

sa.bə: A TIBETAN RITE OF PASSAGE

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ABSTRACT

dze.ne Village residents practice the *sa.bə* ritual that announces the coming-of-age and likely marriage of a young couple.

KEY WORDS

Ganzi, Luhuo, marriage, rites of passage, Tibetan marriage

INTRODUCTION

dze.ne (Brag mda', Zhangda) Tibetan Village, Nyin mo (Yimu) Township, Brag 'go (Luhou) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province is eight kilometers east of Brag 'go County Town (Xindu) and about 500 kilometers from Chengdu City, the provincial capital.

In the context of dze.ne Village, *sa.bə*¹ refers to a young couple staying for three days in the home of a relative as part of the marriage process and, in most cases, after negotiation between the couple's relatives, it leads to marriage.

Seven accounts illustrating the details of enactment (or ignoring) of *sa.bə* follow. Account One describes a couple whose parents arranged their marriage; Account Two describes a couple who knew each other and wished to marry; Account Three concerns a couple who held *sa.bə* without informing their parents and had a child before their formal wedding; Account Four is of a couple who wished to marry but the couple's families could not reach agreement consequently, no marriage was held; Account Five concerns a couple whose marriage was arranged by their parents; Account Six presents a case where *sa.bə* was not observed; and Account Seven illustrates a case of matchmaking.

After the accounts, to better understand the context in which *sa.bə* occurs, we examine the village's location, language, and economy; provide a map illustrating the village's location; discuss village lineages; and describe the village moral code, matchmaking, and planning for *sa.bə*.

¹ IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet) is used to record words spoken in the local language used in dze.ne Village, Wylie is used to transcribe Tibetan, and Chinese is written in *pinyin*. A list of all non-English words in appropriate scripts is given at the end of this paper.

sa.bə ACCOUNTS²

Account One

I was sleeping with Father one late winter night in 1998 under two quilts atop a Tibetan carpet placed on straw on the floor in the family sitting room. Someone called Father's name. I didn't know who it was exactly and I was worried because it was so late.

Father got up, immediately went outside, and returned about ten minutes later with Thub bstan, a neighbor, who was wearing a new Tibetan robe, and a person with an unfamiliar face. Later I realized she was Chos sgron, who I didn't see very often because she was from the First Brigade. We lived in the Second Brigade. She was also wearing a new Tibetan robe. Father took them to our guest room where they slept together that night.

I noticed Father was gone the next morning when I got up for breakfast and entered our kitchen. When I asked, I was told that he had gone to see Thub bstan's parents. Our two guests got up also. I was shy when I saw them because I was barefoot and only wearing underwear.

Chos sgron was very much a stranger to me and my older brother, older sister, and younger sister. Breakfast was usually accompanied by much laughter and chatting, but this day was unusual because everybody was quiet. My sister and I gawked at the girl, which offended Mother so much that she scowled at us angrily. Father returned as we were about to finish breakfast, and reported that he had informed our guests' parents that they were staying in our home. I expected them to say something in reply but they were silent.

Chos sgron and Thub bstan didn't talk to each

² Lhundrom provided all the accounts based on personal experience and what fellow villagers told him.

other during the day; they seemed like strangers.

Father finished breakfast and left again because Thub bstan's parents wanted him to participate in the ensuing negotiations. After breakfast, Thub bstan said that he would make a wooden toy gun for me, so my older brother and I took him out to the courtyard. My sisters and mother chatted with Chos sgron. I didn't know what they talked about. The day passed without excitement. I guess I was expecting something new; the arrival of a young couple didn't usually happen. Chos sgron and Thub bstan didn't even so much as look at each other. They didn't seem to be lovers.

We took Thub bstan outside our home courtyard the next morning. Father had a bicycle and Thub bstan taught us how to ride it. Chos sgron helped with the family chores. Father came home late that night. I was in bed when he arrived. When Mother came and asked how the negotiations had gone, he replied, "It was decided they will live in Chos sgron's home because she is the only one in her family who can remain at home to take care of her parents and maintain the family inheritance." The next day, my family prepared a generous lunch of steamed dumplings stuffed with pork, soup made from beef boiled with wheat grain, potatoes cooked in butter, twisted bread sticks fried in canola oil, and candies bought from the village shop. During the meal, Father told Chos sgron and Thub bstan that their parents had agreed to the marriage.

Father escorted them to Chos sgron's home early the next morning. Thub bstan returned to his home three days later and then visited my family with a bottle of home-made barley liquor for Father, to thank us for letting them stay in our home.

Account Two

Bde skyid³ (b. ~1983) is from the village and married a village man (b. ~1982) when she was twenty-two. They had known each other since they were children. They left the village to undertake migrant labor and then were able to form a steady relationship. After a few years they decided to marry. However, in fear of their parents rejecting the marriage, they decided to observe *sa.bə* secretly.

One winter night about two months before the New Year⁴ in 2004, Bde skyid told her parents that she was going to stay at her maternal uncle's⁵ home for the night. Her parents believed this because staying at a relative's home for a night is common. When she reached her

³ A fictitious name.

⁴ In village elders' memory, Brag 'go County Monastery (Brag 'go dga' ldan rabs rten rnam par rgyal pa'i gling) announced the date of the first day of the New Year. This changed in about 1959 with the Chinese lunar calendar and Gregorian calendars becoming more important. Villagers were eventually pleased with this because, beginning in about 1995, most families had televisions and enjoyed watching the programs featuring singing and dancing shows broadcast during the Chinese lunar New Year period. In 2006, Brag 'go County Monastery urged observing the New Year according to the Tibetan calendar, which resulted in villagers celebrating New Year twice. The discrepancy between the two calendars created few problems during the fifteen days of New Year celebration, except for the very first day in 2006 when boys and men visited the local mountain deity altar on the first day according to both the Chinese and Tibetan New Years. In 2007 and 2008, the Tibetan and Chinese New Years were on the same date and thus there were no such complications.

⁵ Her mother's oldest brother.

uncle's home, she didn't speak of her real plan. At around one a.m., she quietly left the home and went to meet her boyfriend at the village *mani* stone pile as they had earlier agreed. Next, they then went to the boy's paternal uncle's home and stayed there for the night. The following day before daybreak, the male household head where they were staying informed the young couple's parents of their visit. The parents, in turn, informed all their relatives.

The parents and relatives of both sides then negotiated and decided that the couple would live in the boy's home after marriage. Bde skyid went to her boyfriend's home after *sa.bə*, stayed for three days, and then returned to her parents' home. Representatives of both sides later met again and discussed the actual wedding ceremony, which took place on the sixth day of the Tibetan New Year.

Account Three

Shong lo (b. 1978), a native of Brag mda' Village and X's paternal uncle's oldest daughter, had a secret nomad boyfriend. One night when she was twenty-four, she took her boyfriend to her paternal aunt's home for *sa.bə*. The family was shocked and somewhat reluctant but, because it would have been very rude to refuse, the family provided accommodation.

Once the first night of *sa.bə* is observed, events proceed adhering to traditional, well-known procedures. The morning after their arrival, Sgrol lo, X's father's older sister, went to Shong lo's home with a bottle of homemade barley liquor. At an ensuing meeting attended by representatives of the families, it was decided that the nomad would live with the girl, but the actual wedding ceremony would be three years later.

The nomad returned to his home after *sa.bə*, which

was about an hour away by horseback, and did not visit Shong lo's family again until the actual wedding ceremony. Later, Shong lo gave birth to a baby girl, Mtsho sgröl, who ran about merrily in her new clothes during her parents' wedding ceremony. This was all received as though it was nothing out of the ordinary.

Account Four

Seng ge (b. 1985) took his girlfriend to his paternal aunt's home in June 2009 for *sa.bə*. All relatives were duly informed according to tradition, and a meeting attended by representatives of both sides was initiated. During the meeting, representatives disagreed on where the couple-to-be should live and related concerns. The girl's family wanted them to live with their family, and the boy's family wanted them to live with their family. They were unable to agree and, during the second round of negotiations, it was decided that no marriage would occur.

The girl's family accused the *sa.bə* family of wrongfully providing accommodation and demanded they pay compensation. The accusation was that she had been deceived by the boy and his relatives who had provided a home for *sa.bə*. However, these demands were dropped after two more *sa.bə* meetings between the two families.

Account Five

The *dze.ne* family of Sgröl ma (b. 1987) asked Dar rgyas's family to allow their son, Dpal Idan, to marry Sgröl ma in 2007. Dpal Idan's family agreed. On the twelfth night of the twelfth lunar month, they observed *sa.bə* shortly after Dpal Idan returned from logging work in Gzhi mda', bordering Daofu County. They went to Sgröl ma's paternal

grandfather's sister's home for *sa.bə*. Because both families had earlier agreed to the marriage, little further negotiation was needed. The couple remained at the *sa.bə* home for three days. Next, Dpal Idan went to Sgrol ma's home and stayed for three days, and then returned to his own home. Their formal wedding ritual was held on the ninth day of the first lunar month in 2008.

Account Six

Nyi ma (b. 1974), a native of *dze.ne* Village, obtained an official job when he was twenty-four and then moved to the county seat, where he has lived since. He met a Tibetan girl there and was frequently with her. He brought the girl to his home during holidays. His family understood they were a couple because no one brings opposite-sex friends to their home unless they are lovers. After three years together, they decided to have a wedding ceremony (when he was twenty-eight). They did not observe *sa.bə*; instead, they sent invitation cards to relatives and held a wedding feast on the first floor of the Kangbei Hotel restaurant in the county seat.

Account Seven

When X's wife's younger sister (b. 1990) was at the traditional age for marriage, her parents asked X to be her matchmaker. In a discussion attended by her parents and X and his wife, the parents openly shared their thoughts regarding who they preferred as a marriage partner for their daughter—X's cousin. X was confident about making the match, given his relationship with the prospective groom.

X talked to his cousin, who agreed but noted that

his parents would make the final decision. X then talked to his cousin's father and he agreed. Two weeks later, however, X again chatted with his uncle to further the plan and found that his uncle's wife disagreed on the grounds of a past unpleasant relationship. No marriage occurred.

LOCATION, LANGUAGE, AND ECONOMY

Historically, dze.ne Village was relatively isolated, which impeded local economic growth in comparison to such neighboring communities as Sha ba thung (Xialatuo) while, simultaneously preserving local culture and language. In about 1960, a bridge was built over the xu.ru (Xianshui) River, which marks the southern border of dze.ne Village. The bridge, which is a twenty minute walk from the village, reduced the time required to reach the county town (the local market) on foot from about four hours to one hour. In 2008, a highway ran in front of the bridge to the county town, making it convenient to take buses that needed only twenty minutes to reach the county town. This was a significant improvement in market access for locals.

Figure One. Map of Brag 'go (Luhuo) County.



The 105 households (500 residents) are officially classified as Tibetan and are culturally Tibetan. However, they speak a Qiangic language that is not intelligible to nearby Tibetan language speakers. The literature has referred to the village language as Ergong, Dijiaohua 'Speech of the Ends of the Earth' (Luhuo Annals 2000: 425-426), Huoer, and Daofu yu 'Daofu language' (Duorji 1997:3). Local Tibetans refer to the language impolitely as 'dre skad' 'Ghost Language', and more politely as 'Mi nya'. Local villagers refer to their language as *dze.ne ske* 'dze.ne language' and by the Tibetan term 'Mi nyag'. There is general agreement that the language belongs to the Qiangic branch of the Tibeto-Burman Language Family.

dze.ne villagers cultivate barley, peas, wheat, and

potatoes. An ample amount of rich, irrigated land serves as the base of subsistence, as well as providing cash income through sale of barley. Additional income is earned through work at road and building construction sites. Certain families have a home in the village and also send family members to the mountains to herd livestock year round.⁶

LINEAGE

When a *dze.ne* villager is asked where they are from, and they reply:

ŋa-ŋanga-va-to
I-our-person-BE⁷
'I am a native person.'⁸

it indicates that they and their ancestors are originally from the village and belong to one of the seven indigenous families. In contrast, a person who answers:

ŋa-kərmzi-va-to
I-Dkar mdzes⁹-person-BE
'I am a Dkar mdzes (County) person.'¹⁰

⁶ A detailed introduction to the village is provided in Lhundrom et al. (forthcoming). For photographs of the village see :

- <http://picasaweb.google.com/Lhundrom/PhotosTakenInBragMdaVillageAnziTibetanAutonomousPrefecture#>
- <http://picasaweb.google.com/Lhundrom/DramdaTibetanVillageZhangguCountyGanziPrefectureSichuanChina#>.

⁷ BE = 'be verb'.

⁸ Nga sa cha 'di'i mi red.

⁹ The name of a neighboring county.

¹⁰ Nga dkar mdzes ba yin.

indicates that they or their ancestors are originally from Dkar mdzes County, even though they may have lived their entire lives in the village. Families tracing their lineage to outside the village are believed to be descended from, for example, traders and fugitives who settled in the village and then intermarried with locals. Ample arable land attracted outsiders, as did the location of xu.ru River, which was a major impediment for outsiders to reach the village (perhaps in pursuit of fugitives) without the help of locals and their *dzə* 'rafts', made by tying several logs together. The time required for outsiders to reach the village gave fugitives living in the village time to escape.

Rgyal lo (1929-2010), a village native, said all the village families are derived from twenty-six families, of which seven are indigenous local families because there are no accounts as to where their ancestors originated.

Parents believe that if their children live near each other they can assist each other with harvesting, funerals, weddings, and so on. Consequently, about seventy percent of marriages occur between villagers. Family lineage plays a significant role in determining a suitable marriage partner. Other factors include wealth, closeness of blood relationship, personality, and character. A local saying goes:

rmi-mari-sota-mc^hə-tə-çəve-ŋi-rə

name-NEG¹¹-instead-outside-FU¹²-go-better-BE

'It is better to marry outside the village than marry a person from a nameless family.'

In this context, 'nameless family' might refer to, for example, a trader who settled in the village and married a poor local woman, or descendants of a pastoralist who fled to

¹¹ Negative.

¹² Future tense.

the village to escape feuding in his natal homeland. Marrying blood-related relations (both paternal and maternal) within three-generations is taboo. Given the village's limited population, it is common for marriage partners to be fourth generation relatives.

VILLAGE MORAL CODE

The village moral code dictates that girls retain their virginity until *sa.bə*.¹³ To avoid gossip, unmarried teenage girls and young women should only associate with relatives and villagers. If villagers often see a girl with outsiders, they might say that she is *merəm* 'disobedient' and *jaməje* 'out of control'. A girl should be conservative and traditional, e.g., she should not stay out late at night, should not participate in such social gatherings as two-three day picnics on the nearby grassland, and should stay with her parents most of the time. Such local norms are examples of the criteria used to evaluate a girl's suitability as a potential marriage partner when a boy's parents search for a bride for their sons.

Sexual intercourse is not required during *sa.bə* and may not occur when the couple does not know each other well, as in the case of a marriage arranged by parents, e.g., Account Five. On the other hand, in the case of free-choice marriage, couples would likely have intercourse during *sa.bə* in the hope the girl will become pregnant, making their eventual marriage more difficult for their families to oppose, as illustrated in Account Two.

¹³ In contrast, there is little concern for or value placed on male virginity.

MATCHMAKING AND MARRIAGE

When children reach marriageable age, parents discuss who is a good match for their child. Once they identify a potential spouse, a parent visits the potential spouse's home. If the family disagrees, a common polite rejection is "Our child is too young" or "We don't want them to marry so early." Disagreement might give rise to subsequent conflict; therefore, rejections of such requests are given very carefully.

Parents also consult a close relative with connections to both families to learn what the parents of the prospective spouse think. They might also ask a mutual relative to take a message because rejection, if it occurs, is less embarrassing. However, ninety percent of families agree when approached.

Matchmaking is preferable when the parents in search of a spouse lack confidence in negotiations with the parents of the prospective spouse and especially so when the latter is from a wealthy family. As illustrated in Account Seven, the family making the proposal chooses a matchmaker who is mutually connected to both families.

Most marriages are arranged and *sa.bə* is the most important component of a successful marriage. The planning begins with a meeting between the parents or family elders, who discuss where the future couple should live, and possible partners and their suitability for marriage. Once a likely candidate is identified, the focus is on how to initiate a meeting with the prospective spouse's family.

Parents wish to keep their most capable and obedient son at home to maintain the family lineage, as well as care for parents. This son then inherits all the family property. Parents arrange the marriage of their other children, who marry and either establish their own households or move to their spouse's parents' home to live. About half of the village young men move into their wives' homes and are referred to by a local term *mə.xa* (*mag pa*). The stigma often attached to being a *mag pa* in Tibetan societies is absent in *dze.ne*.

PLANNING *sa.bə*

Parents conceal marriage arrangements from the community in order to protect the family's reputation should negotiations fail, and in order to promote their children's reputations, as explained below. When the master of the *sa.bə* home informs the couple's families, the news spreads quickly through the village—*sa.bə* is a very public event. Because the parents of the couple have kept the marriage arrangement secret, most villagers have a sense that the young couple is thoughtful and considerate. They are seen as ideal children because they are ideally suited for each other—their parents searched for an ideal partner with the result that the couple is well-matched. The parents, on the other hand, appear to be model parents, because the arrangement was secret; certain villagers will believe that the couple chose each other without parental pressure. The parents thus epitomize models of parental responsibility and the children exemplify filiality.

Accounts Two, Three, and Four are examples of free-choice marriage with the couple concealing their *sa.bə* plans. A couple may be afraid that if their *sa.bə* plans are known, their parents will object. In such cases, the couple often chooses a place and time to meet, usually in the village late at night, and where to go for *sa.bə*. Most often, the boy takes the girl to one of his relative's homes. When they reach the gate of the relative's house late at night, they call to the family. When someone from the home hears, they get up, meet the caller, and immediately understand that this is a *sa.bə* couple. Tradition requires the family to offer accommodation and the couple is led to a room. For the next two days and two nights the couple lives with the family. They are not expected to do hard work; they may help with housework. The morning after their initial arrival, the male household head of the family where the couple is staying informs the couple's parents who, in turn, notify their network of relatives. These relatives then visit the new

couples' families with liquor.

The two families negotiate for the next two days. Each side invites an eloquent and experienced relative to participate in the negotiation that centers on where the couple will live and how well the couple will be cared for by the family with whom they will live. Once this is decided, the couple goes to the home where they will live together and stay for an additional three days. They may informally visit other relatives during this time.

CONCLUSION

Most *sa.bə* lead to marriage, but not all, e.g., Account Four. If, for example, both families have a child at home to maintain the family lineage (e.g., one of their children has already married and lives with their spouse in the parent's home), they probably do not wish to have a second such couple live with them—it is almost never the case that a family has two children with their respective spouses living in the parents' home. The only choice in such a situation is for the *sa.bə* couple to establish their own home, which means to build a new house. However, this is too expensive for most village families and the marriage may be rejected.

In the case of arranged marriage, *sa.bə* announces the traditional form of marriage, indicating that they are now to be considered formally married and no longer available for further marriage consideration. For example, after *sa.bə*, it was expected that Dpal Idan (Account Five) no longer often associate with unmarried boys, stay outside his home very late, and spend much time with them chatting, making jokes, and drinking. This behavior is culturally acceptable for boys who have not observed *sa.bə*. Once Dpal Idan observed *sa.bə*, it was expected that he behave as a married man.

The traditional function of *sa.bə* in the case of arranged marriage is to notify the community of their

children's filiality, and not to provide time for the parents to negotiate the marriage, since both sets of parents have already agreed.

Arranged marriage may put the couple in an awkward situation because it is common for the couple to never have even chatted. As mentioned earlier, young people are outside of the village most of the year earning cash income and may know nothing of their marriage and parents' arrangement until they return home for New Year and shortly before their parents have scheduled *sa.bə*. The details may astonish them.

The day after the night of their arrival, their families and relatives are informed and people visit the concerned families. The bride and groom's families also meet but, as they have both agreed to the marriage, they discuss preparations for the coming wedding rather than negotiating over a possible marital solution. The couple goes to a home where they live in the future after *sa.bə* and remains there for three more days.

As Account Four illustrates, couples who observe *sa.bə* do not necessarily marry, however, the impact of observing *sa.bə* remains influential for the remainder of their lives, particularly for women.

Sa.bə is also observed in such nearby communities as Shwa ba thang, Gzhi mda', and Srib mo, where it is known by the same term.¹⁴ Further research is needed to determine how *sa.bə* in those communities compares to what is practiced in dze.ne Village.

¹⁴ dze.ne ske was spoken in these communities in the recent past but those born after ~1980 can only understand fragments of the language and do not speak it at all.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS¹⁵

B

Bde skyid བདེ་སྐྱིད, di.scə

Brag 'go བྲག་འགོ་, ra.yu, Luhou 炉霍

Brag 'go dga' ldan rabs rten rnam par rgyal pa'i gling, བྲག་འགོ་

དགའ་ལྗན་རབས་རྟེན་རྣམ་པར་རྒྱལ་པའི་གླིང་།

Brag mda' བྲག་མདའ་, dze.ne, Zhangda 章达

C

Chengdu 成都, Khrin tu'u མིན་ཏུ་ལུ།

Chos sgron, ཚོས་སྒྲོན།

D

Dar rgyas དར་རྒྱལ་, de.ci

Dijiaohua 地脚话

Dpa' ldan དཔའ་ལྗན་, pa.din

'dre skad འདྲེ་སྐད་, dzi.ske

E

Ergong 耳龚

G

Ganzi 甘孜, kərmzi, Dkar mdzes དཀར་མངོས།

Gnas 'gro གནས་འགོ་

Gzhi mda' གཞི་མདའ་,

H

Han 汉, rja, Rgya རྒྱ།

Huoer 霍尔语, Hor ཧོར།

J

jaməne

K

Kangbei 康北

kər.mzi, Dkar mdzes དཀར་མངོས།, Ganzi 甘孜

¹⁵ The order of terms is the term given in the text, dze.ne ske (IPA), Wylie, Tibetan, *pinyin*, and Chinese characters.

L

lhə.ndzə, Lhun grub ལུན་གུབ། M

mani, ma Ni མ་ཤི།

me.rəm, Ma rabs མ་རབས།

mə.xa, mag pa མག་པ།

Mi nyag མི་ཉག, mə.nə, Muya 木雅 N

Nga dkar mdzes ba yin ང་དཀར་མཛེས་བ་ཡིན།, ŋa-kə.rmzi-və-to

Nga sa cha 'di'i mi red ང་(ས་ཆ)འདིའི་མི་རེད།, ŋa-ŋanga-və-to

Nyi ma ཉི་མ།, ə.ma

Nyin mo ཉིན་མོ།, Yimu 宜木 R

Renda 人大, nʒə.mda,

Rgyal lo རྒྱལ་ལོ།, rje.lo S

sa.bə

Seng ge སེང་གེ།, sin.ngi

Sgrol ma སྐྱོལ་མ།, dzo.ma

Sha ba thung, ʃa.ra.tʰon, ʃa.və.suɛɛ, Xialatuo 虾拉沱

Shong lo ཤོང་ལོ།, ʃon.lo

Sichuan 四川, si.ʧʰan, Si khron སི་ཁྲོན།

Srib mo སྲིབ་མོ།, Simu 斯木

stewu, Rta'u ཏཱུ།, Daofu 道孚 T

Thub bstan ཐུབ་བསྟན།, tʰə.sten X

Xindu County Town, Xindu zhen 新都镇

xu.ru, Xianshui 鲜水

Y

Yizu 一组