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URA YAKCHÖ

The Grand Annual Festival of Ura Village

12th - 16th day of the 3rd Bhutanese Month every year

Opening Day

The Yakchoe formally starts around 1pm with the procession from Gaden temple to Ura. The lama, relic and Gadan Gathpo are received with traditional *marchang* ceremony at five places and the procession ends with the installation of the relic in the temple. This is followed by three items of *chamjug* or dance test/rehearsal. At about 8pm the exorcism or *gektre* ceremony is held within the temple. The temple space is consecrated for the religious ceremony and all evils exorcised in a bonfire ritual. The day ends a round of drinks.

Please do not get in between the procession and dancers.

Day One

The lama and priests wake up at 3.30am and perform religious rituals. At 8am, the villagers go on a breakfast round and at 9.30 a musical orchestra from the temple heralds the beginning of the day's public events. From around 10am, the priests perform mask dances and the village girls perform folk dances alternately. Main events include:

- The Dance of the Gathpo and Retinue
- The Dance of Yamantaka
- The Black Hat dance
- The Damsi and Garuda dance
- The Dance of Vajrapani and Ten Wrathful Deities and Four Door Guardians
- Public Ceremony Tea in the Temple
- The Hound and Stag dance
- Public dance led by village elders

The day ends with religious rituals and drinking sessions.

Day Two

The events until 9.30am are the same as Day One. Main events, which begin around 10am, include:

- The Ritual of Deity Worship
- The Drum Dance of Drametse
- The Durdag, Tsholing and Ging Dance
- The Three Ging Dance of Pema Lingpa
- Public Ceremony Tea in the Temple
- The Handsome Men and Pretty Women
- Public Dance led by village elders.

The day ends with religious rituals and drinking sessions.

Day Three

The events until 9.30am are the same as previous two days. Main events include:

- The Deer dance
- The Raksha Entry Dance
- The Lord and Messengers of Death Dance
- Public Tea Ceremony in the Temple
- The Hound and Stag dance
- Public Dance led by village elders

The day ends with evening chants, dance and divination by the Gathpo, and a round of drinks in the temple.

Concluding Day

By 10am the priests unfurl the *thongdrol* applique and conduct supplication to Padmasambhava with *zhugdrel* ceremony during which Zhengzhi Pema Dance is performed. Around 12pm, the spiritual blessings of the religious practice are distributed to the public. Then, the relic is taken on a tour of the village in a procession to the four representative houses. Finally, the relic is left in the house, where relic is believed to have been initially found, and the village bids a sad farewell to the lama.



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Ura: The Hidden Valley of Ugyen Rinpoche

Ura is named after Ugyen Padmasambhava, the saint who brought Buddhism to Bhutan in the eighth century. It is nestled in a valley at roughly 3200m altitude, surrounded by forests of spruce, pine, larch, fir, juniper, bamboo and rhododendrons where wildlife such as tigers, leopards, bears, boars and red pandas roam. Its beautiful landscape, bestrewn with the farmhouses, watermills, temples, stupas and prayer flags, provides a wonderful balance between pristine nature and thriving traditional life. It is one of the largest clustered villages in Bhutan consisting of some seventy households and about four hundred residents. Until the seventeenth century, Ura had a *dhung* ruler who reigned over many parts of central Bhutan. Today, the Yakchö festival is organised using archaic systems from that era.

Yakchö: The Grand Festival of Ura

Padmasambhava is said to have passed through the village in the eighth century. It is however his second coming that the village remembers and celebrates during Yakchoe. An ancient account has it that the Ura community prayed to Padmasambhava to cure themselves of an epidemic leprosy. He appears as a mendicant at the house of an old lady, who was busily spinning wool on her terrace. The lady invites the mendicant to lunch, but he mysteriously disappears when she has finished making buckwheat pancakes.

Thoroughly perplexed, she sits down to spin her wool only to discover a statue of the Buddhist deity Vajrapani sitting in her wool container. The statue, people believe, then flew from Ura to Gadan after three nights in the old lady's house. When the statue of Vajrapani reached Gadan, a nine-headed snake rose out of the ground and slithered out of the valley. Leprosy was eventually overcome.

The Yakchö is a commemoration of this event although it may also have some animistic origin as some archaic rituals of nature worship are still performed. Today, the Yakchö festivities formally begin on the twelfth of the third Bhutanese month with a procession from Gadan to Ura, where the Vajrapani relic and the Gadan Lam are received by the people. Having arrived in Ura, the *gomchens* perform the dance tests and a ceremony dedicated to Vajrapani. The religious ceremony continues for several days in early mornings and late evenings, while dozens of masked dances alternated by folk dances occupy most of the daytime.

The festival ends on the fifth day with the distribution of blessings accumulated by the religious ceremony and the tour of the relic through the village before it is brought back to the old lady's house, where it remains for three nights to mark its initial arrival in the village. The festival is a local event organised by the village through voluntary contributions.

