

# Contesting Values of Brewing “*Chang*” in a National Park of Bhutan



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**Abstract** Many commonalities can be seen in people’s eating habits in the Himalayas, and home brewing and distillation of liquor have constituted an indispensable part of these. Home brew or so-called *chang* in Bhutanese is made from a variety of staples. *Chang* is deeply incorporated into people’s everyday lives through daily offerings to deities, receiving guests, showing appreciation for family and neighbors’ labors, and occasional events and religious ceremonies. The recent attempts of the Bhutanese government to restrain people from brewing and distilling *chang* have been justified mainly on the grounds of national health and social issues. However, they are also connected to the environmental policies regarding swidden agriculture, which produces grain for brewing in rural areas. By restraining themselves from making alcohol and drinking, people choose to restrain themselves from conducting conventional shifting cultivation, which the government intends to end. This study examines how those governmental policies have transformed people’s value systems, and how people interpret them in rural areas in relation to their everyday practices.

**Keywords** Bhutan · Environmental conservation · Swidden agriculture · *Chang* · Hospitality · Home brewing

## 1 Introduction

Politically independent Bhutan, located on the southern slope of the Himalayas, is bordered by Tibet and the Sinosphere at the great mountain range’s northern ridgeline, and by the Indosphere at the southern border where an expanse of dense forests spread out in the lowlands after one crosses the central mountainous region. The country contains differences in elevation of more than 7000 m; mountain peaks around 7000 m in height stand in the cold northern region and a subtropical region

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of about 100 m in elevation can be found in the south. Rivers and streams from glaciers and glacial lakes criss-cross the country. These features create diverse ecosystems and myriad differences in the livelihoods and customs of the Bhutanese people.

For instance, the intermediate mountainous region in central western Bhutan forms a rich rice-producing environment as a result of having a warm and wet climate. On the other hand, in the cold mountainous region near the northern border, people make their living by raising yaks and cows, and cultivating wheat and buckwheat. In the intermediate mountainous region in eastern Bhutan, besides hydroponics, dry field farming and swidden agriculture are popular, and crops such as maize and rice are primarily consumed as staples. Furthermore, in the hilly region near the Indian border, because distribution routes are more established in comparison with mountainous regions, there are many people who grow cash crops such as oranges and cardamom. However, despite differences in such crops, many commonalities can be seen in the Bhutanese people's eating habits, including a diet based on chilies and cheese. Another commonality is the home brewing and distillation of liquor, which is made from a various staples found in Bhutan.

Alcohol in the dominant society in northern Bhutan is generally called "*chang*."<sup>1</sup> *Chang* can be broadly divided into three types. First, there are "*banchang*" and "*shinchang*," which are unfiltered wines. Boiling water (for the preparation of *banchang*) or cold water (*shinchang*) is poured on the fermented grain mash and the product is extracted. The second category is distilled liquor. It includes "*ara*," similar to Japan's *shochu*. The third category is "*chang-ke*," which is a slightly fermented rice drink. *Chang-ke* is consumed to celebrate special occasions such as the birth of a child, the New Year, and annual festivals. These varieties of *chang* can be seen in almost the entire country of Bhutan. In the villages of central Bhutan, where I have conducted field studies for the last decade, the distilled spirit *ara* is offered to indigenous deities and Buddhist gods and goddesses. It is also served to priests and shamans who perform Buddhist services and healing rituals, and to guests. In contrast, in addition to being served to visitors, the unfiltered wine *banchang* is drunk by people as an everyday drink like water and tea. In short, *chang* is deeply incorporated into the Bhutanese people's everyday lives. Without it, ceremonies and rituals cannot proceed, and hospitality cannot be extended to guests.

In these ways, the custom of drinking alcohol is deeply and broadly rooted among the people. However, it is said to be the main cause of cardiovascular diseases, one of the major three illnesses in Bhutan, and cirrhosis of the liver. Furthermore, it has drawn attention as a serious factor contributing to the frequent occurrence of domestic violence. As a result, the government has enacted certain restrictions, such as establishing every Tuesday as a "dry" day; the sale of alcohol in urban areas is prohibited on that day. In Bhutan, types of alcohol such as whiskey, brandy, rum, and beer are frequently consumed. They are brewed and

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<sup>1</sup>Ethnic groups from Nepal such as the *Sherpa* (Kimata 2008) also call their alcohol *chang*.

distilled mainly in plants of the Army Welfare Project<sup>2</sup> managed by the government. While the government and a few companies enjoy a monopoly on the production of these liquors, policies that ban the traditional production of home-brewed liquor in village communities have been established. At present, opportunities for residents of urban areas to drink *ara* and *banchang* are very limited.

In the following sections, the sociocultural significance of brewing *chang* is described. The impact of Bhutan’s forestry policy as well as recent restrictions on alcohol consumption are then examined.

## 2 Home Brewing of Local Liquor

It is said that the people living east of the Black Mountains in Bhutan consume the most alcohol in the country. Much of the spirit drunk is home-brewed liquor, especially in rural areas. The ingredients of these spirits differ depending on the area. For example, wheat and buckwheat are predominant in cold regions and maize and millet in areas with relatively lower elevation and warmer temperatures. Of the alcohols mentioned in the previous section, *ara* and unfiltered wine are drunk daily. Of the unfiltered wines, *banchang* is the name of alcohol produced by adding boiling water to fermented grain mash and then extracting the product, and *shinchang* is the name of alcohol produced similarly but by adding cold water. In the case of *banchang*, hot water is added to the mash every time one wishes to drink it. In the case of *shinchang*, cold water is added directly to a pot containing fermented grain mash and left to sit for 24 h. *Shinchang* refers to the top clear liquid layer that is then extracted; people say that it contains a greater amount of alcohol compared with *banchang*. The choice of extraction method depends on the elevation and climate. In cold areas, such as the Bumthang and Gasa Districts, *shinchang* is produced often. In subtropical areas such as the Trongsa and Mongar Districts, *banchang* is often found.

In Bhutan, the brewing of alcohol is often carried out by women. Let us examine the methods of both brewing and distillation used in N Village in Trongsa District as an example (Fig. 1). In N Village, the primary ingredients are maize and millet. Maize harvested by villagers is first left to dry by hanging the ears from ceilings. Afterwards, kernels are removed from the cobs and boiled together with millet in a large pot (Fig. 2). After being sufficiently boiled, excess water is removed, and the cooked kernels are spread on large bamboo mats and left to cool. After they reach the appropriate temperature, homemade yeast is sprinkled over the cooked grain

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<sup>2</sup>The Army Welfare Project is a commercial enterprise of the Royal Bhutan Army that was established in 1974 to aid retired veterans of the army and the Royal Bhutan Guard by providing them employment, pensions, and monetary loans. Headquartered in Phuentsholing, bordering India, it has breweries in Gelephu and Samtse. To date the organization has produced more than 18 brands of liquor. Besides commanding an overwhelming domestic market share, it also exports its products to India.



Fig. 1 Study area



Fig. 2 Boiling in a large pot

and the mixture is stirred and folded. Next, it is transferred to a vessel open to the air, such as a bamboo basket, and left for about 24 h. Finally, it is transferred to a large container about the size of an 18 l drum and sealed with a lid to ferment for about two weeks. In this way fermented grain mash is produced. In the past, people used earthen vessels to preserve the mash, which they sealed airtight by covering the opening with leaves and a mixture of ash and cow manure. These days, however, empty containers that previously contained cooking oil or other items are often used.

When drunk as *banchang*, the fermented grains are transferred to a small aluminum pot or earthen pot to which water is added. After the mixture is heated and boiled, a deep bamboo strainer about 8 cm in diameter is placed in the middle of the pot. The liquid that flows into the strainer is ladled into a cup. When a small amount of liquid remains, the strainer is pressed against the mash to scoop out the last drops.

To produce the distilled alcohol *ara*, the fermented grain mash and water are added together into a large stock pot. Three wooden rods about 40 cm long are placed vertically into the pot, where they are crossed and bound to form a tripod. A small vessel already holding about three cups of water is placed on the tripod to collect drops produced through the distilling process. A big brass or aluminum basin whose diameter is just bigger than that of the stock pot is placed on top of the stock pot. Cold water is placed into the basin to cool the steam that forms in the stock pot. To prevent steam from escaping out, a wet cloth is wrapped around the crack between the brass basin and the stock pot (Fig. 3). Vapor from the heated *banchang* comes into contact with the bottom of the cooled basin and becomes water droplets. The droplets run the course of the bowl-shaped bottom of the basin and drip into the small vessel placed in the middle of the stock pot. To ensure the droplets flow smoothly, women minding the distillation periodically ladle up water and pour the water from the ladle into the basin so as to create bubbles and gently vibrate the basin.

Because the water in the basin needs to constantly remain cold, the women use a ladle to scoop out warmed water and replace it with fresh cool water during the process of distillation. The women pay constant attention to the coldness of the water in the basin. They must also continue to adjust the heat of the fire by adding firewood. When the village festival season arrives, families in the village set up the stock pots, which are usually black in color because of the soot, in a row under the eaves of houses. Women stand next to each other and chat while distilling *banchang*.

### 3 *Chang* and a Hospitable Self

*Ara* plays an important role as an offering for deities and gods/goddesses during rituals and as a drink to be served to guests. On the other hand, *banchang* is a daily drink rooted in everyday life. It quenches thirst and invigorates the body during and



**Fig. 3** A wet cloth is wrapped around the crack between the brass basin and the stock pot

after strenuous farm work in the hot summer and on excursions. It is also drunk before and after dinner to relax after a tiring day of farm work and as an aid in sleeping. When I visited farm families in the evening, I often observed *banchang* being prepared next to the fireplace for family members as well as for day laborers just returning from hard farm work. In this way, *chang* is deeply embedded in people's lives. The villagers not only consume it themselves, but also use it as an indispensable resource to offer to guests.

N Village is well known to surrounding villages and visiting government officials for its hospitality. One of the components behind this reputation is the heavy use of *chang* to entertain guests. *Chang* is found everywhere in the village after a harvest. Families of the village first serve the distilled alcohol *ara* instead of tea when a visitor arrives. It is stored in an empty glass bottle, plastic bottle, or a conventional bamboo container called a "*pharang*" so that if a guest appears suddenly it can be easily served. In N Village, if you develop a good relationship with a villager even slightly, you are not constantly asked "Would you like some *ara*?" Instead, if the host knows that you drink *ara*, you are automatically served *ara* without being asked, as soon as you sit down. Villagers are sensitive to the quality of *ara* they produce. If a guest is slow in drinking the *ara*, they worry that its quality is poor, and steal glances at each other to gauge the mood of the guest. In

response, the guest should declare and show by his or her expression that the *ara* is delicious.

If a guest declines *ara*, *banchang* is offered next. The fermented grain mash is transferred to a small pot, to which water is added and heated. The host then carries the pot toward the guest or guests and sits in the middle facing them. She or he then pours *banchang* in all the cups to the brim. On such an occasion, it is rare to be asked whether one wishes to drink *banchang*. If a guest does not wish to drink at all, he or she must forcefully stop the host when she or he rises to bring the pot. Once you begin drinking, the etiquette is to drink the entire *banchang* in the pot before returning home. This is because *banchang* cannot be preserved once boiling water is added (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Pouring *banchang*

If a guest does not drink *banchang* either, then tea is reluctantly served. In contrast, in western Bhutan tea is almost always served first.<sup>3</sup> However, because villagers need to purchase tea leaves and sugar outside the village, these items are not something they normally stock. In short, tea is a luxury item owned by those with cash income. In contrast, home-brewed liquor such as *ara* and *banchang* are produced from grains grown in their fields. They are everyday drinks accessible even to the poor, and allow anyone to be hospitable to guests.

In this way, treating guests with *ara* and *banchang* is taken as a matter of course by the people of N Village. However, it does not necessarily mean that they are not conscious of their reputation of being hospitable. During my field survey in N Village, I sometimes visited neighboring villages to conduct interviews. Upon returning to N Village, I was constantly asked “Did the villagers welcome you sufficiently?,” “Did they serve you enough alcohol?,” and “Which village do you like best?” as though they wanted to learn the grade of the other villages’ reception. Thus, it seems obvious that the people in N Village take pride in the quality and lavishness of their hospitality.

However, the custom of daily alcohol consumption and the people’s hospitable nature in eastern Bhutan is seen by the dominant society residing in western Bhutan as the practice of “lazy drunkards” who lack self-control. Areas in western Bhutan, such as Punakha, Thimphu, and Paro Districts, have established themselves as the political centers of Bhutan. People in this region make even stronger *chang* in terms of alcohol content, but it is rare for them to drink it regularly. The people of western Bhutan see themselves as diligent and self-disciplined citizens, and they frequently consider people of eastern Bhutan as their opposite. Although the number of central government officials hailing from eastern Bhutan has become significant, people’s perception of the eastern Bhutanese still remains unchanged.

#### 4 *Chang*, Swidden Agriculture, and Nature Conservation

Where, then, is the grain used to produce *chang* harvested? N Village is located in a subtropical region on the southern side of Trongsa District. It is found on gently inclined tableland carved out by the surrounding rivers. An established irrigation system produces fertile rice paddies. Thus, villagers can cultivate sufficient amounts of rice. In addition to growing rice, cultivating maize is considered indispensable, and most maize is grown in the surrounding forest using slash-and-burn methods of cultivation.

Swidden agriculture is basically a renewable and cyclical form of shifting cultivation in which a forest is cut down, left to dry, and then burned; the resulting

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<sup>3</sup>In Bhutan, two kinds of tea drinks are commonly enjoyed: “*suja*” (butter tea made from boiled tea bricks to which butter and salt are added and the mixture churned inside a special container) and “*gaja*” (boiled black tea to which sugar, milk powder, and if available a bit of cardamom are added).



ashes serve as fertilizer for the cultivation of mixed crops such as maize, millet, and upland rice. After a few years of cultivation the land is left fallow for a certain amount of time (from 12 to 15 years) to restore the vegetation and soil fertility, before people use the land again. The fallow land is gradually covered by assorted trees. Because good fodder grows during the first four or so years until the forest develops a canopy, the land can also be used as grazing land for cattle.

Maize harvested from swidden cultivation is rarely used as the main staple in N Village. However, it is dried and used as an ingredient for making alcohol as well as for making snacks. To make a snack called “*gezaship*,” dried maize is roasted and beaten with a poulder to be thin and soft, like cornflakes. These cornflakes are eaten throughout Bhutan with tea or *chang* as a snack or nibble. They are especially preferred in eastern Bhutan, where the weather and soil are suitable for maize cultivation. At the same time, the same amount or more of maize used for *gezaship* is used to produce *chang* in these areas. According to the village chief, in N Village about 30 to 60% of harvested crops from slash-and-burn agriculture conducted in the forest is used to produce home-brewed liquor. This implies that the people of N Village cut down the trees of their surrounding forests and practice swidden agriculture almost entirely for the purpose of making *chang*.

Meanwhile, the Bhutanese royal government has been gradually implementing nature conservation as a national policy since the end of the 1980s, and enacting proactive environmental measures (Miyamoto 2004). In 1993, 1999, and 2008, the government gradually widened the boundaries of nature conservation areas. By 2008, almost 50% of the country had become protected areas, such as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries (Miyamoto 2015). N Village was incorporated into a new national park as a result of the reorganization of protected areas in 1993. Later, in 1998, specific conservation programs began to be implemented, but a national park field office was not constructed within the village until 2002. For the office, one park ranger and two forest guards were assigned to monitor the villagers’ agricultural practices and livestock farming as well as their everyday use of natural resources, such as gathering firewood and non-forest products. Among these concerns, swidden agriculture has been the biggest issue for the national park. It is regarded as a practice that destroys forest vegetation and was completely banned by the 1995 Forest and Nature Conservation Act.

Swidden agriculture in N Village established a fallow period of 12 or more years once people cultivated the land. The duration of this longer fallow period was indispensable for making this cultivation system sustainable. To maintain the fallow period, several households combined their potential forest lands together and worked together to clean one area of the forest every year, so they had enough land to cultivate each year until their own forest land became fertile and ready for the next round of cultivation. This reciprocity-based practice of joint cultivation was also effective in preventing damage to crops by wild animals.

N Village had never been easily accessible until a bridge was constructed in 2013. Until 2002, even forest officers seldom visited. Therefore, it was not difficult for villagers to ignore government rules and regulations, including forestry laws. Although the establishment of the national park field office drastically changed

conditions, persuading or forcing the community to immediately abandon long-practiced swidden agriculture was not an easy task for forest officers. It was also impossible to identify dispersed cultivated areas in the vast mountainous region without the cooperation of villagers. The national park thus tried implementing restrictions gradually. It first made it mandatory for villagers to request permission from the forestry department to carry out swidden agriculture. In addition, cutting down trees five years of age or older was prohibited even inside one's own farm land. In response, people tried to make it possible to continuously use a forest for swidden agriculture by shortening the fallow period to five years.

## 5 Self-restraint in Making *Chang*

As restrictions against swidden agriculture gradually become stricter, the *Geog Yargay Tshogchung*<sup>4</sup> to which N Village belongs discussed whether or not to ban the custom of home brewing around 2006. Almost all of the grains used as ingredients for *chang* are produced by swidden agriculture in the village. Therefore, restrictions against slash-and-burn farming carried out under the name of environmental conservation directly manifested themselves as pros and cons of continuing to brew *chang*. While at first glance the question of whether or not to produce home-brewed liquor is an extremely individual question, here it transcended an individual's lifestyle and began to be closely related to the government's forest and land use policies.

### 5.1 Proposal from the Sub-district Chief

At the time, the topic of prohibiting the production of alcohol was introduced by a villager who was the head of the *geog* (sub-district), or *gup*. As *gup*, he argued that if crops used for alcohol production were used for food, they would be sufficient until the beginning of spring, when people started suffering food shortages. Furthermore, excess crops could be sold for cash income, thereby reducing poverty in the villages. He also emphasized that by banning the distillation of *ara*, which requires the use of fire for a long period of time, firewood could be conserved, leading to the conservation of forests.

In addition to being the sub-district chief, for many years the villager had been a forest watcher, or *reesup*. *Reesups* are responsible for monitoring an area's forest to prevent fires and illegal lumbering by outsiders. They can be assigned

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<sup>4</sup>“*Geog*” is a group of villages that forms a geographical administrative unit under a district called “*Dzongkhag*.” *Geog Yargay Tshogchung* comprises the *gup*, *mangmi* (an elected representative of the *geog*), and *tshogpa* (a representative of a village, or a cluster of villages) as members (RGoB 2002).

independently by a village, or to new areas by the government’s forestry department (Miyamoto 2004). N Village belonged to the second category. The *gup* was first assigned as a *reesup* in the sub-district in 1990, and occupied the position exclusively over a period of many years. His main obligation was to make routine patrols several times a week and submit a report once a month to the department of forestry. According to him, it was not his job to restrain villages from conducting slash-and-burn cultivation in the 1990s. On the contrary, he himself enthusiastically undertook swidden agriculture. However, after the field office of the national park was established, the role of the *reesup* was revised with the main purpose of protecting the natural environment, and it became a task of supporting park monitors to maintain biodiversity and prevent forest degradation.

For the *gup*, his proposal to ban home brewing of alcohol, which promotes the economic development of the community and protects forest resources, was a compromise intended to represent the interest of villagers while at the same time fulfilling his responsibility as a *reesup*.

## 5.2 *Ara or Banchang?*

Many elderly people of N Village strongly opposed the idea of banning the old custom of home brewing, saying that “without *chang*, we can’t work or enjoy life.” On the other hand, it was pointed out by villagers in their 30s and 40s, who are the main workers in the community at present, that there were many who were alcohol dependent. Some of the villagers had started to worry about problems caused by the negative social influence and conflict brought about by excessive drinking. A middle-aged man mentioned that there were always fights between villagers due to drunkenness. Consequently, it was argued that restricting *ara*, which has a strong alcohol content, might be advisable. Furthermore, another man pointed out that there were mothers who drank in the daytime and could not take care of children, and thus it was a good idea to prohibit home brewing to alleviate this situation.

The villagers clearly separated *chang* into distilled spirit *ara* and unrefined maize wine *banchang*. *Ara* is basically produced for Buddhist annual festivals, various religious rituals, and community gatherings. In short, it is a ceremonial drink and an offering to gods and guests. It is also said that *ara* causes hangovers and headaches because of its high alcohol content. There was a relatively large number of heavy drinkers in N Village, and many said they consumed *banchang* but not *ara*. In contrast, *banchang* is a liquor drunk daily. Besides being consumed after a day of hard work and before or after meals, *banchang* is often carried to supply water and restore vigor when embarking on a trip. I remember that whenever I went on an excursion from the village, a member of the host family I stayed with would always fill a bottle with one to two liters of *banchang* for me to carry along. During the dispute about self-restraint in brewing *chang*, it seemed that abolishing *banchang*,

which has deeply permeated into people's daily lives, was not a realistic idea. Thus the village managed to propose a compromise that would initially restrict only the distillation of *ara* but allow the brewing of *banchang* to continue. However, people were still allowed to produce *ara* as an offering to gods and deities.

## 6 Conclusion

The people of N Village maintain conventional swidden agriculture, and have pride in the quality of their hospitality. They place great value in their self-image of treating guests well. However, their drinking culture draws contempt from the dominant society of Bhutan and warnings about the social ills of alcohol consumption from the government and the Ministry of Health. These external factors are gradually influencing people's livelihoods and existing customs in the village. Furthermore, because of the incorporation of the village into a national park, the government's desire to showcase the "wilderness" of nature and Bhutan's "eco-friendly nature" to tourists is disturbing the use of natural resources by the villagers, as exemplified in the case of swidden agriculture.

In the midst of these changes, the decision by villagers and the gewog development committee to restrain themselves from producing home-brewed liquor can be seen as a proactive attempt by the villagers of their own accord to adjust to a new environment consisting of governmental laws and universal development theories by changing their age-old lifestyle and customs. This adaptation could be an attempt to incorporate the attributes of being "diligent and rational citizens," which have been sought for modernization. Meanwhile, the villagers' choice to prohibit the distillation of *ara* but to keep *banchang* made it possible to maintain their virtue of hospitality, which they regarded as one of their significant attributes, even as they were forced to retreat.

In the village, *chang* is not a luxury item, without which villagers might feel that something was missing, but an essential item for their lives. For the villagers, it is a source of nutrition on par with rice. It also plays an important role as an offering to deities. Furthermore, it is essential as a form of compensation to be paid by hosts for the reciprocal exchange of labor. Therefore, the decision of the village also sought to protect the sociocultural as well as the socioeconomic value of *chang*. However, as economic development and the creation of a rational citizenry to support it are being further pursued in the process of Bhutan's democratization, the custom of producing and consuming *chang*, and its sociocultural value and meaning, is being transformed in various ways.

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