

THE CULTURE OF THE DARDS¹

Sonam Phuntsog, Achinathang

Stories of origin

The Dard people occupied lower Ladakh in 200 BC. The inhabitants of Khalatse, Skindiyang, Takmachik and many other villages are descendants of the Dard race. Over the course of many years, they mixed with the cultures of the Tibetan race. The word 'Dard' is Sanskrit for "people who live on hill-sides."

Some historians assert that when Alexander's army returned to Greece, following his invasion of India in 327 BC, some troops stayed behind in the Gilgit area, and so Greece is the region where the Dards originated (Khan 1987). Gilgit is called Bru-sha by Tibetans, and Polu and So-po-tzu in Chinese. Songs sung by contemporary Dard people, however, indicate that their origin was in Rome, Italy. Legends recounted by elders such as Apo Sonam Paljor of the Gochepa house in Hanu also favour this version. According to this argument, their language which is called Minaro gradually emerged from a mixture of various languages. Thus, a few words in their vocabulary are similar to Indo-European words. For example, *me* in Minaro is used for 'I', *bubu* for 'baby', *bayo* for 'boy', *wa* for 'water', *kat* for 'cut', *khar* for 'ass', and *murey* for 'gooseberry'. Besides this linguistic evidence, some of their cultural habits are also similar to those of Europeans. For instance, they eat fresh butter with local foods like *kho-lag* and *pa-ba*. They brew wine from grapes and have their own calendar based on solar revolutions.

The settlement of the villages of Da and Hanu can be traced to the second migration of the Dard people. According to Chinese sources, Gilgit was conquered by Tibetans in 722 AD. In 736, the daughter of the king of Tibet, Thinles Thupstan, was married to the

¹ Translated by Ravina Aggarwal and Konchok Phandey.

SONAM PHUNTSOG

king of Gilgit, Mao-ching. As Tibet and Gilgit were now related, 20 small principalities of Western Tibet started paying tribute to Tibet. Zhen-tseng, the emperor of China from 712-751, was enraged by this union and in 746, he sent his General, Gao-Ziang-Jhu, to capture Gilgit. It was during that time that a group of a hundred people, under the leadership of Galo, Melo, and Dulo, fled from the Gandum and Sasil villages of Gilgit saying they were heading for the lands of their maternal uncle (*azhang-yul*). In the course of their journey, they passed the region of Turmik (now called Rongdo) and reached the high pastures of Da (Da-Brog). Thus, the residents of Da and Hanu are called 'Brog-pa. After many years, the descendants of Galo settled in Hanu, those of Melo established the villages of Da and Garkon, and those of Dulo founded the village of Ganogs. Makano, a descendant of Melo, set up the villages of Lhalung and Silmo. De-de Horimo and her seven children from Garkon established the village of Dartsigs. The village of Chulichan was founded by Konchok Sherabstan, a Buddhist meditator of a Dard family from Ledo, according to Tshering Angchung of the Watolpa house of Da.

Festivals and cultural celebrations

Weddings (Bag-ston)

Initially, when proposing to a girl, one man from the groom's *pha-spun* and his father had to approach the girl's house bearing a pot of chang, seven *ta-kyi*, and one needle. When they brought the bride back, then the maternal uncle, *pha-spun* member and father of the groom took one pot of chang, seven *ta-kyi*, and a big button to her house. One day before the bride left her home, gifts (*rin-tho*) from the groom's family had to be presented to her family: these included a sheep, a goat, fifteen metres of woollen cloth (*snam-bu*), and seven khal (84 kilos) of grain. There was no custom of giving a dowry (Khan 1987).

Funerals (Shi-ston)

According to Apo Tashi Rigzin, Chukholak pa, in the past, the dead were buried in the ground with pots and pans. If the deceased was male, a bow and arrow were placed with him and if she was female, a

CULTURE OF THE DARDS

spindle was laid with her. This custom ended during the reign of King Singge Namgyal. Now, an apricot tree has to be cut and the wooden piles heaped by the shore where the body is cremated. After four days, a small bone relic has to be picked up with wooden tongs and deposited in the *Munal* (burial ground) of the *pha-spun*. The villagers lament during this procession. The ashes of the dead are thrown in the river. A few monks are summoned for prayers. Only a new hat is presented to the monks and the rest of the dead person's possessions are distributed to the villagers on that very day.

Ya-tra (spyin-pa)

A *ya-tra* is a charitable party thrown in the summer by those who have no children or by older people before they die. It was started so that wealth could be redistributed among the villagers. After slaying four goats, a party is thrown for all the villagers in which meat, butter, and *pa-ba* are all served. The men and women bring flat wheat-bread (*ta-kyi*) and sing a song that goes like this:

Brother Skyid Paljor, what do you lack?
You have sheep and goats to eat.
You have heaps of butter to eat.

Boys - We praise the gods! (3 times)
Girls - It was a fine occasion! (3 times)

Lo-gsar (New Year)

The New Year is celebrated at the beginning of January. On the eve of Lo-gsar, the villagers carry torches and eat meat at night. On the second day, four goats are slain. The festivities last for a week.

Ma-mani

According to Brug-Tshering of the Michungpa family of Da, on the 21st day of January, villagers eat the cooked heads and limbs of sheep and goats that have been stored throughout the year and propitiate the dead with flowers.

Sngo-lha

The *Sngo-lha* festivities take place in mid-June and last for three days. In anticipation of the animals getting pasture, humans avail of dairy products. On the morning of the first day, a goat is offered to the

SONAM PHUNTSOG

village deity. The villagers eat curds, butter, *kholag*, and meat. After this, all the animals are led to the mountains.

Srub-lha

Early in the month of July, before harvesting commences, a sacrificial offering of one goat is made to start off the four-day *Srub-lha* feast. Meat, bread, butter, milk, and curds are eaten. At the end of this occasion, the fields are harvested.

Cho po Srub lha

Chopo Srub-lha or *Bonona* was started after the settlement of Da. It is a festival which lasts for seven days. Twenty one songs have to be sung during this time: seven commemorating the journey from Gilgit, five about hunting, five on herding, three in praise of the deities, and the last one on the separations of Gods and humans.

This festival rotates between Da, Garkon, and Ganogs. Celebrated during the first week of October, it corresponds with celebration of *Tho Shali* in Hanu, *Shah Nassir* in Chulichan, and *Manthana* in Dartsigs.

Juniper is lit for seven days as an offering to the 360 deities who are said to reside on the peaks of the Nyin 'dum mountains. During this time, the taking cigarettes and other intoxicants is forbidden. Outsiders (considered beef-eaters) were prohibited from touching objects in the kitchen lest they pollute them. From 1985 onward, several changes have taken place. Now kitchen objects are not guarded as strictly. Cows and chicken are domesticated and people are becoming more open to the consumption of butter. But even today, in Dartsigs and Garkon, lactating cows are rarely kept.

CULTURE OF THE DARDS

A Minaro Hunting Song (Da Dialect)

Collected from Tshewang in Garkhon (1980)

Sat tarune gapsara	Seven men had a discussion with each other
Sho tarune lingsara	Hundred men assembled for the hunt.
Kurami fitig tayari	Prepare the jaggery!
Kholagi khogmari tayari	Prepare the barley flour and butter!
Chonaro falo tayari	Prepare the tip of the arrow!
Tsandani tangkhune tayari	Prepare the bow made of sandal wood!
Numeni khikung tayari	Prepare the precious-jewel hunting dog!
Wapa to wa lagshan	Send the men to the mountains!
Tsepa to tse lagshan	Dispatch one group to the peak!
Zhungpato zhung lagshan	Dispatch two others to the sides!
Numeni khikung wa lagshan	Let loose the hunting dog!
Sat batum desur baturig	Drop a rock from the peak!
Zhap zhap zhap lagshan	Stealthily follow the ibex!
Zir zir zir lagshan	And aim the arrow at the target!
Tum tum tum lagshan	They shot the arrow at the ibex.
Di di di lagshan	The ibex was killed.
Bumurig lhasolog	The hunters praised the gods.
Tsepa wa lagshan	Now, You men, descend from the mountains!
Sar sar sar lagshan	Then the flesh was cut with a knife.
Tsim tsim tsim lagshan	Then the meat was roasted.
Tal tal tal lagshan	The roasted meat was distributed.
Them themb themb lagshan	All the men received an equal share.

SONAM PHUNTSOG

References

Lio-Zhang. 750-850. Old Tang Shu.

Phuntsog Tashi. 1973. Bod kyi rgyal rabs gsal b'i me long.
Translation of the Chinese New Tang Shu (850-1200), pp. 324-
457. Dharamsala: Cultural Printing Press.

1903. Tung-chien Annals Chinese.

Khan, Sikander.1987 *Qadim Ladakh: Tarikh va Tamaddun (The
History and Culture of Ancient Ladakh)*. Yogma Kharbu: Kacho
Press.

Oral Sources

Apo Tashi Skyidphel, Garkon Gol pa.

Apo Tashi Rigzen, Da Chukholak pa.

Apo Sonam Paljor , Hanu Gongma Gocheпа.

Lama Konchok Thinles, Hanu Gongma Gonpa pa.

Brug-Tshering, Da Michungpa

Tshewang, Garkhon