

## THE SPIDER, THE PIGLET AND THE VITAL PRINCIPLE: A POPULAR RITUAL FOR RESTORING THE *SROG*

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The notion about the vital principal or the life force being snatched by the “special class of malignant spirits called *bla gced* ‘soul killer’<sup>1</sup> is a widespread belief among the Bhutanese. Although the work of Lessing mentions as *bla gced*, yet it is more appropriate in the popular Bhutanese context to refer to it as *srog gced* the ‘vital principal killer’. Despite the power of medications, when an ailing person fails to respond positively to the treatment, a Bhutanese would normally conclude that the patient’s ‘vital principal is smothered’ (*srog gced da nug*). This is a clear sign that the vital principal of the sick person has deserted his body under the bad influence of the malignant spirits. Consequently, to restore it back, a ritual has to be performed as prescribed by the astrologer.

In effect, this paper presents an overview of a non-Buddhist ritual conducted to restore the vital principal or the life force of a sick person in the village of Trashi Tokha.<sup>2</sup> The paper also attempts to discuss the concept of *srog* and *bla* as well as the symbolic presence of the spider, the pig and the birds in the ritual.

### *Srog* and *Bla* : Are the Terms Synonymous ?

Although there is no blanket distinction between the two terms, yet it is essential that we have a clear understanding of each of the concept of *srog* and *bla* before discussing the ritual. *Srog* can be loosely attributed to life force or the vital principal which is housed within the body; as such the body perishes when the vital principal leaves it.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, after the separation, the *srog* or the vital principal too drifts away and mingles

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<sup>1</sup> Lessing, F.D, 1951:267.

<sup>2</sup> Trashi Tokha (*Bkra shis To kha*) is one of the villages of Bjena Gewog (*Sbe nag rged 'og*) of Wangdue Phodrang (*Dbang 'dus pho brang*) district in Western Bhutan. It comprises of 10 households holding 150 inhabitants. The cultivation of paddy is their main occupation. They also migrate to Khothangkha (*Kho thangs kha*), a half day’s walk from Trashi Tokha, in summer. In Khothangkha they cultivate potatoes which is their main source of cash income. Barley, wheat and vegetables like chilly, radish and beans also supplement to their livelihood. Almost all the households keep animals: cows for milk, ox for ploughing their fields, horses for carrying the load and hens for eggs. Rearing of pigs was also very popular just a decade ago. However, under the influence of Buddhism about 50% of the households have stopped rearing pigs.

<sup>3</sup> The expression “do not take the vital principle” (*srog gced ma 'bad*) is widely used when animals are killed.

with the air above which leaves the body deprived of its own life-supporting strength and vigour as now this is believed to have been possessed and captured by the malignant spirits. This then, would mean the death of the sick person.<sup>4</sup> The popular concept which explains that the loss of the virility and energy depends upon the graveness of the disease (illness), appears plausible here, for now the body would be left weak and emaciated-clearly devitalised!

Coming to the term *bla*, the most explicit meaning of it, is the 'strength, power and vitality.' Although used very sparingly, it is also understood as the 'soul' but more befittingly *bla* can also be understood as a 'blessing, the power of blessing and omen.'<sup>5</sup> However, what is so interesting to note here, is the nature of *bla* - which stands to represent the person's 'soul'-for even an inanimate object can be considered his or her *bla*, which is why we have *bla rdo* (*bla* stone), *bla shing* (*bla* tree),<sup>6</sup> and *bla tsho* (*bla* lake)' and many more which are closely knitted as the common motifs in the folklores. The destruction or the defilement of these elements could be fatalistic and life threatening as it could lead to the sickness or worse still, the death of the person whose *bla* is considered to be that 'disturbed and now sullied' stone, tree or lake. Such similar examples are also not uncommon in the literature of English as in 'The Golden Bough'<sup>7</sup> which is the classic example. The author treats the 'bough' as the representation of the soul of one of the characters, the destruction of which could kill the same person. This analogy clearly portrays the 'oneness' or the 'synonymy' in the two terms- the 'soul' and the *bla*. The soul like *bla* is omnipresent, as it can dwell not only in the objects but also can live independently even after the extinction of the body,<sup>8</sup> or even harm the body if it remains detached from the *bla* for too long as it is still captivated by the malignant spirits. Feeble it may seem, but against this background, *bla* can be then equated with soul?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Oral communication of Pema Tenzin, 63 years old farmer of Trashy Tokha village, the area of study for this paper.

<sup>5</sup> See Lessing, F.D, 1951: 281 where he cites from the Tibetan-English Dictionary of H. A.. J chke.

<sup>6</sup> The term *srog shing* (*srog* tree) is also employed but as far as my understanding goes, terms like *srog tsho* (*srog* lake), or *srog mdo* (*srog* stone) is not popular.

<sup>7</sup> Frazer, Sir James G., 1933.

<sup>8</sup> Lessing, F.D, 1951: 281, end note 9. See also Tylor, E.B, 1970: 10, 21-25 where he talks about the independent existence as well as the nature of soul.

<sup>9</sup> For the purpose of this article, based on the explanations provided in the text, *bla* would be arbitrarily translated as soul hereafter.

Now, if we look at the concept of soul we have to understand it from two levels: for the sick or the dying and the other one for the one already dead.

Firstly, after the death of a person the soul is invited by a monk for a meal which is done by performing (*bla skugp*) ritual, the act of 'calling the soul'. As for the soul of the sick, there dwells at least two souls: the animal soul and the rational soul.<sup>10</sup> It is considered a loss of the rational soul if the victim becomes enfeebled, and loses his/her senses and falls into a delirious state of unclear thinking. The Bhutanese refer to such situation as the moment of 'scattered soul' (*bla stor*), the chaotic state of mind which now the ritual will try to recuperate and re-assemble 'the scattered-ness' through *bla skugp* or the 'call the soul'.

*Srog* vanishes with the physical death of the body while *bla* lives even after, ushering in a glaring difference between the two. In effect, one is compelled to ask whether the soul and vital principal be considered two different entities? If so, can one ignore their similarities? For, both soul and vital principal is indispensable for the survival of the body, both stands vulnerable to the 'soul killer' (*bla gced*) and 'vital principal killer' (*srog gced*) class of malignant spirits and both can be restored only by conducting appropriate rituals. Then, can soul and vital principal be considered as one? This can be not only confusing but also bewildering!

### The Two Level Diagnosis

Even in the towns among the literates, astrologers are still sought after for their advice especially in the cases of prolonged illness or a failure of the medicines to improve the health of the one sick.

At times the astrologer diagnoses the vital force of the sick person to have been severed by the *srog gced* class of malignant spirits. Indicating thus that the vital force has to be restored (*srog blugs*).<sup>11</sup> In consequence,

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<sup>10</sup> Tylor, E.B., 1970: 21. The notion that a man has several souls is widespread. For instance, the Fijians distinguish between dark soul that goes to Hades and the light soul that stays where it dies. The Algonquians of North America believe strongly in the duality of soul. One soul goes out and sees dreams while the other remains behind. At death one of the two abides with the body and for this the survivors leave offerings of food, while the other departs to the land of spirits. For the Dakotas there are four souls whereby one stays in the corpse, one in the village, one goes in the air and one to the land of the spirits. (ibid: 18). The Cambodians believe that a man has nineteen souls which are related to the ten great doors of the body (the ears, the eyes, the nostrils, the mouth, the navel, the anus and the urinary tract), the four conscience (door of the mouth and navel), the four memory/senses which communicates with the eyes and the ears and the digestive system. (Khoan, N-V, 1933: 146, footnote 8).

<sup>11</sup> It is important to remark that the concept of *srog blugs* can be differentiated into two. The first type is the restoration of the life force when someone is sick. The desired result is the recovery of the sick person. The other one is very common among the Buddhists whereby people buy fish,

the astrologer's first diagnosis is related to the identification of the problem with the prescription for solution.

Based on the advice received from the astrologer, one of the relatives or neighbours of the sick approaches a medium for his assistance. The medium is the only specialist considered fit and proper to negotiate with the malignant spirits and who can help restore the vital principle of the sick person. But preceding that recuperation treatment, the medium has to first make the second level diagnosis to find out the direction in which the spirits have taken the vital principle. For this purpose, the medium attires himself in his full costume<sup>12</sup> as a preparatory step towards the second level diagnosis. A vessel is filled with paddy, on which an arrow bound in a scarf is planted and kept in front of the medium. After the fumigation of the items and cleansing himself, the medium begins the diagnostic ritual. At the very outset the deities are invoked as slowly the medium enters into a trance during which he tries to find out the direction in which the vital principle has been stolen. This takes about an hour or so, and with the completion of the ritual, the diagnosis is made.<sup>13</sup>

### Restoration of the Vital Principle: the Two Modalities of Conducting the Ritual<sup>14</sup>

There are two different ways in which the vital force is restored. They may differ in terms of the degree of preparation and also the place for conducting it. One ritual requires more preparation as it involves

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birds or animals which are destined to be killed and sold as meat. After buying, they are set free in appropriate and save places. The roosters, hens, cows and oxen would be sometimes offered to the temples or the monastic body. The purpose of this benevolent act is to gain merit and ultimately break away from the samsaric cycle.

<sup>12</sup> In the village of Trashi Tokha the ritual of restoration of the vital force is performed either by a Pawo, a Neljorma or a Phajo. The paraphernalia of the Pawo (*dpa' bo*) and the Neljorma (*rnal 'byor ma*) are a head dress (*rig lnga*), a scarf with fringes as well as red stripes on the edges (*kha dmar*), a hand drum (*krang kri*) and a bell (*dril bu*). On the other hand, the Phajo (*pha jo*) wears a just a scarf similar to that of the pawo and neljorma and carries a drum (*rnaga*) which is beat with a drum stick (*rnas tog*).

<sup>13</sup>[<sup>13</sup>] Oral Communication of Angay Zam, 67 years old medium from the Chungseykha (*Chung se kha*) village in Wangdue Phodrang.

<sup>14</sup> More fieldwork will definitely reveal myriad other modalities of restoring the soul. The case that I have studied is restricted just to one village. For instance, in some parts of Bhutan, after the medium has identified the direction in which the soul has been taken, someone goes out to a bushy area, cuts some bushes, brings it inside and shakes it on a piece of white cloth which is spread on the floor. If there is a spider it is picked up with the help of cotton and placed near the heart of the sick person signifying the restoration of the vital principle. Interestingly, if the spider is black it indicates that the soul has been brought back from a malignant *bdud* and the white spider from that of a *dman* (pronounced as mem), both different class of malignant spirits. □ It should be noted that the ritual is called *bla blugs* and not *srogs blugs* like in the village of my study. (Oral Communication of Karma Lhaki, 63 years old, Changzamtoe (*Chang zam to*), Thimphu (*Thim phug*) dzongkhag (*rdzong khag*) □ whom I interviewed on June 4, 2003.)

making the sacrificial materials (*gtor ma*) made of rice or flour and the proprietary items which is then conducted inside the house. On the contrary, the other is conducted outside without such elaborate preparation. However, both serve the same purpose - for restoring the vital principle of the sick person.

As witnessed above, the first modality demands some preparation although not very elaborate. The medium makes one hundred thumb sized and thumb shaped *gtor ma*. Butter rolled in the size of a pea, is then pasted on all these materials, which along with a butter light is then placed on a small piece of plank or on any flat surfaced object. Some of the proprietary items which are sprinkled at the base of the *gtor ma* consist of cooked rice, curry (if there is), a piece of shredded meat, pieces of chillies, some tea leaves, a clump of butter, a pinch of salt and a teaspoon of alcohol.

But of all these, the most special feature of this preparation is the presence of a sacrificial material called the 'tree of malignant spirit' (*bdud shing*) of which one half is painted in black and the other half in white.

To this material is also tied a string which is painted in half black and half white. Whilst its black fringe remains tied on the painted material its white end is attached on the hand of the sick person.<sup>15</sup>

The parti-colour is suggestive of the predicament of the situation; the uncertainty in retrieving the soul back from the clutches of the spirits. So the black colour is a symbolic representation of 'death' that is still lurking just as the white symbolizes 'recovery' of the sick person.

The string is highly evocative as it represents the battle between the evil spirits and the personal deity of the medium<sup>16</sup> who has to struggle to get back the soul. At this point, one wonders if the string too represents a route, a passage through which the vital force journey back from the alien world of the spirits to the familiar world of mankind. This restorative ritual is conducted inside the house, beside the bed of the sick person. But the most significant feature of this part of the ritual remains the symbolic presence of the object that stands as the 'representative' of the sick man. As discussed earlier, it can be anything - an egg, bird,<sup>17</sup> a chunk of meat, or a pig<sup>18</sup> that is placed together with the sacrificial cakes.

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<sup>15</sup> Oral communication of Trashi Penjor, 40 years old medium of Shelngo Jangsa (*Zhal ngo byang sar*) village, Shaba (*Shar ba*) in Paro dzongkhag whom I had interviewed on 28 May, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> The black and the white parts of the string represent the world of malignant spirits and the personal deity of the medium respectively.

<sup>17</sup> In Cambodia the rooster is used during the ritual of restoring the soul because it has five virtues which are: the crest on its head represents the civilisation; the claws on its feet symbolises the military courage; it is always ready to fight representing bravery; when it finds something to eat,

The restoration ritual begins with the fumigation and sprinkling of water on all the items now placed on the wooden plank, which is followed by the chanting of the sacred spells. Entering into a deep trance, the medium now communicates with the *srog gced* class of malignant spirits, making attempts to negotiate and barter the 'representative' together with the cakes for the captured soul and so he chants:

Oh! Black bird<sup>19</sup> of the black spirits (*bdud*) I dare call thee  
 For white you are not-the White bird of the white deities.  
 Bear away the malaise and the pain with him it has lain.  
 The bird of vital force has set out on its mission.  
 So bear away this misery and this pain as you descend  
 To the underworld of the subterranean deities (*klu*).  
 And you my bird of vital force, hark!  
 To the subterranean world you shall sail and mark  
 Your presence, there to entreat the world of *btsan*.  
 Bear this pain, this misery away- for I urge thee again  
 Submit to my charge-to my bidding and my summon  
 To the frontier of the malignant spirits (*bdud*) and god (*Lha*)  
 You shall retire so hark thee again to this bidding.  
 I am but the tutelary deity yidam (*yid dam*) Tandin  
 Between the malignant spirits and the god, I function  
 I am the mediator, the emissary and all  
 I am the tutelary deity Yidam Tandin.  
 So carry this misery, this pain away  
 Borne and endured by this sufferer alone  
 This bird of vital force I do send.  
 To the above thirteen world of deities it shall soar  
 To the world of *btsan* in the middle it will tour  
 To the underworld of the subterranean deities (*klu*) it will roam.  
 So to my summon, to my command you come

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it invites friends symbolising charity ; it guards through out the night and is accurate with time. (Khoan, 1933: 19). Even in the Bhutanese context, a song known as *Ko ko ri ko* describes the rooster as being virtuous through the praise of the different parts of its body.

<sup>18</sup> The choice of bird, piglet, egg or meat solely depends on the wish of the family of the sick person. However, the most common practice in the urban area is the use of egg or meat as it is easily available. On the other hand, the people in the rural area use bird (hen or rooster) and in some cases piglet. It is also to be remarked that in the village of my study the choice depend on the graveness of the sick person. If the person is seriously ill they use bigger animals like pig. (Oral communication of Rinchen Dorji, 35 years old and Sangay, 75 years old farmers of Trashigang Tokha village whom I had interviewed on 18 January, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> The bird which has been reflected in the chant as the representative of the sick person can be substituted by pig. However, if egg is used the word employed would be bird and similarly pig if pork is used.

For, I am after all the hero (*dpa' bo*) Tandin.<sup>20</sup>

As the act of negotiation continues, the medium also prescribes other rituals for the recovery of the sick person, which is promptly noted down by any of the family members as the future remedial course. Finally, with the completion of the negotiation, the string is cut across so that the white is now separated from the black - a clear indication of the restoration of the vital force and its liberation from the grip of the malignant spirits. In this light, one sees the plausibility in the string being a representation of a path along which the vital force finds its way back and returns to its real owner. The *gtor ma* together with other items are then slowly and with extreme care, taken outside and placed in the direction prescribed by the medium. The 'representative' of the sick person is also directed to travel towards the world of spirits, as the substitute of the vital force and also bearing with it all the sufferings of the sick person.

However, we note that the representative is not in an actual sense killed but only symbolically so. At the end of the ritual, if the representative is a hen, cock or even a piglet, it is, in most cases taken by the medium, for even otherwise, the family of the sick person cannot retain the ownership over it as they have already sent it as the substitute. Keeping it would mean aggravating and trying out the malignant spirits, which would eventually lead to the further mishaps - the relapse or death of the sick person or even a calamity that might befall the family. Thus, if the 'representative' does not interest the medium, which of course is very rare, the family lets it free as a stray pig or bird or in some cases, offered to a temple.

On the other hand, the preparation for the second modality just involves spreading of a cane woven mat<sup>21</sup> on a clearing in the woods near the house. A small raised pulpit<sup>22</sup> (which serves as a table) is then

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<sup>20</sup> // *gnag po bdud kyi bdud bya khyod in/ dkar po lha gi lha bya khyod men/ khyod nad pa'i ah tsa ah na 'bag sti gyin/ khyod srog bya nyim mar btang do dgo/ lus kyi ah tsa ah na 'bag sti gyin/ khyod mar 'og phyogs klu luy song sma red/ khyod nyan cig gsan cig ngi srog bya/ mar yog phyog klu lu btang da tshel/ nar bar phyog btsan lu zhu do dgo/ lu kyi ah tsa ah na 'bag sti gyin/ khyod bka' dang dam lu gsan 'di gyin/ mar lha 'dre gnyis kyi sa mtshams lu/ khyod bka' dang dam lu gsan 'di gyin/ nga yid dam Dpal chen Rta mgrin byon do dgo/ nga lha 'dre gnyis kyi zing 'cham yin/ nga yi dam Dpal chen Rta mgrin yin/ khyod nad pa'i ah tsa ah na 'bag sti gyin/ srog bya nyim mar btang do dgo/ steng lha rigs bcu gsum 'di bzhes cig/ nang bar phyogs btsan lu 'di bzhes cig/ mar 'og phyogs klu lu 'di bzhes cig/ bka' dang dam lu 'di bzhes cig/ nga sprul pa'i dpa' bo Rta mgrin yin/ / (The original chant transliterated in the note has been freely translated in the text. However, the meaning and tone has been maintained as far as possible.)*

<sup>21</sup> In Dzongkha it is called *ridi (ri di)*

<sup>22</sup> In Dzongkha it is called *chentan (spyen stegs)*.

placed on the mat. A vessel filled with paddy on which is planted an arrow with a scarf fastened to it, is displayed on the pulpit. With this the preparation is complete.

This modality too begins with the fumigation and the sprinkling of water but on the piglet,<sup>23</sup> the 'representative' of the sick person.

Entering into a state of trance, the medium invokes his deity and begins to negotiate and bargain with the malignant spirits, during which time he too prescribes rituals to be conducted for the recovery of the sick person. Towards the end of the ritual the medium lifts up the piglet, cuts the tip of the tail, and still holding it by its tail, swings it into the air and flings it. This act of cutting the piglet's tail to draw out blood from it, is symbolic of the sacrifice and killing, and the tossing and flinging the piglet of the transaction that takes place between the two parties, for now the piglet is bartered for the vital principle of the sick person.

Here we witness the important role played by the piglet in this ritual: for as a substitute it travels to the world of the malignant spirits. Furthermore it is also said that the place where it lands is where the soul is found. Can we then conclude that it is also an indicator, pointing the direction where the soul resides? For that reason a member in the family (usually a male) who assists the medium, runs to the place where the piglet lands, and breaks a branch from any of the thickets growing there. Running back as quickly, the man shakes the branch on the mat, as eagerly he scans his eyes on what drops from it. Indeed it is a spider that he searches for, and finding one, promptly picks it up, for there is a fear that the malignant spirits may take back both the vital force (the spider<sup>24</sup>) if one is slow in picking it up as well as the piglet. Then this spider is placed on the chest, next to the heart beat of the sick person. It is worthy a question to consider why it is done so? Does it imply that the Bhutanese identifies the vital force with the heart that the spider<sup>25</sup>(vital force) is closely placed there? For, doesn't the vital force dwell in the heart in the actual sense?

One notes the highly evocative presence of the spider, which remains as the most important feature in the restoration ritual. The spider

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<sup>23</sup> I had the opportunity to witness one ritual in January 2000 in the village of my study where a piglet was used. In effect, in this part I will focus on the piglet as the animal used as the replacement of the sick person. It is important to note that, according to Trashi Penjor (see the preceding not for details of this informant), when a pig is used the name of the ritual is also called 'sending the pig to the malignant spirit (*bdud*)' (*bdud phag btang ni*).

<sup>24</sup> If there is no spider, any insect would do as a substitute. However, the spider is the most preferred. Again, if there aren't any insects the whole ritual has to be repeated.

<sup>25</sup> The Basutos think that the soul is his heart ; Karens and Papuas connect soul and blood ; the Macusi Indians of Guiana say that the body decays but the man in the eyes will continue to live, associating the place of soul in the eyes. (Tylor, E.B., 1970 : 14)



is a recurrent imagery that appears in many of the rituals as a symbol and a representative of soul or the vital principle. So the ritual ends only with the restoration of the vital principle.

The medium is also paid in kinds and in accordance with the economic status of the family, as there is no fixed rate for seeking his assistance.

### Conclusion

The treatment of the spider as a representation of the lost soul remains a powerful symbol and a popular motif in the soul and vital principle restoration rituals. The idea founded on the relationship that is built between the spider and the soul is a non-Buddhist concept. "Buddhism denies the existence of a soul in any sense of that we understand it. The ensemble of phenomenon which lead to the assumption of a soul substance or substratum is attributed in Buddhism to some sort of actualism, a complicated dynamic interplay of conscious and subconscious forces...."<sup>26</sup>

Another intriguing observation that begs a question is the absence of the spider in the first modality during the restoration of the vital principle or the soul. It is indeed very surprising that such a rich and a potent character as the spider that is highly symbolic could remain unidentified and missing from the ritual. What further puzzles us is the loosely employed terms for restoration ritual such as *srog blugs ni*, *bla blugs ni*, *bdud phag btang ni* though the purpose of conducting the ritual and the desired result, as we have seen, are the same. To reveal and unfurl this mystery would call for further exploration and an in depth inquiry on this area. A more detailed study on the different modalities of rituals performed to restore the vital force, and a literature survey on the restoration rituals would not only help solve most of these questions which are left unanswered in this paper but also help find out whether *srog* and *bla* means the same or two different concepts.

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<sup>26</sup> Lessing, F.D., 1951 : 265. Also see Karmay, S.G., 1998 : 310-331.

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