2.2. TRADITIONAL GAMES

The traditional games of Bhutan required no sophisticated materials or equipment but always made-do with what was available. Bhutan is an agrarian country and still a majority of the population depend on agriculture and farm produce. In a typical Bhutanese family, sons (and sometimes even daughters in the absence of sons) were always bestowed with the responsibility of herding cows or whatever livestock the family raised. They would spend days in the pastureland letting their cows graze the rich grasses. During those idle times, herders would spend their time together playing different games with make-shift items. Some say that the simplest game would have been invented by the cow herders of those days when they had nothing much to do, but to explore their minds and innovate something to pass their time.

There are many kinds of simple outdoor games like, “Bang jug” (Free Running), “Eh tsoel” (Hide and Seek), “Akay changni” (Swing), “Lem lem” (See-saw), “Do chung” (Furthest Stone Throw), and “Khakhe” (Snow exchange) a game played on the first day of the snowfall. “Hung khay” (Pillow Fight) involves two men atop a suspended wooden beam facing each other and armed with pillows that they swing at each other in an attempt to throw the opponent off the beam. Other games are “Ji ibu” (Weight Lifting) and “Ihap then ni” (Tug of War).

There are other indoor mind-developing games like “Nya baep” (Fish and Frog), Kolokpa and “Ta dang nor” (Tiger and Cow), “Gyalpo ta sho” (King losing Horse) which not only have positive educational impact but also improves one’s mental faculty, enhances concentration and sharpness. There are also games based on religious aspects played primarily by monks called “Sa lam droe ma”, a highly regarded spiritual game based on religious composition. It is a very intricate game where players have to believe in fate and have utmost faith in religion. The outline of the game can be faintly compared to snakes and ladders game.

However, in this game, players have to go through numerous kinds of heaven and hell. One uses only one dice and a huge hand written paper for a board where all the composition of the game is written. The game can be played with any number of players. The main objective is to accomplish heavenly realms without spending much time in hell(§). It is believed that if one falls into one of the many hells and takes more time than required to get out, one is naturally compelled to vow to do virtuous deeds like offering butter lamps or chant the sacred mantra 100,000 times or prostrate the equal times. An interesting observation is, when players take the dice and rub it inside their palms and cross their hands and place it on their forehead and fervently pray before playing the dice to relieve from the hellish stages.

Modern technologies have made things easier and viable. Traditional games have started to disappear in the phase of luxurious entertainments and sports. The only remaining popular games are the Archery and the barely surviving Khuru because these are touched by modern technology as the traditional bamboo bows and arrows are replaced by compound bows made of fibreglass and arrows made of metallic substances. The influence of television and internet have overwhelmingly taken the attention of youth these days, though a few of the traditional games played in the past are included in rare Nyagoe contests while some others are played during the annually held National Day celebrations.

2.2.1. Archery

Datse or archery is deeply rooted in the history and legends of the country besides also having spiritual association. In the 15th century, Lama Drukpa Kuenley shot an arrow from Phari in Tibet which hit the staircase of one Pelzang Buthri’s house in a village called Toebesa in Punakha. By and by the game of archery has been promoted by our hereditary kings with great enthusiasm, particularly the Second King Jigme Wangchuck. But before archery became an entertainment sport, bows and arrows were used as weapons to hunt and during battles.

Today, archery is the most popular and important sport in Bhutan. It was designated as the National Game in 1971, following Bhutan’s 1970 admission to the United Nations during the reign of the third king, H.M. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck.

Archery goes by different names in different regions. In Dzongkha it is called Datse mostly in the western part of the country while in Bumthang (district in central Bhutan) it goes by the name Mew. However, the method and equipment used to play the game is not very distinct from each other. The essence of the game however remains the same even today although a lot has changed in the equipment used. There are three basic elements required to play the game of archery. Those are - a bow (Zhu), a pair of arrow (Da) for each player and targets (baa) on each side.
2.2.1.1. Bow

The *Zhu*, or bow, is made from a distinct species of bamboo called the *zhu shing* which is only grown in the warmer parts of the country. There are generally two types of bow, *tab zhu* and *chang zhu*. The stems of *zhu shing* are cut about 1.5 metres long, then dried naturally in the sun which may take up to 75 days or smoke-dried in the kitchen which takes less time, before they are cut into two equal parts and then joined in the middle. This is literally the *tab zhu* which means folded bow. In earlier times, the joint in the middle section of the *tab zhu* was securely bound by a leather or cloth strap. However nowadays materials like copper or steel wire are used to bind the two pieces of the bow together. This type of bow was originally used as weapons to hunt wild animals. *Chang zhu* is still popular in the country.

The traditional bow string used to be made from a wild vine plant called *tshelme pangki*. It is believed that there is normally a specified season when the vine is obtained. The vine is then cut into four parts and dried. Then the skins are removed which then becomes small thread-like and then all four pieces are wound together to make a strong bowstring. Today, the industrial high-end nylon strings are used which are easier to find and stronger.

2.2.1.2. Arrow

*Da* (arrows) are made from a particular species of bamboo of which the most preferred kind is called *Jala Yangka*. It grows in the *Jala* area of Wangdue Phodrang district in Western Bhutan hence the name *Jala Yangka*. These bamboos are cut to the required height and dried for a long period of time. But one can also use heat to dry the bamboo more quickly. It is then washed, dried, straightened and polished. A notch is curved out from one end of the arrow. All these require a skilled craftsman to produce a perfect pair of arrows. The feathers are then attached to the shaft of the arrow using traditional hide glue. The most commonly used feathers are that of the monal pheasant but rare feathers are often classified as special. A special five-coloured thread is wound around just below the notch and above the attached feather. The arrowheads (*dachag*) are made from metal sheets especially made by blacksmiths. Different kinds of arrow heads are used for different purpose. The *dachags* are attached at the end of the arrow with special indigenous glue called *la chu* which becomes gluey when heated and strengthens when dried.

There are other accessories like *lem cha* and *dzug shup*. These are protective gears worn by an archer. The *lem cha* is a protective strap made from clothes or leather worn on the left hand side by a right-handed archer. It protects the arm from being hit by the bowstring when releasing the arrow. The *dzug shup* is a finger guard also made from leather to protect an archer’s finger while drawing the bow string.
2.2.1.3. Quivers

Sorae (quivers) is a Dzongkha term and in the language of tshangla the term used is sor palang. The quiver is made of either wood or bamboo. Ostentatious quivers which have intricate designs are also made depending on a person’s affordability.

2.2.1.4. Targets

There are different kinds of ba (targets) used while playing a game of archery. Some of the targets are relatively longer while some are shorter. The longer targets measure about one dom (‘Dom’ – measurement equal to the length of both arms outstretched in opposite directions). A white sheet is glued over the front of the board which is then painted with lime. In the centre of the target, a circular drawing is painted in the colours of the rainbow. The centre of the circle is painted dark as bull’s eye. The bottom of the target is also painted to show water and earth. The shorter target may be about 45 cm high and 15 cm wide or less.

The traditional archery field spans about 130 to 140 metres between the two targets. The targets are fixed on the ground at each end of the range facing each other. There are many kinds of archery matches. There are friendly matches where the games are played for fun and entertainment. The important match is called Chogda where two teams from two different villages or regions or even districts participate in a game of archery which lasts for about two days. The best of three sets of game wins the match. Chogda is an important game which is highly associated with traditional beliefs. People believe that the winning team portrays good omen and would bring forth good fortune to the village while on the other hand, the losing team is denounced and believed that misfortune would unfold in the village. Therefore, before the actual day of the game and sometimes even days before the game, the teams seek astrological advice and ask for blessings and guidance of their deity.

A team comprises 11 players but the number of players can be more or less as agreed by both teams prior to the match. They are ushered into the archery ground in a traditional ceremonial manner. A Marchang ceremony is also conducted before the game commences offering alcohol to the deities for a safe and peaceful match. It is also important for all the players to agree the rules for measuring scores. A karey (a hit on the target) fetches two points. A hit on the bull’s eye, earns three points for the team. If an arrow ricochets off the target it manages one point. There is also a sa karey where the archer hits the target but below the ground. When an arrow lands very close to the target it is called daya and earns a point but only if it is closer to the target than that of an opponent. However, if an opponent’s arrow hits the target, the daya is discounted. One also earns a point when an arrow skids from the ground and hits the target as well as when an arrow hits the target but jumps off the target and splits a piece of wood from the target. This way of counting the points can be worked out precisely and decided prior to the game. In the game of chhogda there is no stake but considered very auspicious for the team as it becomes a matter of prestige and beliefs mentioned above. If a member of the royal family participates in the game, only his pair of arrows can be kept in front of the target while the shooting is in progress. The arrows of the players must be kept away from the target.

Wives and other women also participate in the game indirectly. They help prepare large feasts consisting of elaborate meals and wine and other local edibles. Women also partake as supporters and dance to entertain the audience. The cheering women are allowed to make fun of the opponent players by making any kind of remarks in their songs including humour and mockery. This is aimed at distracting the opponent and making him miss the target. This is called dakha logni.

Dhakha logni is performed only during important archery competitions. Moreover, this unique way of cheering is only performed from the half way point of the final deciding game. The team of cheerers stands at one end of the range while the cheerers for the opponent stand at the other end. The cheerers also encourage the archers of the team they support with praising songs.
Following are a few words used while distracting the opponent players.

**Hopelessness! Hopelessness!**

*Oh! He who shoots toward the wide southern plains;
The bald headed one! You will not hit the target;
It will slip away, even if you hit the target;
May it go higher and miss the target;
May it fall short of the target;
May it be swayed by the wind in between;
May it disturb the arrow, bow and both. Here is an encouraging song for the team members:
The arrow of a gentleman; (used for an ordinary person)
The arrow of lord with power; (used only for a high-ranking official)
May it not fly too high;
May it not land low, short of the distance;
May the wind not disturb its flight;
May it hit straight on the bull’s eye.

During the olden days when the king participated in an archery game, the person who hit the target the highest number of times would be rewarded with coins and cash and also clothes of extravagant quality.

Archery has evolved in many ways since its inception to the present day use of technologically enhanced equipment. Nowadays, traditional bows and arrows are used by fewer people while playing casual games. Quite often, special tournaments are organised in which contestants must use the traditional equipment. Archery enthusiasts make the modern compound bows their first choice of equipment and mostly use these both in friendly games, sometimes for small betting, and also in organized tournaments where there are major prizes to be won.

2.2.2. Stone Discus

*Doegor* is a traditional sport played by men of all ages as a pastime. It is played using two flat round-shaped stones hurled at a target almost hidden in the ground at each of the opposite ends of the field, about 25 metres apart. It is one of the simplest games ever played since it doesn’t require more than a pair of flat stones. One only needs two round and flat stones barely a kilogram in weight for each player and the targets are made from a stake of bamboo or any other wood. The stake is inserted into the ground so that it is hardly visible. There is no standard for the number of players in a team. It can be played between two players at least or more depending on the consent of the participants.

Each player hurls the round stone at the target from one end to the other and the one which lands closest to the target earns a point. The distance between the target and the stone is measured by a yardstick. The interesting part is when the following opponent players are allowed to displace the stone that has earned a point and replace it with their own.

*Doegor* is played by laymen, farmers and even monks all over Bhutan mostly to pass their free time such as New Year or on holidays. The stake for the game differs from place to place and the people who are involved in the game, but mostly takes the form of dinner or feasts hosted by the losing team.

2.2.3. Soksom or Sorsum

*Soksom* is a type of game played in the olden days by cow herders to pass their leisure time while they are watching over their grazing cows. A thin and strong piece of bamboo about two metres long, or a stiff and thin branch is cut and sharpened at one end. This game can be played between two players, or between two teams if there are more players. This appears more like javelin throw but at a specific target rather than covering the long distances.