



Archery Tournament -

More than a

sporting
event

Archery is much-loved national sport of Bhutan. No festival is celebrated without inter-village archery competition. Villagers throng the tournament site to buck-up their team and shout

Photo by Win Robins



In Bhutanese folklore there is a weapon referred to as the Divine Arrow which 'when shot at a target is seen only in the mind'. Legend has it that during the Duar War with England, the father of the first king of Bhutan said prayers to Yeshe Gonpo, the guardian deity of Bhutan, and then shot an arrow from a mountain top towards a British camp, hitting the British general square in the forehead. Religious history and folklore are full of references to bows and arrows as weaponry. So it is little wonder that archery has evolved as Bhutan's national sport.

In Bhutan, the centuries-old tradition of archery matches is more like folk dancing and folk singing than a sporting event. These are occasions of immense gaiety, with the entire village turning out for a day of frivolity and picnicking; and, oh yes, watching the competition from the sidelines. Women wear their best *kiras* - hand-woven masterpieces with patterns from their native valley - and bring food and homemade wine called *ara*. They sing and dance in circles during intermission, and when the competition is in progress they shout, taunt and hurl insults at the opposing team to throw them off their aim.

Traditionally, archers are males and spend the days before the competition in diligent preparation, meeting with astrologers and lay monks known as *tsips* to determine the order of shooters, time to start and pause for intermission, and other serious considerations. Everything depends on astrological alignments, birth



years and spiritual merit earned by the participants. *Tsips* are also hired - though recently declared illegal by Bhutan Archery Federation - to cast spells with the nasty intention to impair the accuracy of opponents and defile their equipment by placing 'unclean' objects on them. To protect bows and arrows from such harm they are kept inside the temple and no one is allowed to touch them. In the hours that lead up to the match, final consultations are made with the team's *tsip*, and village deities are propitiated.

At the archery ground, both teams march in a centuries-old ceremony meant to appease local deities and stave off quarrels and accidents. Two wood targets with colourful bull's eyes - the size of dinner plates - are set up with a distance of 140 metres (150 yards) between them. With the competitor's arrows in flight, opposing team members stand beside the target



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squinting with great concentration at the steel-tipped bamboo shaft while it zips through the thin mountain air. Only in the nick of time they jump out of the arrow's path, turning quickly to point out where it landed with the tips of their bows so the far-off shooter can see where it landed.

Girlfriends and wives line up facing the shooter and wave colourful scarves in front of their team's archrivals while the latter remain glued to the target. Only a Zen-like concentration can help them to remain unaffected by the barrage of insults that refer to their appearance and manhood. Jumping in and out of the contestants' peripheral vision with flailing scarves, the cheerleaders shout insults in unison like 'You have the nose of a pig and the ears of a donkey'.

The taunts that evoke the maximum laughter and jeers from the crowd usually refer to the shooter's sexual prowess, physical features or ancestral lineage.

Thirteen archers comprise a team. Each of them shoots two arrows apiece, walking back and forth to switch targets after each round. Given the distance between targets, it is not unusual for players to walk up to six miles or 10 kilometres in a good contest. Whenever a point is scored, the scoring team breaks out into jumping and shouting and then both teams quickly fall in a line to dance the archer's dance and sing songs in praise of the archer's skill and the tradition of archery bequeathed down from generations. The shooter, who scores a point, tucks a brightly coloured scarf into his sash and the game continues. The game is won by scoring 25 points and the match is won by a team who wins two games. Two points are awarded for hitting the target and one point when the arrow sticks firmly in the ground within the length of the target.



Each archer is allowed two arrows, his ownership designated by a colourful string wrapping beneath the string notch. Made of hard reed found in the Himalayan foothills, arrows are arduously straightened using techniques passed down through the generations. Steel arrow tips are fastened to the shafts with glue made from melted beetle carapace, another ancient technique that is still in use today.

Traditional bows are made from two pieces of native bamboo found in high mountain valleys. These bamboo pieces are carved and whittled to a

taper then wrapped with wire or iron bands at the middle to form the hand grip. This folding bow allows easy transportation and travel. Some archers make their bows more elaborate by carving hand grips from light willow wood or wrapping it with leather.

In recent years, modern compound bows have made their way onto the archery fields, and major tournaments are now sponsored for both compound and traditional equipment. Except a few changes in the rules for high-tech archery, the rich customs and traditions surrounding the traditional tournaments are maintained. An archery match is one of the most colourful and picturesque events in Bhutan.

On my first tour to Bhutan in 2001, at my request, tour guide Karma Namgay of Rainbow Tours

sought out several farmers in Bumthang valley and arranged for an archery match in which I could participate. I actually got pretty close to the target but never hit it - the farmers scored frequently. After the match, I handed out prizes of sunglasses and then we all went to a local restaurant where we drank local beer, ate great food, laughed and continued our newfound friendship. I learned the archer's dance from men who had learned it from their fathers and uncles, and from the spirits of their forefathers dating back to pre-recorded history. Since then I have returned every year with a tour group of photographers - men and women - who come to Bhutan to be part of, rather than just witness, the cultural wonderland that is Bhutan.

Each year we meet the same farmers on a field outside Jakar to shoot our arrows through the thin Himalayan air. And we dance the archer's dance. 🌅

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