

The Alama Ritual: Part 1

Sonam Wogyal (Bsod nams Dbang rgyal)

The Alama (Ala ma) Ritual is held jointly by Jyongra (Gyang ra) and Gardo (Dga 'mdo) villages, Pizza ('phel tsha) Township, Narong (Nyag rong) County, Ganze (Dkar mdzes) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China. It is an annual ritual observed on the fourteenth day of the eleventh lunar month of the Tibetan Calendar by children and youths to expel illness and other evils at the end of the lunar year and to have fun. At least one person from each family should participate in the ritual unless a family experienced a death in the current year, in which case no one from that family participates.

Jyongra Village is located in the north and Gardo Village is located in the south. About one kilometer of level farmland separates the two villages.

Organizers from each village go to every household to collect wheat straw, wheat, salt, bones with little meat, black powdered tea, and salt. Participants prepare torch straws. Simple torch straws are made of a handful of wheat straw. Male participants make large torch straws from tea containers, which are made of small pieces of bamboo. They add straw and tar to their torches to ensure they burn well.

Before dusk, Jyongra participants call to each other, gather in front of their village in the field, and face south, toward Gardo. Two girls each have a big bundle of straw on their back and hide at the north end of the Gardo Village, e.g., under a tree behind a small slope. They must hide otherwise Gardo participants might attack and burn their straw.

Meanwhile, Gardo participants gather south of their village and face north toward Jyongra. Two Gardo girls take bundles of straw and hide at the south end of Jyongra Village.

Participants burn straw at dusk, divide, and discuss what positions they will take when they run over the field between the two villages. Before this, however, some participants burn straw and circle their own village in a counter-clockwise direction. After some participants circle their village and return to the gathering places, both sides burn straw and run onto the field between the two villages. They shout and wave their straw torches in a counter-clockwise direction. Fleet runners from both sides compete to be on the western most side of the field while running toward each other. Participants (both girls and boys) shout and directly run toward each other and beat whomever they meet with their torches while running. When they pass each other they must not run back to their village for any reasons.

When Jyongra participants reach the south end of Gardo Village the two girls who have brought straw have made a fire. Participants throw their straw torches in the fire, sit in front of the fire, remove their shoes, and describe what just happened to them, e.g., hitting someone with a torch and escaping without retaliation or being hit and having their clothing burned.

Meanwhile, Gardo participants reach the south end of Jyongra and do the same thing.

Participants from both sides empty their shoes of dirt that may have accumulated and dried grass used to keep their feet warm. They say "Evils, sicknesses, and other disasters all are being thrown into the river." They burn all their straw to make a big fire and use long sticks to toss burning straw into the air. They shout and feel excited. After they finish burning all the straw, they walk back to their villages. Each side takes a different route. They sing "Ao...ma...Aa...Hu...Pedza...Geru...Pema...Sedehu..." loudly.

When they reach their own village they go home to get bowls. Soon everyone arrives at a field inside an enclosed wall where others are cooking *lanchan* (*la chan*) made of wheat, bones with little meat, and salt. While *lanchan* is cooking, participants sing traditional songs, circle dance, and play traditional games. They tell jokes. In 2010, youths knew fewer traditional songs and dances and sang modern songs, including Chinese songs. *Lanchan* is cooked for two to three hours in one pot and black tea is boiled in another pot. Often people only eat two big bowls of *lanchan* since the quantity is limited. After eating they continue singing, dancing, and playing games.

When the pots are cold, people take soot from the pots and and chase each other, trying to put soot on each others' faces. Early the next morning they exhaustedly return home.