

‘Listen to the Lama’:

Analysing Bhutan’s digital media and online religious practices

ABSTRACT

Bhutan is one of the last countries to join the modern, mediated world. Yet with the growth of digital media and online connectivity, especially on social media platforms such as WeChat, these technologies allow Bhutanese—even in the remotest communities—to ‘leapfrog’ the problem of media access. New literacies and social practices have emerged that were unimaginable in the previous century. In this chapter, we first describe Bhutan’s mobile media and digital practices in this deeply religious, Buddhist nation. This is then linked to studies of online religion and digital chronotopes that show how people can perform and do rituals on digital platforms. Second, we present a sample analysis from an ethnographic study of a temple ceremony that is broadcast on WeChat, and responded to by members of an online group. This demonstrates how offline practices are adapted and transformed in the digital environment, while maintaining the meanings and understandings of the sacred across time-space dimensions.

KEY WORDS

Bhutan, Buddhism, Affordances, WeChat, Chronotope, Online religion, Digital literacy, Hypermediation, Enlightenment, Lamas

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INTRODUCTION

As a small, land-locked country in the Himalayas, Bhutan was one of the last countries to join the modern, mediated world. Radio signals became widely available only in the early 1990s, and television broadcasts began at the end of the decade. As people lived in small communities spread across deep mountain valleys, the pace of life was slow, and

communication was mostly oral and face-to-face (Phuntsho 2015). Yet dramatic changes began at the turn of the century: internet connectivity spread, mobile phone use grew, and digital media and technologies allowed Bhutanese—even in the remotest communities—to ‘leapfrog’ the problem of media access (Avieson 2017). Now, with Facebook, people can follow local and international news, share pictures that document their lives, and stay connected with Bhutanese friends and family near and far. With WeChat—a popular social media app developed in China—they can send audio and text messages to friends and family, and remotely participate in Buddhist ceremonies (Sandel and Wangchuk 2020). Digital technologies have afforded a range of “new literacies” and social practices (Knobel and Lankshear 2015) unimaginable in the previous century.

The aims of this chapter are twofold. First, we describe Bhutan’s mobile media and digital practices, explaining how they afford new digital literacies and practices in this deeply religious Buddhist nation. Second, we present findings from an ethnographic study of the multimodal, digital messages shared by members of an extended Bhutanese family, and by extension, local communities. In particular, we are interested in exploring how the affordances of social media are contextualized to address time/space dilemmas (chronotopes) that involve local traditions, languages, social settings, and ritual practices. Therefore, we analyse the digital and offline practices centred on Bhutanese deities, that integrate sacred/secular time-space dilemmas, communicated via WeChat’s audio/visual/textual messages.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ‘ONLINE RELIGION’

As the Internet emerged in the 1980s, one online use of the technology that soon emerged was for spiritual rituals and discussion of users’ beliefs (Campbell & Connelly 2020).

Religious enthusiasts created bulletin board systems to discuss religious issues, with most created by Christian and Jewish groups. In this first and early wave of adoption of online religion, the Internet was used as a space for ‘cyber-religion’ to index a ‘space’ for religious activities conceived of as separate from the in-person world (Brasher 2004). This was then extended with the development of social media and as religious groups expanded: Facebook

accounts were created to discuss ‘Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, and Mohammed’ (Campbell & Connelly 2020: 473). But by the early 2000s, scholars observed a second wave adoption of online religion, using platforms not only to enhance religion, but also as places to do ‘online religion’ (Helland 2000). This included the development of ‘cyberchurches’ and ‘cyber Buddhist temples’, for the online virtual display and use of religious objects (e.g., altars and liturgy) and ‘virtual pagodas, large prayer wheels’ and other religious artefacts (Campbell and Connelly 2020: 475). Then, during the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020-2021, when in-person gatherings were prohibited or limited, social media platforms were used to do ‘digital religion’, including services for Neo-Pagans and French Muslims (Evolvi 2022) and Rabbi-led virtual Jewish prayer services (Ben-Lulu 2021). These studies demonstrate how digital technologies afford what Evolvi (2021) calls ‘hypermediated religious spaces’, meaning that spiritual practices are not necessarily separate from the offline world, but can be adapted and mediated for online practices.

This hypermediation can also be observed in Bhutan. Most people in Bhutan practice a form of ‘devout Buddhism’ that was brought from Tibet in the seventh century CE (Phuntsho 2013; Sandel and Wangchuk 2020). Similar to the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the world as inhabited by Bön deities – malevolent spirits that guard sacred spaces (Powers, 2007) – Bhutanese perceive the landscape as imbued with powerful deities: Buddhism came not to erase these deities, but to tame them (Karchung 2014). Thus, as churches constitute the religious and symbolic centers of European villages that date back to the Middle Ages, so do temples physically and spiritually constitute the heart of most Bhutanese communities (Phuntsho, 2013). Yet in recent years as many Bhutanese moved away from rural villages to find work and educational opportunities in cities, support for the lamas, monks, and temple activities – both financial and material – has fallen (Sandel and Wangchuk 2020). A solution

that emerged in recent years is to use digital media to broadcast temple services and create supportive online and offline networks. Hence, similar to Evolvi's (2022) finding that social media are platforms for online rituals that construct 'hypermediated religious spaces', in Bhutan Buddhist lamas use WeChat, a popular social media platform, to broadcast their services and link distant followers in a shared chronotope, or time-space of the temple (Sandel and Wangchuk 2020). Digital literacies have developed among Bhutanese to use platforms such as WeChat and Facebook as ways to raise funds for temples, for group members to 'chat' online about affairs both spiritual and mundane, and to participate in the rituals and prayers of temple services.

THE ERA OF MOBILE PHONES AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA

Until the late modernisation period of the twentieth century, much of the communication among Bhutan's rural population, which makes up 62.2% of the nation's total population of 727,145 (Population and Housing 2017), was through oral means (Wangchuk 2007). Hence, the introduction of modern mass media such as radio was part of this modernisation process to bridge the gap in communication across Bhutan's rugged landscape. The actions that created Bhutan's media infrastructure – including television and internet connectivity (Avieson 2015), arguably led to media that played the role of what scholars such as Smith (2002) define as the task of ensuring a common public mass culture.

Mobile phone service was introduced in Bhutan in 2003 in the capital city of Thimphu, with a population of 138,736 people (Population and Housing 2017). The rugged mountainous terrain of Bhutan meant that it was not until 2011 that all twenty district centres of the country were served by a cellular network. Rural communities often lag behind the urban centres in terms of resources and services (Gyabak and Godina 2011). Nonetheless, because mobile phone networks do not require physical copper lines to be pulled, even with a limited number of cellular towers, it has 'become the most effective and convenient means of

communications in the country’ (Annual Info-Comm 2011: 12). This may be because the country, as Avieson (2015) states, has managed to leapfrog directly from oral to digital. Leapfrogging is a phenomenon that was observed in many developing countries in the early 1990s (e.g. Lamberton 1994) as they adopted digital telephony systems and other technological innovations.

Concurrent with the expansion of the cellular network, a broadband service and a mobile Internet service were launched in 2008 in the capital city (Zangmo and Namgay 2016), which signalled the start of another era in communication in the country – the entry of smartphones. iPhones became the preferred brand for monks and lamas because of a built-in Dzongkha script. The sales and adoption of smartphones saw a sharp rise when 3G broadband service was extended to fifteen of Bhutan’s 20 districts by 2013.

Based upon data from the first information and communication technology (ICT) household survey conducted in 2021, Bhutan has an estimated 745,137 mobile phone users, who constitute 99.5% of the total population, and 734,667 internet subscribers (National ICT 2022). Of all mobile phones in the country, 87.2% are smartphones. In terms of urban-rural percentages, 96.4% of users in urban areas have smartphones, while in rural areas the percentage is slightly lower – at 81.6% (p. 31). Still, this is significant for a population that never owned a rotary or fixed-line telephone. For reasons discussed below, it is quite likely that most use WeChat, or they purchased smartphones to use WeChat.

Table 1. *ICT/ communications technology growth from 2003-2021*

Year	Fixed line telephony		Mobile phones	
	Total subscribers	% population	Total subscribers	% population
2003	30,285	5.9	18,995	3.7
2008	27,837	4.2	228,347	34.3
2013	26,485	3.6	544,337	74.3
2018	22,161	3.0	707,556	96.2
2021	21,779	2.8	762,975	99.8

Source: National Household ICT Survey 2022

WeChat in Bhutan

Launched in 2011 by the Tencent Company, WeChat is a mobile messaging app that was developed and released primarily for use in China, but entered the international market and has more than a billion active users (Iqbal 2022). WeChat is a multipurpose platform that offers not only messaging services and social interaction, but also mobile payment services, including services such as transportation bookings (Montag et al 2018). These multipurpose features make WeChat one of the most popular applications in the market today – a ‘super app’ and ‘app for everything’ (Sandel et al 2019).

The app supports instant messaging services where voice messages, pictures, audio and video files and documents can be shared with other users – either directly to a contact or by posting them to ‘Moments’ And like other messaging apps such as WhatsApp, WeChat affords users the ability to make free video and voice calls. Another feature is a large selection of emojis to visually emphasise, convey, and express emotions and feelings (Montag et al 2018).

Furthermore, the ICT survey of 2021 found that WeChat is the most popular social media app in Bhutan, used by 73% of the population, followed by Facebook with 71%. WeChat is more popular among those over 25 years old, while Facebook leads among those between the ages of 15 and 24; among WeChat users, 90% use it at least once a day (National ICT 2022: 60, 62). People use these apps to share news and information, call for emergency medical services, help raise funds for poor people, or talk to their relatives who live abroad (Pem 2017; Zangmo and Namgay 2016).

WeChat and other social media platforms enhance connections between the Bhutanese government and its citizens (Yonten 2018) and community members’ connections (Zangpo 2019). For instance, yak herders in the higher Bhutanese Himalayas use the voice messaging function of WeChat to find missing yaks by sharing information about the location of the animals: when someone spots a neighbour’s yak, the owner is contacted via WeChat (Wangchuk 2022). The highland community of Soe in Paro, whose main livelihood is yak rearing, formed a WeChat group to share real-time information about the herd, as yaks graze and move among large high-altitude pastureland in the rugged Himalayan mountains (Zangpo 2019).

WeChat's appeal in Bhutan can be attributed to two technical features of the app. First, the Hold-to-Talk button is simple and user-friendly, and does not require the ability to read and write (Sandel et al. 2019). With this feature a message is converted to an audio file and then sent as an attachment, like in an email, without the need to convert it into another format. This technical ease of function is well suited for Bhutan which has a low literacy rate among the older population and a limited consumption of print media and text-based media such as email. (Avieson 2017: 270), Second, WeChat features easy to create, user-generated group chats for friends, relatives, and/or work colleagues. These closed, invitation-only groups, where messages cannot be seen by the public, are suitable for Bhutan's kinship-based society that is less open to unknown outsiders. This is also suitable under conditions of rural-urban migration, as WeChat helps physically separate village kinsmen and family members digitally connect.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGICAL TRENDS

The first ICT household survey of 2021, commissioned by the Ministry of Information and Communications, provides a view of emerging trends in technology use in Bhutan. The country lags behind most countries in the region in terms of digital infrastructure, access and services. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when 'online digital teaching and learning initiative by the Ministry of Education ran into several issues as both teachers and students could not cope with the sudden shift in the teaching-learning medium' (National ICT 2022: 73). The situation was better with banking services where people could carry out transactions like paying with mobile apps, and for farmers who used digital platforms to sell their produce and receive payments, while also accessing news and information on the pandemic. For example, digital platforms made it easier for older farmers to receive money from their adult children who lived far away. Furthermore, technology helped people to manage previously cumbersome, in-person bureaucratic procedures (National ICT 2022: 75); it also provided users opportunities to gain access to information from outside Bhutan, such as online education portals that provided free content from universities across the world. As necessitated by the pandemic, technology also enabled working remotely and moving in-person meetings to the digital world.

A final development is the relationship between society and government where transparency and accountability from the government are called for by citizens through active participation

in social media groups, and online discussion forums. The National ICT report commended initiatives by the Bhutanese Prime Minister's Office to release press briefings, Facebook live sessions, and updates on the pandemic through social media feeds on such platforms as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (National ICT 2022: 74).

CASE STUDY: : RIGZIN KUSUM CHOELING (RKC) WECHAT GROUP

In this second part, we present a sample analysis of the digital media practices of a community in eastern Bhutan, known as '*Toedtsho Gewog*' (gewog means sub-district) to illustrate how WeChat as a social media platform is used when performing a Buddhist ceremony. Like observed in other rural communities, many people in this village moved to other regions, especially young people who moved to urban centres in the pursuit of jobs and better education opportunities (Choda 2012) Thus, in this village as elsewhere, the majority of residents are older people who engage in small-scale farming (Sharma et al. 2013). This out-migration has led to a decline in the wealth of rural communities and the temples that they support. Countering these trends, however, are the opportunities afforded by digital connections and social media, namely informal WeChat groups that support temple activities (Sandel and Wangchuk 2020). Therefore, we studied one WeChat group, *Rigzin Kusum Choeling* (RKC), named after the community's temple in Toedtsho. This group of approximately 180 members was initially formed to raise money to support the reconstruction of the temple; it continued for reasons explained below.

Wangchuk (first author) began the study from which this sample analysis is drawn by conducting an informal discussion and having a series of conversations with the Tshampa and two lay members. He followed the group on WeChat from 2018-2022 by listening to voice messages, scanning through stickers and emojis, and watching the videos that they posted. Screenshots were taken of exchanges that showed interesting patterns. Since many Bhutanese avoid giving interviews, saying that are not knowledgeable about a topic, and if they agree to an interview, they may give short responses and/or answers that they think the interviewer wants. Thus, data for the study consist primarily of informal conversations and screenshots of the group's WeChat posts. Of particular interest is the interaction between the offline temple/sacred site and the online interactions among the community members, explored through the analysis of voice and text messages, pictures, stickers, emojis and videos.

We frame the study within the concept of affordances – as in action possibilities afforded by the environment. We also analyse the findings through the Bakhtinian notion of the chronotope, as we show how members address time/space dilemmas. Bakhtin (1981: 84) proposed the chronotope as a ‘formally constitutive category of literature’. We propose viewing it as a formally constitutive category of all humans, social and cultural life. As Blommaert (2017) claims, all human actions, thoughts, and experiences can be perceived as developing and evolving in a chronotope. Thus, we exist in chronotopic constructions that shape our existence and make us who we are.

Consider the Buddhist temple as a chronotope. As one enters, behaviours and actions evolve to fit within a specific organisation of space and time. The space is framed by a hall, where monks sit in rows, led by the chant master, whom the lama presides over, with participants facing the main altar of statues of divinities. Time is structured according to predetermined intervals – when to begin the rituals, when to chant the mantras, when to play the religious instruments, when to take breaks and when to cast away the ritual cakes. Within this chronotope, we (Bhutanese Buddhists) behave in a certain manner. We leave our shoes outside the main door, we first prostrate three times to the lama and monks, then prostrate three times to the divinities, and then give offerings of money, flowers, fruits, and food items. We light a butter lamp.

The sample analysis shows the following. First, a hybrid community, which meets both offline and online, is co-constructed on WeChat. Second, the lama and the temple construct a chronotope of the sacred that offers a hallowed time/space for members to enter - either in person or mediated via WeChat. Third, Buddhist rituals index a simple, and yet profound purpose – connection, as in connection to self, to the community, and to the higher self and the supernatural world, that is not bound by temporal or spatial limitations. Therefore, the posting activities that we observe show how digital technology affords collective action, social mobilisation, and a re-imagined place for the inhabitants of Toedtsho Gewog.

We proceed by first providing an ethnographic description of the place, people, spoken vernaculars, and the sacred sites and deities that they invoke in ritual ceremonies. Second, we describe a Buddhist ceremony at the community temple, showing how digital literacies are

adapted from the offline world for online participants to share and respond digitally on the WeChat group, *RKC*. Last, we discuss the implications as they apply to Bhutan.

The place, people, and languages

Toedtsho Gewog lies in the northeastern corner of Bhutan at the border with India. It is a two-day drive from Thimphu, the capital city, located in one of the remotest gewogs (sub-districts) in Bhutan, and while the gewog centre is connected by road, not all the houses can be accessed by road. The mobile service network is good and apps like WeChat work well in this area. The gewog has 533 registered households spread across an area of 47 square kilometres, out of which 107 households have been declared as *gungtong*, which refers to ‘abandoned houses’ (Toedtsho 2018), as many have out-migrated. The last nationwide census conducted in 2017 shows 14,376 people out of 28,125 living outside the district (Population and Housing 2018: 234).

The area is inhabited by a mix of people known as Tshangla (also called Sharchop), who occupy the upper half of the gewog – and the *dakpa*, which is a smaller ethnic group settled in the lower half (Dorjee 2014). The *Dakpas* speak both the languages of *Tshangla* (also referred to as Sharchopkha – meaning ‘language of the people of the east’) and *Dzalakha*. According to Dorjee (2014), *Dzalakha* is also referred to as *Yangtsibi-kha* – meaning the language of Yangtse, referring to the district of Trashigang in northeastern Bhutan.

The sacred site of Omba

Toedtsho Gewog is a popular spiritual destination for Bhutanese people. The *Omba Ney*, which is one of the most sacred sites in the country, hangs on the rock face of an imposing mountain overlooking all the villages in the gewog. Nicknamed the ‘Taktshang of the East’ (Toedtsho 2018), *Omba Ney* is one of the three sites in Bhutan associated with Guru Padmasambhava (also known as the Guru Rimpoche) who spread Buddhism to Bhutan in the eighth century (Puntsho 2013). The main temple looks like it is literally pasted on the cliff (Wangchuk 2022). *Omba Ney* is where Guru Padmasambhava travelled from Tibet to suppress a demon he was chasing. Upon subduing the demon, Guru Padmasambhava meditated in *Omba* for a few months. Like in other parts of Bhutan, whether a person lives in the locality or moves elsewhere, they must periodically return to conduct or sponsor

appeasement rituals at places such as Omba Ney, as deities have the power to do good or cause problems to people if not appeased. (Sandel and Wangchuk 2020).

Bhutanese rootedness in villages

Why are the Bhutanese people deeply rooted in, or connected to their villages when 40 per cent of the population is now urban dwellers, with many infrequently returning to their place of birth? Apart from kinship connections, a sense of community or nostalgic responses, there are two major reasons why people remain connected to their home villages.

The first reason is spiritual. One cannot disown, or move away from the local deities, which include a birth deity and family tutelary deity, and other deities, such as their parents or grandparents; this is especially important at times when deities' support is sought. Therefore, when a person is born into a family in Bhutan, all of these deities are inherited and become a part of the extended family. Regardless of whether someone wishes to believe or accept the deities or not, a person is obliged to honour them, as the deities are integral to a their identity. In return and when properly acknowledged, the deities are obligated to offer their steadfast support; but if ignored, the deities may bring trouble. Some deities, such as 'family deities' travel with the family, as they can move, or migrate to another village. However, mountain deities (*tšen*) and the spirit-kings (*gyelpo*) do not move and, thus, must be appeased at their place of residence. As for people born in Toetsho Gewog, they have not one but three *kay-tšen* - mountain deities that are 'birth deities' which do not move.

A second reason is a legal-administrative matter. Every Bhutanese person requires two items for civil registration – a land and house registration number. If someone migrates to another village and is unable to buy land and a house – which happens to many economic migrants – they cannot move their civil registration. These reasons – the deities and civil registration – tie many Bhutanese to their native village. Many young Bhutanese will say that they are from this, or that village, even though they may have never visited the village in their life.

Community WeChat groups

Many Bhutanese form community WeChat groups that may involve people linked to the same village or the same *gewog* (sub-district). A WeChat group is formed to support a

religious event, or a building project associated with a community temple in the village; the founder then adds all related members from their contact list. The group will then grow and be sustained if a well-known religious leader or lama, joins the WeChat group. This is what we observed in the study.

The *Rigizin kusum choeling* (RKC) WeChat group was launched in the second half of 2018. The initial aim was to help the lama, Ugyen Tshering, popularly known as *Tshampa* (yogi-meditator) to raise funds to complete the reconstruction of the community temple. It was also formed for members to connect to the deity and sacred site of Omba Ney. The members later decided to continue the WeChat group and sustain the regular rituals held on auspicious days. Extra funds were then diverted to the construction of the temple. In the process, members felt that being connected on social media was good for bringing members together – especially those who lived away from the village.

The Feast Offering Ceremony

At the temple in *Toedtsho Gewog*, the Tshampa leads the chants and recitations and plays the cymbal, which provides the cadence for other religious instruments such as drums, horns, and the Tibetan shawm; these are played by the monks at specific intervals according to the holy scriptures. The lama and the monks are seated in a single file and face the main altar. When devotees from the village arrive, they enter the temple and prostrate three times to the lama. Then they turn towards the altar and prostrate another three times. This is followed by making a monetary offering at the altar. Some also bring food, fruit and drink as offerings to the altar, which are received by a monk who acts as the altar master.

The ceremony that we followed was on 13 October 2019 (according to the Western calendar), the community lama, Ugyen Tshering, or Tshampa ('master meditator'), initiated a *Tshogkor* ceremony at the sacred Omba Ney. He was assisted by six or seven monks who, for two days, prepared colourful ritual cakes called *torma*, and other offerings, including food, fruit, water, alcohol, butter lamps, joss sticks, and dried cypress leaves for smoke-offerings; they also tested the sounds of the religious instruments. The ceremony began at dawn by purifying the place and by giving a send-off to the obstacles and negative energy, which are represented by a *torma* called *gek-tor*. They then had their breakfast, after which the ceremony began.

Broadcasting on WeChat: sample analysis

For members who participated online, it began in the morning with a post on WeChat by the Tshampa (lama). He first sent a short, 13-second audio file that announced the sacred ceremony and invited participants ‘all esteemed patrons’ to make their wishes to the Guru Padmasambhava and the local mountain deity, Koncho Zhidi at Omba Ney (Figure 1). This was followed by two pictures, showing the altar and torma offerings.

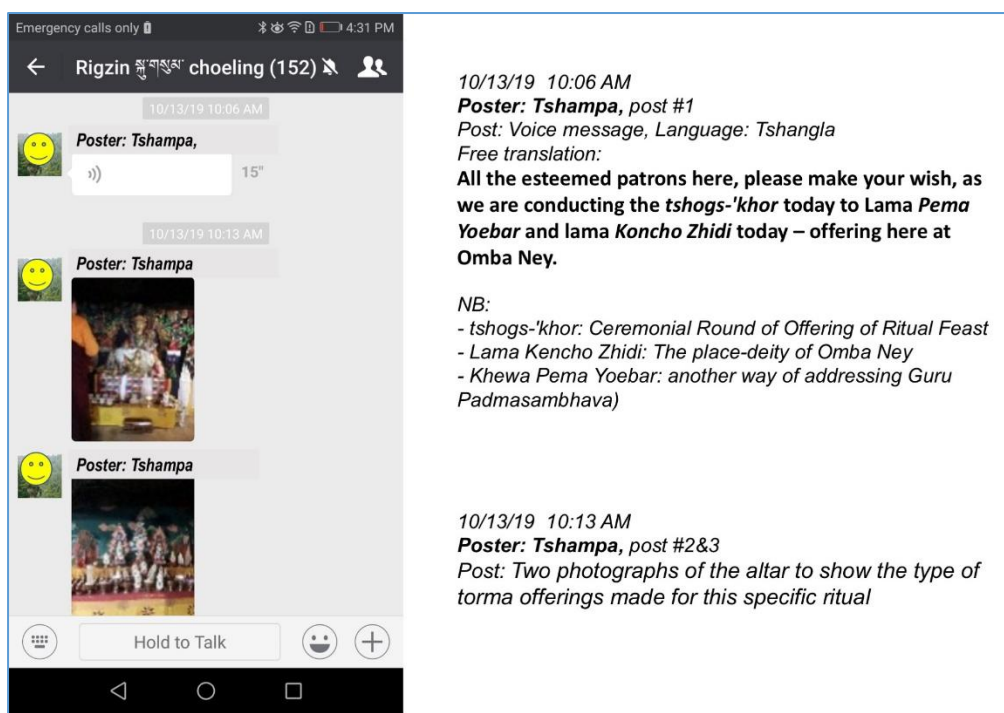


Figure 1. Post by Tshampa: Audio message and pictures of *torma* (author’s image)

Here we see that the altar is decorated with an offering called *torma*, ritual cakes made to represent a specific deity or divinity to whom the ceremony is dedicated. *Torma* can be representations of, or offerings to, the various deities. These photos show the activities at the temple (space), and invoke a time for offering prayers and wishes.

Next were posts (not shown) by three different group members, who thanked the Tshampa. These take the form of stickers and pictures of monks making a folded-hands, praying gesture to acknowledge the ‘presence’ of a superior being and to receive a blessing. The gesture is directed towards the deities and divinities represented by the *torma*.

The Tshampa then posted another voice message (not shown) thirty minutes later - at 10:40 am, explaining the time, reasons for the ceremony, and which deities will be invoked. He explained that the ceremony is *tshog-kor*, which literally means ‘feast offering’, and is offered as gratitude for the deities continued blessings and protection. He further explained that it is the full-moon day of the eighth month as per the lunar calendar – a very auspicious day, and that he, like on full-moon days, is conducting the *tshog-kor* ceremony at a specific place, *Omba Ney*, which is dedicated to its guardian mountain deity, *Koncho Jidey*, and to the omnipotent Buddhist master, Guru Padmasambhava. As it was a Sunday, many Bhutanese, especially those who worked in schools, the government and large corporations, had the day off and could physically be anywhere. However, the Tshampa draws them to another place – Omba Ney, and another time – the 15th Day of the 8th Month (according to the Buddhist calendar), and to another event – the monthly *tshog-kor*.

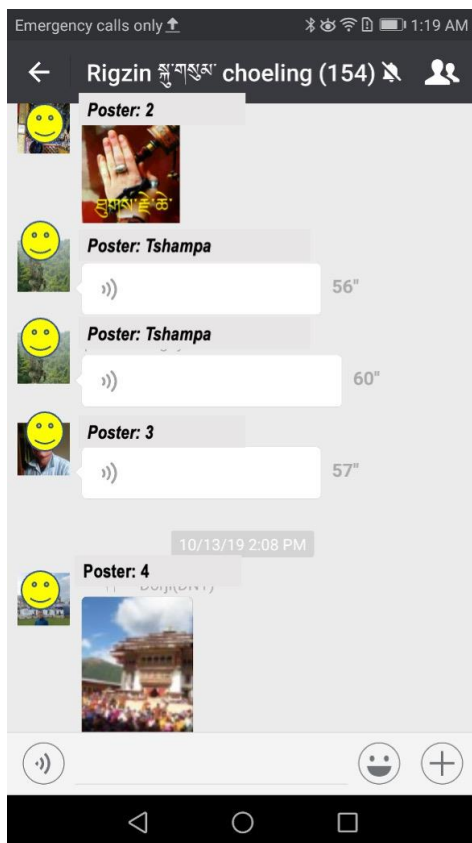
In response, another group member posted (not shown) two short audio messages to the Tshampa, addressing him as *Ajang*, which means ‘maternal uncle’. The kinship term suggests that they are either close or are related by blood – or both. The speaker thanked the Tshampa on behalf of the group when he said, ‘To all the patrons of Kusumchoeling temple’, which was followed by posts and replies of agreement by others. These took the form of stickers with an image of praying hands, as shown in Figure 2 (Poster 2) below.

We observe here and in other ceremonies, that in the WeChat group younger members rarely post audio messages or text messages: perhaps they do feel not ‘entitled’ to post verbal or text messages in a group chat with older persons. This follows how Bhutanese often respond in offline contexts, especially in activities that exhibit an age-based hierarchy: younger participants nod their heads or nonverbally express their gratitude, dissent, or agreement when elders speak. That is, in this group with more than 150 members, only 19 users posted content of any type, and only three posted audio messages. The few posts by younger members took the form of stickers and emojis – similar to nonverbal expressions (e.g. praying, prostrating) in offline contexts. That is, when attending a temple ceremony in person, younger members rarely speak or chant.

Later in the ceremony, following the two audio messages posted by the Tshampa, another person (not shown) posted an audio message expressing the following.

Some people might be too busy with their work - more than engaging in virtuous practices on such auspicious days. I apologise if I am wrong. However, being unenlightened minds, if we have enough to enjoy for now, there are only a few who watch their own backs. Therefore, I thank *Ajang* Tshampa for including them in this group too as you do the blessings.

Here the speaker referenced the practice of loving, kindness, and compassion, which are core principles of Mahayana Buddhism. He thanked the Tshampa for prayers and blessings, even for those who do not contribute, because *we* are all *unenlightened* minds who cannot think ‘as long as we have enough to enjoy for now.’ This imagines and indexes a society that is compassionate and embraces not only the downtrodden, but also those who cannot think for others.



10/13/19 1:59 PM

Poster: 2

Post: Picture of folded-hands wrapped with prayer beads – plus a written phrase. Language: Tibetan
Translation: **Thank you**

Poster: Tshampa, post #5 & #6

Post: Audio recordings of the ceremony,
Language: Choekay
Translation:

(last line)to the deity, I prostrate hereby

Poster: 3, post #2

Post: Voice message, Language: Tshangla
Free translation:

OK, Kuzuzangpo! To all 160 members in the group, Good afternoon. I am much thankful to Tshampa for conducting rituals and 100-butterlamps offering rites at Ombaney, I apologise for not contributing to Tshampa, as I am too rich. I will try to offer in near future. These days we are out of balance, since our salary is deducted because of damaged machines at the plant and we only receive 3000-4000s which is totally insufficient to live.

10/13/19 2:08 PM

Poster: 4, post #3

Post: Picture of Gangtey Gonpa – a sacred site in western Bhutan

Figure 2. Expressions of thanks and pictures from Gangtey (author’s image)

Later the Tshampa posted audio messages (Figure 2) that are recordings of the chanting and music at the temple, which signal to WeChat participants that the ceremony is ongoing and

that they should focus their attention on the temple chronotope. The sounds of the *tshog-kor* ceremony (i.e. chanting, bells, and musical instruments) and the audio posts of the master's voice are techniques in Vajrayana believed to lead a practitioner to liberation. Speech, translated as *soong* in Dzongkha, is considered to be a powerful tool for achieving enlightenment.

This was then followed by an audio response from Poster 3 (Figure 2) who said: 'Okay, *Kuzuzangpo!* To all 160 members in the group, Good afternoon. I am much thankful to Tshampa for conducting rituals and 100-butter lamps offering rites at *Ombaney*'. This message is implicitly given on behalf of the group, a stance taken because of his age (elder). Yet he also apologised for not being able to contribute financially: 'I apologise for not contributing to Tshampa ... These days we are out of balance, since our salary is deducted because of damaged machines at the plant and we only receive 3,000-4,000s [about 35-45 USD] which is insufficient to live'. That is, a leader of the group is expected to contribute financially. But this can be delayed or withheld if a reasonable explanation ('out of balance' 'salary is deducted') is offered.

We also see here in Figure 2 a picture of the temple of Gangtey Gonpa (Poster 4). Gangtey is one of the holiest places in Bhutan, and a two-day drive from Toetsho Gewog in eastern Bhutan. The poster explained in another message (not shown) that it is the concluding day of the sacred festival there – implying a connection between these festivals that can confer blessings on the WeChat members whose minds are attuned to these two events. That is, these pictures allow users to 'visualise' the sacred temples and ceremonies conducted simultaneously across great distances. By sharing pictures of sacred places and people, the receiver feels blessed. For example, if you show a picture on the mobile phone of a holy person to a devout Buddhist, they may place the mobile phone with the picture on their forehead as a sign of being blessed.

The visual image shown here, and short video clips of the ceremony posted by others (not shown), are evidence and the means for entering the chronotope of the temple for those who participate in the ceremony digitally. This allows members to be blessed by the virtuous act of seeing – known as *thong-drel*, which means 'enlightenment through visualisation.' It is based on the Vajrayana beliefs and techniques for attaining liberation from samsara through the visualisation of certain objects and phenomena.

This case shows how digital technology affords a kind of ‘digital citizenship’ that involves pilgrimage both physically and digitally – through the sharing of audio-visual materials and pictures of holy places and high Buddhist masters. Users post videos and pictures as they experience an event - a pilgrimage that they are undertaking, or share a teaching of a Buddhist master, or a picture. This has been observed in many WeChat groups – whether they are community groups or family chat groups. Pictures, and audio and video files of important lamas, and of places of great spiritual significance that may be distant and hard to visit (e.g. Tibetan temples and monasteries) are highly valued. Digital responses to such posts can take the form of a sticker of folded, praying hands, or a voice or the text message, ‘I take refuge.’ These practices are especially popular in groups led by and/or that follow monks and lamas, whose vocation is religion and spiritualism. This form of digital literacy is based upon the Buddhist belief in attaining enlightenment through sight, known as *thongdrel* – liberation through seeing.

DISCUSSION

WeChat, the platform used by the RKC group, affords the simple ‘record and post’ function. This low-level affordance is taken to a higher level by those users who post short voice messages, audio files of important teachings of Buddhism, folk songs, poetry and so on. This is important for people who never owned a fixed telephone. As McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) explain with the concept of vernacular affordances, when people come face-to-face with technology, innovative affordances emerge from their experiences with the action possibilities that the social media platform offers.

In the case of Bhutan, written modes such as letters and mail, and mediated communication such as newspapers, require basic literacy, are used by few older people in Bhutan. WeChat, however, offers high-level affordances: Audio recordings are easy to produce and share; they can be spoken in vernacular languages – *Tshangla* or *Yangtsibi-kha*. This allows less educated users from isolated communities to extend their senses and their content beyond time and space (Sandel and Ju 2019). Hearing your own voice, the voices of your relatives and the people of the same ethnic group, is important for building and maintaining community and connections, especially under the condition of out-migration from rural areas. Simply put, a digital recording of the prayer ceremony from Omba Ney, or a joke from one of

its members, can be sent to the other side of the globe and is not limited by space or terrain. This is significant for small ethnic groups with distinct language and social traditions that are threatened by dominant, national and global cultures and languages (e.g. English).

From this study we see how identities adjust to specific chronotopic requirements and needs (e.g. deity appeasement), while participants also draw on different contexts and frames of understanding. As in a literary chronotope, the temple chronotope brings together events from different times and places and fuses them, and enchants the participants, to the present. Furthermore, afforded by new communication technologies the temple chronotope is extended beyond temporal and spatial spheres. Members can be virtually present in another chronotope and participate digitally in rituals while receiving blessings and a sense of connection and belonging. This we see in the following quote by a member of a WeChat group, who hails from a distant gewog, but lives in the capital city of Thimphu. She not only considers the power of the blessings and divinations as real, but says that she feels secure and reassured:

Thanks to WeChat and smartphones it is even better than before. I mean, my uncle Tshampa, you know, he is a yogi, and he wanders off without telling anyone and on one hand we have to be worried about his safety. On the other hand, he is nowhere to be found when I need him to conduct a divination for me. Now he is there around the clock. Or that's what I feel. (Karma, Personal communication 11 November 2020).

CONCLUSION

The sample analysis of a Buddhist ceremony shows how digital media technologies and literacies do not replace traditional practices, but extend, and perhaps even enhance them. Lamas, temples, and the practices that they enact and support can be broadcast across time and space, unimaginable in the pre-digital world that was limited by the high towering peaks of this Himalayan landscape. Instead, a person stuck in traffic on the busy streets of Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, through WeChat can focus her thoughts, energies, and prayers on the chants of a lama far away, thus entering the 'chronotope' of the sacred. The sample analysis from Bhutan shows evidence of a 'hypermediated religious space' (Evolvi 2022) whereby the offline activities of a temple ceremony are mediated through and into WeChat as an online environment, and community of followers. Users develop digital literacies that are adapted to

the mediated environment, that mimic and recreate a range of nonverbal (e.g. praying, prostrating) and verbal (e.g. expressing thanks) behaviours. Hence, we see in the analysis new ways for reconfiguring a community of sacredness via and on the online environment.

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