

**Bjagoed Menchu (Bya rgod sman chu): Legacy of Vulture with a Broken Wing**

| Author  | Abstract  |
|---|---|
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**Introduction**

**Context of *menchu (sman chu)* and *tsachu (tshwa chu)***

In Bhutan, hot springs are referred to as *tsachu (tshwa chu)*, holy water is called *drubchu (sgrub chu)*, and medicinal water is called *menchu (sman chu)*. These water bodies are found in sacred places and are highly valued by Bhutanese and

it is believed to be blessed by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Worldwide, medical hydrology, commonly referred to as medical water therapy, is used to treat illnesses and promote relaxation. Some scholars believe it started thousands of years ago in Asia, with Indians, Japanese, and Chinese being among the first to use tea extracts and natural hot springs for cleansing the body and soul (Wangchuk et al., 2020). Bhutan, often referred to as *Lhojong Menjong (lho ljongs sman ljongs)*, or "the land of medicine in the south," has a long history of using medicinal plants and healing customs. These practices have been used since the seventh century, Bhutan is a prominent hub for traditional medicine (Wangchuk et al., 2020).

The introduction of Mahayana Buddhism in 746 AD and the visit of Guru Rinpoche are associated with the creation of *menchu (sman chu)* and *tsachu (tshwa chu)* in Bhutan (Wangchuk, 2021). The science of healing, or *so-wa-rigpa (gso wa rig pa)*, is mentioned in Mahayana text. Unlike in many other countries where hot springs and medicinal waters are used for recreation and relaxation, in Bhutan, they are used as therapy to treat diseases. There is no comprehensive scientific literature on the origin of *menchu (sman chu)* and *tsachu (tshwa chu)* in Bhutan. Even today, the origins are not well documented. However, history tells that these medicinal waters (*sman chu*) and hot springs (*tshwa chu*) were discovered by Guru Rinpoche during his visit to Bhutan.

### **Culture and development**

There are various ways to describe culture, but in general terms, it's the beliefs, norms, and behaviors of a group of people (Adedokun, 2020). Common values, beliefs, and practices that influence how members of a community identify, conduct, and interact with one another are collectively referred to as culture. The degree to which culture adjusts to modernity and globalization determines whether it advances or hinders development. On the other hand, reorganizing and reorienting the entire economic and social system is a complex process that takes towards development (Cotgrove, 1978). William (2004) believes that local culture is crucial to community development because it affects how people live and the power dynamics in each community, which can either promote or hinder advancement. Adekola (2005) states that as culture comprises all facets of a person's life, tackling community development from a cultural perspective ensures that all components of development are addressed.

Sustainable growth depends on culture and development, which are not just significant but also necessary. A nation's socioeconomic development is based mostly on the ethical principles and cultural values of its citizens and communities. Buddhism is deeply rooted in Bhutanese culture and traditional values. The behavior, perspectives, and day-to-day lives of its inhabitants are significantly influenced by this relationship, which is more than just basic. Their religious and cultural beliefs shape their every move, thought and habit, weaving a unique tapestry that directs their way of life and development approach (Dorji, 2010).

The increasing interconnectedness of cultures due to globalization and technology has brought up both opportunities and problems for growth. One of the main issues facing development today is how to maintain cultural identity while gaining the benefits of globalization. As a result, there is complexity in the relationship between culture and development. It is crucial to understand the impact of culture on both individuals and societies in order to develop inclusive, culturally aware, and sustainable initiatives. Societies can evolve in a way that respects regional identities and seizes global potential by valuing cultural diversity and addressing its challenges (Adekola, 2005).

### ***Menchu (sman chu) and tsachu (tshwa chu) in Bhutan***

*Menchu* and *tsachu (tshwa chu)* are widely available and highly valued throughout Bhutan. Table 1 presents a list of a few well-known *menchu (sman chu)* and *tsachu (tshwa chu)* in Bhutan. According to Dorji et al., (2015), these *menchu (sman chu)* and *tsachu (tshwa chu)* are believed to be able to treat a wide range of illnesses, including arthritis, joint pain, whooping cough, gout, body aches, ulcers, fractured bones, stiffness in the limbs, and many more.

**Table 1**

Popular *menchu (sman chu)* and *tsachu (tshwa chu)* in Bhutan

| <b><i>Dzongkhag</i></b> | <b><i>Name of menchu (sman chu) and tsachu</i></b>                                   |
|-------------------------|--|
| Paro                    | Bjagoed menchu, Dobji menchu   |
| Gasa                    | Bjagoed menchu, Gasa tsachu  |
| Thimphu                 | Kabisa menchu  |
| WangduePhodrang         | Dangchu-Wangchu menchu   |
| Bumthang                | Ura Drakchu menchu, Dhur tshachu and Pasalum tsachu                                  |
| Zhemgang                | Dangkhar menchu, Duenmang tsachu   |
| Mongar                  | Aja gNey menchu  |
| Lhuntse                 | Bharab menchu, and Chethgang menchu, Khambalung gNey tsachu, Yoenten Kuenjung tsachu |
| Punakha                 | Chuboog tsachu, Koma tsachu  |
| Sarpang                 | Gelephu tsachu   |

### ***Brief history of Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)***

A *lama* from the nearby *Dzongdrakha monastery* made the first discovery of *Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)* (Dorji et al., 2015). Many elders consider this *menchu (sman chu)* to be extremely sacred and believe *Lama Drukpa Kinley* to have blessed it. The *lama* noticed a vulture beside a little spring that had a broken wing; the bird was known as *Bjagoed (Bya rgod) in Dzongkha*. The bird had repeatedly dipped its injured wing in the spring water. After many days, the bird's injured wing had fully healed and it flew away as if it had never been hurt (Dorji et al., 2015). As words spread around about the water's healing properties, people began coming to the *menchu (sman chu)* for their broken bones and other

illness. This is how it got the name "*Bjagoed menchu*," (*Bya rgod sman chu*) while some residents still refer to it as bone-healing *menchu* (*sman chu*).

In the past, people would construct temporary camps, heat stones, and used the heated stones to warm the healing water in wooden tub. But the holy spot suffered as more people came to visit. The forest was used as a toilet, trash was not managed and trees were chopped down for firewood and tent poles. The community raised concerns and asked for immediate help from the local government leaders (Tshering, 2019). In 2017, a project funded by the UNDP's Global Environmental Facility – Small Grants Programme (Gef-Sgp) in association with the government gave the *menchu* (*sman chu*) a major renovation (Tshering, 2019). The project decreased the demand for firewood by installing water heating stoves and solar-powered water heating systems. The location was converted into a sustainable community business with UNDP's assistance. Nine wooden-tub bathhouses, a guesthouse for each bathhouse, common restrooms, a canteen, and outdoor seating for patients and their families are now available. The facility is administered by a local who hires staff to manage garbage, heat the stones, fill the baths with hot stones, clean the tubs, maintain the restrooms and run the canteen (Wangchuk, 2021). The *menchu* (*sman chu*) has also created job opportunities for locals. Currently there are five young school dropouts helping the manager.

### ***Bhutanese tradition of going to menchu (sman chu)***

Visiting *menchu* (*sman chu*), or medicinal water sites, is a deeply ingrained custom in Bhutan. Locations endowed with *menchu* (*sman chu*) are mostly in remote and peaceful natural areas. These *menchu* (*sman chu*) places are visited by families and individuals seeking spiritual and physical relief. Many view the trip as a pilgrimage and believe that *menchu* (*sman chu*) can heal a variety of illnesses and improve general health. The healing process includes bathing in or drinking the water and performing rituals and prayers for blessings. Because of Bhutanese belief in the interconnection of mind, body, and spirit, these visits incorporate spirituality with medical care. This tradition has been passed down from generation to generation. Today, it is an important fabric of Bhutanese culture and many Bhutanese still continue to rely on this traditional health practice.

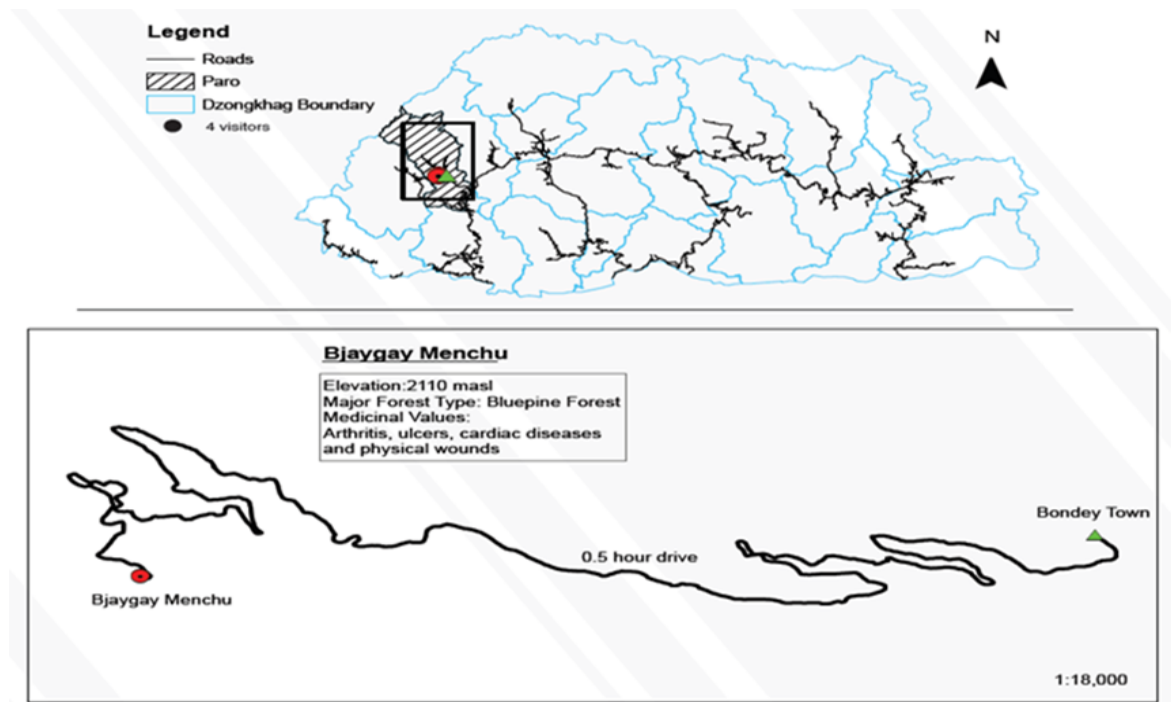
## **Research Methodology**

### ***Study area***

The study was conducted in *Bjagoed menchu* (*Bya rgod sman chu*) located in *Jiwphu* village, *Lunyi* gewog, under *Paro Dzongkhag*. It is located at an elevation of 2110 meters above sea level. It is just 10 kilometers from *Paro Bondey* town and takes about half an hour to drive to the site. The site is located near the road, within the *Lunyi* Community forest area (Dorji et al, 2014) as shown in figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Location of Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)*



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## Sampling

The respondents were selected using a convenience sampling method. The data was collected twice in the months of December 2023 and May 2024 supplemented by data from reports, press releases, and related journal articles.

## Data collection methods

Before the data collection, pilot study was conducted. Data was collected through interviews. Both the owner and the visitors were interviewed. A total of 18 respondents were interviewed.

## Data analysis and interpretation

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Qualitative data was categorised into themes for interpretation.

## Themes

### *Sources of information*

Although there are many sources of information regarding *Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)*, the following were found most popular. Family and friends can be an excellent source of information for various aspects of life. They provide valuable insights, share personal experiences, and offer reliable advice on

numerous topics, ranging from importance and curative nature of *menchu* (*sman chu*) and *tsachu* (*tshwa chu*). Their support and knowledge are invaluable. As shared by one of the respondents, *"Well, my introduction to medicinal waters and hot springs came from my family. I grew up hearing stories from my grandparents about the healing properties of natural springs in Paro. These stories intrigued me, and as I grew older, I became more interested in exploring it."* (Male, 29, Samdrup Jongkhar). Furthermore, one of the respondents shared, *"My friend recommended that I visit a local hot spring to cure my severe back pain"* (Female, 33, Wangdue Phodrang). For a respondent, his source of information was media and song. He shared, *"I knew about it through BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Service). Further, I also remember when I was young, there used to be a person who sang about Gasa Hot Spring and I came to know about hot spring from his song"* (Male, 33, Paro).

### **Health/ Physical wellbeing**

People believe that *menchu* (*sman chu*) contains medicinal properties that can heal a variety of illnesses while improving overall well-being. *Menchu* (*sman chu*) is well known for easing signs and symptoms of rheumatism, arthritis, and skin diseases (Wangchuk et al., 2020). It is believed that minerals in the water offer medicinal and anti-inflammatory properties that reduce pain and discomfort. In this regard, one of the respondents said, *"I broke my ankle in a car accident and I stayed in a hospital for about four weeks and had medicines also. It wasn't getting better. So, I decided to come and dip in this Menchu. I feel I am getting better. I can move my legs a bit and my pain, especially during the evenings, has gone down"* (Female, 44, Trashigang).

It is also believed body is detoxified when we take bath in *menchu* (*sman chu*). The natural minerals and components of *menchu* (*sman chu*) facilitates detoxification, promotes metabolism, and improves internal organ function. Since ancient times, hydrothermal therapies have been used for their many benefits, which include disease prevention and health promotion (Cohen 2020). Some medicinal springs contain warm temperatures that help promote better blood flow. Improved circulation helps the delivery of nutrients and oxygen to tissues and organs, hastening the healing process and enhancing vitality. It is thought that frequent visits to *menchu* (*sman chu*) will boost immunity. The combination of physical relaxation, mental peace, and the mineral content of the water helps enhance the body's natural defenses. One of the respondents shared, *"as you immerse yourself in menchu (sman chu), you feel that stress melts away. The heat naturally relaxes tense muscles, promoting a sense of calm, well-being, tranquility and enjoying a restful night's sleep"* (Male, 28, Mongar). Cohen (2020) states that there are psychological advantages to hydrothermal treatments which include better sleep, less stress and anxiety, a connection to nature, and social connections, are helpful in overcoming trauma and feeling powerless caused by forced confinement and unpredictable economic and social situations.

## **Psychological wellbeing**

The tradition is deeply rooted in Bhutanese culture and has many benefits for mental health, including fostering calm, relaxation, and spiritual connection. *Menchu (sman chu)* locations frequently lie in peaceful, undisturbed environments, making them ideal getaway from everyday stress. The peaceful surroundings and the relaxing effects of the medicinal water helps to lower tension and encourage relaxation. It is said that taking a *menchu (sman chu)* bath can enhance mental clarity and reduce anxiety. As shared by one of the respondents, *“menchu (sman chu) provides full body relaxation and my knee pain disappeared at once and I am so happy. I don’t know the science behind it but may be something to do with the temperature and the mineral content of the water and stone”* (Female, 26, Samtse).

In order to help people focus their thoughts and obtain a clearer perspective on life, the visits frequently include spiritual exercises and isolated reflection. Believing one is being blessed by the divine can provide comfort to many and lessen feelings of depression and anxiety (Cohen 2020). Using the healing water together with rituals, prayers, and offerings fosters a sense of balance and togetherness that improves mental health in general. In this connection, one of the respondents shared, *“I have been here for almost two weeks and every time I soak into menchu (sman chu), I pray to God to heal my pain and day by day I feel I am improving. Now I feel more clearer mentally and focused after visiting this menchu (sman chu). I want to stay here for one more week”* (Male, 67, Paro).

The therapeutic properties of the water and the surroundings' natural beauty are two apt examples of how *menchu's (sman chu)* natural elements can greatly improve mood. A more optimistic mindset results from the union of spiritual and physically healing. As a means of fostering social ties, offering support, and elevating sentiments of connection and belonging, visiting *menchu (sman chu)* is frequently done with family and friends (Tshering, 2019). A powerful experience that nurtures the soul can be experienced by going to a quiet and sacred location, conducting rituals, and immersing oneself in the healing water. People can fully interact with their environment and inner selves which promotes mindfulness and presence. As shared by one of the respondents, *“this place is beautiful and ideal, away from the town without any disturbances. I can devote my time for spiritual path, time for myself, meditate, etc. I love this place and I want to visit again”* (Female, 71, Paro). Regular heat-based treatments such as saunas, steam rooms, hot spring bathing, hot mud wraps, etc., build physiological and psychological resilience and lead to lower overall morbidity and mortality (Cohen 2020).

## **Menchu as an economic hub for the local community**

*Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)* has significantly boosted the local economy. As shared by one of the respondents, *“I have a small shop located nearby the menchu (sman chu). Visitors buy vegetables and fruits, and I earn a*

*minimum of Nu. 3,000 per day most of the times"* (Female, 42, Paro). This increased foot traffic has resulted in a noticeable uptick in business for local vendors, highlighting the direct economic impact of *menchu (sman chu)*. Another respondent noted, *"We've seen an increase in visitors, which has led to more business for my restaurant. We've also started offering packages that include meals which is gaining popularity at the moment"* (Female, 53, Paro). This innovative approach to bundling services has not only increased revenue but has also enhanced the overall visitor experience, further promoting the *menchu (sman chu)* as a key attraction.

Moreover, the popularity of the *menchu (sman chu)* has opened new opportunities for the local hospitality industry. A respondent shared, *"I've noticed more tourists staying in our rooms. This has opened up opportunities for home-stays and local tour guides, providing additional income for a few families around"* (Male, 44, Hotel owner, Paro). The rise in tourist accommodations has stimulated the local economy by providing diversified income streams. Home-stays offer a more authentic experience for tourists while generating additional revenue for local families. Additionally, the need for local tour guides has grown, creating new job opportunities and allowing residents to share their knowledge and culture with visitors.

The *menchu (sman chu)* has become an essential part of the local tourism economy, bringing in tourists and generating a wide range of employment opportunities. As one respondent mentioned, *"menchu (sman chu) and tsachu (tshwa chu) have become key attraction in our area. They not only bring in tourists but also create jobs for locals as guides, drivers, and in hospitality services. This has helped reduce unemployment in our community."* The influx of tourists has necessitated hiring of local guides, drivers, and hospitality staff, thereby reducing unemployment and contributing to the overall economic stability of the locality. Investments in infrastructure have also played a crucial role in the development of the *menchu (sman chu)* as a tourist destination. The current owner of *Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)* has invested in developing infrastructure such as better footpaths and amenities. This investment has paid off by attracting more visitors, which in turn supports local businesses and generates revenue through the sale of locally produced items. Improved infrastructure not only makes the *menchu (sman chu)* more accessible to visitors but also enhances the overall experience, encouraging longer stays and higher spending.

From the experiences and observations made by local communities and visitors to the *menchu (sman chu)*, we can deduce that *Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)* is leveraged effectively to boost economic development of the locality.

### ***Challenges faced during visit to menchu (sman chu)***

There are various challenges faced by visitors on their way to *menchu (sman chu)*. Geographic location and travel time are factors which hinders visitors. As



shared by one of the respondents *"I heard about this menchu (sman chu) a long time back and people refer to it as bone healing menchu (sman chu). I tried many times to visit menchu (sman chu) but since I stay at Trashiyangtse, I couldn't make it. This time I sought my son's help and I am here"* (Female, 41, Lhuentse).

Accommodation is another obstacle faced by the visitors. As shared by one of the respondents *"I was supposed to come last month but all rooms were booked. There are only nine rooms and if we do not make reservations in advance, it is difficult to get the rooms"* (Male, 28 Mongar). In addition, one respondent shared that, *"I visited other hot spring and found out that the cost did not match with the services, it is expensive here"* (24, Female, Haa).

For some, miscommunication between service providers and clients was an issue. In this regard, one of the respondents shared, *"There is a lack of communication and last month it created misunderstanding between my husband and the manager whom we encountered through the Facebook page. He was not hospitable"* (41, Female, Punakha). The major challenge that the visitor foresees in the coming days is for the person with disability as shared by one respondent, *"There are no wheelchair ramp facilities and it is very difficult for people who cannot walk. I have to carry my father from the roadside"* (Female, 53, Paro).

### **Future opportunities**

During the peak season, the hot springs became well-liked by people of nearby *dzongkhag*. This has led to surge in lodging rates. The manager is preparing to design a unique wellness package that will feature trips to nearby hot springs, spa treatments, yoga retreats, and excursions. The product diversification will also attract diverse clients which will eventually increase revenue and bring economic benefits to the immediate community and create enabling environment for clients to stay longer.

Tourists to the hot springs are observed expressing an interest in purchasing handcrafted goods from the area as souvenirs. This will create opportunity for the local entrepreneurs to make handicrafts unique to the locality. The manager is planning to create a consistent market for handmade products.

There is also a plan to create an environment for people with disabilities who are interested to visit the *menchu (sman chu)*.

### **Conclusion**

Culture is a dynamic and vital component that affects every facet of human progress, not just the setting for it. Results from development initiatives that take cultural factors into account and incorporate them can be more inclusive, sustainable, and productive. Development initiatives can be adapted to match the particular needs and goals of communities by recognizing and valuing

cultural contexts. This promotes a society in which cultural diversity and development go hand in hand. Culture can always be leveraged to advance economic development.

Culture can serve as an effective tool for promoting growth and plays a significant part in creating societies. Through the utilization of cultural characteristics and values, communities can cultivate creativity, establish cohesive and determined teams, and establish sustainable methods. Embracing and integrating cultural insights can result in more inclusive and effective growth initiatives, which will eventually advance the cause and improve well-being in general.

Culture is a holistic approach that reflects the complete way of life in a society. Culture and tradition are never hurdles to development rather culture provides positive strength for sustainable development. People should not take culture and tradition as hurdles to development instead take it as strength for sustainable growth and development.

The case of *Bjagoed menchu (Bya rgod sman chu)* is a good example of leveraging cultural values to boost economic development and prosperity.

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