The population known as the Brokpas (‘Brog pa’) are yak-herding nomads. Me rag (literally the ‘Fire Burnt Valley’) and the Sag steng (‘Plain of Bamboos’) have been the home of these nomads since their displacement from the southern edge of Tibet during a time frame that I am not able to specify. The Brokpas have for centuries endured the harsh life in the wilderness in settlements situated 3500 meters above sea level, tending to yak and sheep for their livelihood. Agriculture is virtually impossible and non-existent when living at such heights. Their livelihood is augmented through bartering of yak meat, cheese, butter, yak tails and products of matted bamboo baskets, winnowers and the like with their Tshangla counterparts (southern Bhutanese neighbours who engage in agriculture), in exchange for maize and paddy that add to their staple diet of cheese and milk.

The Brokpas are of Tibeto-Burman stock, which is reflected not only in their outward appearance and their dress (which is made of yak and sheep hair and covered on top with animal skin), but also in their language and social norms. “Polygyny and polyandry in the forms of fraternal and sororal are accepted norms that keep the family property and units together”.

Regardless of all these differences from the majority Tshangla population living in Eastern Bhutan, the Brokpas live a vibrant life with a profound sense of its own intrinsic worth. They maintain a homogenous socio-cultural category with utmost concern for their tribal polity.

Despite being strong adherents of the Dge lugs pa school of Buddhism, the earlier forms of original Bon, i.e. nature worship and animal sacrifice, still feature in their way of life. Fumigation, erecting prayer flags, consulting local priests (phra mins) and Buddhist priests

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1 Tamdin Dorji 1999.
are everyday-associated rituals. The highlight of their festival is the pilgrimage around Jo mo Kun mkhar: the abode of their deity yul lha Aum Jo mo Sman btsun Re ma ti. This festival, that begins from the 7th month of the Bhutanese calendar, is a festival in honour of this figure, who is considered their saviour and goddess. The Tshangla population also worships her, and rituals (gsol kha) are offered to her to solicit her help and protection.

The two areas of Me rag and Sag steng are situated in the easternmost part of the country that falls under the jurisdiction of Bkra shis sgang district. They have common borders with Rta dbang district in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. This proximity has led to close affinity between the peoples. Me rag can be approached from various points including Phong med, Ra dhi or Shong phug. A feeder road from Bkra shis sgang connects all these entry points. Sag steng can be approached from Phong med and from Me rag.

**The Myth of Jo mo Re ma ti** and Her Iconography

The text “Rituals and Offerings in Honour of Sman btsun Re ma ti, the Guardian Deity of Eastern Bhutan”, authored by the late Dil go Mkhyn brtse Rin po che (1910–1991), in three folios, gives the following narration of her origin. The guardian of the Dharma, the glorious female protector, was born out of emptiness adorned with the glory of the universe. Her face is like that of a young goddess garlanded with white scarves, and ornaments of turquoise and jewels and with innumerable rays radiating from her body. She rides a white horse with wings of wind, carrying in her right hand an arrow adorned with scarves that extends human lives. In her left she carries a skull filled with various ornaments.

Since she was born to help sentient beings she manifests herself in a variety of forms including those of a mermaid, a nāga and countless beautiful girls. She resides in 108 abodes of lakes, surrounded by four warriors and millions of other deities of the three realms: lha'i 'jig rt'en

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2 Also refer to Tucci 1980: 218–89 on the history of origin of Jo mo Re ma ti.
3 The text is titled as Lho ljongs shar gyi lha sman btsun re ma ti mchod gsol gyi cho ga 'dod dgu'i 'phrin las kun stsol. This text was prepared by late Dil go Mkhyn brtse Rin po che on the request of Drag shos Bstan 'dzin rdo rje, as indicated at the end of the text.