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"Do Not Even Think about Giving Me Less Chang": Notes on Fermented and Distilled Beverages in Tibetan Societies

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Abstract

In the Himalayas every household has a still. Fermented and distilled beverages are integral to community rituals and gatherings, and play a central role in economies of labor exchange and systems of local taxation that go back centuries. In this paper we outline the history of these practices across Tibetan cultural areas to contextualize our ethnographic work learning the process of brewing and distilling from a local matriarch in Nubri, Nepal. While pointing out some of the ways alcohol consumption has been contested in Tibetan culture, we examine its use as a social lubricant and its function in maintaining socioeconomic relationships, as well as breaking down the process of distillation itself. The first part of this paper provides a cursory overview of chang in historical perspective. The next parts are dedicated to production, gender, and sociality before turning to the role of alcohol in Nubri's ritual life. The overall objective is to highlight the role alcoholic beverages occupy in some, but certainly not all, Tibetan societies.

Keywords

Alcohol; distilling; Nepal; Tibet

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Introduction

Chang (a fermented beverage) and arak (a drink distilled from chang) are ubiquitous across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan region.[1] They are common offerings to guests and social lubricants during celebrations, festivals, and weddings where 'beer song' (*chang glu*) or 'toasting song' (*chang gzhas*) genres are sung. In one such song, "A Pouch of Fortune Has Come to Me," collected by the authors in 2018, the singer rejoices that he has had multiple windfalls of good luck: he lives in a civilized country, inhabits a golden chamber, is surrounded by meadows of turquoise flowers, has an elegant foal and many sheep, and has arrived at a happy place through the power of good thinking and by upholding the *samaya* vow—the tantric bond between guru and disciple. Thus his "pouch of fortune" is deserved, and with this evidence of his victory, he proclaims, "Do not even think of giving me less chang!" ('chang khu bsam nas ma nyung/')

Despite the prominence of alcohol in Tibetan societies, only a few studies have focused on its social and ritual usage (Wilkes 1968; Ardussi 1977; March 1987; Namgyel 2009; Targais et al. 2012; Jenkins 2019). In this article, we discuss spirits in Tibetan societies with an emphasis on Nubri, a valley in Nepal's Gorkha District whose roughly 3,000 residents identify for the most part as ethnically Tibetan: they wear Tibetan dress, speak a Tibetan dialect, adhere to many Tibetan norms of social organization, and practice Buddhism with an emphasis on Nyingmapa and Kargyupa teachings. Nearly every home has a cask for fermenting grain and paraphernalia for distilling arak. As researchers dedicated to the craft of participant observation, we have acquired the requisite experience to comment on Nubri's drinking culture.

As a caveat, we are not well versed in the anthropology of drug and alcohol literature, so we do not intend to make theoretical contributions to that field of study. Yet we can situate our analysis in relation to earlier scholarship, which focused on drinking as a culturally constructed social practice that facilitated exchange and social solidarity (Mandelbaum 1965; Douglas 1987; Heath 1987). Much of this early work was subjected to allegations that anthropologists were complicit in 'problem deflation,' that is, glamorizing alcohol usage while minimizing its negative impacts (Room 1984), and that anthropologists paid too much attention to drinking within local settings without considering the political and economic factors that shaped local production and consumption patterns (Singer 1986). Such criticisms helped catalyze a shift in scholarly orientation—especially among medical anthropologists—to frame research in line with public health (Gilbert 1993; Marshall et al. 2001; Dietler 2006). The anthropology of alcohol transitioned from a focus on sociocultural value (Douglas 1987) to a focus on addiction and its accompanying social problems (Singer 2012).

By describing the uses and some meanings of alcohol in Tibetan societies, we do not intend to romanticize drinking or minimize its deleterious effects. We have friends whose health has suffered from excessive drinking; we know people who have suffered fatal accidents while drunk; and we have witnessed families disintegrate due to addiction. Many people in Nubri, notably women, have attempted to curtail drinking by prohibiting the importation of the strong Chinese liquors that are associated with severe inebriation. Nevertheless, we feel that today's emphasis on drinking as a social problem misses the role that chang and arak play in maintaining socioeconomic relationships in a place like Nubri. As such, the first part of this paper provides a cursory overview of chang from a historical perspective. The next parts are dedicated to production, gender, and sociality before turning to the role of alcohol in Nubri's ritual life. The overall objective is to highlight the role alcoholic beverages occupy in some, but certainly not all, Tibetan societies.

A brief historical perspective

Archaeologists have revealed that people in China have been fermenting rice, millet, barley, and other substances for at least five millennia, including in the mid-Yellow

River, which is historically connected with the northeastern Tibetan Plateau (Wang et al. 2016; Liu et al. 2022). Beer production existed in the region well before agriculture facilitated permanent occupation of the Tibetan Plateau roughly 3,500 years ago (Chen et al. 2015). By around 1,400 BC, barley and wheat—the most common grains for brewing chang in Tibet today—had replaced millet as the staple crop on the eastern margins of the plateau (D'Alpoim Guedes et al. 2015).[2]

Evidence suggests that chang was common during Tibet's imperial period from the seventh to the ninth centuries. Monks in Dunhuang left extensive records of brewing during that time (Trombert 1999); some scholars even blame inebriated Tibetan monks for the rise of Dunhuang's alcohol businesses (Zheng and Wei 2020). A Tibetan legal text includes the guidance to "measure your consumption of beer" ('chang la tshod zin pa'; Dotson 2006:325), while a story purportedly from the imperial era references chang's effect on loquacity. The tale centers on ministers dispatched by the emperor to find a boy with magical powers. When they encountered a child and asked where his parents were, he responded, "Father has gone to search for words. Mother has gone to search for eyes." The father showed up carrying chang and the mother came bearing fire. The ministers then located a man who was adept at governance but refused to help them, so "in order to steal his intellect" ('blo rku ba') one of the ministers gave him salty dried meat. Beset by thirst, the man said, "Now if someone came giving something for my thirst, I'd obey whatever he said'." The ministers met the request with chang concealed for this contingency, after which he divulged advice on how to govern the realm (Dotson 2006:353-355).[3]

The insinuation that chang makes one garrulous is reflected in Tibetan proverbs such as "If one drinks chang, one talks more" ('chang 'thung na gtam mang/') and "If chang is the impetus for speech, then chang is a necessity" ('lab rgyu chang red de/ dgos rgyu chang dgos/'). On the other hand, immoderate consumption can lead to incoherent blathering, as implied by "Chang is the mouth's leftover mash" ('chang kha'i sbang ma/') (Cüppers and Sørensen 1998:83, 251).

In later centuries, yogins referenced chang in songs of spiritual realization (*mgur*; Skt. *dohā*). Ardussi notes that chang often appears in Tibetan writings as a symbol for 'nectarous essence' (*amrta*; Tib. *bdud-rtsi*), or "the refined essential of teachings or contemplative experiences." He cites songs by Milarepa (1040–1123), Lorepa Wangchuk Tsondru (1187–1250), and Drukpa Kunle (1455–1529) in which brewing and drinking chang is used as a parallel to meditational practices and other spiritual endeavors. Granted, songs by great saints like Milarepa were only written down long after their lifetimes, so their value as historical sources is questionable (Quintman 2014). Nevertheless, they provide insights on how, in certain contexts, alcoholic preparation and consumption—but not intoxication—could be viewed in a positive light.

This point is reflected in an oral tradition song attributed to Milarepa and collected in 2018 by the authors in Nubri. The master extols the virtue of Kathmandu Valley as a sacred pilgrimage place to his disciple Rechung, and tells him, "Weak rice chang is ready to drink—the instructions are not to get drunk!" ('chang 'bras chang bsil thung rgyu che/ bzi rgyu med de gdam ngag yod/'). Here, *chang bsil* refers to the third straining, or weakest version, of chang in terms of alcohol content. In this context, it refers to chang as a sacrament in tantric ritual in which it is transformed into a non-intoxicating, pure substance called *aṃrita*, or nectar. As Ardussi argues:

> Drinking alcohol to produce intoxication does not seem to have been regarded even by Tantric Buddhists as a 'skillful means' of comprehending the intoxication of Enlightenment. On the contrary, its use in the *gaṇa-cakra* appears designed to illustrate the practitioner's acquisition of power over experiential reality, in effect his

> power to resist its intoxicating effect. (1977:123)

Whereas Ardussi highlights chang's positive associations in spiritual practice, many clerics have pondered alcohol's negative effects and advocated for abstinence. Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol (1781–1851) told a disciple, "Alcohol is the root of all evil actions; do not even drink a sip of it" (Ricard 1994:286, 411; see also Dhondup 2013:131). The Sakya master and founder of Ngor Monastery, Ngorchen Kunga Sangpo (1382–1456), advocated strict monastic discipline and banned the consumption of meat and alcohol in his monastery. The fact that he felt compelled to issue such a ban suggests that drinking may have been widespread within the institution. His composition, "An Epistle Benefiting Students" (*spring yig slob ma la phan pa*), cites 35 problems of consuming alcohol as laid out in the Nandika Sutra (*dga' ba can gyi mdo*), the last of which suggests explicit consequences:

> Since one created and accumulated the karma of a mad person, one's body will come to ruin, and after one has died, one will be born among the hell-beings of the lower realms of existence. Even if one passes away from there and is born here in this world as one who has the same fortune as human beings, wherever one is born, one will turn into a mad person, and one's memory will be blurred. (Heimbel 2019:89–90)

In "The Grave Consequences of [Drinking] Chang" (*chang gi nyes dmigs*) Rigzen Dudul Dorje (1615–1672) asserts that alcohol consumption clouds one's ability to perceive the natural state of essential purity (*gzhis lugs ka dag*). He lists the sufferings a drinker will encounter in future rebirths: consignment to the hot and cold hells (*mar dmyal ba tsha grang*), the hunger and thirst of the hungry ghosts (*yi dwags bkres skom*), and the stupidity of a beast of burden (*byol song blon mongs*). Several proverbs also take a dim view of drinking, for example, "It's water that adulterates chang, and it's chang that adulterates man;" "If you drink chang, it gives you a headache. If others drink chang, it gives you a heartache" (Pemba 1996:59–60); "Strife is unimpeded when drinking chang immoderately" (Cüppers and Sørensen 1998:83); and "When a superior man drinks chang, he will advise and counsel. When a middling man drinks chang, he will sing and play. When an inferior man drinks chang, he will quarrel and fight" (Cüppers and Sørensen 1998:154).[4] Drugpa Kunley (1455–1529) made a similar distinction, "If the saint drinks, chang turns into an ocean of nectar; if the commoner drinks, chang turns into an ocean of poison" (Dhondup 2013:132). Bhutanese scholar Singye Namgyel had this clever way of describing how a person's behavior degenerates while drinking:

> It is indeed tempting to share some personal observations, that is, a heavy drinker goes through three stages of changes; that of a monkey, a tiger, and a pig. Monkey because after few rounds of drinks, one chats and chats like that of a monkey. Second stage is that of a tiger, as he becomes arrogant and is ever ready to attack and fight anyone who challenges. The third stage is that of a pig. Due to excessive drinks, one loses not only sense but also body balance and is likely to fall anywhere, including in the ditch and drain. From time immemorial, alcohol was considered as the root cause of all evils, as Buddhist literature also delineates. (2009:66)

These examples indicate that Tibetans have ambivalent attitudes toward alcohol. When consumed in moderation, some yogins associate chang with sacred nectar, whereas excessive drinking is viewed as an impediment to spiritual advancement and a cause of social problems. Clerical disapproval aside, most laypeople, in our experience, are not averse to a tipple.

Production

Jäschke, in his dictionary, first published in 1881, not only details how the beverage is made but also reveals his status as a connoisseur:

> If proper care is taken (and the people of Ü and Ladak generally do so), the pale beer, thus obtained, is not amiss, and sparkles a good deal, but not being hopped it does not keep long. The people of Lahoul are accustomed to press the *glum* (the fermented mash) with their hands, instead of filtering it, and mismanage the business also in other respects, so that their chang is a gray muddy liquor, that has hardly any resemblance to beer. (1972:154)[5]

In Nubri and elsewhere, women are generally tasked with fermenting chang and distilling arak.[6] The yeast preparation, a prerequisite for fermentation, varies regionally. In Bhutan, the process involves combining the ground-up leaves of *Delphinium brunonianum* and *Artemisia gmelinii* with wheat flour and water, molding them into tablets, wrapping the tablets in a woolen cloth, and allowing them to dry in a dark room (Boesi 2014:15; see Berger 2019 for other regional variations in Bhutan). In Rolwaling, millet flour balls are wrapped in the leaves of *Artemisia vulgaris* and *Waldheimia glabra* until a white fungal growth appears, after which the leaves are removed and the balls are fumigated (Sacherer 1979:56, cited in Boesi 2014:15). In Nubri, the starter culture (*phab*) is produced by mixing different roasted and ground grains that are added to a broth of boiled bones. When the grains have cooled, they are combined with a little honey or unrefined sugar and the froth from a previous fermentation, made into balls, and dried. The naturally occurring yeast is most likely the *Saccharomyces eubayanus* strain, which is commonly used for brewing European lager beers. Archaeologists have found evidence that *S. eubayanus* derives from the bark and rotting wood of oak and other deciduous trees on the Tibetan Plateau and hypothesize that this strain made its way to Europe by the 1400s, when lager beer was first brewed (Bing et al. 2014: R380; see also Stewart 2017:38–39). Several species of oak grow in Nubri, a possible source of their natural yeast.

To make arak, a mash of fermented grain is added to a still comprising four main parts: the base containing the mash (*ar zangs*), a vessel perched upon the base with holes in the bottom to allow steam to rise (*ar tsha*), a conical vessel on top of that filled with cool water to induce condensation when the steam reaches it (*ba dra*), and a catch basin (*ar snying*) into which a bit of water is added initially (*snying chu*). The distiller seals the seams between vessels with wet cloth, long strands of wool soaked in water, mud, or dung, and monitors the water in the condensation vessel until it is nearly boiling, at which point she empties and refills it with cold water. The distillation process is complete after the water has been changed three times, which takes roughly an hour. The arak is then emptied into special wooden flasks adorned with brass (see also Wilkes 1968:351 and Namgyel 2009:68–69). Bhutanese stills do not have a middle vessel but instead insert a tripod into the bottom container to support the catch basin (Berger 2019).

Gender and hospitality

Serving beverages in Tibetan societies is generally done by women who, in more formal or festive settings, can be engaged as 'ceremonial beer-servers' (*khrung zhu ma*) or 'beer-serving mothers' (*a ma chang ma*) (Diehl 1996; Huber 1999:192; Henrion-Dourcy 2005:201–203; Tenzin 2008:34).[7] Even a nun like Orgyan Chokyi of Dolpo was expected to serve chang to temple visitors, which she lamented because it impeded her spiritual progress (Schaeffer 2004:157–161). A folk song we collected in two villages in Nubri in 2016 and 2018 makes it very clear about who should serve chang within the domestic realm. In "Song of Two Siblings," or "Pasang Bhuti," a husband commands his wife not to sleep but to "get up, fetch water, light a fire, and I will drink delicious tea and chang!"[8] The gendered nature of serving alcohol is constantly on display in Nubri. 'Ja tung ga sho' ("Come drink some tea") is a common invitation that invariably includes arak alongside tea, as reflected in the lyrics of a local song that proclaims, "I'll drink delicious tea and beer ('zhim po ja chang

thung yod/’).”[9] When visiting homes, it is invariably the hostess who serves us. Even when we recently visited a widower friend, he called on his neighbor’s daughter-in-law to dispense the libations.

As Dietler notes, some scholars have argued that the penchant for women in pre-industrial societies to be the primary producers and suppliers of alcohol consumed by men is evidence of male exploitation (2006:235–237). In contrast, Dietler cites Kathryn March’s study (1987) as an example of how women gain or maintain status within the domestic realm and wider community through their role in furnishing hospitality, in which dispensing alcohol plays a major role. The central argument rests on reciprocity. March argues that “An offering [usually chang or arak] is effective if or because it creates an ambiance of amicable feelings,” and that serving alcohol is a means to “obtain social cooperation because givers of hospitality are thought to draw recipients into an obligation to repay that cannot be refused” (March 1987:352, 357). In other words, alcohol is vital for creating and maintaining reciprocal relationships in the Tamang and Sherpa societies that March studied.

We can confirm March’s observations on a personal level. Namgyal Choedup, a co-researcher and author on several of our studies in Nubri, often noticed that, after a few rounds of arak had been served, a host or hostess would indicate through body language that an entreaty for assistance was forthcoming. He would whisper in our ears, “They are coming to affix a stone to the rat’s tail” (‘tsi tsi rna ma rdo li btags/’), meaning they intended to oblige us to reciprocate the hospitality by honoring the forthcoming request. Refusing to accept the proffered drink is considered a serious rebuke, so at the very least we would listen and carefully consider the entreaty.[10] The vignette illustrates March’s point. Hospitality, especially when it involves serving alcohol, can be perceived as a way of creating a conducive atmosphere for seeking assistance. This is pure speculation, but it is possible that a petitioning individual will attribute a successful request to their hospitality and the quality and quantity of beverages offered.

Extending March’s observations further, in Nubri, labor exchange (*lag spos*), the recruitment of members of other households to fulfill time-sensitive tasks such as plowing, sowing, and harvesting, is essential to the agricultural economy. On the day when help is recruited from neighbors and friends, the household’s matron must provide workers with three rounds of arak alongside food and tea. This exchange of work for sustenance creates a debt that must be reciprocated. A matron who does not provide arak or who serves inferior quality spirits may place the household in the unenviable position of struggling to recruit labor at a crucial moment in the agricultural cycle. Many people in Nubri unequivocally state that without arak they would lack the stamina to endure a hard day of toil, a conviction echoed in the Tibetan proverb, “For us, children of Tsang, a swig of chang and a bite of barley will make hard work not distasteful.” (Pemba 1996:92)[11]

Alcohol as offering

The following discussion further highlights that alcohol can be used as a gift when appealing for favorable treatment. In Nubri, the complainant and defendant in legal cases must offer the adjudicating official a flask of arak before he will hear their sides of the story. In other instances, we have observed a head of household offering arak to village officials when requesting that they adjust his taxation status during the review of household membership and assets (*sleb dngos*), an event that transpires every third year. Individuals in Mustang also offer chang and arak when making formal petitions to local authorities. One written petition reads:

> Tshering Hrithar of Tshug and the elder Tshering Hrithar and the Ka cu (name not clear) of Te, and Guru of Tangma (in Tshug) came bringing a flask of chang and a ceremonial scarf

> (*dar kha*) for the petition (*zhu lam*) of Phurba Angmo. Phurba Angmo was distressed (*'u dug rten*) at having no house in which to live, and begged Lama Rangdrol and his son Tshewang Bumpa to lend her a house in which to live until her death. But the lama and his son refused, and the petitioners (*zhu lam byas mi*) begged them respectfully (to change their minds) (Ramble and Drandul 2016:54).

The importance of offering alcohol also manifests when laypeople request something from a lama. For example, as a young man aspiring to study religion, Pema Döndrup (b.1668) and a friend sought advice from a local lama. Dondrup's biography reads, "Since we had some chang to offer, we invited the lama of Gyayul to ask for his counsel since it was not right to hide our intentions from him" (1979:18).[12] Similarly, Pema Wangdu (b.1697) sought to enter the path of religion under the guidance of Pema Döndrup. As an offering to his future mentor, Pema Wangdu stole some chang from home when his parents were working in the fields.[13] Pema Döndrup's disciples in Nubri commonly greeted him bearing gifts of chang, for example, "The fully ordained monk Samdrub and all the nuns from Kog came to greet me bearing chang" (1979:118).[14] While traveling in Upper Mustang, a herder brought him chang alongside buttermilk and tsampa (1979:79),[15] and while in Manang, an official asked locals to bring him and his entourage some chang. Apparently, they brought more than enough because Pema Döndrup reported, "We kept the tasty chang and sent the unappealing stuff away" (1979:81).[16]

In these cases, offering chang to a lama in Nubri seems to be an extension of the hospitality ethic, whereby, as March argues, alcohol is a means to "obtain social cooperation because givers of hospitality are thought to draw recipients into an obligation to repay that cannot be refused" (March 1987:357). It may seem crass to envision this exchange as a form of reciprocity until one considers that Pema Döndrup, when seeking an audience with a prominent lama in Tibet, was almost denied his goal by a monastery's treasurer on the grounds that he had nothing of value to offer (1979:22–28; see Childs 2004:81–83). At least in Nubri, a beverage fermented at home using the produce of one's land and labor could facilitate relations between lamas and laypeople.

Alcohol and rituals in Nubri

Religious leaders in some Tibetan communities discourage drinking during rituals, for example in Rebkong, where prohibition was enshrined within temple charters (*bca' yig*) in the nineteenth century (Dhondup 2013:130–132). While it is possible to complete any ritual without intoxicants, most people in Nubri prefer events that are not teetotal. Evidence from the aforementioned biographies suggests that this has been the case for some time. Pema Wangdu was once staying at a mountain retreat when villagers commenced a major rite. He was left alone when "the lama and all his disciples went to drink chang [at the ritual]" (1979:177–178).[17] *Chang* makes an appearance in Pema Döndrup's biography during the consecration of a temple (*rab gnas*) in Bi when "my religious friend Gyaltsen donated chang" (1979:90).[18] Plenty of arak was being consumed at the consecration of a mani wall in the same village when we visited in April 2022.

In Nubri, the way that grain is procured and then distilled for ritual participants suggests that alcohol plays a role in community solidarity. In most villages, a series of annual rites is funded through a grain procurement system that binds households in an exchange relationship with the local temple. Grain supplied to the temple by laypeople supports rituals that protect everyone against malevolent spiritual forces. To illustrate how this works, we focus on one ritual in the village of Trok. The Kanjur Ritual (*bka' 'gyur mchod pa*) commences each year on the third day of the third Tibetan month. It has been held since the early 1920s, when Sonam Wangyal, a lama who migrated to the village from Barpak, acquired a copy of the Kanjur from Tibet. The Kanjur Ritual involves the full recitation of the 108 volumes of the Kanjur

[Translated Word (of Buddha Shakyamuni)] and all other Buddhist texts kept within Chökhang Gompa, one of the five communal temples of the village. The recitation takes from eight days to two weeks, depending on how many people are available each day. When all the texts have been read, they are carried around the village's fields in a grand circumambulation, followed by an archery contest. Here, we examine two local administrative documents. The Kanjur Interest Document [*bka' 'gyur sbad (bed) yig*] outlines how grain should be procured to support this ritual, whereas Rules [Made By] the Monasteries (*dgon pa rnams kyis khrims bca'*) specifies when, how much, and to whom arak should be distributed throughout the ritual.

The Kanjur Interest Document is one in a series of administrative texts that details how each of Trok's annual rituals will be funded. It first specifies the size (measured in *zhing bre*) of each gompa field that supports this ritual and the amount of grain measured in *dey* (*bre*) that the person who tills this field must give to the gompa. *Dey* is a volume measure equivalent to approximately one liter; *shing dey* (*zhing bre*) is the unit of land on which one *dey* of seed is sown. For example, "For Upper House [a field's name] that measures nine units, sixty measures of grain are owed," and "For Below Chörten [a field's name] that measures five units, seven measures of grain are owed."[19] A decade ago, 932 measures of grain would have been procured from the thirty-six temple fields identified in the document. That was before many temple fields were abandoned due to household labor shortages stemming from outmigration, so the amount is greatly reduced today. Nubri's sharecropping system is somewhat different from that of other Himalayan communities. For example, in Te, Mustang, grain for making chang for the Lama Guru festival comes from communal fields dedicated to supporting the ritual (Ramble and Drandul 2008:57).

Next, the document outlines a system whereby each household accepts a mandatory loan from the village temples and every year thereafter is obligated to repay one-third of the loan as interest; the actual amount varies depending on a household's status (see Childs and Choedup 2019:41–51). The document specifies that each large household (*grong chen*) took a loan of seventy-two measures of grain for this ritual and was thus obligated to repay twenty-four measures in interest. Solitary male and female households (*pho hrang mo hrang*) and male religious practitioners (*pho mchod*) owed fourteen and two-thirds and nine and two-thirds measures, respectively on their grain loans. In addition, each large household received a cash loan of eighteen coins; the interest owed is one and a half measures of grain per coin, or twenty-seven measures of grain. Solitary male and female households and male religious practitioners owed thirteen and a half measures of grain for their cash loan of nine coins, while solitary religious practitioners were obligated to repay two coins on their loan of six coins.[20] Table 1 summarizes the funding sources and amount of grain and cash procured for the Kanjur Ritual through the loan and repayment system.

In this relatively small village, 3,515 *dey* is a large quantity of grain, yet the Kanjur Ritual is one of the longest and most complex in the village's annual cycle of rites. Table 1 reveals that the bulk of the procurement comes from large households whose combined interest payments equal 56.6 percent of the yield. They are also the households most likely to till temple fields, so their contribution is probably close to 80 percent.

During the daily recitation, which starts when the sun hits the village, readers are served tea and arak throughout the day. We visited the temple kitchen, where the ritual managers (*g.nyer pa*) were making food while tending two stills. Beside the stills sat several large plastic fermentation drums (in the past, they used wooden barrels). Each contained eighty measures of fermented maize, but—as a sign of rising affluence—some rice as well. The managers' duties started well before the ritual commenced

Source	# of fields	measures of grain	sub-total	percent of grain
gomba fields	36	932	932	26.5
Source	**# of households**	**measures of grain**	**sub-total**	**percent of grain**
large household grain interest	39	24	936	26.6.
large household coin interest	39	27	1,053	30.0
solitary male/female grain interest	18	14 and 2/3	264	7.5
solitary male/female coin interest	18	13 and 1/2	243	6.9
male religious practitioner grain interest	9	9 and 2/3	87	2.5
Total			3,515	100.0

Table 1: Funding sources and amount of grain and cash procured for the Kanjur Ritual

because they had to have the first batch of arak ready for day one. Each day, they distilled between seven and twelve batches. In Mustang, those who ferment chang for rituals must swear an oath about the quality of their product and are fined if they make an inferior batch (Ramble 2008:299; Ramble and Drandul 2008:16, 50). No such oaths are required in Trok.

The Rules [Made By] the Monasteries document has a section dedicated to the Kanjur Ritual. The opening line reads, "Regarding the allotments for the [reading of] Kanjur and Prajnaparamita starting on the third day of the third month, . . ." The document then outlines the allocation for participants for each part of the ritual. To make better sense of the text, we read it together with Dorje Thakuri, who is knowledgeable about village rituals and administration. Note that most of the references to chang in the document refer to arak.

The first allotment is three measures (*debs gsum*; one *debs* is four bottles so roughly twelve liters) of 'connection chang' [*gom* (*goms*) *ldan chang*] served to all the ritual participants on the third day of the Tibetan month, the opening day of the ceremony. Dorje explained this as akin to an auspicious connection *(rten 'brel*) associated with the first time people congregate. Participants are served rice chang (*ba lo khu ba*) then arak. The more temperate participants, including some monks, typically just take a sip of the beverages, whereas most others drink their fill. This signals the opening of the Kanjur Ritual. The document then states that three measures of 'excellence chang' [*yon ldan* (*tan*) *chang*] must be offered to the religious council (*chos 'khor*), the nine families who comprise the keepers of religious law (*chos khrims pa*).

The text then refers to three time periods: commencement event [*tsug* (*'dzug*) *don*) refers to the day when the ritual begins, middle events (*bar don*) to the middle days, and liberation [*grol* (*sgrol) ldan*] to the day when the text reading concludes. The first day's routine of three servings is repeated on each of the reading days (*yang gsum ldan re re yod*). Dorje explained that the allotment of three measures of arak does not vary according to the number of participants; the more people who attend, the less each person receives. The text specifies that from the fourth day onward, recipients shall be served 'bedtime chang' [*zhang* (*bzhengs*) *chang*] and 'sleep chang' [*zim* (*gzim*) *chang*]. In addition, during a gathering to offer 108 feast items (*tshogs*) and butter lamps (*mar*) to the Kanjur and Prajnaparamita,

the people who offer these are to be served two measures of 'victory chang' [*gya* (*rgyal*) *par chang*]. One measure of 'good fortune' *chang* (*bkra shis chang*) is procured for the dough offerings (*gtor ma*) to the protector deities.

On the sixth day of the month the readers take a break. That day is a commemoration service (*sku mchod*) for Sonam Wangyal, the lama who brought the Kanjur to Trok from Tibet and initiated the annual rite. Those who participate are offered two large measures of 'commencement chang' (*gtsug chang*), two large measures of 'feast gathering chang' (*tshogs chang*), three large measures of 'excellence chang' [*yon ldan* (*tan*) *chang*], and two large measures of 'victory chang' [*rgya* (*rgyal*) *par chang*]. At the end of this day, food items imbued with sacred powers through chants and recitations are distributed to community members at the feast gathering (*tshogs*). One of the items is 'empowerment chang' (*dbang chang*), which in this case is chang and not arak. In the words of a Tibetan proverb, "If there is no feasting chang (*tshogs chang*), then how can there be a feast gathering (*tshogs 'khor*)?" (Cüppers and Sørensen 1998:210).[21]

When the reading is complete, ritual participants circumambulate the village fields while carrying the sacred texts on their backs. At this time, two large measures of arak and three small measures of chang are needed for the performance of 'golden libation' (*gser skyems*) offerings performed by a lama when the procession takes a break at each of the cardinal directions. Eight measures of arak are provided for these occasions. On the following day, in the archery contest, the three village functionaries (*las tshan*) receive three large measures of 'winner's chang' (*thob chang*) and the two men who set up the targets receive two measures of 'target chang' [*bem* (*'bem*) *chang*]. When a contestant hits the target with his arrow, he is offered a cup of arak.

This ritual confirms the importance of chang and arak in the religious lives of Nubri's inhabitants. A tax system is in place and designed to procure the grain that the attendants ferment, distill, and serve in specified amounts at precise times, as detailed in documents drafted for the purpose of keeping everything on schedule. Each serving has a title that expresses its purpose or function within the ritual. This is not to say that the rituals degenerate into Bacchanalian drinking sessions. Most men in Nubri are veteran imbibers who can hold their liquor quite well. They perform sacred duties with solemnity, decorum, respect for tradition, and full awareness that their actions are meant to benefit everyone in the community. Consumption is spread throughout the day; we have not witnessed a decline in decorum due to drunkenness among the ritual participants.

The annual performance of the ritual binds households in Nubri together through a system of exchange involving grain for spiritual protection. The intended outcome is for crops to flourish, bovines to multiply, and family members to remain healthy and prosper. Even people who have moved permanently out of the valley keep some land so they can honor tax obligations and reap the benefits of this exchange, showing how the rituals help maintain community solidarity and a sense of belonging.

Final thoughts

To reiterate, we do not intend to romanticize the drinking culture or claim that Nubri does not have any of the social problems typically related to alcohol. Yet we do seek to highlight how fermenting, distilling, and imbibing are time-honored and sustainable practices in Himalayan communities. It is no exaggeration to assert that chang and arak are tightly woven into the fabric of Nubri society, perhaps akin to the situation in Europe and America before the sweeping commodification of the alcohol industry and a concomitant drop in prices ravaged home-brewing traditions. Chang and arak remain essential for nurturing social relationships, economic exchanges, and ritual practices—aspects of culture that tend to be swept away by the forces of global modernity. The efficacy of home-crafted beverages in facilitating social cohesion in

rural Himalayan communities should not be taken for granted as commercially produced brews and distillates come to dominate local markets.

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Endnotes

1. An agricultural survey in Bhutan revealed that the amount of grain dedicated to fermenting and distilling ranged from 13% to 22% by village (Namgyal 2009:63–64). Wilkes provided an unsubstantiated estimate that 40% of barley in Tibet was dedicated to chang production (1968:350), similar to Osmaston's approximation of the percentage of grain Ladakh's farmers devote to brewing (1995:132). Kunwar estimated that 110–160 kg of grain were used annually by Sherpa households to brew chang (1984:9).

2. According to archaeologist Xinyi Liu, "My hypothesis is Tibetan fermentation is old. Barley and millet were adopted to the plateau around 4000–3500 years ago, and they had been used for fermentation for thousands of years before their introduction to Tibet. But there is no archaeological evidence on the plateau thus far" (personal communication, 6/2/2022).

3. Dotson's study of administration and law in the Tibetan Empire drew upon the Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rgyas pa of Mkhas pa Lde'u, composed in the mid-thirteenth century, and the Mkhas pa'i dga' ston composed by Dpa' bo Gtsug-lag Phreng ba between 1545 and 1564. Uray argues that the latter text is based on a prototype composed in the early eighth century (1972:47-48).

4. chang de chu yis sla po bzos/ mi des chang gis sla po bzos/; chang rang gib tung na mgo na/ chang mi yis btung na snying na/; chang tshod med la kha mchu bar mi chad/; pho rabs gcig gi chang 'thung la/ gros mdun ma gnyis kyi sne 'khrid byed/ pho 'bring gcig gi chang 'thung la/ glu rtsed mo gnyis kyi sne 'khrid byed/ pho mtha' gcig gi chang 'thung la/ gyod rgyab 'dre gnyis kyi sne 'khrid byed/

5. For other descriptions of the processes of brewing chang and distilling arak, see Wilkes 1968, Dorje 1985, Kunwar 1989, Namgyel 2009, Targais et al. 2012, and Berger 2019.

6. See March 1987; Diemberger and Schicklgruber 1989: 269.

7. For the recollections of two former ceremonial beer servers, see the Voice of Tibet piece posted in 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uy-kKrtmd4M, accessed 12/30/2022.

8. spa bzang bu 'khrid ma nyal/ spa bzang bu 'khrid bzhangs/ spa bzang bu 'khrid bzhangs nas/ mar po me gcig tang/ mar po me gcig tang nas/ sngon mo chu gcig blang/ sngon mo chu gcig blang nas/ ngas zhim po ja chang gcig thung/ (this is an amalgam of versions from Prok and Tsak).

9. The custom of serving an alcoholic beverage alongside tea is not confined to Nubri. See, for example, Fjeld's ethnographic descriptions of social life in Central Tibet during the early 2000s, in which she makes many references to tea and chang being served together (2022). Other evidence is a Tibetan saying, "If one is invited for tea, one is invited for chang" ('ja 'dren chang 'dren/'). (Cüppers and Sørensen 1998:91). Furthermore, it is not a new custom in Nubri. While traveling with a friend to Tibet in the late 1600s, Pema Döndrup encountered a government official from Lhasa stationed at the border town of Nangtsar who "invited us to have tea and chang" (p. 23) ('nyid la ja dang chang drang . . ./').

10. See Ramble and Drandul (2019:152, 159) for an example of how refusing an offering of drink can have serious social consequences. In a dispute between two groups of nuns in Mustang, one testament reads, "When we asked them [the other group of nuns] angrily why they were so late and why they had only come when the prayers had finished, they paid homage to the great Maitreya image while remaining standing, and announced that from that day on they were leaving the convent. We invited them to sit down with us and to have some beer, but they refused to have any."

11. bdag cig gtsang ba'i o lo/ i dang i phag byung na/ las ka la skyug ma bro/

12. nyid gnyis la 'chang gcig yod pas/ 'u rang rgya yul gyi bla ma phebs zhus nas 'ka' bros gzhus gos bla ma la sang nas mi yongs/ Greeting a lama with chang or arak is still a custom throughout Nubri today, albeit many of the younger religious practitioners trained in monasteries are teetotalers.

13. chang cig rkus nas/

14. dge slong bsam grub dang dkog pas jo mot hams cad gyi 'chang khur nas nga mjal ba la sleb byung ngo/

15. 'chang dang da ra dang tsam pa dang khyer byung shin po'i don yin zer/

16. 'chang mang po khur yong pa zhim pa tsho zhan/ mi zhim po tsho log te khyer song/

17. bla ma dpon slob gang yod ni chang 'thung la phebs song/

18. yang bi'i mgon pa yi lha khang gyi rab gnas la/ chos grogs rgyal mtshan gyi 'chang ton . . ./

19. grong stod zhing bre dgu sa la rbad bre 60 yod/ mchod rten ma zhing bre lnga sa la rbad bre 7/

20. bka' 'gyur sbru ['bru] rbad 'kor [skor] la thogs mar grong mchen [chen] la bre 72 dngos dang ṭam 18 dngos/ yang ṭam 1 la rbad bre phye 3 yod 'de rnas [nas] grong chen la len gos [dgos] yod/ pho rang mo rang la bre 44 dngos dngos/ ṭam 9 dngos yod/ spod cod bkor [skor] la bre 29 dngos dang/ ṭam 6 dngos la skyed ṭam 2 len gos [dgos]/ The term ṭam is an abbreviation of ṭam kha. One ṭam is equal to ½ Nepalese rupee (Ramble and Drandul 2019:15).

21. tshogs chang med na tshogs 'khor ji ltar skor/

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