013), a *tshechu* known as *Do Tshechu* or *Dawa Tshechu* was performed in the area. The term *do* or *dawa* signifies "month," and this monthly *tshechu* was reportedly held in each village, corresponding to what are today the *chiwogs* of Bartsham (Fieldnote, 3 October 2023).

Bhutanese Calendar Date	Name of *Do Tshechu*
10th day of the third month	Kumung *Do Tshechu*
10th day of the fourth month	Dzongthung *Do Tshechu*
10th day of the fifth month	Nangkhar *Do Tshechu*
10th day of the sixth month	Tashang *Do Tshechu*
10th day of the seventh month	Kumung *Do Tshechu*

Table 1. Schedule of Monthly Do Tshechu in Bartsham

In 1966, *cham* was introduced to Bartsham by the late Ugyen Dorji, the first Bartsham *Gup* (elected head of *gewog*), together with Lama Pema Wangchen (Lama Nakpo), the first Bartsham Lama. This led to the establishment of the Bartsham *Tshechu* (*Soendoep Tshechu*) at Chador Lhakhang, which continues today. Following this development, the practice of *Do Tshechu* was discontinued, and village *tshechu* began to emerge in several settlements.

Majawung *tshechu* offers a representative example of how village *tshechu* emerged in Bartsham. This account draws on the "Catalogue of Majawung *Tshokhang*" (publication year unknown), written by Chador Phuntsho, a former resident of Majawung. According to this source, in the Year of the Wooden Monkey (1944), a village *tshechu* and *nyungne* (fasting ritual) were initiated at the entrance to Drupchu cave by several lay leaders—Tsipa Tashi of Drupchu, Kabte Kota of Majawung, Tsewang Rinchen, Memey Tenzin—and the local community. The *nyungne* was led by Aha Lama (Chador Phuntsho n.d., 2–3). Later, rumours circulated that "where white Dharma spreads, black evil also spreads," and by 1973 the core members withdrew from the village *tshechu*, leading to its discontinuation (Chador Phuntsho n.d., 4).

Around three years later, a resident named Dawa Dolma passed away. During her death rites, Tshampa Gompo participated as a ritual specialist, and her husband, Sangay, resolved to revive the village *tshechu* for the benefit of the deceased and all sentient beings in the intermediate state (Chador Phuntsho n.d., 7–8). Sangay pledged one hundred as seed money, Tshampa Gompo offered twenty, and Gelong Dondrup undertook responsibility for butter lamp offerings. From the year following Dawa Dolma's passing (1978), the village *tshechu* was held annually in Majawung village (Chador Phuntsho n.d., 8–9). This forms the historical background to the establishment of Majawung *tshechu*.

Yingom *tshechu* provides another example. Its origins are documented in "A Brief History of the Construction of Rigzin Pema Choling Lhakhang" (publication year unknown), written by Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi, a native of Yingom. According to this text, two sisters—Abi Chozom and Abi Kuchimo—once visited a sacred site at Changmi where one's impurities are said to be revealed when passing between two rocks. Although Abi Chozom passed through successfully on her way in, she became stuck upon returning. The site's custodian instructed her to make a virtuous vow, and she pledged to hold a village *tshechu* in her village, whereupon she was freed (Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi n.d., 3).

After returning home, she told the story to her husband, Memey Gordan, and together they sponsored the first village *tshechu* around 1945. A temporary hall was erected in the square before the *chorten* (stupa), and Galing Lopon was invited to lead the rituals. At that time, Galing Lopon and Memey Thinley were conducting annual village *tshechu* and *nyungne* at Cheten Lhakhang (Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi n.d., 3–4). This account forms the background of the Yingom *tshechu*.

Other village *tshechu* in Bartsham show similar patterns. For example, Mantsang *tshechu* is said to have once had a *karcha* (catalogue) comparable to that of Majawung, although it has since been lost. In contrast, Gompa *tshechu* lacks written documentation altogether. Thus, Majawung and Yingom represent rare cases where documentary evidence survives, and for most villages, historical reconstruction relies on oral history.

One oral account describes the origin of Mantsang *tshechu* as follows: A *jatsha* (crossbred ox) belonging to Memey Namgye Wangda of Mantsang frequently injured villagers. The villagers eventually stoned it to death, and to atone for

this act, they first introduced a *nyungne*, followed by a village *tshechu*. This was initiated by Memey Tenzin and Abi Kezang Peldon in the mid-twentieth century, and Galing Lama's father was invited to serve as the *Tsawai Lama* (guiding lama) (Fieldnote, 9 February 2024).

Another oral narrative concerns Gompa *tshechu*. It was originally known as Shongpa *tshechu*, as it was held in Shongpa, where Zo Kezang's house was located. Although the precise origins are unclear, the village *tshechu* is said to have been initiated by his mother, Abi Taumo, and her sister, Abi Neten. At that time, most residents of Gompa were poor, whereas Zo Kezang, an accomplished carpenter, was relatively wealthy. After the deaths of Zo Kezang and his relatives, the village *tshechu* ceased for a period. It was later revived by Aku Wangdra, Memey Namgay, and Tshampa Karma Tashi (Fieldnote, 27 January 2023). Taken together, these examples shed light on the emergence of village *tshechu* in Bartsham. Several common features can be identified.

First, village *tshechu* emerged relatively recently—approximately two to three generations ago, during the mid-to-late twentieth century. This timing is supported not only by the documented founding dates of Drupchu *tshechu* (1944), Yingom *tshechu* (ca. 1945), and Majawung *tshechu* (1978), but also by oral accounts indicating that the initiators of Mantsang *tshechu* and Gompa *tshechu* belonged to earlier generations. Thus, most village *tshechus* in Bartsham appear to have begun in the mid-to-late twentieth century. This relates to the following commonality.

Second, village *tshechu* were initiated primarily by laypeople, often in collabouration with Buddhist practitioners. In other words, their origins reflect the agency of secular villagers rather than monastic authorities. *Tsipa* (astrologers), *tshampa* (hermits), and *gelong* (monks) continue to conduct

rituals in rural communities, working closely with local residents. Likewise, the honorifics *memey* (grandfather/elder man) and *abi* (grandmother/elder woman) denote respected lay figures. These terms suggest that the establishment of village *tshechu* relied on cooperation between ritual specialists and lay community members. This raises the question of what social background enabled such individuals to assume these roles.

Third, the establishment of village *tshechu* required significant financial resources. For instance, Zo Kezang of Gompa *tshechu* belonged to a relatively affluent household, indicating that only those with economic means could serve as principal sponsors. This relates to Bartsham's history of trade. Situated along a route connecting Tibet and India, Bartshampa (people from Bartsham) engaged in trans-Himalayan trade, particularly during the agricultural off-season. In the late twentieth century, traders travelled to Tawang—a three-day journey from Bartsham—and to Gudama and Jaigaon near the Indian border, transporting goods such as raw silk, textiles, alcohol, and electrical appliances according to shifting demand. Trade was largely undertaken by men, and many accumulated wealth within a single generation. These traders served as key sponsors during the formative period of village *tshechu*. For example, the sponsor of Drupchu *tshechu* and those who revived Gompa *tshechu* in the 1990s were engaged in such trade activities.

Finally, the role of the *Tsawai Lama*—the ritual specialist guiding the village *tshechu*—was crucial. Unlike ordinary monks, the *Tsawai Lama* is expected to excel in both doctrinal knowledge and ritual practice. In the above examples, three such figures are mentioned: Aha Lama, Galing Lopon (also known as Galing Lama), and Galing Lopon's father. Of these, detailed information is available only for Galing Lopon.

He was a monk from Galing, across the Gamri valley, who married into

Dzongthung village but later divorced and returned home. Interviews indicate that he was invited not only to Majawung *tshechu* and Yingom *tshechu*, but also to Gompa *tshechu* (Fieldnote, 13 January 2023), suggesting he was widely relied upon throughout Bartsham. Changes in Bartsham's Buddhist leadership occurred only after the first Bartsham Lama, Pema Wangchen, returned from his studies in Tibet. When the two officiated together at Cheten Lhakhang, Galing Lopon ultimately transferred his ritual responsibilities in Bartsham to Lama Pema Wangchen.

In summary, the emergence of village *tshechu* in Bartsham was made possible by two interrelated developments: an increase in access to ritual specialists and the accumulation of wealth through the trade activities of laypeople. How, then, were these village *tshechus*—established under such conditions—practised at the time of my research? The next section examines their contemporary forms and the challenges they face amid ongoing demographic change.

Village *Tshechu* Under Depopulation

Time and Types

Village *tshechu* in Bartsham can be broadly categorised into those held during the farming season and those conducted during the agricultural off-season. The former includes *Phirchu* (15th day of the third lunar month), *Düchen Ngazom* (15th day of the fourth month), *Drugpa Tseshi* (4th day of the sixth month), *Lhabab Düchen* (22nd day of the ninth month), as well as village *tshechu* held on *Yarngoi Düzang* (10th day of each month) and *Marngoi Düzang* (25th day of each month).

By contrast, village *tshechu* conducted during the off-season—roughly from

the tenth to the twelfth Bhutanese month—are commonly referred to as *gungka tshechu* (winter *tshechu*). Those accompanied by *nyungne* are termed *nyungne tshechu*. *Nyungne* is a penitential ritual performed by lay Buddhist devotees and monks. In Bartsham, it is undertaken by voluntary individuals known as *manipa*, who engage in fasting and abstinence (abstaining from food after noon and refraining from private conversation except for mantras and scripture recitation).

Unless otherwise noted, the term "village *tshechu*" in this article refers specifically to off-season village *tshechu*. The focus on off-season village *tshechu* is due to the greater number of *tsawa* (organisers) involved and the stronger cooperative efforts required at the village level compared to farming-season village *tshechu*. For example, in Dzongthung village, the first four *tshechus* held during the farming season were organised by dividing the *tsawa* of the *nyungne tshechu* into four groups, each responsible for one village *tshechu* (Fieldnote, 21 November 2024). However, recent depopulation has reduced the number of *tsawa*, making it difficult to assign sufficient households to each of the four events. By the time of my research, the village *tshechu* held at *Phirchu* in Dzongthung village had already been discontinued.

Budgetary Management of Village *Tshechu*

The funds required to hold village *tshechu* are managed by the *tsochen*, the representative responsible for overseeing the event. Table 2 summarises the revenue and expenditure of A-*tshechu* in 2023.

Advance revenue (*'byung tho*)		Amount (Nu.)
1	Contributions from *tsawa* (*rtsa ba rnams nas dngul bsdoms*)	98,000

2	Remittance from migrated *tsawa*（*skam cha*）	20,000
3	Interest（*ma dngul gyi skyes*）	90,000
	Total	208,000
Expenditure（*song tho*）		
1	Allowances for *chospa*（*chos pa rnam la phyag gebs*）	106,450
2	Payments with receipts（*shog byang yod pa*）	105,665
3	Payments without receipts（*shog byang med pa*）	1,800
	Total	213,915
Shortfall (*ma dngul ma lang pa ni dngul*)		5,915
Post-event revenue		
1	Donations（*mi dmangs nas bzhal sdebs*）	6,120
2	Partial refund of allowances（*phyags gebs log pa*）	11,580
	Total	17,700
Balance (*lhag lus*)		11,785

Table 2. Revenue and Expenditure of A-Tshechu, 2023

Regarding revenue, the largest portion was the interest earned on *mur*—communal savings accumulated through fixed annual contributions by villagers over generations. In A-*tshechu*, for example, there were sixteen *tsawas*, including two *tsawas* residing in Thimphu. The *mur* contribution was Nu. 7,000 per *tsawa*, while the Thimphu-based *tsawas*, unable to provide *dulang* (the predetermined household contributions), remitted Nu. 10,000 each in addition to their *mur* contribution. As shown in Table 2, interest from the *mur* amounted to Nu. 90,000, suggesting a deposit balance exceeding Nu. 1,000,000.

Interview data indicate that nine villages funded their village *tshechu* primarily through interest on accumulated deposits. Like A-*tshechu*, these villages were generally able to cover expenses through interest and supplementary income without collecting additional *mur*. One village, for instance, reported holding Nu. 1,000,000 in a fixed deposit and Nu. 300,000 in a current account. In another case, family members of the owner of a private house used as the village *tshechu* venue each contributed Nu. 25,000 to increase the *mur*. The house itself was vacant, as the owner and their family were engaged in business outside the village and returned during the village *tshechu* time.

Normally, A-*tshechu* collected approximately Nu. 1,000–2,000 per *tsawa* as *mur*. However, in 2023, the amount was set at Nu. 7,000 because expenses for the inauguration ceremony of A-village's temple the previous year had been paid from the *mur* account, reducing the deposit balance. This indicates that *mur* can occasionally be used for purposes other than the village *tshechu* itself. In recent years, as more villagers have migrated to Thimphu or overseas, an increasing number of individuals have contributed to the *mur* not as *tsawa* but as personal donations. Such donors are commonly referred to as "Thimphu *jinda*" or "Australia *jinda*" (sponsors originating from Thimphu or Australia).

In the 2022 agricultural off-season, eight villages in Bartsham held village *tshechu* alone (i.e., without *nyungne*). The average number of *tsawa* involved was 4.5 households (range: 1–8). In two cases—B-*tshechu* and C-*tshechu*—the number of *tsawa* was so low that no specific *dulang* contributions were designated. Instead, financial support was provided by civil servants or overseas residents originating from those villages. For B-*tshechu*, the son of the *tsochen*, employed as a teacher in another *dzongkhag* (district), contributed directly. For C-*tshechu*, a migrant family member residing in the United States covered the entire cost of the village *tshechu* (approximately Nu. 120,000). The

average budget for such single- or two-*tsawa* arrangements was Nu. 135,000.

In addition, *nyungne tshechu* were held at nine locations, with an average of 10.7 *tsawa* households (range: 5–17). These figures indicate that *nyungne tshechu* require greater labour and financial resources than village *tshechu* alone, making it difficult to sustain them when the number of *tsawa* declines. For example, D-village reported that they had discontinued their *nyungne tshechu* due to a reduction in *tsawa* (Fieldnote, 1 December 2022). Although detailed budget figures are unavailable, the cost of A-*tshechu* in 2023 (Nu. 213,915) suggests that *nyungne tshechu* require a budget roughly 50% higher than village *tshechu*-only events.

Together, these findings illustrate that the sustainability of village *tshechu* in Bartsham increasingly depends on external financial support—from migrants and overseas residents—as the number of resident *tsawa* declines. Depopulation has therefore shifted the economic basis of ritual life from shared village labour to remittances and interest income, reshaping how religious practices are maintained in rural Bhutan.

Actors in Village *Tshechu*

Village *tshechu* today involve three primary categories of participants: *tsawa*, *chospa* (Buddhist ritual performer), and *tshechupa* (guests). *Tsawa* serve as the principal organisers of the village *tshechu*. Coordination is led by the *tsochen*, who uses platforms such as WeChat to determine which households will serve as *tsawa* for the year, schedule the village *tshechu*, and decide the contents of *dulang*—the predetermined household contributions used to provide meals and refreshments for *chospa* and *tshechupa*. As noted above, A-*tshechu* in 2023 involved sixteen *tsawa* households: fourteen from within the village and two

residing in Thimphu. This demonstrates that households can participate as *tsawa* regardless of residence, maintaining ties between places of origin and destination through ritual participation.

Each *tsawa* household within the village contributes to the *dulang*, which typically includes rice, *zaw* (puffed rice), *ara* (local alcohol), cheese, butter, and cash. The specific composition of *dulang* varies between villages. In some cases, households based in Thimphu substitute foodstuffs with cash remittances sent to the *tsochen*. These contributions are used to pay the daily wages of the *chospa* and to provide meals for *tshechupa*. In addition, *tsawa* are responsible for procuring foodstuffs, gathering firewood, cleaning and preparing the venue, and erecting temporary structures when necessary. Preparations for the village *tshechu* typically extend over several days before the event.

The second group consists of *chospa*, Buddhist ritual performers such as *gomchen* and *tshampa* from neighbouring settlements. When only the village *tshechu* is held, they typically arrive in the morning and return home after the evening meal. They are invited either by the *tsochen* or by resident Buddhist practitioners in the host village, and on occasion monastic students are dispatched from Chador Lhakhang. The number of *chospa* varies depending on the scale of the event, averaging around twenty participants.

The third group comprises *tshechupa*, guests who attend the village *tshechu* but are neither *tsawa* nor *chospa*. They typically arrive around midday, bringing a *bangchung* (woven bamboo container) filled with rice, one *palang* (wooden container) of *ara*, and a small cash offering for the *tsawa*. In return, meals and drinks are provided by the *tsawa*. Guests who stay into the evening often join the *tsawa* in singing and dancing (*zhabthra*) late into the night. Because village *tshechu* are held on *düzang*—days on which activities involving killing, such as

agricultural work, are avoided—these occasions function as "*minappa ga chutti* (a holiday for farmers)", allowing villagers to attend village *tshechu* in neighbouring settlements from the daytime onward.

Taken together, these observations show that village *tshechu* in Bartsham rely on three interdependent groups: *tsawa*, who organise and finance the event; *chospa*, who perform the rituals; and *tshechupa*, who participate through reciprocal exchange and social support. However, as depopulation reduces the number of resident *tsawa*, their labour and financial burdens increase, while the number of *tshechupa* is also declining. This transformation highlights how demographic change is reshaping the social foundations of ritual life in Bartsham—an issue examined in greater depth in the following sections.

Decrease in *tsawa*, *tshechupa*, and *manipa*

Decrease in tsawa

On the day of the village *tshechu*, *tsawa* households take on multiple responsibilities, including that of the *godingpa* (overall coordinator), *nyelpa* (responsible for the storehouse and finances), *thaptsangpa* (food and tea preparation), and *dangjapa/dongsepa* (serving food and beverages). Because meals are served to dozens of guests and the containers are heavy, the role of *dangjapa* is typically performed by young men. By contrast, the physically demanding role of *thaptsangpa* is often undertaken by elderly villagers. As both tasks require significant manpower, villagers frequently remark, "*thaptsangpa dang dangjapa ma lang pa na*" (There are not enough *thaptsangpa* and *dangjapa*) (Fieldnote, 25 August 2023). Individuals performing these duties are sometimes referred to as *laipa* or *yokpa* (workers), or alternatively as *drang khan* (servers).

In 2023, one village *tshechu* was cancelled entirely due to a shortage of *drang khan* (Fieldnote, 31 January 2024). As of 2022, at least six village *tshechus* had been discontinued or merged with those of neighbouring settlements. Interviews indicate that Yingom *tshechu* once had twelve *tsawa* households, but due to migration and the passing of elderly members, this number had declined to three households by 2022 (Fieldnote, 29 January 2023).

Moreover, people have begun stepping down as *tsawa* not only due to depopulation but also because of the increasing financial burden associated with rising prices. According to an interview with a *tsochen*, there were discussions in 2023 about abolishing the collection of *mur*, as daily wages and food costs for *chospa* have increased and economic disparities among *tsawa* households have become more pronounced. As a result, it was suggested that only households with sufficient financial means would contribute to *mur* (Fieldnote, 1 January 2023). Although the amount of *mur* varies from year to year, the Nu. 7,000 collected during the 2022 off-season A-*tshechu* clearly represented a substantial burden for resident households.

At the same time, contributions to *mur* have increased through donations from civil servants and businesspeople living outside the village—in Thimphu, Australia, and Trashigang Town—thereby reducing the financial burden on resident *tsawa*. Yet this shift has altered the direction of merit. As one *tsawa* household noted, "The civil servants' *mur* has increased. We become the recipients of good deeds (*gewa dok khan ri lay*)" (Fieldnote, 25 July 2023). Village *tshechu* are grounded in Buddhist values. As Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi explains in his history of Yingom *tshechu*, they are held "to accumulate merit for the living and purify their sins and obstacles" and "to perform meritorious deeds for the welfare of the deceased" (Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi n.d., 5). Villagers similarly describe village *tshechu* as "*gewa a lay ga*" (for virtuous

deeds) or "*drigpa jang may ga*" (to reduce sins) (Fieldnote, 18 January 2023).

Expressions such as "one can gain merit by becoming a *tsawa*," "offering food is an act of generosity (*jimba*)" (Fieldnote, 20 December 2022), and "eliminating discord (*si*) within the settlement" (Fieldnote, 25 February 2023) illustrate that becoming a *tsawa* is understood as a way to accumulate merit (*tsho*). While other forms of virtuous action exist for Bartshampa, opportunities to practise generosity on a large scale are limited. As a result, the village *tshechu* serves as a special annual occasion for villagers to perform *gewa*.

However, with the increase in *mur* contributions from civil servants and other out-migrants—and their view that they, too, become recipients of *gewa*—a shift has emerged whereby *tsawa*, who traditionally act as the givers of good deeds, now sometimes find themselves in the position of recipients. At the same time, as the financial burden on *tsawa* continues to rise, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold the village *tshechu* without external support.

Financial support from out-migrants is also grounded in Buddhist values. Consequently, such contributions—often provided as remittances for organising costs—function not only as economic remittances, as discussed in migration studies, but also as extensions of Buddhist merit-making by sustaining the practice of village *tshechu* from afar. This article refers to this phenomenon as "ritual remittance."

Decrease in tshechupa and manipa

Depopulation and ageing have affected not only *tsawa* but also the number of *tshechupa* and *manipa*. A decline in *tshechupa*—the recipients of good deeds—means fewer opportunities for *tsawa*, the givers, to perform virtuous acts. As

one *tsawa* noted, "*songo ma nyi la gewa nyungpu*" (Without people, there are fewer good deeds) (Fieldnote, 31 January 2023).

Changes are also evident in the relationship between *tsawa* and *tshechupa*. One *tsawa* explained, "*oma sho lak tshap dabu ri wa la*" (It has become like labour exchange) (Fieldnote, 23 January 2023), indicating a shift toward balanced reciprocity in which participation is increasingly based on mutual expectation—"if they do not attend our village *tshechu*, we will not attend theirs."

During my participation as a *nyungne manipa* at the 2023 D-*tshechu*, an exchange between an elderly man from D-village and another from E-village illustrated this shift, following the conclusion of the fasting period early in the morning.

> D-village man: "Will people from E-village come to the *tshechu*?"
> E-village man: "I don't know."
> D-village man: "They will come. After all, we attended their *tshechu*."
> (Fieldnote, 25 February 2024)

For *tshechupa* themselves, participation in the village *tshechu* holds religious significance. As one woman explained, in response to concerns that *tshechupa* now often arrive only in the afternoon: "*Tshechu* must be attended from the morning. Attending from the morning reduces the days spent in hell by one day" (Fieldnote, 31 January 2023). This comment highlights the belief that the timing and duration of participation contribute to the accumulation of merit and the reduction of future suffering.

The ageing of both *tshechupa* and *manipa* has also become a concern. Previously, villagers from neighbouring settlements would join *nyungne* as

manipa simply upon hearing about it by word of mouth, but in recent years they rarely participate unless explicitly contacted (Fieldnote, 20 November 2022). Even neighbouring villages face logistical challenges: in Bartsham, where houses are scattered across steep mountain slopes, reaching the next village can be difficult. During D-*tshechu*, *tsawa* with vehicles transported *tshechupa* and *chospa* to and from the site—a journey of more than 30 minutes each way—to enable elderly participants to attend.

Thus, the village *tshechu* now requires *tsawa* to actively consider how to ensure the participation of *tshechupa* and *manipa*. This situation is perceived as reducing opportunities for *tsawa* to accumulate merit.

Collectively, these observations show that depopulation and ageing affect not only the number of *tsawa* but also the participation of *tshechupa* and *manipa*. As opportunities for social gatherings diminish and mutual attendance increasingly operates through balanced reciprocity, the circulation of merit has become more restricted. While the village *tshechu* remains a vital occasion for religious practice and social exchange, ensuring attendance now requires considerable labour and coordination—particularly transport support for elderly participants. The decline in both those who give (*tsawa*) and those who receive (*tshechupa* and *manipa*) thus threatens the moral economy of merit that underpins village ritual life.

Conclusion

Small-scale festivals such as village *tshechu*, which have historically embodied the cultural and social fabric of rural communities, are gradually disappearing—often without conscious recognition. This article has demonstrated that although contributions from out-migrants—what I term ritual remittance—help sustain village *tshechu*, the more pressing challenge is

the shortage of participants within the villages themselves: *tsawa*, *tshechupa*, and *manipa* from both host and neighbouring settlements.

Hovden (2013, 226) argues that "the sponsorship of rituals can be seen as an indicator of the economy and wellbeing of the society". In Bartsham, by the late twentieth century, population growth and improved economic conditions enabled many villages to organise village *tshechu*. Participation was understood not only as a social duty but also as a means to "*gewa a lay* (to do good deeds)." However, present-day Bartsham reveals the challenges of sustaining village *tshechu* under depopulation. Reduced festival activity reflects diminished opportunities for villagers to engage in merit-making within their local communities. By 2022, when I conducted fieldwork, six village *tshechus* had already been discontinued or merged. Although remittances and donations now constitute a substantial share of funding, the most critical need is not financial resources but physical participation—fellow villagers to share the labour of organising village *tshechu* and performing *gewa*, thereby sustaining both social and spiritual life.

This situation echoes Yoneyama Toshinao's observations in a depopulated Japanese village in the 1960s. He noted that depopulation was often treated merely as a demographic or socioeconomic problem, rather than one that "affects the very existence of the people caught up in it" (Yoneyama 1969, 29). For villagers in Bartsham, whose everyday lives are deeply grounded in Buddhist values, depopulation and the disappearance of village *tshechu* represent not only social and cultural losses but also a reduction in opportunities to accumulate merit. Thus, the decline of village *tshechu* constitutes an existential challenge that threatens both community continuity and spiritual practice.

Depopulation and out-migration in rural Bhutan are becoming increasingly

severe. In this context, it is necessary to understand the lives of those who remain—not only in terms of livelihoods and economic conditions, but also with regard to their cultural and religious worlds. The case study presented in this article shows that although rural Bhutanese continue to uphold Buddhist values, depopulation and migration make their realisation progressively more difficult.

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