

JUDIT BÉRES

Wedding Customs in Amdo, Eastern Tibet

Marriage and the customs associated with it are broadly similar in different Tibetan areas, although they can differ in detail just like folksongs and toasts accompanying these rituals and celebrations. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss these differences in detail, for as the Tibetan saying goes, “In each valley there is a spring, at each place there are different customs, in each village there are different dialects, in each family there is a different lifestyle”,¹ and clearly this would require a larger volume of writing. Therefore, this paper will only give an overview of wedding customs, the structure of the wedding, and the folksongs and toasts, based on examples from some areas of Amdo, Eastern Tibet. Concerning Tibetan words, Wylie transliteration² is used.

For the purposes of this paper, a Tibetan wedding includes not only the act of marriage itself but also the events and customs related to the whole process – from the selection of a spouse to moving in a new family. Due to modernization in Tibet, wedding traditions have also been shortened and simplified from their original form, which often involved a process lasting several days or even weeks. However, this article doesn’t deal with the changes brought about by modernization, instead focusing principally on an examination of the traditional structure of Tibetan weddings. Arranged marriage is peculiar to Tibetan families, although free will has also gained some ground in recent years. In the case of arranged marriage, the first thing that is looked at is whether the two families are a good fit regarding their wealth and social circumstances, and who the protector deities of the families are (*srung ma*). For example,

¹ *Lung ba re la chu mig re / sa cha re la lugs srol re / sde ba re la bshad lugs re / khyim tshang re la 'gro lugs re/* Gcod pa – Snying bo 2004: 451.

² Wylie, Turrel V.: “A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol. 22 (1959), Harvard-Yenching Institute, 261–267.

there can be grounds for refusal if one of the families respects Therang (*the'u rang*),³ and the other Palden Lhamo (*dpal ldan lha mo*)⁴ as protector deity.⁵ When the family's background is examined, the presence of "body odor" (*gseb dri/bse dri*)⁶ can be grounds for refusal as well. Marriage with other nationalities is not preferred, and especially so with those of other religions⁷ – Muslims, Christians, Bon believers. Basically, marriages with Mongols are considered the least problematic, but most Tibetan people marry Tibetans.

Inter-clan marriage is also an area where restrictions can be imposed and varies from place to place. South of Kukurong (*mtsho lho*) in Serchen Dzong⁸ (*gser chen rdzong*) it is permitted, but east of Kukurong (*mtsho shar*) in the Hualong⁹ (Bayankhar) area (*dpa' lung/ba yan mkhar*) it is not possible to marry a cousin from the paternal side.¹⁰ In Mangra¹¹ (*mang ra*), marriage from the same clan is not allowed.¹² Another custom is the preference for the parties to be of about the same age, and is especially favourable when the boy is slightly older. Birth dates must be examined with the assistance of an astrologer using three methods: mo divination,¹³ astrological calculations and prophecy (*mo rtsis lung gsum*). Although the calculations are derived from a very complex system, the results showing incompatible birth years (*lo dgra/bdun zur*) are represented simply as the following saying shows:

³ Therang is a type of spirit who can bring fortune and wealth to the person who respects him, but harm to the others depending on their appearance – for example, a mountain or wild Therang (*ri the'u*) and home Therang (*yul the'u*). The custom of respecting Therang may inherit in the family lineage.

⁴ Most of the families in Amdo respects Palden Lhamo as a family protector. But many other deities, such as Gyelvo (*rgyal bo*), Gompo Chagdrug (*mgon po phyag drug*) are respected as well (Bon 2016: 188).

⁵ Bon 2016: 188. It's believed that a family that respects Therang, with the help of the deity can cause damage to the property of others.

⁶ Bon 2016: 187. Kun dpal 2007: 23. The examination of a clan's purity is divided into two parts: meat (*sha*) is the mother's part (*ma rgyud*), the bone (*rus*) is the father's part (*pha rgyud*). Somebody from a family with *gseb dri* (or with an ancestor with *gseb dri*) can only marry a person from the same type of family.

Lcags 2012: 13–14. But there are many examples of marriage between a Buddhist and a Bon believer as well.

⁸ Gonghe County, Hainan Prefecture, Qinghai Province.

⁹ Hualong County, Haidong Prefecture, Qinghai Province.

¹⁰ Informant: Nyima Tshering 2020.

¹¹ Guinan County, Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province.

¹² Bon 2006: 185.

¹³ Tibetan divination, a way to answer questions with the use of different kinds of objects, such as stones, bones etc.

“Dog and dragon are enemies through their speech, mouse and horse are enemies through their legs, tiger and monkey are enemies through their ability, pig and snake are enemies through their dwelling place, ox and sheep are enemies through their punch, rooster and rabbit are enemies through their food.”¹⁴

Polygamy and polyandry¹⁵ also may occur in some regions in Amdo, but it is not typical at all and in the majority of areas decidedly taboo.

Proposal (*gnyen slong ba*) and engagement (*gnyen rtags kyi cho ga*)

If the above-mentioned examinations go well, the boy’s family will choose a matchmaker – or two or three – with a glib tongue (*bar ba*). The matchmaker first visits the girl’s family (*bar ba gtong ba*) to let them know of the intended proposal. The next visit will be “official”. Depending on local customs, in the early morning, the matchmaker might bring different kinds of presents: one or more¹⁶ bottles alcohol (*gnyen chang*) with a *khatag* (*kha btags*), a ceremonial scarf on it, bread and tea.¹⁷ Even if the family agrees to the marriage, a game then begins to delay the decision-making and allow for the negotiation of a good price. The matchmaker gives a speech (*bstod*), praising the boy, the merits of the boy’s family, and the gifts they sent, to which the girl’s father also responds with a speech, praising the girl’s merits and so on. If the decision is not made immediately, a new date will be set to meet. If the proposal is rejected,¹⁸ the gifts will be returned. If accepted, a lucky date will be set for the engagement, during which the matchmaker will visit the girl’s family and discuss the value of the bride’s dowry (*rgyu rin*).¹⁹ Traditionally, gifts can be livestock, silk, cloth for dresses, the skin of animals (fox, otter), tea, *chang*²⁰ (*chang*) and silver. Now-

¹⁴ A gnam 2007: 286. *Khyi ’brug skad kyi bdun zur / byi rta rmig pa’i bdun zur / stag spre l rtsal gyi bdun zur / phag sbrul tshang gi bdun zur / glang lug rdung ba’i bdun zur / bya yos zas kyi bdun zur /*

¹⁵ For details see: Rong 2001.

¹⁶ Lcags 2012: In Gling rgya village this number is from 7 to 10.

¹⁷ Bon 2016: 204.

¹⁸ In the case of the girl agreeing, the boy’s family can elope with the girl (*gro mor khyid pa*). Before they enter the boy’s home, similarly to the normal wedding, the girl prostrates at the gate and makes offerings to local protector deities. Next day mediators (*dmag ’gog*) go to the girl’s home to get permission, and they bring the girl back in new clothes. A bargaining can start here (Skal – Stuart 1996: 443–444.). A married woman can escape as well. Nowadays a lawsuit (*gyod*) may also take place, but traditionally the man, who elopes, sends mediators (*gzu ba*) and let them compensate the husband with livestock or money (*bag stong/stong ’jal ba*). Bon 2016: 164–165.

¹⁹ Skal – Stuart 1996: 444–445.

²⁰ Alcohol made of fermented barley.

adays families give only money.²¹ During these negotiations, the male family member's words are more decisive, reflected in the following Tibetan proverb: "Father and uncle give advice, women braid the hair" (*blo pha khus gros dang skra ma srus bsles*).²² Finally, the contract is sealed with an opened bottle of *chang*²³ and so this part of the procedure is also referred to as the "meat of deliberation, *chang* of deliberation" (*gros sha gros chang*). Fumigation and libation are made to the supposed direction of the local protective deities.

Preparation (*gra sgrig*)

As a sign of engagement, the bride's hair will be braided. In some areas, this ceremony (*bag skra bsles/bag skra'i cho ga*) is held one or more days, weeks, months, or even a year before the wedding,²⁴ but generally, it's on the night when the bride departs to the groom's family. A married female relative²⁵ is called upon to braid the hair, however, a widow, a woman who has lost her parents or one who is divorced are taboo. She braids the hair into small braids, extending the ends with black thread and decorating them with silver and coral ornaments. The bride's close friends can accompany to the procedure, and various songs and advice (*kha ta, skra bshad*) are sung by relatives in a sorrowful mood. Their content emphasizes the correct behavior of a wife towards her husband and her husband's family. The bride is expected to mourn her abandonment of the family home. The following excerpts²⁶ are from a *hair recital* (*skra bshad*) that the brother tells his sister:

bkra shis phun tshogs kyi nyi ma//
bde skyid mnyam 'dzoms kyi nyi mar //
bar ba kun dga' don 'grub kyis //
chang bdud rtsi zil ma'i dam kha la //
'ja' dar tshon sna lngas g.yang btags nas //

²¹ The amount is different, it depends on the wealth of the family and the job of the bride. If she works in the public sector, her family will ask for more money, because her salary will be high as well. Lcags 2012: 23.

²² Kun dpal 2007: 25.

²³ The bottle can be open by a distant relative, not a close one (Lcags 2012: 18). In other places, this is a task performed by the eldest male relative from the bride's side Bon 2016: 257.

²⁴ Kun dpal 2007: 28.

²⁵ Not only can female relatives braid the hair but the bride's brother too, as we can see below in the *hair toast*.

²⁶ Because of their length I am presenting only parts of the recitals, but the whole texts can be found in the sources indicated in the footnotes.

nga'i sring chung gnas la ster dgos zer //
 nga'i sring chung gnas la byin pa'i nyin //
 skra thog skra'i rin pa rta brgya ster zer //
 skra 'og skra'i rin pa nor rgya ster zer //
 skra ral ba'i rin pa lug brgya ster zer //
 gos 'brug ma 'dom la 'jal nas ster zer //
 g.yu byu ru bre la tshad nas ster zer //
 dngul dong tse lag gis rtsis nas ster zer //
 kho gnyen tshang dpon po'i mdzod khang ster zer //
 ngas sring chung gnas la mi ster zer //
 rgyu mi rtag rtswa mgo'i zil ba 'dra //
 dgung nyi ma shar dus yal nas 'gro //
 de bsam nas sring chung mi ster zer //
 [...]

ma bu mo 'gro sa gnas yul yin //
 mo gnas nas rgas na las 'grub yin //
 nga'i sring chung lo lo gnas la song //
 rtags rten 'brel nyi ma'i rtse mo la //
 nga'i sring chung lo lor skra stsol zhu //
 skra thog skra stsol dang thog lwa bzo //
 thog lwa gos chen 'brug ma bzo //
 skra bar skra stsol dang bar lwa bzo //
 bar la nor bu cha bdun bzo //
 skra ral ba stsol dang 'og lwa bzo //
 'og lwa a 'jam tsha ru bzo //
 [...]

ma sems can bag mar rta zhig yod //
 khyod gzhan dang mi 'dra rta zhig yod //
 rta mgo yid bzhin nor bu yin //
 rta rnga dar skud gle ma yin //
 'gros gom pa rlung nag 'tshub ma yin //
 [...]

nga'i sring chung ma ngu gnas la song //
 dus de ring nyi ma'i rtse mo la //
 bag lam dkar po dar gyis bsu //
 de med na sring chung mi bskyal zer //
 bag ma gangs seng 'o mas bsu //
 de med na sring chung mi bskyal zer //
 bag rta 'bru drug nas kyis bsu //
 de med na sring chung mi bskyal zer //

ja chang gnyis kyi mtsho mo skyil //
de med na sring chung mi bskyal zer //
sha thud gnyis kas ri rab brtsigs //
de med na sring chung mi bskyal zer //
glu gar rol mas bsu ba byos //
de med na sring chung mi bskyal zer //
nga'i sring chung lo lo nga la nyon //
gnas kha btsan che no bod kyi dpe //
kha yag tshig gis brtsi shes byos //
zhim po mngar mo las shes byos //
rgan rgon byis pa snyor shes byos //
'gro gom pa 'gro shes 'dus shes byos //
kha tshig gsum bshad dgod shes byos //
gos a 'jam tsha ru gon shes byos //
phyi sde ba'i mi la 'grig ni byos //
las dkar nag gnyis kyi dbye ba phyes //
de byas na sring chung bsam don 'grub //
de skyid kyi nyi ma dgung nas shar //
dka' sdug gi mun pa mtha' nas sangs //
nga'i sring chung ma ngu gnas la song //
skyid me tog bzhad pa'i bkra shis shog //²⁷

On the day of auspicious happiness and prosperity,
 On the day of this joyful gathering
 The matchmaker, Kunga Dondrub
 Bound the fortune to this glass of glorious chang
 With silks in five colours of the rainbow.
 My sister must be endowed²⁸ – they said.
 On the day, when my sister gets married,
 A hundred horses will be given for the roots of her hair – they
 said.
 A hundred yaks will be given for the end of her hair – they said.
 Hundred sheep will be given for her braids – they said.
 Feet²⁹ of best silk³⁰ will be given – they said.
 Liters of turquoise and coral will be given – they said.

²⁷ Chab 'gag 2006: 20–27.

²⁸ In this context, and in Amdo dialect, *gnas* is the groom's home, with the meaning of getting married.

²⁹ 'Dom is a Tibetan measure unit, it's equivalent to about 1.8 metres.

³⁰ *Gos 'brug ma* (silk with dragon pattern) it refers to a very good quality of silk.

Handfuls of silver coins will be given – they said.
 A chief's treasury will be given – they said.
 I don't let my sister be endowed – I say.
 The impermanent wealth is like a dewdrop on the grass,
 The Sun disappears after rising up.
 If I think about this, I don't want to give my younger sister.
 [...]

The groom's home is the place for the bride.
 It's her karma to get old there.
 Go, my sister, to your groom's home
 At the dawn of this auspicious day.
 I am braiding my younger sister's hair,
 I am braiding on the top and sewing upper clothes.³¹
 I make it from expensive silk.
 I am braiding in the middle and sewing the middle clothes.
 I put seven jewels in the middle.
 I am making the braids and sewing the shirt.
 I make it from the wool of lamb.
 [...]

A bride has got a horse,
 But you have a horse which is different from others.
 The head is like the wish-fulfilling gem,
 The tails are silk thread,
 When steps are like a black storm.
 [...]

Don't cry, my sister, go to your groom's home.
 The bride's way is covered with white silk
 On the morning of this day:
 If not, my sister cannot be brought – I say.
 The bride is greeted with the snow lion's milk:
 If not, my sister cannot be brought – I say.
 Her horse is greeted with the best, six kinds of grains:
 If not, my sister cannot be brought – I say.
 Ocean of tea and chang is damming,
 If not, my sister cannot be brought – I say.
 The Sumeru is built by meat and thu³²
 If not, my sister cannot be brought – I say.
 Greet her with songs, dance, and music,

³¹ Upper clothes made of cotton or silk.

³² *Thud* is a kind of sweet made of butter, sugar and cheese.

If not, my sister cannot be brought – I say.
 Listen to me, my sister,
 Be silent in your husband's home, this is the Tibetan way.
 Talk with nice words, respect.
 You have to know how to cook delicious, sweet food,
 Take care of the elders and children.
 You have to know when to stay and when to go,
 When to talk and when to laugh.
 You have to know how to wear a lambskin dress.
 Get along with the folks of the village,
 Make a distinction between good and bad.
 If you do so, my sister, your wish will be fulfilled,
 The sun of your happiness will rise in the sky,
 The fog of obstacles will clear up.
 Don't cry, my sister, go to your groom's home.
 The blooming flower of your happiness may be blessed!

During the preparation the bride is said to cry for her home she is leaving behind. This is the expected behavior as well. Below, a part of a song sung by the bride during the braiding of her hair is presented: *Pearl beads of tears of the bride* (*bag ma'i mig chu mu tig phreng ba*):

[...] *pha a khu rdza ri mthon po yin //*
rdza gang mtho bltas nas 'dug no yin //
ma bu mo rdza mgo 'i zil ba red //
zil ba mi 'dug 'gro ni yin //
snying re e rje pha khu tsho //
ming chung rdza rdo khra mo yin //
rdza gang gzar bltas nas 'dug no yin //
sring chung rdza chu bsil ma red //
rdza gang zab bltas nas 'gro no yin //
snying re e rje ming chung tsho //
 [...]

ma bu mo yul na yod dus su //
pha a khus rta brgya 'tshos na yod //
rta brgya 'tsho rogs bu mo yin //
bu mo gnas la 'gro dus su //
bu mo 'i rdzongs la rte'u chung byin //

*rte 'u chung ma bsdad 'tsher nas yong //
snying re e rje a khu tsho // [...]*³³

The father and uncles are high rocky mountains.
No matter, how high they look like, they stay there.
The girl is a drop on the rocks,
The drop doesn't stay, it goes on.
My father and uncles, don't you feel sorrow for me?
The brothers are multicolored stones of the rocks.
No matter how rugged they look like, they stay there.
The little sister is a cool mountain gill.
No matter how deep it looks like, it goes on.
My brothers, don't you feel sorrow for me?
[...]
When the girl lived at home,
The father and uncle bred a hundred horses.
The girl assisted in herding a hundred horses.
When the girl gets married,
The farewell gift is a small horse.
The horse doesn't stay, comes in fear.
Don't you feel sorrow for her, my uncles? [...]

A mother's advice to the girl (*pha ma 'i kha ta*)

*[...] khyod gnas la song ba 'i phyi nyin la //
zas 'go ma dkon mchog gsum la mchod //
zas bar ma a myes a ner byin //
zas gzhug ma rang gi tshe grogs byin //
de 'i zas lhag 'phro lhag rang gis zos //
de byin na bu mo 'i rgyan zhig yin //
[...]
khyod gnas la song ba 'i phyi nyin nas //
rgyab gon pa lug chung tsha ru yin //
dbyar char chu bab na mnyam re zhog //
gos tsha ru sbangs dus rul ma zer //
rgyab 'dogs rgyan dngul dang dong tse yin //
dbyar smug pa 'thibs na mnyam re zhog //
dngul bca 'yis zin na rul ma zer //
mgo gon pa zi ling wa mo yin //
me dmar bo bus na mnyam re zhog //*

³³ Chab 'gag 2006: 28–44.

wa me lce rgyugs dus rul ma zer //
ske 'dogs rgyan g.yu dang byu ru yin //
g.yu byu ru rgyun thag sra mo byos //
gan thag se 'thor dus rul ma zer //
 [...]

mgron dga' nas rtse nas yong dus na //
me ma 'bar bsdad na ngan ma zer //
thal ma 'phud bsdad na ngan ma zer //
mgo 'phrug nas bsdad na ngan ma zer //
ja ma bskol bsdad na ngan ma zer //
*khyim ma phyags bsdad na ngan ma zer // [...]*³⁴

[...] When you get married, the next day
 The first food offer to the Three Jewels,
 Then give to your mother-in-law, father-in-law,
 Then to your lifemate,
 Then what is left, eat yourself.
 If you do so, it's a girl's honor.

[...]

When you get married, from next day
 It's a lambskin that you wear on your back.
 Take good care of it, when it rains,
 If the lambskin gets wet, it's said you are a slothful wife.
 Silver and copper is your back's ornament,
 Take good care of it, when summer fog falls across it.
 If the rust corrupts the silver it's said you are a slothful wife.

The hat on your head is a Ziling fox,³⁵
 Take good care of it, when you set fire.
 If the flame catches, it's said you are a slothful wife.
 Your necklace is turquoise and coral,
 The thread of turquoise and coral firmly must be tied,
 If that thread is torn, it's said you are a slothful wife.

[...]

When guests arrive for enjoyment and fun,
 If you sit without setting a fire, it's said you are bad.
 If you sit without clean the dust, it's said you are bad.
 If you sit and scratch your head, it's said you are bad.

³⁴ Chab 'gag 2006: 50–61.

³⁵ Fox fur from Ziling (Xining), which is a good quality fur.

If you sit without boiling tea, it's said you are bad.
 If you sit without sweeping the house, it's said you are bad.
 [...]

Before departure, the women make a big piece of bread,³⁶ which they will bring to the groom's home. In Dowi³⁷ (*rdo sbis*) and Gyelwo (*rgyal bo*)³⁸ a kind of game, *pulling the matchmaker's ear* (*bar ba'i rna mchog 'then pa*)³⁹ is played on this day. The groom and his helper (*mag rogs*), who is usually equivalent to a matchmaker, go to the bride's home after sunset. In the bride's home, the guests are welcomed, songs are sung and the *mag rogs* gives some presents to the female relatives and asks for the bride with songs in which he wishes long life to the bride. Some women then pull his ear to get more presents and money (*rna mchog gi sgor mo*).⁴⁰ In Bonkor⁴¹ this game is played a few days after the wedding party, held in the groom's home (*bag ston*) and entails the groom and some close male relatives going to the bride's family for a small party (*mag ston*). Here the groom's ear is pulled (*mag pa gi rna mchog 'then*).

In the case of the bride moving to the groom's home,⁴² it is the task of the groom's family to prepare the party, arrange foods and beverages. The festive table is richly decorated, similar to the table prepared for the New Year, with the decorative dishes⁴³ towered high on the plates.⁴⁴ The whole decorated table is called *derkha* (*sder kha*).⁴⁵

³⁶ It is a popular custom around Repkong, called *kha thud* and *gor thud*. *Kha thud* is given to the bride and female guests. It is a flat bread of about one meter in length or even longer. *Gor thud* is for the groom and the male guests, in the case of the groom moving to the bride's home, but it can be made for other celebrations too. It is about half a meter long round bread. Lcags 2012: 21.

³⁷ Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, Haidong Prefecture, Qinghai Province.

³⁸ Tongren County, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous County, Qinghai Province.

³⁹ Rin chen 2006: 619.

⁴⁰ Skal – Stuart 1996: pp. 453–454.

⁴¹ Snying bo – Rino 2008: 106.

⁴² For example, if there are only girls in a family, the groom from a poorer family with more boys can move there (*mag pa 'gyo pa*). It's not really popular, because it means the groom's family don't have enough money to pay for the bride, so they are looked down upon a little bit.

⁴³ These decorations are really only decorations, for the guest there are several snacks to eat.

⁴⁴ The higher the better. It symbolizes the wealth of the host family. Just like in the New Year celebrations, the "stage" number on the plates must be odd.

⁴⁵ Lcags 2012: 25.

Wedding party (*gnyen ston*)

A wedding can be held at any time during the year, but there are some dates that more preferable than others. Some days of the lunar month – according to the lunar calendar prepared by the monastery – are luckier. Also, New Year is a favoured date and generally speaking the whole winter, when there is less work with livestock and in the fields.

Regarding food, two kinds can be distinguished for the wedding party: vegetarian (*dkar ston*) and non-vegetarian (*dmar ston*) celebration. If the wedding is non-vegetarian, basically meat, butter and *thud*⁴⁶ will be consumed. In this case, each family in the village (*sde ba*) gives a piece of mutton tied with a *khatag*. Other gifts will be given at a vegetarian wedding.⁴⁷

In many places, on the day before the wedding, the bride must not eat anything or at least only a little. It's said to be lucky to arrive at the groom's home before sunrise, so the household get up very early and the bride dresses with the help of female relatives.

Before they depart, the men make incense offerings (*lha bsangs*) and a ceremony⁴⁸ is performed to preserve the family fortune (*g.yang 'bod*).⁴⁹ Throughout the wedding, maternal uncles, *azhang* (*a zhang*)⁵⁰ play an important role, one such task being to accompany the bride. At a nomadic wedding, their number can be as many as 15-20, whereas in agricultural areas usually less *a zhang* take part in transporting the bride. Before leaving the home behind, the bride makes prostrations. In a description⁵¹ of a nomadic wedding in Rungen (*ru sngan*),⁵² west of Kukunor (*mtsho nub*) we can read the following words:

“With the help of an *a zhang*⁵³ the bride sits on her horse (*bag rta*) and goes around the tent three times in a clockwise direction.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, a man imitating the bride's mother and shouting in a high voice, says:

⁴⁶ A kind of sweet made of butter, tsampa, sugar and cheese.

⁴⁷ Gcod pa – Snying bo 2004: 457.

⁴⁸ He can be a monk or tantric practitioner (*sngags pa*), but can also be the girl's father or an elder male relative as well.

⁴⁹ So that the bride doesn't take it with her. However, for the groom's family, the bride brings them luck too.

⁵⁰ At weddings all male relatives are referred to as *a zhang*, not only the maternal uncle. Snying bo – Rino 2008: 105.

⁵¹ Ru sngan 2004, 216.

⁵² Dulan County, Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province.

⁵³ According to Kun dpal Tshen ring in Kangtsa (*rkang tsha*; Gang cha County, Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province), from north to Kukunor (*mtsho byang*), it's made by a person whose birth date harmonizes with the bride's birth date. Kun dpal 2007: 30.

⁵⁴ Incense altar in the courtyard of houses. If there is no such altar, they go to the public one near the house (*bsang khri*).

Skyid cig yod na rang gis khyer // g.yang zhig yod na pha mar⁵⁵ (yul) skyur //⁵⁶
 What is happiness, take with you, what is fortune, give to your parents.
 Then a *zhang* answers: o ya / ya //” Ok!

We can read something similar in this description of the Bonkor wedding:⁵⁷

“[...] During the *g.yang 'bod* is performed, with the help of two *a zhangs* the bride circle around the incense pot in the courtyard three times, meanwhile, incense offering is performed in the direction of the monastery and the location of local protector deities. During this time or when the bride leaves the home, the mother or a relative calls to the bride at the gate”.

Before arriving at the groom’s home, the matchmaker and some male relatives welcome them on the road.⁵⁸ In the description of Lcags byams Tshe ring⁵⁹ about weddings in Lingya (*gling rgya*)⁶⁰ a custom is mentioned in which female relatives from the groom’s side welcome the bride on the way and offer presents to “get the bride”. The companions hit the present (some meat) with a stick and say: “Beating the meat sounds like skinny bone, looks like this sheep has not eaten anything for three months.” Skal bzang Nor bu and Kevin Stuart mention⁶¹ the following game in Dowi: The bride is welcomed by the matchmaker and male relatives on the road. When they arrive there, somebody from the groom’s side asks for the bride, but the bride’s side refuses to give her with the result that the groom’s side “steal her”. Then some songs are sung by the bride’s side to entrust her to the groom’s family. When they arrive at the house, at the door the *a zhang* makes offering with some alcohol (*sgo chang*)⁶² and the bride makes prostrations. But first, the bride can only get off the horse at the door near to a swastika (*g.yung drung*) shape grain drawing on the ground.⁶³ Here, once more, a game begins, called *debate about the bride’s horse’s bridle* (*bag ma’i rta kha*

⁵⁵ *A mar* (to your mother) instead of *pha mar* (to parents). Bon 2016: 281–282.

⁵⁶ Ru sngan 2004, 216.

⁵⁷ Bon 2016: 281–282.

⁵⁸ Or women relatives welcome them with presents for the female relatives of bride’s side. Lcags 2012: 30.

⁵⁹ Lcags 2012: 31.

⁶⁰ Tongren County, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous County, Qinghai Province.

⁶¹ Skal – Stuart 1996: 445.

⁶² In Rungen it’s said: *khong tshang la dkyus skor brgya dang brgyad tshang dgos la / ma tshang la de ring nang la mi phebs* / Ru sngan: 2004: 216.

⁶³ With a symbolic meaning of “unchangable”.

*rtsod pa/ rta kha bsu pa*⁶⁴). A young girl gives a *khatag* to the person who is holding the bride:

“bkra shis pa’i kha dar dkar po ’di khyed la ’bul / don ’grub pa’i srab mda’ khra chung de nga la ster rogs /”⁶⁵

“I give you this white lucky khatag, you give me this small multicolored task-fulfilling bride!”

Then the girl takes the bridle and leads the horse to the swastika. The bride is asked to get off the horse by praising her and the horse:

da a zhang dgung gi nyi ma ’dra gi //
dgung dro khol ’dzoms dus rta las bobs //
bu ming chung rgya stag dmar po ’dra gi //
stag thig le sgrigs dus rta las bobs //
a ne khu byug sngon po ’dra gi //
gsung snyan mo ma sgrogs rta las bobs //
a bag ma a lo lo //
 [...]
rta ’do ba g.yu ’brug sngon mo ’dra //
sga bes sang nyi ma rang shar ’dra //
yob chen zla ba tshes pa ’dra //
glo rnyed nyi ’od shar ba ’dra //
rta mgo yid bzhin nor bu ’dra // [...]”⁶⁶

A zhang is like the Sun on the sky.
 As the sky warms up, get off the horse!
 The small brother is like the red Bengal tiger,
 As the tiger’s stripes are arranged, get off the horse!
 The aunt is like the blue cuckoo,
 Don’t sing a pleasant song now, get off the horse!
 Little bride! [...]
 The excellent horse is like the turquoise dragon,
 The good saddle is like sunshine,
 The stirrups are like waxing moon.

⁶⁴ Skal – Stuart 1996: 442.

⁶⁵ A gnam 2007: 292.

⁶⁶ Chab ’gag 2006: 75–82.

The girth is like the sunshine,
The head of the horse is like the Wishfulfilling Gem. [...]

After getting off the horse, she is helped to the house by some women from the groom's side, while covering her face all the way. Arriving at the door, a *zhang* and some women from the groom's family sings *door songs*⁶⁷ ('*gyog glu/sgo 'gyogs*). The song below is from Trika⁶⁸ (*khri ka*) sung by a *zhang*:

sgo ya shing yar la gtad nas zhog //
ma dal can ma zhig thon gi yod //
sgo mar shing mar la gnon nas zhog //
rkang sug lham ma zhig thon gi yod //
bag ma'i so 'di dung so yin //
ma dung so ma zhig thon gi yod //
bag ma'i skra 'di dar skra yin //
ma dar skra ma zhig thon gi yod //
bag ma'i mig 'di khyung mig yin //
*ma khyung mig ma zhig thon gi yod //*⁶⁹

Let the lintel lift!
A light-footed girl is coming.
Let the threshold sink!
A girl with leather boots is coming.
The bride's teeth are like pearls,
A girl with pearl teeth is coming.
The bride's hair is like silk,
A girl with silk hair is coming.
The bride's eyes are of garuda's eyes,
A girl with garuda's eyes is coming.

This is an answer variation from Rungen:

'gyog 'gyog 'gyog zhang brgya 'gyog /
zhang brgya bo 'gyog pa dgung nas 'gyog /
sgo yar gyag yar la gyag le yod //
mgo wa mo can zhig yong gi yod //

⁶⁷ 'Gyog means "lift", the meaning of the song is to symbolically let the door rise up in order to let the bride go in.

⁶⁸ Guide County, Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province.

⁶⁹ Chab 'gag 2006: 105.

sa sgo 'gram thad gi lang nge yod //
gos 'brug ma can zhig yong gi sdod //
sgo mar gyag mar la smad le yod //
rkang sag lham can zhig yong gi sdod //
sha ri rab 'dra zig brtsigs le yod //
de za gi a zhang yong gi sdod //
chang mtsho mo 'dra zhig bskyil lo yod //
de 'thung gi a zhang yong gi sdod //
rdza khra yag 'dra ba'i a zhang shog //
'brong bre ser 'dra bas bsu gi yod //
nags rgya rdzong 'dra ba'i a zhang shog /
stag thig las 'dra bas bsu gi yod //
chu gtsang mo 'dra ba'i a zhang shog /
nya gser mig 'dra bas bsu gi yod /⁷⁰

Lift, lift, lift, hundred uncles, lift!
 All hundred uncles lif it to the sky.
 The lintel lifts upwards.
 Someone in fox fur hat is coming.
 The dust rises from the door,
 Someone in a silk dress is coming.
 Threshold sinking, sinking,
 Someone in leather boots is coming.
 The meat piles like Mount Sumeru,
 The uncle who will eat it is coming.
 Chang swirls like a lake,
 The uncle who will drink it is coming.
 Motley rock-like uncles, come here!
 We'll welcome you like the wild yaks,
 Huge forest-alike uncles, come here!
 We'll welcome you like the striped tiger.
 Clear water-alike uncles, come here!
 We'll welcome you as the golden fish.

Then the bride makes prostrations at the home altar. During the celebration, the bride stays in kind of small tent (*bag ras/bag khang*) with her helper (*bag rogs*), she doesn't take part in the party. Neither too does the bride or the groom sing.

⁷⁰ Ru sngan 2004: 217–218.

Guests then enter the room and take their seats at the tables according to rank (age) and make an offering with tea (*ja mchod cho ga*). Then female members from the groom's side ask for a *khatag* from the bride's family in song and in the form of a playful discussion (*bu res rtsod pa/bu ras bslangs pa*).⁷¹ If it is asked on the groom's side, it is called *bu ras*, if the bride's family requests, it is called *chu dar*.⁷² Upon each request, the guest family responds that the *khatag* have been lost or forgotten, and so on. Their responses to each other are as follows:

“stod rgya gar yul gyi phrug gcig dgos / phrug gcig rung thig le mi gcig pa zhig dgos / smad rgya nag yul gyi gos shig dgos / gos gcig rung ri mo mi gcig pa zhig dgos / bod gangs can yul gyi dar zhig dgos / dar gcig rung dar sne mi gcig pa zhig dgos //”⁷³

“We need a woolen dress⁷⁴ from India, but not any kind of woolen dress, but a differently patterned dress. We need silk from China, but not any kind of silk, but a variety of figurative silk. We need a *khatag*⁷⁵ from Tibet, but not any kind of *khatag*, but a *khatag* of different ends.”

Thereafter different kinds of songs can be sung. In Amdo there is no specific order and type. Usually though, these are *praise songs* (*bstod glu*) and *debate songs* (*glu shags*). Later the younger ones can sing *love songs* (*la ye*), at which point the elder relatives go to sleep. But before singing, permission must be asked:⁷⁶

dgung a sngon gnam na bya gsum yod //
bya gcig 'phur re stod la song //
bya gcig 'phur re smad la song //
bya gcig ma 'phur da rung yod //
bya de 'phur ba 'i gnang ba zhu //
nga 'i gangs dkar sems na glu gsum yod //
glu gcig 'gral mgo 'i a khur blangs //
glu gcig gnyen tshang rgan por blangs //
glu gcig ma blangs da rung yod //
glu de len pa 'i gnang ba zhu //”⁷⁷

⁷¹ In some places this game is played in the night when the “matchmaker’s ear is pulled” (informant: Nyima Tshering 2020).

⁷² Bon 2016: 178.

⁷³ Geod pa – Snying bo 2004: 460.

⁷⁴ *Phrug lwa*: traditional upper clothes with long sleeves and belt on the waist.

⁷⁵ *dar* means silk or clothes, and *khatag* as well, here the latter one.

⁷⁶ Many taboos are connected to singing love songs, one is that they are prohibited to be sung in front of elder relatives.

⁷⁷ Ru sngan 2004: 222–223.

There are three birds on the sky,
 One has flown to India,
 One has flown to China,
 One bird has not flown anywhere yet, still here.
 This bird is waiting for permission to fly.
 There are three songs in my snow-white soul:
 One I sing for the uncles sitting at the head of the table.
 One I sing to the elders from the groom's family,
 One song I have not sung yet, still with me,
 I am waiting for permission to sing.

A kind of permission can be a song like this:

*'ur cha bzung ste nor la 'gro na /
 thom bu bzung nas chu la 'gro na /
 sta re bzung ste nags la 'gro na*⁷⁸

If I hold a sling, we go to herd yaks,
 If I hold a bucket, we go to take water,
 If I hold an ax, we go to the forest.

Most of the guests stay a few hours, the *a zhangs* can stay overnight. During the celebration, the tail of mutton is offered to the uncles. *A zhang* recites *wedding recital (gnyen bshad)*, and the groom prostrates to him three times and male family members sing songs to praise the *a zhangs*. The wedding recital is long with many proverbs in a copious style. It starts with the history and genealogy of Tibetans, continues with the origins of wedding celebrations – first between gods and *nagas*, the earth and sky – the marriages of Songtsen Gampo (*srong btsan sgam po*) and later the origin of their clan. The bride, groom and their family are praised in a long toast, finally, the *a zhang* entrusts the bride to the new family, wishes good luck and long life for them. Below is a part of such a wedding recital:

*"ya nga'i lag gi kha btags 'di'i lo rgyus drang gsum gyi gtam re bshad na / 'di
 stod nas ma chad smad nas chad zig / smad rgya nag rgyal bo'i yul nas chad zig
 / rgya 'dar ma 'dar gyi lag nas chad zig / kha btags na 'dom gang zer ba / kha
 tshar na khru gang zer ba / stod rgya gar yul la khyer na / pha bla ma bzang bo'i
 mjal dar nyan gi / smad rgya nag yul la khyer na / dpon chen po'i khirms dar
 nyan gi / phyr pur rgyal bod la khyer na / gzhon nu nga tsho'i lce dar nyan gi zer
 rgyu can gyi lo rgyus drang gsum gyi gtam re bshad na 'di 'dra zhig red zer gi"*⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ru sngan 2004: 222–223.

⁷⁹ Karma – Bkra shis 1997: 4.

“So, I tell three kinds of true stories about this khatag held in my hand: It’s not from the upper, it’s from lower parts,⁸⁰ it originates from the country of the Chinese emperor. It is made by Chinese people. The length is almost two meters,⁸¹ the width is about a cubital. If we bring it to India, we can offer it to eminent monks. If we bring to China, we can give to big leaders in the court. If we bring to Tibet, we, youth, hold in our hands and say toasts. All of them are true just as I told these three kinds of story.”

Other *celebration recitals* (*ston bshad*) can be recited as well, the style and way of telling are similar to wedding speeches, but the topic differs a little bit: praising of the guest and decorations, food served on tables.

Several other songs and toasts are sung and recited, such as *chang* speech (*chang bshad*), which is about the origin and praising of *chang*. *Tea speech* (*ja bshad*)⁸² about the origin and praising of tea. *Fast questions* can be asked (*mggyogs ’dri gtong ba*) from the groom’s side to the bride’s side, and the *a zhang* can say a kind of *belt recital* (*mag lcug bcings pa*). Sometimes small horseraces can be held, and the guests enjoy small song competitions and games:

According to the description of a wedding in Rungen, a piece of meat is put on a tent and younger girls and boys try to grab it (*bo sha rgyag pa*).⁸³ In his article⁸⁴ about weddings of nomads near Kukunor Gcod pa don grub mentions a *meat competition* (*sha rgyug*), in which some members of the two families pull a lump of meat.⁸⁵

When *a zhangs* depart home, again *door chang* (*sgo chang*) is offered to them. They make an offering and the mutton’s tail is presented to them as well. The closest maternal uncle will receive a bigger present, traditionally horse (*zhang rta*) or dress (*zhang gos*). The brothers of the groom (*ming bo*) may receive a horse as well (*ming rta*). The bride’s mother receives a female of yak (*’bri*) or female of yak-cow (*mdzo mo*) as *milk-money* (*nu rin*), a reward for raising the bride. Another speech is connected to this: *mother’s milk price* (*a ma’i nu rin*).

⁸⁰ Upper (*stod*) under lower (*smad*) have geographical sense, usually mean North (*stod*) and South (*smad*), but sometimes, and definitely in this case, they mean India and China.

⁸¹ ’*Dom*, is a Tibetan unit, equivalent to about 1,8 meters.

⁸² It can be recited not only at weddings but there are different types for different occasions. For instance, in Rdo sbis, *chang* and tea speeches are not recited at weddings. Skal – Stuart 1996: 442.

⁸³ Ru sngan 2004: 217–218.

⁸⁴ Gcod pa – Snying bo 2004: 459.

⁸⁵ In Mongolian areas the meat can be on a horse’s back, and the two groups – girls and boys – try to grab it from there (informant: Nyima Tsering 2020).

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