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**A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa (zhabs drung phun sum tshogs pa) Thangka from the National Museum of Bhutan Collection**

*Ariana Maki*

**Introduction**

Visions, and the ability to articulate them in an accessible fashion, play a crucial role in disseminating religious tradition, lineage and claims to legitimacy. Further, visions can and do stand as testimony to significant persons, entities and events. The visions of religious masters and treasure revealers give rise to new doctrines and practices, while a leader's vision frequently provides the impetus for the development and implementation of institutions and ideals. And the visions of artists offer tangible forms to religious and philosophical concepts.

The third king of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug, 1928-1972, r. 1952-1972), was a key visionary who redefined the path of his kingdom in many

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· PhD Candidate, History of Art, Ohio State University, Assistant Curator, Himalayan Art Resources, Correspondence: maki.4@osu.edu.

## *A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka*

ways, by bringing Bhutan into the UN, abolishing labour taxes, and significantly overhauling the structure of the government. It was also his foresight that established the National Museum of Bhutan ('brug rgyal yongs 'grems ston khang; Figure 1). When the National Museum opened in 1968, only a few personal guests of the royal family and some government officials visited. Today, the number of museum guests surpasses 20,000 annually. Seven floors of galleries showcase Bhutanese visual culture from its earliest phases, and span archaeological finds, paintings, postage stamps, weaponry, bronze ware, traditional crafts, natural history specimens and religious treasures. The article intends to illustrate how iconography can frequently illuminate what lies behind a particular work of art, and as a result can increase our understanding of the time, place and context that gave rise to it. This painting, like so much of Bhutanese art functions in the religious and philosophical realms, and, due to the circumstances of its creation, carries with it strong political overtones as well. Beyond attesting to a lineage, some works illustrate how particular individuals saw themselves, or, how they wanted to be perceived.

This paper presents recent research on one thangka from the museum collection depicting the theme of Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa (zhabs drung phun sum tshogs pa), or 'submitting [oneself] to the one with perfect qualities'. The composition converges around the 17<sup>th</sup> century religious and political master, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (zhabs drung ngag dbang rnam rgyal, 1594-1651).

Shortly after his birth in Tibet, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was recognized as the incarnation of the great scholar Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po, 1527-1592; Figure 2), who was the fourth Drukchen ('brug chen), or head, of the Drukpa Kagyu ('brug pa bka' bgyud) Buddhist tradition. However, this recognition was contested, and as his situation became increasingly perilous, the Zhabdrung left Tibet in 1616 and headed south. At the time, 'Bhutan' was a series of small

valley-based kingdoms that lacked clearly defined boundaries and had little if any national identity. During the Zhabdrung's subsequent thirty-five year reign, he revolutionized the political history of the nascent nation by systematically establishing administrative fortresses known as dzongs, consolidating constituent valleys into a nation state, introducing the dual system of religious and political rule, and codifying laws. With great effort and foresight, the Zhabdrung was able to succeed in bringing unification to a large portion of the country under a centralized Drukpa Kagyu Buddhist rule.

Given his deep impact on Bhutanese religion, history and governance, the comparative importance of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in Bhutanese history cannot be overstated, and is testified to in part by an abundance of images of the master, crafted in metal, moulded from clay and immortalized in thangkas. While Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa compositions have been the subject of an initial study, far more remains to be done, as it is one of the most ubiquitous themes in Bhutanese art.<sup>1</sup> It is the intent of this article to reveal the ways in which the National Museum thangka both adheres to and markedly diverges from other published examples of the Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa theme, and to offer analysis of these differences and the possible motivations behind its creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson, David. "Brug pa bKa bgyud and Bhutanese Painting: Preliminary Findings in History and Iconography" in *Written Treasures of Bhutan*, 205-231. See also Jackson, "Portraits of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Zhabs drung Ngag dbang nam rgyal) in Bhutanese Painting: Iconography and Common Groupings of the Great Unifier of Bhutan" in *The Dragon's Gift*, 78-87.

## **The National Museum Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka**

Paintings with the Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa theme center on the figure of the Zhabdrung, surrounded by a series of his previous incarnations as well as other Buddhist masters, early Tibetan kings, and divine beings (Figure 3). Works with this theme are made and displayed to generate an auspicious ritual environment in temples or home shrines, a goal that is accomplished through the combined power and charisma of its figures.

In *Written Treasures of Bhutan* and *The Dragon's Gift*, Dr. David Jackson presented initial thoughts on a variety of compositions that emphasize the Zhabdrung, including those of the Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa type, which he translates as “The Perfectly Endowed Abbatial Candidate” and presents the following list of individuals as an enumeration of those figures that constitute a Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa composition:<sup>2</sup>

1. Lokeshvara (Tib. *ʼjig rten dbang phyug*)

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson, David. “Brug pa bKa brgyud”, 227 and “Portraits”, 81. Jackson states that the list was provided to him by John Ardussi, and “based in part on lists originally compiled by E. Gene Smith.” The list seems to be drawn directly from the biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal authored by the 69<sup>th</sup> Je Khenpo Gendun Rinchen (*'brug rje mkhan po dge 'dun rin chen*, 1926-1997) entitled *dpal 'brug pa rin po che mthu chen chos kyi rgyal po ngag dbang rnam rgyal gyi rnam thar rgya mtso'i snying po*, which refers to this lineage as “The Incarnations of Avalokiteshvara” (*thugs rje chen po'i sprul pa'i sku 'phreng*), f. 4b. Jackson refers to the lineage as “The Avalokitesvara Incarnations of the ‘Brug pa Tradition” in “Brug pa bKa brgyud”, 226 and “Portraits”, 80.

2. Pundarika (Kulika king of Shambhala) (Tib. pad+ma dkar po)
3. Srongtsan Gampo (srong btsan sgam po; 605/617-649)
4. Shantarakshita (Tib. zhi ba 'tsho; ca. 8<sup>th</sup> century)
5. Naropa (nA ro pa, 1012/16-1100)
6. Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen, 1079-1153)
7. First Drukchen Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gtsang pa rgya ras ye shes rdo rje, 1161-1211)
8. Second Drukchen Kunga Paljor (kun dga' dpal 'byor, 1428-1476)
9. Third Drukchen Jamyang Chokyi Dragpa ('jam dbyangs chos kyi grags pa, 1478-1523)
10. Fourth Drukchen Kunkhyen Pema Karpo (kun mkhyen pad+ma dkar po, 1527-1592)
11. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (zhabs drung ngag dbang rnam rgyal, 1594-1651)

In his brief treatments of the subject, Jackson highlights that further documentation and comparative study of Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa compositions is necessary, and as such it is the intention of this article to contribute the National Museum example to the body of known works as it diverges from the proffered list in significant and meaningful ways.

The National Museum thankga composition consists of thirteen main figures, identified by number in Figure 4:

*A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka*

1. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal<sup>3</sup>
2. Srongtsan Gampo (srong btsan sgam po)
3. Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug)
4. Tsepagme (mgon po tshe dpag me[d])
5. Trisong Detsen (chos rgyal khri srong lde btsan)
6. Shantarakshita (shAn+ti rak+Shi ta)
7. Naropa (dpal ldan nA ro pa)
8. Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (sgam po pa)
9. Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gtsang pa rgya ras)
10. Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po)
11. Jampel Dorje (rje bstun 'jam dpal rdo rje)
12. Jamgon Tsuglag Gyatso (gtsug lag rgya mtsho)
13. Mipham Tsewang Tenzin (mkhas grub tshe dbang bstan 'dzin)

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<sup>3</sup> These parenthetical transliterations are in accord with the inscriptions found on the painting; if there is no transliteration, there is no inscription present on the work for that particular figure.

### **Points of iconographic correlation**

As this article seeks to emphasize the unique elements of the National Museum thangka composition, there will be only cursory discussion of those figures that appear in both the painting and the published list.

The early Tibetan king Songtsan Gampo (srong btsan sgampo, 605/617-649; Figure 5) is pictured in the far upper left corner of the composition. Songtsen Gampo unified the Tibetan kingdom by forming alliances with neighboring powers Nepal and China by marrying princesses from each region. With the wives came important Buddhist images, which were housed in two temples in Lhasa. King Songtsen Gampo further established Buddhism in Tibet by building a large number of temples throughout the region. The figure opposite Songtsan Gampo, in the far upper right is the great scholar and pandit Santarakshita (zhi ba 'tsho, ca. 8<sup>th</sup> century; Figure 6). He was abbot of the famous Buddhist university of Nalanda in India, and he also played a key role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet. It was the later Tibetan king Trisong Detsen (khri srong lde btsan, 742-796), who invited Santarakshita to Tibet to establish a monastic community at Samye. As Trisong Detsen is not always encountered in Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa compositions, further discussion of him will take place in the following section.

Under the image of Songtsan Gampo is the Indian master Naropa (na ro pa, 1012/16-1100; Figure 7), whose teachings went on to serve as a source for the Kagyu (bka' brgyud pa) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism when he gave extensive teachings to Marpa Chokyi Lodroe (mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1012-1097; not pictured). When Marpa brought those teachings back to Tibet, he eventually accepted Milarepa (mi la ras pa, 1052-1135; not pictured) as a student and entrusted the transmission to him and other select students. And it was a student of Milarepa by the name of Gampopa

## *A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka*

Sonam Rinchen (sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen, 1079-1153; Figure 8), shown below Santarakshita. Gampopa initially resisted taking on disciples, yet when he finally did in his later years, some of these students would go on to found four distinct traditions of Kagyu practice. For the Drukpa Kagyu, the most important of these four traditions was the Phagmodru (phag mo gru pa), which itself branched off into eight sub-traditions within two generations. Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gtsang pa rgya ras ye shes rdo rje, 1161-1211; Figure 9) was the founder of the Drukpa sub-tradition, and appears below the figure of Naropa. It was through Tsangpa Gyare's effort and initiative that a Drukpa Kagyu presence was introduced in western Bhutan in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and ties continued to be cultivated between Drukpa sites in Bhutan and Tibet for centuries thereafter.

Thus in this composition, the individuals included reach back to the earliest strata of Tibetan Buddhist history and illustrate key personalities that were formative in the stepwise development of what eventually became the Drukpa Kagyu tradition. The painting is, however, notable in its omissions of major figures such as Marpa and Milarepa. Yet once we correlate the pre-incarnations of the Zhabdrung as enumerated in his biography (rnam thar) and published in Jackson's list, it is clear to see that these "Avalokiteshvara incarnations" are a discernable presence. Yet this lineage accounts for only five of the twelve subsidiary figures in this thangka, and so it is to the remaining seven that we now turn.

### **Points of iconographic divergence**

The remaining figures in the National Museum composition do not appear in the list, and, in the cases of Ngagi Wangchuk and Pema Karpo, seem to be present in a conflated form:

1. Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug)
2. Trisong Detsen (khri srong lde btsan, 742-796)
3. Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po)
4. Jampel Dorje ('jam dpal rdo rje, b. 1631)
5. Third Pawo Jamgon Tsuglag Gyatso ('jam [m]gon gtsug lag rgya mtsho, 1567/8-1633)
6. Khedrup Tsewang Tenzin (mkhas grub tshe dbang bstan 'dzin, 1574-1643)

Thus, this composition diverges from the list by not including the Shambhala king Pundarika, Second Drukchen Kunga Paljor (kun dga' dpal 'byor, 1428-1476), and Third Drukchen Jamyang Chokyi Dragpa ('jam dbyangs chos kyi grags pa, 1478-1523). Given that Zhabdrung was considered the immediate incarnation of the Fourth Drukchen Pema Karpo, it is noteworthy that the Second and Third Drukchens are so obviously missing.

As will be explored in detail in subsequent sections, there are a number of reasons why such seemingly notable figures are excluded, while others are imported or present in conflated forms. It is my suggestion that if the Fourth Drukchen Pema Karpo is present at all, it is only in a form where he is conflated with a bodhisattva, a phenomena that happens elsewhere in the composition in the figure of Ngagi Wangchuk. Further, I will offer possibilities as to why the configuration and identities of the individuals in this composition intentionally draw upon authorities outside the Drukchen lineage, specifically, members of the ancient Tibetan Gya (rgya) family. Additional figures proclaim and reinforce the multiple sources of authority employed and promulgated by the Zhabdrung during the often-tumultuous

years of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. These next sections will illustrate how the National Museum Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa thangka reveals this markedly different iconographic scheme—one that emphasizes the prominent roles played by certain individuals during the course of the Zhabdrung’s life, and does so by drawing on multiple sources in a comparatively unique and innovative way.

### **Conflated figures**

At first glance, one could identify two figures as candidates as the bodhisattva Lokeshvara, or Chenrezig (spyan ras gzigs) in Choekey, present as either the figure in the top row to the left of Tsepagme, or alternately below Gampopa at center right. Yet additional examination reveals a more complex situation. The figure to the left of Tsepagme is inscribed Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug; Figure 10), a form of the bodhisattva of wisdom Jampelyang (Skt. Manjushri). This particular form of the Jampelyang could be confused with Chenrezig; however, the two armed, lotus-bearing form of Chenrezig (Skt. Padmapani Lokeshvara) would invariably have a small animal skin over his left shoulder, an attribute which is clearly absent in this figure. Close examination of Ngagi Wangchuk reveals his chest muscles are painted as fully round circles, which could lead to his being mistaken for a female deity, most likely Drolkar (sgrol dkar, Skt. Saptalocana Tara). However, in Himalayan art history this convention for the depiction of the male chest is not unknown and does not necessarily indicate that the figure is a female. Further, were this a form of Drolkar, she would most likely have seven eyes present, three on her head, one on each palm and one on each sole of her foot. Her right hand would be in the gesture of giving (Skt. varada mudra), unlike the earth-touching gesture (Skt. bhumisparsha mudra) displayed here. In fact, Ngagi Wangchuk is exactly who the inscription attests him to be—a form of Jampelyang, the bodhisattva of wisdom. And, according to the Zhabdrung’s biography, it was this

specific form that played a significant role in the confirmation of the Zhabdrung as the true incarnation of Pema Karpo.

According to his biography, in 1620 the Zhabdrung was in the process of building the memorial chorten (sku rten) of his father, Yab Tenpai Nyima (yab bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1567-1619; Figure 11).<sup>4</sup> Zhabdrung was unsure of the exact measurements and dimensions as had been prescribed by Pema Karpo, and thus he summoned a teacher from Tibet to come and confirm. The teacher's name was Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe (yongs 'dzin lha dbang lho gros, b.16<sup>th</sup> century) and he had been a student of both Pema Karpo and the Zhabdrung's father Yab Tenpai Nyima.<sup>5</sup> The Yongdzin complied with the Zhabdrung's request, but arrived expressing some doubt over Zhabdrung's claims of being Pema Karpo reincarnate.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the early in his stay, Yongdzin proposed that in order to end the dispute, Zhabdrung be acknowledged as the body emanation of Pema Karpo, while the Tibetan contender, Pasam Wangpo (dpag bsam dbang po, 1593-1641) would be declared the speech emanation. Zhabdrung refused, saying that he alone was the body, speech and mind incarnation of Pema Karpo. Zhabdrung then went on to request that the Yongdzin remain and assist in constructing Yab Tenpai Nyima's memorial chorten.

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<sup>4</sup> Dzongkha version related in Dorje, 166-175; English translation Kinga, 99-102

<sup>5</sup> Lhawang Lodroe (*lha dbang blo gros*) is mentioned as a "very old lama" being in frequent company of the Zhabdrung in the Jesuit priest Father Estevão Cacella's report on their travels through the region on their way to Tibet. See translation in Aris, *Sources of Bhutan*, 173.

<sup>6</sup> See Dorji, 99-105 for a detailed account of Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe's time with the Zhabdrung.

Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe agreed to stay and help erect the chorten of his former teacher. Later in his stay, the Yongdzin was performing a weeklong ritual dedicated to Jamkar, the form of white Jampelyang illustrated in the National Museum thangka. This manifestation is distinctive due to the display of bhumisparsha mudra with his right hand, rather than the more expected varada mudra gesture of giving generally seen in forms of white Jampelyang, and is further notable in that it lacks Jampelyang's common (but not universal) attributes of a sword and book.

In the midst of his meditation on Jampelyang, the Yongdzin suddenly experienced a vision of his other main teacher Pema Karpo, who offered Yongdzin a book on astrology based on the Dukyi Khorlo (dus kyi 'khor lo; Skt. Kalachakra) system. This offering left the Yongdzin a bit perplexed until the next morning, when the Zhabdrung appeared with an unexpected request: for Yongdzin to compose a text based on the Dukyi Khorlo. At that moment, the Yongdzin ceased to doubt the Zhabdrung was the true incarnation of Pema Karpo, and publically confirmed him as such. Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe went on to formulate the Kalachakra-based system that forms the core of the Bhutanese calendar, and he also conferred upon Zhabdrung the few remaining Pema Karpo-related initiations and teachings he had not yet received.

Thus, as it was while the Yongdzin was practicing this particular form of Jampelyang when Pema Karpo appeared to him and offered forth the Dukyi Khorlo text, I suggest that the inclusion of this distinctive and less-common form of Jampelyang is a deliberate reference to that specific moment in the Zhabdrung's life—the moment that enabled Yongdzin, a qualified Tibetan master, to recognize the Zhabdrung for who he claimed himself to be, namely the rebirth of Pema Karpo. The name employed in the inscription, Ngagi Wangchuk, acquires another layer of significance when we note the moniker was shared with a highly important human master. And the human Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug grags

pa rgyal mtshan, 1517-1554) was yet another main teacher of Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe as well as of Pema Karpo.

Keeping these connections between master and student in mind, our examination of the composition can now turn to the other bodhisattva style figure located at middle right. Shown with a similar crown, color, countenance, and attributes as Ngagi Wangchuk above, this figure is inscribed Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po; Figure 12) or White Lotus, a common epithet of Lokeshvara. Yet, as noted above, if this was the form of Padmapani Lokeshvara outright, there would almost invariably be an antelope skin over his left shoulder. It is my suggestion that this figure in fact references the *historical* Pema Karpo, the fourth Drukchen and pre-incarnation of the Zhabdrung, shown in the guise of a bodhisattva much as his master is conflated with Jampelyang above.

Further evidence in support of these connotations is seen in the placement of the figures themselves. Full bodhisattvas would never be placed below human masters as in this case, Pema Karpo appearing underneath Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (Figure 13). When a composition focuses on a human master, bodhisattvas and other deities are shown at the top of the composition, as are Ngagi Wangchuk and Tsepagme (Skt. Amitayus), the Buddha of Long Life. In general, these highly realized beings are placed along the top of the composition, a hierarchal position befitting their comparatively advanced levels of attainment. In other types of compositions, bodhisattvas are found outside the top registers and surround the main figure as a set of bodhisattvas. In that arrangement, those bodhisattvas would be shown in groups of four, eight, ten or sixteen of them gathered around the main figure—clearly not the case here. Alternately, a pair of bodhisattvas could flank the main figure as attendants, yet that is the only case when the main figure is a Buddha; bodhisattvas would not appear as attendant figures to a human master. And, whenever they are shown as primary

attendants to a central Buddha, the bodhisattvas are most frequently in a standing, not seated.

Given that “Ngagi Wangchuk” can refer to both the specific form of Jampelyang directly related to the Yongdzin’s recognition of the Zhabdrung’s legitimacy and to the human Ngagi Wangchuk, teacher of the Yongdzin, and that the lower inscription Pema Karpo (deliberately chosen over the far more frequently-encountered moniker Chenrezig) references the previous life of the Zhabdrung, I postulate that these epithets were selected with the intention of conflating these human masters with particular bodhisattvas. Buddhist texts are rife with the use of epithets, where masters are frequently given epithets of deities as expressions of their divine qualities. In texts, such confluations are not at all a new idea. I suggest this thangka is operating in a similar way, following the pattern of conflating the qualities of deities with incarnate or accomplished masters that is so frequently encountered in Buddhist texts. In the National Museum composition, this convention of conflation is instead presented primarily in an artistic, visual form, and is supported by precise inscriptional choices. Thus, when we observe a thangka and encounter ‘common’ bodhisattvas and other deities, they should not be so quickly dismissed as ‘just another Chenrezig’, and special attention should be paid to the specific epithet being employed lest we overlook the full significance and meaning of their presence in the composition.

### **Connections to the Gya (rgya) lineage**

As mentioned above, in the National Museum thangka the notable absence of the Second and Third Drukchens is supplanted by the remarkable presence of members of the

ancestral Gya (rgya) lineage.<sup>7</sup> From the Drukpa Kagyu perspective, the Gya extend back to Lhaga (lha dga') and Luga (klu dga'), two individuals responsible for accompanying the Lhasa Jowo statue to Tibet in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Members of the Gya have played significant roles throughout early Tibetan history, with periods of waxing and waning power.<sup>8</sup> Branches of the Gya also provided a multitude of incumbent throne holders to Nening (gnas rnying) and Ralung, further embedding itself in the religio-political history of Tibet.

The Drukpa Kagyu founder Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje was a holder of the Gya lineage, and would endure as the key figure to which all subsequent Drukpas traced their own Gya histories. Though he died in 1211, Tsangpa Gyare did not reincarnate until 1428, when Kunga Peljor (kun dga' dpal 'byor, 1428-1476) deemed to be his incarnation and assumed the title of Second Drukchen. Only two years elapsed between the demise of Kunga Peljor and the arrival of the Third Drukchen, Jamyang Chodrak (jam dbyangs chos grags, 1478-1523), and only four years between his death and the birth of the Fourth Drukchen, Pema Karpo (1527-1592). Each Drukchen was essentially part of the Gya lineage by dint of being direct incarnations of Tsangpa Gyare, yet none of them appears in human form in the National Museum thangka. By keeping in mind that the Zhabdrung was not universally accepted as the incarnation of Pema Karpo and thus as the Fifth Drukchen, this composition can be easily reconciled through a brief study of the interrelatedness of Gya physical and incarnation lineages.

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<sup>7</sup> See Ardussi, "Rgya [Gya] Family and Reincarnation Lineages of Ralung Monastery (Tibet) and Bhutan" in *Dragon's Gift*, 373-375, for an extensive ancestral chart which compiles information from a wide range of historical sources.

<sup>8</sup> See Vitali, "Glimpses of the History of the rGya Clan with Reference to Nyang Stod, lHo Mon and Nearby Lands (7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Centuries)" for a fuller treatment of the activities and legacy of the rgya.

The alternate candidate for the Fifth Drukchen was Pasam Wangpo (dpag bsam dbang po, 1592-1641), born to the Chonje Depa (‘phyong rgyas sde pa) Ngawang Sonam Dragpa (ngag dbang bsod nams grags pa) from an affair he had had with a maid.<sup>9</sup> The Chonje Depa petitioned for his son to be recognized by the Tsang Desi (gtsang sde srid) at the same time that the Zhabdrung was residing at Ralung, having secured numerous acknowledgements of his recognition as Pema Karpo reincarnate. Mipham Chogyal (mi pham chos rgyal, 1543-1604) was at that time the seventeenth hierarch of Ralung, yet despite his best efforts the two contesting parties would neither reconcile nor acquiesce. At this point in history, central Tibet was embroiled in an enormous amount of political turmoil.<sup>10</sup> In short, tensions and struggles for power between the Gelugpa (dge lugs pa) and Karma Kagyu (kar+ma bka’ bryud), coupled with the arrival of the Mongols had resulted in an incredibly unstable and opportunistic climate in central Tibet and its environs. Despite significant efforts both above board and otherwise, once the Tsang Desi supported Pasam Wangpo as the incarnation of Pema Karpo, in order to safeguard his life, the Zhabdrung had to heed a vision of Mahakala, which had been urging him southward to Bhutan, where a long-standing network of patrons awaited.

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<sup>9</sup> Dorji, 60.

<sup>10</sup> A full treatment of this period of Tibetan history lies outside the scope of this paper. For further reading, see articles by Samten G. Karmay “The Fifth Dalai Lama and His Reunification of Tibet” (p. 65-80), and Elliot Sperling “Tibet’s Foreign Relations during the Epoch of the Fifth Dalai Lama” (p.119-132) in *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century: The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*, ed. Françoise Pommaret. Brill Tibetan Studies Library, Vol. 3. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003; *The History of Tibet*, ed. Alex McKay, Vol. 2, ed. London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. A thorough Bhutanese historical account of this period is offered in Pema Tsewang (pad+ ma tshe dbang), *brug gi rgyal rabs*, Thimphu: KMT Press, 2008 (reprint), p. 202-316. See also Aris, *Bhutan*, 212-232.

Thus, in this composition, it can be noted that essentially the interceding Drukchens between the Zhabdrung and Tsangpa Gyare have been cut out. Pema Karpo, arguably one of the most important scholars of his era in any tradition is not even shown in human form, as we discussed above. Instead, his representation as bodhisattva is echoed by—and subservient to, due to his lower placement in the composition—that of his teacher Ngagi Wangchuk. Also Ngagi Wangchuk, himself the sixteenth Ralung heirarch, was Gya, born to the fifteenth Ralung heirarch Ngawang Chogyal (ngag dbang chos rgyal, 1465-1540), the son of Lhayi Wangpo (lha'i dbang po, b. 15<sup>th</sup> century) and brother of Second Drukchen Kunga Paljor. In short, Ngagi Wangchuk was the Second Drukchen's great uncle. Ngagi Wangchuk fathered the above-mentioned seventeenth hierarch of Ralung, Mipham Chogyal, who in turn fathered Mipham Tenpai Nyima (mi pham bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1567-1619), previously mentioned as Yab Tenpai Nyima, father of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

So whereas Pema Karpo could only claim incarnation as his link to Tsangpa Gyare, the Zhabdrung also held a traceable physical lineage, extending back to Nangtsan (nang btsan), who was related by blood to Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje. I believe that this is why Pema Karpo is not fully shown as a human being, because when shown as a bodhisattva, his humanity is essentially stripped from the figure, and it was that human birth (and death) which caused such disruption for the Zhabdrung. Despite his monumental achievements as a scholar and Buddhist master, Pema Karpo is shown here without human attributes, represented as a bodhisattva subservient to his teacher-as-bodhisattva Ngagi Wangchuk, who was the great-grandfather of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Rival contender Pagsam Wangpo, on the other hand, could only draw on Drukchen lineage for authority, whereas Zhabdrung's blood link to Tsangpa Gyare left him free to emphasize this physical lineage and thus emphasize his status as the true incarnation of Pema Karpo. In this way, the thangka retains the authority of Pema Karpo while

downplaying the significance of the preceding Drukchens, and concurrently placing Pema Karpo in a subordinate position to one of his masters, Ngagi Wangchuk.

Further, when looking closely at the composition, we note that the figure of Pema Karpo mirrors that of Tsangpa Gyare, with the Zhabdrung directly between them (Figure 14). It could be reasonable to read this portion as deliberately juxtaposing these masters on either side of the Zhabdrung, who at that time was the embodiment of the Gya physical lineage and the religious legacy that they represented.

### **Divergent historical figures**

Additional insight as to the motivations behind the National Museum painting and the messages it sought to communicate can be discerned in the remaining figures.

In addition to establishing Samye and with it the first organized monastic presence in his kingdom, the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen also convened a historic religious council (Figure 15). At the meeting, a debate contest was held between Chinese and Indian Buddhists, who were competing for favor and patronage in the region. Indian Buddhism ultimately prevailed and became the preferred doctrine in the kingdom, and thus strongly aligned the Tibetan empire with Indian Buddhist methodology and practice. And more importantly to the Zhabdrung, Trisong Detsen had a relationship with the Gya family. According to Vitali, it was Trisong Detsen who awarded significant lands to the Gya clan through an imperial decree.<sup>11</sup> Before the second diffusion of Buddhism (*bstan pa phyi dar*), the Gya effectively controlled by the area encompassing modern western Bhutan, and in fact it was a member of the Gya family Gya Tsonseng (*rgya*

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<sup>11</sup> Vitali, 9.

brtson seng) that led the delegation to India that invited Atisha to Tibet.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it could be argued that were it not for the Gya family, the re-establishment of Buddhism in Tibet could have followed a drastically different path.

Perhaps there is an additional rationale behind Trisong Detsen's inclusion in this thangka, for during the Zhabdrung's reign in Bhutan, he was able to accomplish somewhat analogous feats, all thanks to the long ago acts of Trisong Detsen. When Zhabdrung arrived in Bhutan in 1616, there were a number of Buddhist traditions already present in the region, however, as the Zhabdrung consolidated power, he was able to selectively establish one, the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, as predominant, especially in the western and central parts of the country. By building dzongs throughout his domain, he visually proclaimed his control of that particular area under the Drukpa banner, and further implemented a system of laws and governance to create structure from disorder. The dzongs were eventually filled with government officials as well as a monastic presence whose job it was to oversee the ritual needs of the nation and of the populace. Perhaps the Zhabdrung considered his accomplishments in creating an organized and consolidated empire as comparative to and a logical outgrowth of similar developments Trisong Detsen overseen in Tibet centuries before.

The three figures at the bottom of the thangka offer much information as to the time and place this work was created, and the intentions behind it. At bottom left is Jetsun Jampel Dorje (rje btsun 'jam dpal rdo rje, b.1631-1680/1; Figure 16), the biological son of Zhabdrung. Jampel Dorje was recognized as the reincarnation of Yab Tenpai Nyima—his own grandfather. His inclusion here represents the continuation of the physical lineage of the Zhabdrung, and the combined

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<sup>12</sup> Vitali, 10.

hopes for this family line, and by extension the newly established status quo, to continue.

After conducting an informal and brief survey, Jampel Dorje does not seem to be frequently encountered in art or murals in Bhutan, aside from a brief period in the late 17<sup>th</sup>-early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, at which point artistic evidence reveals a shift towards an emphasis on the Sungtrul (gsung sprul; speech incarnation) and Thugtrul (thugs sprul; mind incarnation) lineages of the Zhabdrung. This shift seems to coincide with the realization that Jampel Dorje was deemed incapable of assuming power. It seems that he lacked sufficient health and capacity to do so, and went on to live a fairly unremarkable life until the age of fifty, when he passed away without having produced a viable heir.<sup>13</sup> It seems possible that Jampel Dorje's inclusion here indicate that the work may have been created during his lifetime; specifically, after he had reached a sufficient majority age yet before he was deemed unfit to rule. In other words, the piece may have been painted sometime near Zhabdrung's death in 1651 when his son was about twenty years old, and when the continuation of the Zhabdrung's physical lineage—the preferred lineage—was still likely.

At bottom center is Jamgon Tsuglag Gyatso (‘jam gon byams mgon gtsug lag rgya mtsho, 1567/8-1633; Figure 17), the Third Pawo. His inclusion here would at first seem to be

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<sup>13</sup> Jampel Dorje was born in Simtokha to the Zhabdrung's second consort, Goekar Drolma (gos dkar sgröl ma, 1606-1684), and it was Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe who recognized the boy as the incarnation of Yab Tenpai Nyima (Dargye, 137). Well after the death of the Zhabdrung, Jampel Dorje did marry a daughter of ngor zhabs drung klu sdings pa, and their union produced a daughter named Tshokyi Dorje (mtsho skyes rdo rje) in 1680; however, there were no subsequent male descendants to continue the physical lineage. See Dargye, 174; Aris, *Bhutan*, 245, 252-253.

remarkable, as the Third Pawo Tsuglag Gyatso plays a strongly adversarial role in a contentious scene from the Zhabdrung's biography, which we will turn to shortly. First, it is worth exploring the multiple connections between the Third Pawo's previous incarnation—the Second Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa (gtsug lag 'phreng ba, 1504-1564/6).

After the passing of the Eighth Karmapa Mikyo Dorje (mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507-1554), the Second Pawo was the de facto leader of the Karma Kagyu tradition while his student the Fifth Zhamar (dkon mchog yan lag, 1525-1583) was seeking the Ninth Karmapa. The Second Pawo stayed in this role until the Ninth Karmapa was enthroned circa 1562 at the age of six. Textual accounts state that the Second Pawo felt a spiritual connection with the aforementioned Ngawang Chogyal (ngag dbang chos rgyal, 1465-1550), the fifteenth throne holder of Ralung, teacher of Pema Karpo and great-grandfather of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

For his own part, the Third Pawo Tsuglag Gyatso spent his youth and early career under the tutelage of the Ninth Karmapa, and grew up to teach the Tenth Karmapa Choying Dorje (chos dbyings rdo rje, 1604-1674), as well as the Peling Sungtrul (pad gling gsung sprul) Tsultrim Dorje (tshul khrims rdo rje, 1598-1669) and Thinley Lhundrup ('phrin las lhun grub, 1611-1662), the father of famed treasure revealer and founder of Mindroling monastery Terdak Lingpa (gter bdag gling pa 'gyur med rdo rje, 1646-1714). Having students of such a high caliber cemented the Pawo as a person of importance for the Karma Kagyu and Nyingma terma traditions. However, his prestige did not mean that he or his lineage was immune to the political tumult that was engulfing Tibet at the time, yet it was one episode between the Third Pawo and the Zhabdrung at a river crossing that forever

transformed the Zhabdrung's future, paraphrased here from Sonam Kinga's translation of Dasho Sangye Dorji.<sup>14</sup>

Once the Zhabdrung was leaving Tsangrong after receiving offerings of millet, headed for the Tsangpo River ferry at Tagdru. On arrival, the Zhabdrung approached the ferry and began to board. Suddenly, some attendants of the Third Pawo Tsuglag Gyatso appeared, and reached out to restrain the Zhabdrung so that the Third Pawo and his entourage could board the ferry instead. Zhabdrung was furious, but was forced from the boat nonetheless. His own followers drew their swords and began fighting the Pawo's followers, killing two of them outright. The ferryboat capsized and caused further loss of life. At that point, the Zhabdrung sent his own followers into the water to rescue the floundering would-be passengers. As the Zhabdrung sought crossing elsewhere, he encountered guards of the Tsang Desi who were attacking a woman in the village of Rong Tsathang. The Zhabdrung's followers beat up the guards and rescued the woman, but the Tsang Desi, who was a staunch supporter of the Karma Kagyu and thus favored the Third Pawo, saw all the Zhabdrung's actions from that day as egregious offenses.

It was the riverside altercation with the Third Pawo that instigated the Tsang Desi to take action, as he had already felt slighted that his candidate for Fifth Drukchen, Pasam Wangpo, had not been recognized. The Tsang Desi wrote increasingly threatening letters to the Zhabdrung, who replied with his own provocative language. Before matters could come to a head, the Zhabdrung experienced a prophetic vision from the deity Gonpo (mgon po; Skt. Mahakala) to leave Tibet, which after some consideration, the Zhabdrung heeded.

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<sup>14</sup> Kinga, 34-35

On the surface it may seem incongruous that one of the Zhabdrung's main foes is given such a place of prominence in the National Museum thanangka. Yet I suggest the Third Pawo's inclusion is in fact commemorating his role in the events that led the Zhabdrung to leave Tibet and establish an empire in Bhutan. Were it not for the effects precipitated by their disastrous (and murderous) riverside encounter, the Zhabdrung may have felt the same compulsion to heed the requests of Gonpo to head south. Further, the placement of the Third Pawo is in itself telling, he is directly below the Zhabdrung, literally at his feet; perhaps we could say the Third Pawo is himself clearly demonstrating the definition of the title Zhabdrung, 'submitting oneself at the feet of [the master]'.<sup>15</sup>

In the lower right corner is a figure inscribed Khedrup Tsewang Tenzin (mkhas grub tshe dbang bstan 'dzin, 1574-1643; Figure 18). This is Mipham Tsewang Tenzin, who was the grandson of the beloved Buddhist saint Drukpa Kunley ('brug pa kun legs, 1455-1529), who was famed for frequently employing bawdy language and subversive actions to lead other beings toward realization and enlightenment.<sup>15</sup> Mipham, as well as his father Ngawang Tenzin (ngag dbang bstan 'dzin, b. 1590) and grandfather Drukpa Kunley were also all members of a collateral branch of the Gya family. Whereas the Zhabdrung and his family descended from Sherab Sengge (shes rab seng+ge, 1371-1391/2), Drukpa Kunley and his line originated from Sherab Sengge's brother Yeshe Rinchen (ye shes rin chen, 1364-1413).

Mipham Tshewang Tenzin had received his monastic vows at Ralung at age seventeen from Mipham Chogyal—the grandfather of the Zhabdrung. When Zhabdrung arrived in

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<sup>15</sup> Tradition maintains that during the eighth rabjung, Drukpa Kunley came to Tango and prayed that his lineage would come to control the site in the future. See Kuenleg, 6.

Bhutan in 1616 without a place to stay long-term, Mipham Tshewang Tenzin offered the Zhabdrung the Tango (rta mgo) temple near Thimphu.<sup>16</sup> Tango was one of the first sites of Drukpa Kagyu Buddhism in Bhutan, founded when the 12<sup>th</sup> century master Phajo Drugom Zhigpo (pha jo 'brug sgom zhig po, 1184-1251; Figure 19) experienced a vision of his tutelary deity Tamdrin (rta mgrin, Skt. Hayagriva), in the nearby cliff face.<sup>17</sup> Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje had dispatched Phajo as one of many Drukpa 'ambassadors' sent southward in the hopes of establishing a network of patrons for the nascent doctrine in new territory, an endeavor in which Phajo was more than successful.

Mipham Tsewang Tenzin is in fact considered a reincarnation of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo. Further, Mipham was the revealer, or terton (gter ston) of Phajo's biography.<sup>18</sup> Mipham's revelation of this document proved timely for the Zhabdrung, offering him a way of accounting for the long-standing patterns of patronage that had linked Drukpa Kagyu communities in Tibet and Bhutan since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In the intervening centuries between the arrivals of Phajo, and later the Zhabdrung, an extensive network of Drukpa Kagyu patronage had been cultivated and maintained throughout

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<sup>16</sup> Dargye, 129. See also Kuenleg, "A Brief History of Tango Monastery".

<sup>17</sup> Dargye, 129. The Zhabdrung undertook retreat there in 1618 in order to perform black magic rites against the Tsang Desi (gtsang sde srid) for the throne at Ralung (rwa lung). This ritual activity and its intended target could indicate that at this time, the Zhabdrung may have hoped to eventually return to Tibet and reassume control of Ralung.

<sup>18</sup> In one source, the discovery was attributed to his father, ngag dbang bstan 'dzin (1520-1590). (See pad+ma tshe dbang, *'Brug gi rgyal rabs*, 619.) Yet as pointed out by Dargye and Sorensen (xii, note 20), Michael Aris presents a strong argument that mi pham tshe dbang bstan 'dzin was the revealer of said biography. (*Bhutan*, 170, 319). See also Ardussi, "House of 'Ob-mtsho", 23 fn. 28.

western Bhutan through a near-continuous exchange of Drukpa teachers, students, and patrons. This network and the patrons who sustained it offered the Zhabdrung necessary support upon his arrival, and Mipham's through the discovery and (re) introduction of the terma assisted in attesting to the centuries of Drukpa links in the region, thereby substantiating the necessity and propriety of a modern Drukpa's presence in the region while simultaneously connecting Zhabdrung to Phajo. For such a document to be discovered and disseminated to the populace would help provide additional legitimacy for the Zhabdrung, connecting him to the earliest Drukpa Kagyu master to create a lasting legacy in Bhutan, and also to Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje.

Further, according to Bhutanese tradition, Mipham Tsewang Tenzin shared a consort with Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.<sup>19</sup> Her name was Damcho Tenzin (dam chos bstan 'dzin), who a descendant of Phajo via the Changangkha lineage established by his son Nyima. Zhabdrung had been unable to produce and heir with Damcho Tenzin, and so he gifted her to Mipham and himself went on to start a relationship with Goekar Drolma, the mother of Jampel Dorje. The relationship between Mipham and Damcho Tenzin further strengthened his affiliation with Phajo.<sup>20</sup> The significance of their relationship took on a greater meaning when Mipham Tsewang Tenzin fathered Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1798) with Damcho Tenzin.<sup>21</sup> From the moment of his birth, Tenzin Rabgye was expected to take over for the Zhabdrung. Jampel

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<sup>19</sup> See Stein *Vie et Chants*. Also see Namgyal, 94.

<sup>20</sup> See Stein *Vie et Chants* and Namgyal, 94 and Aris, *Bhutan*, 170. The Changangkha lineage originated with Phajo's son Nyima, who founded a temple of the same name in Thimphu.

<sup>21</sup> For brief studies on the wide-ranging impact of Tenzin Rabgye in Bhutanese history and culture, see Ardussi, "Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1696), Artist Ruler of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Bhutan" and "Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye and the Founding of Taktsang Lhakhang".

Dorje had already been discovered to be incompetent to succeed his father, and thus Tenzin Rabgye, who would eventually become the Fourth Druk Desi, was the next best option.

Thus Mipham Tsewang Tenzin played a number of roles: first, he was the grandson of Drukpa Kunley, an important Buddhist master who had cultivated ties in Bhutan; second, he was the revealer of Phajo's namthar, which served to authenticate the pre-Zhabdrung Drukpa Kagyu presence in the region; third, Mipham received his monastic vows from Zhabdrung's grandfather; fourth, the connection between him and the Zhabdrung was compounded by the sharing of a consort from the Phajo lineage; fifth, it was Mipham who offered Tango as a home base for Zhabdrung upon his arrival in the area, and sixth, Mipham and his family were blood descendants of the Gya lineage.<sup>22</sup>

## **Conclusions**

While the Zhabdrung was arguably first and foremost a Buddhist master, given circumstances at the time, he had to concurrently establish national governance and security, and become adept in the political concerns of cultivating a nascent nation. In his article "Formation of the Bhutanese State", John Ardussi points out that the Tsang Khenchen-authored biography of the Zhabdrung was intended "to justify his subject's state-building mission and political position with respect to Tibet. The archetypes of legitimate governance from which [Tsang Khenchen] drew were those that were accepted more or less implicitly by the Tibetan intelligentsia, namely Buddhist canonical and *gter-ma* precedents embedded within

received scripture [and] the hallowed kings of the Tibetan monarchy...”<sup>23</sup>

As Ardussi points out, Tsang Khenchen’s biography of the Zhabdrung—a text which was likely written at roughly the same time this thangka was painted—offers a model of the personalities and histories invoked in order to present the legitimacy of an individual and his rule. And, I feel, why would such mechanisms be limited to texts alone? During this crucial period of nation-building, this particular Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa thangka composition seems to echo the model offered in Tsang Khenchen’s biography of Zhabdrung—drawing upon early Tibetan kings, Indian religious masters and the key founders of Drukpa-related traditions, yet in this painting those individuals are presented in juxtaposition with a number of personalities who were active and necessary during Zhabdrung’s life, and who offered him legitimacy and support, and further, hopes of the continuation of his branch of the Gya lineage.

I suggest that this thangka is working through the same mechanisms used in Tsang Khenchen’s biography and other texts—as using a series of important figures throughout history to solidify himself as the rightful ruler of Bhutan, and further, recalling textual precedents through the use of inscriptional epithets that trigger recollection of other masters, conflating them with bodhisattvas, and thus equating their worldly actions to the actions of enlightened beings, just as texts do when invoking the various titles and names assigned to significant individuals. I also feel that there is clear evidence for heavy reliance on Gya lineage holders in the composition, deliberately stepping away from sole dependence on the Drukchen incarnation lineage, and that these choices are meant as visual evidence for the supremacy of the Zhabdrung’s combined physical and

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<sup>23</sup> Ardussi, “Formation”, 16

## *A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka*

spiritual links to Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje, the founder of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition. These choices would also present the Zhabdrung as the only right and logical choice to lead, given these complex lineal and spiritual relationships, an aim congruent with the early years of the Zhabdrung's empire in Bhutan. I believe that this thangka could date to the period between the maturity of Jampel Dorje yet before he was deemed incompetent, made in those late 17<sup>th</sup> century years when it was still the hope that the physical heir of the Zhabdrung would be able to assume power, and perhaps even when the Zhabdrung's death was being kept secret while a legitimate heir was being sought.

When this thangka is considered against the list proffered by David Jackson, it seems there can be some elaboration upon the nascent definition of those individuals that can constitute a Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa composition. The divergent figures who appear serve to illustrate the physical lineage of Zhabdrung, what his family and spiritual pedigree proclaims about him, the righteousness of his rule and the circumstances that gave rise to it. Thus, in this single work we see multiple strands weaving together—Indian Buddhist masters, early Tibetan kings, and key founders of the Kagyu and Drukpa Kagyu traditions, yet these are compounded by and juxtaposed with comparatively unexpected individuals, interlacing physical and spiritual lineages, yet all of whom in their own way culminate in the central, dominant form of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Enlightened beings conflated with masters, enlightened kings that changed the course of their nations, and enlightened artists who have presented these complex relationships in an elegant and effective way.

This single piece from the National Museum was shared in the hopes of illustrating how the careful examination of art and iconography can bring a painting to life, illuminating the ways in which identities can be constructed or exposed, and reveal how history can be communicated—and sometimes, how history can be made. It is only through informed and

careful examination that we can begin to help uncover the rationale behind these important and meaningful works.

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**Photographs**



Figure 1: National Museum of Bhutan, Paro. Photo: Ariana Maki



Figure 2: Padma Karpo (1527-1592), 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ground mineral pigment on cotton, H: 160 x W: 91.5 cm., Collection of Rubin Museum of Art, C2006.2.6 (HAR 65622).  
Reproduced with permission of the Rubin Museum of Art.



Figure 3: Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa, late 17<sup>th</sup> century,  
Ground mineral pigment on cotton, H: 123 x W: 69 cm.,  
Collection of the National Museum of Bhutan, Paro.



Figure 4: Greyscale image of Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa with numbered figures.



Figure 5: Detail, Songtsen Gampo, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 6: Detail, Santarakshita and Trisong Detsen,  
Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 7: Detail, Naropa, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 8: Detail, Gampopa, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 9: Detail, Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 10: Detail, Ngagi Wangchuk, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 11: Yab Tenpai Nyima, ca. 18<sup>th</sup> century, Metal alloy with pigment, H: 18 cm W: 12 cm., Collection of the National Museum of Bhutan, Paro.



Figure 12: Detail, Pema Karpo, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 13: Detail, Pema Karpo and Gampopa, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 14: Detail, central section, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 15: Detail, Trisong Detsen, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 16: Detail, Jampel Dorje, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 17: Detail, Third Pawa Tsuglag Gyatso, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 18: Detail, Mipham Tshewang Tenzin, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 19: Phajo Drugom Zhigpo. Photo: Ariana Maki.

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## **Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo's Kurseong Years: A Note on Factors in the Foundation of a Modern Bhutanese Religious Community outside of Bhutan**

*Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa\**

In Kurseong, a small Himalayan town in the Darjeeling district of North Bengal, India, a small stupa sits perched in a village a small trek away from the main road connecting Darjeeling with the plains. The stupa itself is simple – only about one metre in height and width – and resembles many others in the area. The fresh coat of red, blue and yellow paint on its edges though suggests that the local community at least continue to revere it, and the establishment of a new monastery just a few meters away confirms that the site is regarded as sanctified. However, the area is not associated with Guru Rinpoche, or any other major Tantric deity, or local protector. Instead, the sanctification of the site comes from the fact that it was home to a highly regarded religious master in the area: a Buddhist teacher and meditator known as Lopen Sonam Zangpo (*Slop dpon Bsod nams bzang po*, 1892-1984)<sup>1</sup>, the very same Sonam Zangpo who is known as Meme Lama (*Me me bla ma*) in Bhutan, and who is regarded as one of the most important religious figures of twentieth century Bhutanese history.

The stupa at Kurseong remains as the only physical relic of the community established there by Lama Sonam Zangpo in the early to mid-1960s. What is significant about this site for

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\* Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the University of Alabama.

<sup>1</sup> These dates of birth and death are contested by different sources. The other most commonly given date of birth is 1888, and date of death is 1983. The dates used in this article are based on my interviews with several of Lama Sonam Zangpo's students.

Bhutanese studies is that firstly, it represents a site outside of Bhutan that has become regarded as sacred due to its association with a modern Bhutanese religious figure. Secondly, Lama Sonam Zangpo is often considered to have established communities exclusively in Bhutan after his return there from studying in Tibet in around the 1930s. This site is therefore an important piece of evidence of an often forgotten chapter in his life, and in the history of modern Bhutanese Buddhism.



Stūpa constructed at Kurseong, Darjeeling District, West Bengal by Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo, c. 1960s; photo by author, 2007.

The histories of religious sites and the communities connected to them can be frustrating to trace out: they may be shrouded in mythology without fixed dates, or perhaps details regarding the early human involvement with the sites

remain vague or uncertain. However, as the literature regarding sacred space in Tibetan cultural areas has established, sites often become sacred through a gradual process, that begins with the establishment of a community in an area associated with a deity or important historical figure. The site at Kurseong represents an important example of a developing sacred site that has been rendered sanctified by the residence of Lama Sonam Zangpo. The current efforts to establish a monastery there demonstrates that it is continued significance and appropriateness for spiritual practice: however, the stūpa is all that remains physically of Lama Sonam Zangpo's time in Kurseong. This paper is a brief attempt to fill in this period of Lama Sonam Zangpo's life, and to provide an exploration of some of the factors that influence the development of religious communities.

### **The Life of Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo**

Lama Sonam Zangpo was one of the most important figures in twentieth century Bhutanese Buddhism. He was noteworthy as a teacher of the Royal family, and also due to his status as one of the main students, or heart sons (*thugs sras*) of the influential trans-Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist teacher, Tokden Shakya Shri (*Rtogs ldan Śākya shrī*, 1853-1919). Later in life, Lama Sonam Zangpo developed his own trans-Himalayan following, with students travelling from as far away as Ladakh and Kinnaur to study with him in Bhutan.

Lama Sonam Zangpo was born in 1892 into an important family of Kurto Ruling (*Kur toe rus gling*), and apparently had links to the current Royal family (at that time, the family of the Trongsa Ponlop). He was born during a period of rapid historical change for Bhutan, but from a young age is said to only have been interested in religion. This led him to join the monastic community at Lhundruptse Dzong (*Lhun grub tshe'i rdzong*) where he studied for a short time before moving to Tharpa Ling (*Thar pa'i gling*) in Bumthang (*Bum thang*) to

perform his preliminary practices. (Nyoshul Khenpo, 2005: 443)

According to Nyoshul Khenpo's account of his life, which appears to be one of the most complete written accounts available, Lama Sonam Zangpo travelled to Kham (*Khams*) to study with Shakya Shri in his teens and stayed there for "more than 12 years." (Nyoshul Khenpo, 2005: 443) If we take twelve years as a guide, it would seem that he travelled to Khams around 1907-1908, which would have made him around sixteen years old at time of departure. He studied with Shakya Shri in Kham and Tsari (*Tsa ri*) until his teacher's death in 1919. To commemorate Shakya Shri, Shakya Shri's sons and students renovated major stupas in the Kathmandu Valley between 1919-1921, and Lama Sonam Zangpo was a crucial actor in these renovations. He also became a highly renowned teacher within Shakya Shri's community, and even held the title of "heart son" (*thugs sras*), which was reserved for only the most close and capable of Shakya Shri's students.

After his teacher's death, Lama Sonam Zangpo taught for a number of years in Shakya Shri's community at Kyiphuk (*Skyid phug*) in Tsari before returning to Bhutan. There he quickly became a highly acclaimed teacher, and founded a unique religious community.

### **The Nature of Lama Sonam Zangpo's Community**

Lama Sonam Zangpo's community did not have a fixed monastery or retreat centre: instead, it was unique in that it moved between sites every few years. In this way, it appeared to have been similar to a Gar (*sgar*), a roaming religious encampment that was common in Eastern Tibet. (Jacoby, 2007: 122) The community remained constantly on the move, setting up at sites that were geographically remote and often long abandoned, and according to several of his students,

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Lama Sonam Zangpo did not remain anywhere for more than three years.<sup>2</sup> Nyoshul Khenpo describes his movements in the following terms:

Over time, [Lama Sonam Zangpo] planted the victory banner of spiritual practice at all of the principal holy sites and places of accomplishment in Tibet and Bhutan— Tsari, the hidden valley of Khenjong, Takstang in Bhutan, and so forth— never deviating from a schedule of four practice sessions daily. Sonam Zangpo did not spend a single day in the worldly atmosphere of towns and villages, but instead frequented mountainsides and isolated places, applying himself one-pointedly to spiritual practice focusing on the very essence... He conferred on many fortunate students the advice and instructions of profound teachings such as the Six Yogas of Naropa and Dzogchen. (Nyoshul Khenpo, 2005:444)

According to Rinzin Wangchuk, between 1939 and 1961 Lama Sonam Zangpo lived in an area known as Khempa Jong (*Mkhan pa ljongs*), a hidden land of Guru Rinpoche in Eastern Bhutan that was discovered by Pema Lingpa (*Pad ma gling pa*) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This is an extremely remote area.

According to the religious interpretation Khempa Jong exists even today as a baeyul imperceptible to the outside world. The site, where Khempa Jong was believed to be hidden, [sic] is located in the extreme northern reaches of the Kurichu, nearly three days walk from Lhuentse Dzong. The area is remote, accessible only by a crude and extremely risky path. About 50 wooden ladders sustain the path on the slippery and

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to several of Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo's students, Se Rinpoche (Manali, India) and Lama Thinley Namgyal (Kathmandu, Nepal) for insights regarding their teacher.

steep parts and across numerous streams. One false step on these ladders could plunge the traveler into steep gorges. Horses can be used only on the first day. (Wangchuk, 2004:47)

### **Lama Sonam Zangpo's Movement to Kurseong**

The fate of this site, which is now described as “inhospitable and dominated by bamboo groves,” is revealed in the following description by Rinzin Wangchuk: in Lama Sonam Zangpo's time it was

... a community of about 62 households, all devoted to religious pursuits. Dzongsar Jamyang Khentse was born there on June 18, 1961. Four months after his birth the place, quite close to the Tibetan border, was vacated because of the tensions resulting from the Sino-Indian war in 1962. Dzongsar Jamgyang [sic] Kh[y]entse recalls that there was a complete village when his parents and grandparents were living here, and today everything has disappeared like a fairy tale. (Wangchuk, 2004:48)

The Sino-Indian War was therefore the temporal context that influenced the shift of Lama Sonam Zangpo's community yet again. In 1962 Lama Sonam Zangpo made the interesting decision to establish a new base at Kurseong, over the Bhutanese border, rather than elsewhere in Bhutan. His motives for doing this are unclear. Perhaps this decision was in response to the uncertain geo-political situation on the border; or, he may have received an invitation from one of his many students.

Lama Sonam Zangpo's activities at Kurseong appear to mirror his activities elsewhere. He spent most of his time meditating, and several times a day would call students individually or in groups for teaching sessions. Locals recall that he lived in a

simple hut. Remarkably, the hut's appearance has been documented for posterity in the 1966 documentary *The Message of the Tibetans*, made by French filmmaker Arnaud Desjardins. This amazing film documents the material realities of life in India for newly arrived Tibetans in the early 1960s. Lama Sonam Zangpo is seen several times in the documentary, and provides meditation instructions on watching the mind to the director in the section regarding Tantra. This resource is extraordinary for its depiction of Lama's simple living conditions, as well as its recording of several students demonstrating yoga practices under Lama Sonam Zangpo's counsel.

The film also portrays the local community: not only are Bhutanese and other Himalayan students of Lama Sonam Zangpo shown circumambulating the newly finished stūpa (which is the same that remains there today), but local patrons, including Newari, Subba, Lepcha, Sikkimese and Tibetan visitors, are also known visiting him there.

**Conclusion: The End - and the Beginning - of the Kurseong Community, and the Influence of Modern Transnational History on Local Sacred Site Foundation**

After approximately three years at Kurseong, Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo returned to Bhutan. There he continued to actively teach up until his death in 1984. He remains a revered Bhutanese religious figure, and his students and family members (most famously, his grandson Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche) remain crucial figures in the Bhutanese Buddhist establishment. His influence stretches well beyond Bhutan however. Most notably, in the 1970s he was responsible for printing and distributing his teacher Shakya Shri's *Collected Works*. His contribution to the ongoing vitality and promulgation of this lineage through ensuring the continuity of its textual corpus cannot be overstated.

As well as his role in preserving Shakya Shri's lineage, Lama Sonam Zangpo's years in Kurseong demonstrate that he was highly regarded by diverse Himalayan communities in his own right. However, his spiritual efficacy was also susceptible to the ebbs and flows of broader transnational history during his life, as demonstrated by the movement of his community from Khempa Jong to Kurseong in late 1961 in response to tensions on the Sino-Indian border. Though he only remained there for three to four years, he left a lasting impression: today, almost fifty years later, local villagers remember him with great affection for his warmth and kindness. His spiritual power is also held in esteem, as evidenced by the efforts of a Nyingmapa lama to build a new monastery in the environs on the site that was previously occupied by his simple hut. Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo's settlement at Kurseong was transitory, like his other retreats, and was not intended to be permanent. However, the lasting symbol of the stupa suggests that he set in motion the development of an intriguing Bhutanese sacred site outside of Bhutan. Given the esteem in which he is held elsewhere in the Eastern Himalayas, including in Sikkim and Arunachal, this site may not be alone, and could be just one in a network of modern, developing sacred spaces associated with Lama Sonam Zangpo that confirm his status as a crucial trans-Himalayan Buddhist teacher.

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## **From Mount Tsari to the *tsechu*: Bhutan's Sacred Song and Lute Dance**

*Elaine Dobson*

For a few days in October, in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, the population of the tiny country increases two-fold as visitors from neighbouring countries in the sub-continent, and from across the world, gather to witness one of the great, annual, Buddhist, three-to-five day, religious, dance-drama festivals or *tsechus*. A *tsechu*<sup>1</sup> celebrates the great deeds that were performed by the religious saint and teacher, Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche<sup>2</sup> or Ugyen Rinpoche). *Tsechus* are held on the tenth day of a lunar month. The exact month depends on the location. Every valley has its own *tsechu*, usually with some identifying traits. These festivals reinforce the social life of the community and offer opportunities for making or renewing friendships, having picnics and drinking, or trading. In Bhutan, villagers who have moved to the larger towns are expected to return for the festival and they will often sponsor a major part of it. *Tsechus* accrue status for the monasteries and villages that stage them, and spiritual merit for those who are their sponsors. The spectacular dances that form these *tsechus* are known as *cham*. The subjugation of evil and the purification and protection from demonic spirits are important themes in the *tsechu* and dances. These themes are usually interwoven with those that are morally instructive or didactic and those that proclaim the victory of Buddhism and the glory of Padmasambhava,

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· Senior Lecturer, School of Music, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

<sup>1</sup> Literally “day ten”.

<sup>2</sup> Literally “precious teacher”.

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Although many dances in Bhutan are thought to have originated from Indian Tantric dances or the animistic dances of the pre-Buddhist Bön religion, it is Padmasambhava who is acknowledged as introducing Tantric Buddhism and its ritual dances, or *cham*, into Bhutan in the eighth century. Padmasambhava is said to have received, via visions, instruction regarding the dances from a succession of deities. It is held that his method of converting and subduing the opponents of Buddhism was by performing rites, reciting mantras and performing a dance of subjugation in order to attract, and subsequently conquer, the local, angry gods. In Tibet, “Padmasambhava used dancing to chase away and eliminate demons that were preventing him from building the famous Samye monastery (775 CE). He again used dances when he was summoned to Bhutan to save the dying king, Sindhu Raja. When he arrived in the Bumthang valley [of Central Bhutan], Padmasambhava performed an entire series of dances in a wrathful form. The fearsome divinities . . . were subjugated and Sindhu Raja was restored to health”<sup>3</sup> and consequently made a vow to rebuild the temples and help the spread of Buddhism throughout the country. Padmasambhava also arranged the first festival (*tsechu*), of ritual dances in Bumthang. The eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche (of which Padmasambhava is the human form) were presented together with the eight forms of dance necessary to destroy evil powers

This article examines the *dramnyen cham* (Tib. *sgra snyan 'cham*), a sacred dance which is led by a *dramnyen* player, and the *choeshay*, a religious song also accompanied with dance, and it explores their connection with the founding and spread of the *Drukpa* (dragon) *Kagyü* branch of Vajrayana Buddhism in Bhutan.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Dompnier, “The Royal Academy of Performing Arts.” *Tashi Delek* (Nov-Dec. 2000) 14.

At the beginning of the thirteenth-century, monks from southern Tibet helped further establish the *drukpa kagyü* sect of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan. It is this that is specifically celebrated in the *dramnyen cham* and the *choeshay*. The *choeshay* is also associated with the saints Yeshe Dorji (1101-1175) and Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorji (1161-1211). These two saints are sometimes mistaken not only because of their similar names for one another, but also because of the similar miracles they performed in overcoming demons, and the description of their dances. However, the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* more specifically commemorate Tsangpa Gyare's victory over a demon, which was obstructing the entrance to a secret valley, on a famous pilgrimage route to Tsari Mountain, which is in Tibet and close to the northern border of Bhutan.

In the sixteenth century, the Bhutanese *drukpa* leader, Kunkhyen Pema Karpo, wrote a detailed narrative of Tsari that included descriptions of firstly, Yeshe Dorji's dance and song, and then Tsangpa Gyare and his subsequent pacification of the demon.

After taking hold of the *gling[-chen]*<sup>4</sup> in his right hand and a walking stick in his left, Yeshe Dorji performed a dance . . . [and sang the following]:

This supreme place, glorious Tsari,  
Is not wandered by all and sundry.  
I have abandoned worldly activities,  
I have self-luminosity of mind itself.

It's a place to fling down life and limb.  
It's a place to remove hindrances whose causes are  
outer and inner.

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<sup>4</sup> A tall herb like wild onion that the Tsari people believed bestowed them with paranormal powers when eaten.

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It's a place to make an analysis of cyclic existence  
(*samsara*).

It's a place to weigh ascetics [and their  
accomplishment] in the balance.

It's a place for thoroughly understanding the mind.

It's a place to preserve the clear light with the  
mind.

It's a place to receive the two levels of paranormal  
powers.

This supreme place, glorious Tsari,

Is not some minor monastery up behind a village.

This *gling-chen*, which is a paranormal power[-  
producing] substance,

Is not the spittle for smashing demons and  
demonesses?

The clerical siblings of this assembled Vajra[yana]  
family,

Are not [the type of] ascetics who roam around the  
marketplace.

Yeshe Dorji made those words resonate in his mind.  
Because he [then] struck his walking stick on a rock, it  
went in as if being pushed into mud. Even nowadays  
the imprint of that [stick] is still found there.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Padma dKar-po (1527-1592), *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'I ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. In *Collected Works (gSun-'bum) of Kunmkhyen Padma-dkar-po*, vol.4. Darjeeling, 1973, ff. 207-74 and \_\_\_\_\_ *Gnas chen tsa ri tra'I ngo mtshar snang pad dkar legs bshad*. Darjeeling, 1982 translated by Toni Huber in "What Is A Mountain? An Ethnohistory of Representation and Ritual at Pure Crystal Mountain in Tibet." Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Canterbury, 1993: 73-74.

Kunkhyen Pema Karpo's account of Tsangpa Gyare, and his conquering of the demon blocking the route to Tsari, describes it as happening "one generation later" than Yeshe Dorji's.

. . . when gTsang-pa rGya-ras [Tsangpa Gyare] was sitting in meditation at Jo-mo Kha-rag . . . the sky-goer Seng-ge'I gDing-pa-can appeared to him on three different occasions and prophesied, "rGya-ras-pa, because the time has come to open the door to the place of Tsari, go there!" He thought, "Is this really necessary?" and as a result, . . . at about sunrise on the mountain peak of Kha-rag, the great accomplished one (*mahasiddha*) Gling-ras-pa<sup>6</sup> appeared in a dwelling tent of five kinds of rainbows and [said]:

rGya-ras my son, hurry your meditation without delay!

In the *mandala* which is manifest as Tsari,  
There is the sky-goer's rDo'i-snying-phug (Stone Heart Cave).

There is *gling-chen* which bestows paranormal powers when eaten.

There is the empowerment of the mother-goddesses and sky-goers.

The Buddha that requires no cultivation is in that place.<sup>7</sup>

After that, Tsangpa Gyare announced his intention of going to Tsari. The most important part of the journey, as far as the *choeshay* is concerned, occurs when they reached "Frog Turquoise Lake where the path was blocked by a terrible frog

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<sup>6</sup> Gling-ras-pa Padma rDorje (1128-88) the teacher of Tsangpa Gyare.

<sup>7</sup> Padma dKar-po in Huber, 74-75.

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as strong as a yak, and it would not let them pass.” Without hesitation Tsangpa Gyare leapt onto the frog’s back, trampled it violently and it changed into a boulder and it stayed that way. Clear footprints appeared on the boulder and the demon was overpowered.

Although Tsangpa Gyare performed many such miracles, it is this story that is usually related in association with the *choeshay* and its dance of subjugation.<sup>8</sup>

An account of the story is told by Ap Dawpel, a former monk and retired, Bhutanese court musician and painter.<sup>9</sup>

When the religious and family friends of Tsangpa Gyare arrived at Tsari they met a demon in the form of a frog that turned into a yak and prevented the party from proceeding. In order to remove this obstacle Tsangpa Gyare jumped on the yak’s back and performed a *dramnyen* dance and said ‘If anybody wants to compare himself to me, the son of the glorious Drukpa Lineage, let him come’. Then the frog changed itself into a rock but, in spite of this, the saint, as if the rock was mud, impressed his foot into it. Thus the frog was subdued.

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<sup>8</sup> Information from the National Museum in Paro also tells this story describing the demon as “an underground serpent spirit”. A similar story appears in Tashi Wangmo [F.P.Imaeda] *Thimphu Tshechu: Festival Programme*. Thimphu: Bhutan Tourism Corporation, [1998] 32-33 and Dompnier, Robert, “The Royal Academy of Performing Arts.” *Tashi Delek*. Nov-Dec. 2000: 12-27. Matthieu Ricard in *Monk Dances of Tibet*, Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1999: 17-18, quotes from the “biography of Tsangpa Gyare” (no details given) which describes the demon as a “turtle as big as a yak” and the lake as “the lake of the turquoise turtle”. Given that Tibet is land-locked, ‘frog’ is the more realistic translation.

<sup>9</sup> Ap Dawpel was the *champen* (mask dance master) in Talo, his hometown. He is regarded as the ‘father of Bhutanese music’.

It offered its life to serve Tsangpa Gyare and he accepted. The frog was established as the guardian deity of that place, the Turquoise Lake, and Tsari was opened up for pilgrimages. Even today, Buddhists undertake pilgrimages to Tsari, and by simply reaching that place are said to achieve enlightenment.<sup>10</sup>

The *choeshay* and *dramnyen cham* dancers' costume shows a connection with this story. It goes back the time of Tsangpa Gyare who wore it as he subdued the demon.<sup>11</sup> This costume, of the armed Tibetan monks who acted as the bodyguard to the *drukpa* high Lamas, consists of elaborate and heavy, woollen clothes; a long black, red-lined, Tibetan-style robe, or *chuba*, together with long, colourful, felt boots. The leaders of the dance will add a brown folded jacket. Under the *chuba* a red, yellow or white brocade or striped shirt, with red and gold brocade collar and red and white or green cuffs, is worn. A coiled headband of red, yellow, green, blue and white stripes represents the traditional helmet. The colours represent the five Tibetan elements, fire, ether, earth, water and air. Three objects are carried around the waist. They are a warrior's sword, a prayer box, which is decorated with one of Buddhism's eight auspicious symbols such as the endless knot (representing the endless cyclic existence), and a small banner (another auspicious symbol representing victory). Two small gold and silver, intricately decorated shields, which can be round or square-shaped (approx. 15 cm across), are worn on the chest and back. From these hang a gold and silver "face of majesty" (Skt. *kirtimuka*). The *kirtimuka* is often

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<sup>10</sup> Ap Dawpel, personal interview, 19 September, 1998. See also Victor Chan, *Tibet Handbook: A Pilgrimage Guide* (Chico, California: Moon, 1994) 210-211

<sup>11</sup> Information collected from the National Museum of Bhutan, Paro. There, a full costume and the very large *dramnyen*, used in the Paro *tsechu* for this dance, are held.

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found on armour, helmets, shields and weapons of war.<sup>12</sup> A large bone ring is worn on the right-hand thumb. Bone ornaments are associated with rites of forceful activity.<sup>13</sup> A turquoise ring and prayer beads are worn on the left-hand.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the saints of the Nyingmapa sect, Dorje Lingpa (1346 – 1405), and Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), also used dancing to subjugate demons and overcome obstacles that were preventing the spread of Buddhism in Bhutan. They built monasteries, discovered many religious treasures and composed the dances that they had received in visions of Guru Rinpoche's paradise.<sup>14</sup> However, it was the arrival of the great leader, organiser and legislator, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651), that brought the *drukpa* sect to its political and religious peak at the time of the unification of Bhutan [1616].<sup>15</sup> Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel composed both the words and music for the *tsechu* dances that are performed today, including the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay*. The dances that were performed in various great monasteries throughout the country were documented. Ngawang Namgyel's work, *Gar-Thig-Yang Sum*, indicates how religious dances and popular dances should be choreographed and performed.

Any *cham* performance is primarily a meditation in movement and an offering for the deities. Through his actions, augmented by chants, music and costume, the dancer assumes the role of the deity he is representing, thereby elevating his awareness to a higher spiritual plane. Every

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Beer, *The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999) 69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 216, 318.

<sup>14</sup> Christian Schicklgruber, and Françoise Pommaret eds. *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods* (New Delhi: Bookwise, 1997) 188-189.

<sup>15</sup> Françoise Pommaret, *Bhutan*. Rev. ed. Trans. Elizabeth Booz. Geneva: Editions Olizane, 1994: 98.

gesture (Skt. *mudra*) the dancer makes is not only symbolic, but has power in itself. Padmasambhava is believed to have made rocks explode and the Tibetan king's robe to catch fire by the power of his gestures.<sup>16</sup> Only monks or the male members of the King's special dance troupe from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts are permitted to perform the *cham* and the *dramnyen cham* and the dance that accompanies the *Choeshay* are no exception. The reason for the prohibition of female performers in this dance can be explained by the sacred nature of the dance and the fact that women were banned from entering the upper Tsari pilgrimage circuit.<sup>17</sup>

Dasho Sithel Dorji gives the words of the *choeshay* (song) in his *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Mask Dances*.<sup>18</sup> The words also describe in detail the movements for the accompanying *cham* (dance). They are divided into eleven "Steps" or stanzas: 1. Chos zhay [Choeshay], 2. Receiving Scarf, 3. Coming of the Pious One, 4. Has Come and Arrived, 5. The Rainbow-coloured Flower, 6. The Peaceful One, 7. The Magical Lasso, 8. The Rainbow-coloured Peacock, 9. The Outer Boundary Wall, 10. The Chinese Lady (Jaza Amai Samdrup), 11. Tashi, The Good Fortune. The dance movement descriptions at the end of every stanza, except for the last, are identical.

Right turns, three and three,  
Left turns, three and three.  
One right, one left;  
One shift, two shift, three shift,

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<sup>16</sup>Jamyang Norbu, "cham: the sacred dance of tibet," *Dranyen* 8, 1 (1984) 7.

<sup>17</sup>Huber, 140-154.

<sup>18</sup>Dasho Sithel Dorji, *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Mask Dances*, trans, Dorji Wangchuk (Thimphu, Bhutan: KMT Press, 2001) 2-10.

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And thereafter, form a circle and finish.<sup>19</sup>

John Levy, gave the following translation of the words. Levy presumed that these words referred to the Zhabrung. They are clearly celebratory and could equally refer to Padmasambhava or Tsangpa Gyare.

The songs of glorious Bhutan/  
Have met their match!/  
It is said that he is the greatest of all./  
Happiness and joy arise!/  
Happiness and joy arise!/  
Happiness and joy arise!/  
Happiness and joy arise!

The lamas and noble monks/  
Have met their match!/  
It is said that he is the greatest of all!/  
Happiness and joy arise!/  
Happiness and joy arise!/  
Happiness and joy arise!/  
Happiness and joy arise!

The chief in their mansions/  
Have met their match!/  
It is said that he is the greatest of all./  
Happiness and joy arise!<sup>20</sup>

The words are similar to the first stanza of words given by Dasho Sithel Dorji for the *choeshay*.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dasho Sithel Dorji, 2-10.

<sup>20</sup> Levy, *Tibetan Buddhist Rites From The Monasteries Of Bhutan, Vol 3: Temple Rituals and Public Ceremonies*. Liner notes. [1971] LLST 7257: 5.

<sup>21</sup> These words should not be confused with those for the *dramnyen cham*, although Levy describes both *choeshay* and *dramnyen cham* under the headings of "Dramnyen Chozhe". Levy also says there are "12 verses" to the song. One might assume he was referring to either an introductory offering or concluding dedication verse in his calculation. These are part of Buddhist practice.

**First Step - Chos zhay**

With the lineage sons of Palden Drukpa  
If anyone would challenge, let him come;  
From the right turn,  
Winnings, mental comfort, and happiness are  
achieved.

With the disciple monks of the various lamas  
If anyone would challenge, let him come;  
From the right turn,  
Winnings, mental comfort, and happiness are  
achieved.

With the various kings and his capitals  
If anyone would challenge, let him come;  
From the right turn,  
Winnings, mental comfort, and happiness are  
achieved.

Right turns, three and three etc.

The fifth stanza refers directly to the Zhabdrung.

**Fifth Step – the Rainbow-coloured Flower**

There is fortune where the rainbow-coloured  
flowers bloom;  
The garden is filled with their rays.  
There is fortune where the rainbow-coloured  
flowers flourish:  
Offer them to Zhabdrung, the Precious One.  
All the rainbow-coloured flowers,  
Blossoming into a thousand petals.  
Right turns, three and three, etc.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Dasho Sithel Dorji, 5.

## *Bhutan's Sacred Song and Lute Dance*

The *dramnyen cham*, is a dance that proclaims the victory of Buddhism over obstacles or negative forces. The composition of the words and music is again attributed to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. The dance is also a notable exception to the general exclusion of stringed instruments in monastic music in Bhutan, and is usually the first or final dance of a *tsechu*. The outstanding feature of this dance is that a single performer plays the *dramnyen*, while dancing alongside others in a circle.

The Bhutanese *dramnyen*, is a long-necked, fretless, double-waisted lute. It is also the most ornate and colourful of the Himalayan lutes. It is painted, or carved and painted, with religious symbols, such as Dharma wheel, the Three Jewels, and Yangchenma – the goddess of melody – and cloud motifs. Its peg box is a distinctive C shape with a carved finial of the head of a *chusing*, a sea monster. Sometimes long tassels are hung from the *chusing's* horns making its appearance even more frightening. Although the *dramnyen* is regarded as a secular instrument and stringed instruments are not part of the monastic orchestra, *dramnyens* are depicted on *thankas* (religious wall-hangings), or placed on the altar as an offering. Sharchop Gyalpo (Skt. Dritarashtra), the guardian king of the eastern direction, is identified in religious iconography by the *dramnyen* he carries. The *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* are instances when the *dramnyen* is permitted to be played in the monastery or *dzong*, albeit only in the courtyard of such.

Three different performances of the *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* are the focus of this study:

1. an audio recording, made by John Levy in 1971, of part of the *dramnyen cham* and what he describes as the first and

third stanzas of the *choeshay* (which will be referred to as Levy),<sup>23</sup>

2. a personal video recording of the complete rehearsal of the *dramnyen cham* performed on open ground outside the auditorium at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, for the *tsechu*, in 1998 (which will be referred to as the rehearsal), and

3. a personal video recording of the complete *choeshay* as performed at the public *tsechu* in Tashichodzong, Thimphu in 1998 (which will be referred to as the *tsechu*).

In the rehearsal, the structure of *dramnyen cham* and *choeshay* is based on three stanzas of a song, each of which is introduced or separated by the passages on the *dramnyen*. The all-male dancers wear their everyday, traditional dress as shown in the photo. The dance is continuous, even during the singing, but the *dramnyen* is not played during the singing. The dance begins with thirteen dancers, in two lines, who are led into the courtyard by the lone *dramnyen* player. While dancing, he plays a simple, three-note motif, C# F# C# (I), which is repeated twice, on the entry of each pair into the courtyard proper.<sup>24</sup> With their arms raised the dancers move forward to form a circle, while the melody pattern changes to a faster one in which each note is repeated three to six times (II). The dancers turn, smacking their arms and then stamping their feet. The melody then becomes more extensive encompassing the pentatonic scale, C# E F# G# B (III), and is repeated five times ending with a stamp. All the time the dancers are moving mostly clockwise, in a circle while slowly turning and bending forward and leaning backwards, moving to the centre of the circle and then back out, and turning again. The main part of this section develops the repeated-

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<sup>23</sup> Levy, op cit.

<sup>24</sup> The C# is a quarter-tone flat.

## *Bhutan's Sacred Song and Lute Dance*

note, pentatonic patterns so that the range extends down to the lower G#. The dance tempo quickens and a more regular metre is established. Apart from the introduction and coda, the cham can be interpreted in simple duple time. This can be discerned from the accent of the notes. The first note of each duple beat is accented by virtue of its longer duration and the plucking technique of the dramnyen player. This plucking technique involves the dramnyen's seven strings (thag) that are tuned in two double courses and one triple course. The seventh half-length string is tuned an octave above the middle unison strings. One of the other courses is usually tuned an octave apart e.g., g G c' c c f f. The instrument is plucked with a long (c. 6cm), tapered (from c.75mm wide), attached plectrum. The plucking motion is 'down-up' and one string of a course is plucked at a time i.e., one string is plucked with a downward motion and the other (usually of the pair) with an upward motion. The downward motion is always stronger and louder than the upward motion and dramnyen players in Bhutan emphasise this feature in both their explanation and performance. A summary of the first dance section exemplifies the complicated repetition of patterns and shifting pitch centres which carry through the entire piece.

Melodic patterns and repeats	Pitch centres	Characteristics
<b><i>Exposition</i></b>		
I (x 27)	C#	introduction, dancers enter and later raise alternate knees up high
II (x 5)	G#	repeated note patterns
I (x 5)	C#	
II (x 5)	G#	slight embellishment
I (x 5)	C#	A stamp at the end
II		expanded
I (x 5)		stamp

**Development**

III		widest range, some repeated-note patterns from II, dancers turning and bending
IV	C#	stamp, slow tempo, repeated C#s while dancers perform on the spot
	G#	Quicker dance tempo
V	C# - E	regular metre
VI	C# - F#	transition to song

Finally, when the dancers slowly lower their hands, the first stanza of the song begins.

Dasho Sithel Dorji gives a detailed translation, which clearly refers to the Zhabdrung. It begins with an offering, and then gives the three song stanzas.

**Melodious Words**

Offering to the Lama, the Buddha and the Dharma,  
Offering to the Three Precious Ones, the best refuge  
for all.

Before the Lord of Lhasa, again and again I offer  
this melody.

The Wordings of the Dranyen [sic] Dance  
The peaceful Sage who resides in the deep  
sandalwood forest of Druk Yul,  
His straight and immovable body is the life-tree of  
Palden Drukpa.

This Buddha who has woken up from the sleep of  
ignorance

Lives surrounded by five hundred Arhats  
Who have conquered the enemy of Delusions.

*Bhutan's Sacred Song and Lute Dance*

In the centre of this prosperous place, Druk, the  
peaceful land,  
Is found Gadhen Choeki Phodrang, the Happy,  
Religious Palace.  
Skilfully adorning his head with the Indian Payzha  
cap,  
Is one who looks like Lama Rechungpa:  
O, is it he or not?  
Please tell the truth; tell the truth.  
Is one who looks like Lama Rechungpa;  
O, is it he or not?

The thousand, golden pealed [petalled] lotus  
blooming in the Great Mountain Lake  
Is a prophecy that a thousand and two Buddhas  
will come to serve the sentient beings.  
The Blue Cuckoo is the happiest among birds.  
The reason for its melodies comes from its own  
mind.  
Let good luck come, the goddess of good luck.  
Let good luck come, the goddess of good luck.  
Let good luck come to the whole country in general;  
Let good luck come to this place in particular.  
This happy state is called Happiness; let it come  
from the right  
This peaceful state is called Peace; let it come from  
the left.  
The tunes for these three calls be matched in  
melody.<sup>25</sup>

This song belongs to the *shay* category i.e., a series of stanzas, sung in a folk-style that date from the seventeenth

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<sup>25</sup> Dasho Sithel Dorji, 12-14.

century armed monks.<sup>26</sup> However, this *shay* is also a religious song. The celebratory and triumphant music of this first stanza or sung section, consists of four phrases and a refrain, the latter being an extension of the preceding phrase and a link to the next: A A, B B, C C, Refrain, D, Refrain, D C, Refrain, D, Refrain, D, Refrain. The pitch centre, a lowered E, is three semitones above that of the *dramnyen* part. The phrases consist of decisive, ascending figures followed by longer, flowing descending ones. Often, the descending phrases are ornamented with lower mordent or appoggiatura embellishments (*nyenku*). Such decorations are also common in the *dramnyen* music. All three sung sections are heterophonic and often there is a softer echo on a repeated phrase. The second sung section is shorter than the first, but the third is much longer. To the continuing circular movement, new dance steps are added and these define each section. In the first, the dancers stand on one leg with the other raised (as if ready to stamp on the demon). In the second the dancers, while crouching, step over their feet, right over left and left over right, in what is known as a crossed *dorje* (diamond sceptre) step. These occur twice between the more staid dance steps and present the illusion of dancing and balancing on the back of the yak or frog demon. This dance also includes soft stamps and standing still (while the *dramnyen* plays fast repeated notes). The third sung section's dance is emotionally intense and slow moving. The dancers appear to be in a state of meditation. The defining step is where the dancers raise their arms, with one pointing forward, and they bend forward while standing on one leg. This illustrates the disciplining and controlling of the demon. At the end the dancers form one line, stamp and turn and come off in pairs, remove their headbands and bow,

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<sup>26</sup> For further information on *shay* see Sonam Kinga, "The Attributes and Values of Folk and Popular Songs, *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 3, 1 (Summer, 2001): 134-175.

## *Bhutan's Sacred Song and Lute Dance*

and finally the *dramnyen* player exits playing the three-note motif of the introduction.

In the *tsechu* performance of the *choeshay*, the *dramnyen* instrument and its solos were completely absent. The dancing and singing were continuous and, like the rehearsal, lasted thirty-two minutes. In the *tsechu* the *dramnyen cham* would have been performed separately, and on a previous day. The dance was the same as at the rehearsal except that the dancers entered in threes, which compensated for the larger circumference of the dancers' circle in the larger courtyard. The full costume was worn, which gave an additional illusion of power (over the demon), to the dance.

The more extensive ornamentation of the *dramnyen's* melodic lines in the Levy recording is the most noticeable difference between it and the other two simpler, later versions. Mordent-type patterns occur on almost every other beat. This is not character with older versions of traditional Bhutanese music in general. The simplification of such *nyenku* by younger players is noticeable in many recent performances of traditional Bhutanese songs and *dramnyen* accompaniments.

The symbolic association of costume, dance steps and gestures with Tsangpa Gyare's victory, and the *dramnyen* with a guardian deity, is obvious. But why is the *dramnyen* chosen to accompany this *cham* and *choeshay*? Firstly, it is well known that the *dramnyen's* beautiful sounds attract demons and that the role of the fearsome *chusing* on the *dramnyen's* peg box is to dispel any such demons.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, in most *cham* a cymbal player is the dance master who, through a repertoire of different techniques, including single and repeated note patterns, conveys the steps to the dancers. In the *dramnyen cham*, the *dramnyen* appears to take on the

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<sup>27</sup> Ap Dawpel, personal interview, 1998. *Dramnyen* means "beautiful sound"

cymbal's role, cueing the movements and keeping the dancers together with notes reminiscent of cymbal patterns. In the *choeshay* the *dramnyen* is no longer essential as the music of the song serves this guiding purpose. The third quality the *dramnyen* gives to the *cham* is that its sound provides a reference beat over which the dancers appear to have a floating movement. When the dancers' steps fall either side of the *dramnyen* note they 'transcend the beat' thereby emphasizing the meditational and mystical quality of the music. The *dramnyen*, then, not only serves the kinetic and rhythmic aspects of the dance, but it also acts as a symbolic transcendence of power over the demon and a link between the secular and sacred world.

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## Photographs



Figure 1: Tsari Mountain (Photo: Ray Kreisel)



Figure 2: Dramnyen cham costume, Thimphu tsechu, Bhutan  
(Photo: the author)

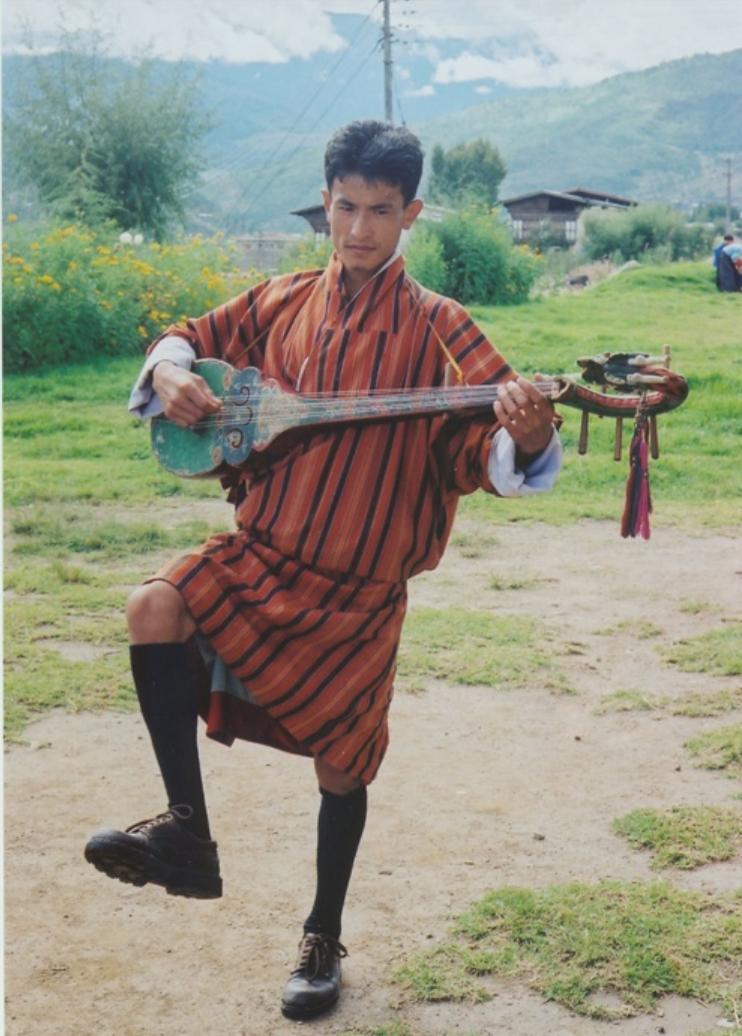


Figure 3: Dramnyen as played at the rehearsal, Royal Academy of Performing Arts, Thimphu (Photo: the author)



Figure 4: *Dramnyen cham* rehearsal at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, Chuba Chu, Bhutan. (Photo: the author)



Figure 5: *Dramnyen cham* performance at the Thimphu tsechu, Bhutan. (Photo: the author).



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# Invoking a Warrior Deity: A Preliminary Study of *Lo-ju*

*Dendup Chopel*

## Abstract

*Lo-ju*<sup>1</sup> (*blo 'gyur*) is an ancient *Pazap* (*dpa mdzangs pa*) festival celebrated every three years across the villages of Shar valley in Wangdue Phodrang. This study focuses primarily on its Chungsekha version.

This ritual of propitiating the *Dra-lha* (*dgra lha*)<sup>2</sup> is conducted for the wellbeing of the Shar community and the nation at large by invoking and appeasing the pantheon of Drukpa protective deities in the martial traditions of the yore. At a glance though, it would seem like a throwback into a warlike past with an enactment of a battle scene by the village *pazaps*.

An in-depth analysis reveals this to be a show of faith, courage and battle preparedness which, by default, is a

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· Researcher, the Centre for Bhutan Studies; correspondence:

<sup>1</sup> There are many colloquial terminologies for the festival though unfortunately how it was originally referred to as is now lost to us through verbal corruption due to a dearth of standard documentation.

<sup>2</sup> A ferocious protector (who as the narrative proclaims, likes the loud sound of warlike exclamations and howls) which in this case seems to be the deified spirit of Prince Wangchuck on whom was bestowed the dual protectorship of the religious and secular wellbeing of the Punakha valley where the Drukpa nationhood originated and to whom the people of Shar subscribed to after he miraculously survived the ordeal of being cast away in the Wangchhu river by Phajo as an authentication of his extraordinary being.

natural deterrent against possible hostilities. An attempt has been made to bear a historical perspective on this tradition which would otherwise seem like an odd cross between vainglorious machismo, anachronistic extravaganza and mindless superstition.<sup>3</sup>

The article is based on manuscript of the rituals, hagiography of eminent Drukpa ('brug pa) hierarchs and other socio-political publications though none of them directly relate to the actual rationale and period of the festival's institution. So, this work is primarily a heuristic recreation of the festival based on stray references found in these sources that are appropriately corroborated with existing myths, legends and other grapevines.

### **A Historical Perspective**

The peace and prosperity of Bhutan today has been wrought upon endless spate of hostilities that was characteristic of the years gone by. The country was a medley of fiefdoms ruled by minor lords who were often at loggerheads with each other. Among the first to launch a process of enduring peace and unity was the vanguard of the Drukpa order, Phajo Drugom Zhigpo (Pha-jo 'brug-sgom zhig-po, 1179-1247), popularly known as Tonden Phajo (stong ldan pha-jo) by the Bhutanese. From his seat in Tibet, Lam Phajo arrived in Bhutan at the age of forty in the year 1218. He came to Bhutan through Lingzhi and settled in Dodena from where he

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<sup>3</sup> It must be stated here though that this writing is a sincere effort on the part of an insider keen on preserving and, possibly, perpetuating a legacy. As such, the work may be biased by the author's partiality for his own root, people and culture. Rigorous scholarly standards have been sidestepped in favour of a more literarily ingenious recreation, with due glorification thrown in for good measure, of a heritage poor on scholarship and tottering on the brink of an ungainly disintegration.

systemically began working towards the formation of a Drukpa state as per the prophecy of Choje Tsangpa Gyarey (gTsang-pa rGya-ras, 1161-1211).

The process began in earnest by defeating the challenge mounted by his spiritual adversary Lama Lhakpa (bla ma lha-pa), then the theocratic ruler of the heartland of Western Bhutan. People who were reeling under his exorbitant taxes readily defected to Phajo's fold, effectively breaking his resistance. After bringing Western Bhutan under the Drukpa sphere of influence, he retreated from public life and spent his time in ascetic pursuit in Tango. His bequest unto his sons included lordship over the newly found Drukpa territories with the added responsibility of its guardianship in the interest of unification, harmony and prosperity. They were to protect its premises under all circumstances and from all manners of malignant intents and pursuits.

After his advent in the year 1616, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (Zhabs-drung Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal, 1594-1651) went about materializing an ecclesiocratic Drukpa state under the "Dual System of Religious and Temporal Affairs" (*chos-srid lugs-gnyis*) by unifying a stretch that was then essentially not-any-one-man's-land into a single nation-state that is now Bhutan. However, some factions saw this as Drukpa expansionism and put up armed resistance. The new Drukpa land also faced aggressions from Zhabdrung's detractors in Tibet who watched with unease as he worked himself into a position of authority in the increasingly powerful Bhutanese state to their immediate south. As a matter of fact, Tibet launched as many as seven attacks on Bhutan in that century alone.

Such a time must have necessitated the establishment of a Drukpa narrative giving much needed authority and legitimacy to Zhabdrung's quest of rallying around a people to unify and build a nation. Facing up to the odds against this

quest would have incurred nothing less than a divine intervention.

Fortunately, on both these counts, Zhabdrung would have had to look only as far back as the life and deeds of the much celebrated Drukpa Patriarch, Tonden Phajo. His divination of the Drukpa state had the authority and legitimacy of no less than the prophecies of Tsangpa Gyarey and Guru Rinpoche (Gu-ru Rin-po-che)<sup>4</sup>. The Drukpa state was then inevitable and Zhabdrung was the man to bring it about, the favoured subject of these saints that he was. The divine protection of the Drukpa state was readily entrusted in the supreme, albeit symbolic, authority of the Lineage Prince Wangchuck over the valley of Punakha and all causes emanating from there by the virtue of his father's empowered bequest.

Thus, the *pazap* traditions of Shar and Wang can be established as a verbatim ceremonial narrative of these developments in celebrating the nation building success under the aegis of the ultimate Drukpa hierarch Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Sui generis manuscripts of the *pazap*

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<sup>4</sup> Leadership in Bhutan is usually tied and linked by prophecies and so tracing ancestry and descent from traditional authority of power is a common practice. While depicting the highest source of influence that Phajo, pioneer of the Drukpa tradition, and his numerous scions had become, Yonten Dargay and Sorensen P.K. purport that 'For Zhabs-drung Ngag-dbang rnam-rgyal, when forced to flee Central Tibet in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was obvious to seek refuge in this southern stronghold and haven of the 'Brug-pas and eventually bring the whole of the Southern Land of the Four Approaches under his sway in the years ahead.' Alternatively, Michael Aris also argues that "It is clear, then, that powerful emotions can be unleashed in Bhutanese society when precedents and justifications are invoked in favour of violent means, ritual or otherwise, to protect the state from perceived dangers. These same emotions were at work in fostering political unity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries..."

ceremonies, analogous across the Shar and Wang valleys, indicate that Zhabdrung's nation building quest was considered a triumphant fruition of Tonden Phajo's path breaking efforts. The festival is in itself an articulate narrative of the events leading up to the formation of the Drukpa state by conquering hostile forces with the aid of the powerful *Dralha*.

### **The Pazap Tradition**

Punakha *Domchoe* (*sgrub mchod*) was first staged to celebrate Bhutan's resounding victory over the invading Tibetan forces in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and to propitiate the tutelary deities (*dgon po*). It is marked by a three-day extended pazap festival. *Pazaps* who brandish military gears and combat accessories stage elaborate battle scenes to the accompaniment of loud trumpets, firecrackers and war songs. Though it cannot be conclusively established, elders in the villages argue that the Shar *lo-ju* is a provincial extension of the Punakha *Domchoe* following the same tradition of *pazaps*.

Apart from this rather theatrically ceremonial role, *pazaps* were an integral part of Bhutan's security apparatus. Given the limited resources of the country, Bhutan could not afford to keep a standing army that could defend itself, much less deter potential aggressors with its apparent prowess. So, what it did was to set up a corpus of peasant militias that could be called at short notice to fight. A British mission's note cited by Dasho Karma Ura in a paper on perception of national security states that "the Bhutanese have only six hundred men in pay as soldiers; but though their government is elective, they hold their lands by military service, and every man in their country is a soldier when called upon." Based upon a heuristic assumption of the tax-paying households, he puts the number of *pazaps* available at around eighteen thousand. Flexibility and cost-effectiveness of a *pazap* force compared to the maintenance of an adequately strong standing army would have contributed to the security of the

country by allowing a size of force disproportionate to the population to be raised, for short periods of time.

Further, when they were not engaged in repelling the numerous foreign aggressions, the *pazaps* fought endless skirmishes between opposing clans that became a hallmark of the period which marked the decadence of Zhabdrung's dual system, two centuries' after its establishment, and the emergence of the Wangchuck dynasty.

*Pazap* ceremonies that were held in the Dzongs and the provinces were as much a ritual of peace as they were a show of strength and preparedness to deter aggression. Practices and performances of battle scenes were ideal training grounds for village men, young and old alike, who were introduced into the martial tradition. To this day, becoming *lo-ju pazap* is a rite of passage that makes men out of boys. Thus, the *pazaps* are hailed as a benevolent warrior clan that is in steadfast tutelary of its adherents.

### **Shar Da Gay: The Eight Great Valleys of Shar**

Surviving tax records from the Zhabdrung's time show Shar to be a major rice-producing province. Favourable landscape, fertile soil and salubrious climate made Shar the famous granary of multiple cereals enabling it to become the lifeline of the Bhutanese state in the years when it chose to follow a minimal trade policy.

At a time when state rewards were based on merit, Shar was favourably placed on the pecking order. A record of the investiture celebration of Zhabdrung Jigme Dragpa I (zhabsdrung Jigs med grags pa, 1725-1761) in 1747 shows that in the *Mang 'gyed* (cash gifts offered by the Desi to his subjects proportionate to their tax status), a large chunk of the *matams* handed out were for the tax-paying households of the prefecture of Wangdue Phodrang. This was in consonance

with the power vested in the Dzongpon of Wangdue Phodrang who was a member of the six member cabinet in Zhabdrung's *Choe-syid Lu-nyi* state. The Wangdue Dzongpon's tax contribution alone was comparable to the regional prefects called *Poenlop* whose jurisdictions were several districts and the Duar protectorates clubbed together.

It was natural then that in the decadent years when strives between Dzong officials vying for supremacy threatened to tear the country apart, the Wangdue *Dzongpon* (*rDzong dpon*) invariably got involved in them. One could like or despise him, but one thing was sure, he could not be ignored. This might explain why the Shar people are fond of strutting their swords, their archery prowess and continue to appease the *Dra-lha* even when one would think that peace is finally home.

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel was always favourably disposed to his Shar adherents. Fearing for the safety of the Ranjung Khasarpani (the self-emanated image of Chenrigzi) at the height of the Tibetan hostilities, he took refuge in the safety of the Shar villages. Later he spent many years traveling between his Centre in Punakha and Wangduephodrang where he personally conceived and initiated the construction of the Dzong at the crossroad of the East and West. The people were worthy hosts during these times of trials, tribulations and subsequent celebrations, and thus, were rewarded with high honours and rights in his political set-up.

### **Organization of *Lo-ju***

*Lo-ju* is an extensive exercise of communal bond in Chungsekha. All the households come together to organize the event and contribute in varied capacities towards its successful conduct. By the relatively frugal rural standards, the two-day festival requires a substantial assortment of

material and human resources. Eighteen of the twenty households in Chungsekha make up an eighteen-men *pazap* force while the remaining two households put in utility services. Each household contributes two *drey*<sup>5</sup> of rice, 1 kilogram of meat, 750 grams of butter, a bucket of *banchang*<sup>6</sup> and a bottle of *ara*<sup>7</sup> towards a grand feast for the *pazaps*.

The six original households of Chungsekha take turns to host the *pazaps* every *lo-ju* year as the chief patron. The patron mobilizes village resources and is responsible for the collection of the various feast ingredients. Apart from preparing the main feast, an endless stream of wine and butter tea must be served for the *pazaps* throughout the day by the host. The host also acts as the patron of the *paow* (*dpa 'bo*) and *neljorma* (*rnal 'byor ma*), the male and female shaman respectively, although their fees are collectively borne. They are separately entertained during their three-day stay in the community by the host. As the organizer and the main focal person, the host will be called upon to address other organizational niceties whenever they come up.

Supported by the *tshogs-pa*<sup>8</sup>, *spyi dpon*<sup>9</sup> and other elders, the host will call for the start of preparation and practice at least five days prior to the day of the rehearsal. The *pazaps* train in choreographed sequence of martial drills and declamation of war songs and ritual librettos every evening on the temple lawn as the organizers discuss nuances of the organization.

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<sup>5</sup> A traditional measurement unit that is roughly 1¼ Kg.

<sup>6</sup> A seasoned rice wine.

<sup>7</sup> A strong rice brewed spirit.

<sup>8</sup> The lowest rung of grass root leader whose office is preserved in the new administrative set-up of democracy.

<sup>9</sup> Unpaid village messenger and utility personnel whose post is filled on rotation basis due to the hardship involved.

The organization of the *lo-ju* has assumed an added significance as an event that brings the whole of Chungsekha together. Chungsebs have caught on with the trend of outward migration too. Most Chungsebs live and work in urban centers today effectively severing a time-honoured bond. Therefore, the festival is a galvanizing force providing an occasion for people to come together, renew old ties and work towards communal harmony.

### **Primus Inter Pares: Ceremonial Pazap Leaders**

There are four ceremonial leaders of the *pazaps* who are entitled to a double serving of meat and gifts (traditionally an offering of silk scarves or *dar* and possibly, money). They are collectively called *Dhar-thob* (*dar thob*) or *Nyi-kel-ma* (*gnyis skal ma*). The primus inter pares, or first among equals is the *Dar-pon* (*dar dpon*) who is the symbolic commander of the force. The *Dar-pon* performs the *bey*<sup>10</sup>. Two *Yang-pon* (*dbyang dpon*) serve as his Next-in-Command and is responsible for singing paeans of the various deities protecting the advancing *pazaps* unit. Traditionally, three leading households held these symbolic positions as a reciprocation of their contributions towards village welfare. These ceremonial leaders are supposed to be the subjects of special favours from the *dra-lha* and of late, competition for these posts have become a bone of contention.

The fourth and the last position in this category is the *paow* who leads the *dra-lha* propitiation ritual as the precentor. Contrary to the popular usage of the word *paow* to denote a possessed shaman, a *paow* in this context is an adept performer of considerable acumen who can reel off monumental volumes of excerpts from hagiographical texts

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<sup>10</sup> *Bey* (*rbad*) is a type of war dance performed with drawn swords and ferocity, invoking the protection of a particular deity by describing aspects of him in martial terms.

and colloquial verses. For this reason, the position is not claimed by traditional rights and is instead offered to a proven maestro.

Based on the performing abilities, another *pazap* is nominated for the rendition of *ley-ma*<sup>11</sup>. As a minstrel in the *pazap* unit, he must show good heart and a sense of humour to maintain the spirit of the unit through a hectic day's ceremonies. However, he does not belong to the *dhar-thob* category. Instead, he solicits alms at the end of the ceremonies. At least two shamans render their services of divine augury and the exorcising of malignant spirits for a stipulated fee. These priests with the capacity of being possessed by the *Dra-lha* are usually hired from other villages as they are unavailable locally in Chungsekha.

### **The Day of the Rehearsal**

On the day of the Bhutanese winter solstice (*ngin-log*) every three years, people of Chungsekha converge on the lawn of its village temple for the first of the two days of *lo-ju*, marking a rehearsal of sorts. Dressed in their best clothes, they sample an array of Shar's culinary delicacies and watch as the *pazaps* emerge from the inner sanctums of the village lhakhang and strut across its lawn singing paeans of the various protector deities, both national and natal. *Pazaps*, mostly young boys and some village elders put up a medieval martial ceremony. *Pazaps* wear traditional robes perfectly fitted with silk scarves reminiscent of medieval battle outfits. They flaunt traditional Bhutanese swords which are symbol of a hero. After offerings of wine, the *pazaps* perform the ritual of propitiating the *Dra-lha*. A vigorous martial drill is staged to the rhythm of the *paow's* declamation of excerpts from Phajo's biography punctuated with folk verses. An

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<sup>11</sup> *Ley-ma (glen-ma)* is a particular type of ceremonial folk verse sung in glorification of the village and its deities.

unmistakable air of combat pervades the hamlet as *pazaps* let out heart wrenching war cries and the *paow's* fiery narrative becomes increasingly warlike to browbeat the evil spirits into submitting before the *Dra-lha's* wrath.

### **Ceremonial Proceedings for the Day**

The second day's (on which the actual propitiation takes place) proceedings start at the break of dawn and ends late in the evening after the host holds a reception for the *pazaps* and everybody else in the community amidst much fanfare. Choicest foods and drinks are served all along in time honoured tradition as the *pazaps* march through the village. This tradition of troops being felicitated on their way is best illustrated in the acclaimed ballad of one of Shar's famous sons, Pemi Tshewang Tashi whose eastbound detachment is received ceremoniously at various points on the road to Trongsa.

### **Setting off from the Village**

As the dawn break on Chungsekha the day after *Nyin-lo*, eighteen *pazaps* are ceremoniously sent off by their respective patrons after being subjected to a fumigation ritual with a combination of holy fire, smoke and water. They then storm the piece of ground at the base of an old cypress tree believed to be the offshoot of Lam Drukpa Kuenley's (blam 'brug pa kun legs 1455-1529) walking stick who had come to visit Chungsey Azhi Gyalzom (khung se a zhe rgyal 'dzom). They are greeted by a shaman who would then go on to augur each of the eighteen patrons' fortune. The *pazaps* leave the shaman as he is possessed by his deity's spirit and leave for an hour's hike up a steep hillside to the Dargay Goenpa (dar rgyal dgon pa) monastery.

### **Blessed Formation from the Goenkhang**

Around 1531, Tenpai Gyaltshen (bstan pai rgyal mtshan, 1506-1538), the son of Lam Ngawang Chogyal (blam ngagd bhang chos rgyal, 1465-1540) built a *lhakhang* called Dargay Goenpa (dar rgyal dgon pa) on a hill overlooking the three great valleys which is revered as the seat of Lung Sup Dorje Legpa (lung srung rdorje legs pa). He is the tutelary deity of Chungsekha, Domkha and Wangpoenkha. The *pazaps* come to pay their homage and seek his protection. There is a more mundane reason for this visit too. The battle helmet and the *Tsendar* (the ceremonial insignia of the deities) of the *pazaps* are kept in the *Goenkhang* of the *Goenpa*. The *pazaps* perform a rite called the *pazapoi chog-ga* and offer gifts and *khaddar* (kha dar). The *Dhar-pon* dons the ceremonial hat, heave the *tsendar* (btsan dar) over his shoulder and perform a *bey* invoking the Patriarch *Lung-sup*.

The *pazaps* then triumphantly leave the *lhakhang* in battle formation with the two *Yang-pon* singing paeans offering their unequivocal allegiance to the Drukpa protective deities. The principal monk of the *Goenpa* host a *marchang* (wine ceremony). One of the two *yang-pon* recites the *chang-choe* (chang mchod) verse (a wine libation hymn)<sup>12</sup>.

In the ceremony, the important deities invoked are Mahakala and Mahakali, the guardian deities of Bhutan. The glorious teacher, the four assemblies of deities, the Daka and Dakanis of the three worlds, the dweller of the carnal grounds and the guardians of four directions are also significantly mentioned in the prayer. Beside the prayer is an appeasement of the deities residing in strategic locations across the country.

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<sup>12</sup> Although the *Chang-choe* ceremony is widely performed, the text of the *lo-ju* version is different and is called *bje-pai chang-choe* (*byis pa'i chang mchod*), literally a young man's verse. It is a narrative expressing a man's faith in the tutelary of his deities and his confident outlook on his own prowess and value as a man, ready and able to serve a righteous cause.

### **The Battle Procession of the Pazaps**

After the hike down to the village, the *pazaps* take a rest just as they come in sight of the first house. A *marchang* (*mar chang*) ceremony is performed followed by a round of *bey* and *ley-ma*. After they have sorted out their outfits and accessories, the long battle march to the ceremonial ground in the heart of the village begins. At the vanguard, the two *Yang-pon* lead signing paeans while the rank and file reciprocate, jubilantly singing their refrain in unison. With drawn sword and the *tendar* heaved over his shoulder, the *Dhar-pon* pulls along the other *pazaps* in a battle parade. At the rear of the *pazaps*, the minstrel follows boisterously holding aloft a quiver. Two *bje-pai paow* (*byis pa'i dpa'bo*) perform with gusto.

They are received on entrance by the two shamans, their patrons and other members of the community with lowered *kabneys*. They stop en route for offers of wine and food by the patrons of households falling along the way<sup>13</sup>. They reciprocate by way of *marchang* ceremonies, *bey* (*rbad*) and *ley-ma* (*gleng ma*), symbolically showering bountiful fortune and protection upon these patrons.

### **Taking Charge of the Hamlet**

As noon approaches, the *pazaps* finally manoeuvre their way through the winding village footpath flanked by long lines of well-wishers and patrons who besieged them with their oblations. The *pazaps* are received upon reaching the *lhakhang* by monks and other functionaries in a ceremony

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<sup>13</sup> The epicurean taste for fine tea and wine is a fact that is illustrated best by Pemi Tshewang Tashi and his troops who show much appreciation for the hospitality of their well-wishers while a sense of disgust overwhelm them when they are made no such oblations as the fateful battle draws close.

called *chibdrel* (*chibs gra*). As exhilarating sounds of religious drums, cymbals and trumpets mixed with jubilant exclamations rent the air, the *pazaps* symbolically take charge of the village and its people as their unequivocal guardians. The *pazaps* circumambulate the *lhakhang* thrice as they keep up the jubilant paeans for grace and protection. They then perform another *marchang* ceremony hosted by the main patron of the day. A *bey* and a *ley-ma* are performed. Depending upon the availability of time, some more *bey* and *ley-ma* are performed by the other *pazaps* followed by some rounds of joyous dances.

### **Midday Hiatus and Lunch**

At around midday, the *pazaps* break for the feast in the patron's house. The seating arrangement reflects the symbolic hierarchy of the *pazap* order. The *Dhar-pon* sits at the head on a raised seat. The two *Yang-pon* flank him on either sides. The *paow* seats next to one of the *yang-pon* and the rest of the *pazaps* complete the arrangement by sitting in two rows. The serving follows the traditional Bhutanese etiquette. The *pazaps* are served traditional nutriments including rice, vegetables, tea, beef and other meat servings. The *dhar-thobs* receive double servings of pork slices befitting their appellation of *Nyi-kelma*<sup>14</sup>.

### **Phallic Power**

After a hearty meal, the *pazaps* go to a spot famous for its panoramic view and gentle breeze. They straighten their clothes and fix their accessories after all the excitable performances. The afternoon's ceremonies begin with the

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<sup>14</sup> Traditionally officials in the court and state services were differentiated by the size of their servings during formal meals with the seniors receiving the most. Usually, commanders receive double servings, a tradition still preserved in this ceremony.

adorning of a phallus, the symbol of virility and fertile prowess usually associated with Wangchu Chengpo (dbang phyug cheng po). *Pazaps* are supposed to be an enlightened warrior clan above the mundane emotions of this world like greed, prejudice, sloth, treachery, insecurity, attachment, shame, et al. Being able to parade a brazen penile projection in a crowd of close relatives reinforce their capacity for victory. The Wangchu Chengpo, as the carved phallus is reverently called, is attached to a bamboo cot and covered in silk scarves. It is carried aloft by young boys ahead of the procession of *pazaps*. The *pazaps* move in for the final assault of the day on the back of the phallic power as paeans entrusting their victory to the divine protectors of the Drukpa order are sung.

### **Shar's Beauty Pageant**

To receive the heroic warriors, young women and girls line up the pathway bearing rejuvenating wine and rice snacks called *sho*. The contrast is striking as the gallant *pazaps* meet the fine ladies. The ladies offer the men their aliments as the men oblige by reciprocal gifts of money and small tokens, usually beetle nuts. If *lo-ju* is a rite of passage for young boys into virile adulthood, it is an occasion for the young ladies to sashay their budding beauties and announce their coming of age. Loving mothers deftly adorn their daughters with fine silk materials and precious family heirlooms because at stake is the fame of *lay-key* (*legs skyel*) which effectively makes a woman the toast of the valley.

### **Tokens of Appreciation**

The *pazaps* are the symbolic defense mechanism of the community in the proud tradition of the Drukpa warriors. They invoke and appease the deities with their prowess and gallantry. For these reasons, the grateful community felicitates its heroes with monetary token of appreciation

called *dhar*. The ceremonial leaders called the *dhar-thobs* are entitled to receive *dhar* individually while the general *pazaps* receive the *dhar* collectively. It often happens that the people who go to offer the *dhar* have their small changes snatched away by the cheeky *pazaps* who would then thank them profusely by way of placating.

### **Invoking the *Dra-lha*: The Narrative<sup>15</sup>**

After the *dhar* ceremony, the battle of exorcising the malignant spirit by invoking the powerful Warrior Deity begins in earnest. The *pazaps* let out terrifying war cries and a firework ensues as the *dra-lha* is invoked. The *paow* takes centre stage as the *pazaps* ceremoniously circumambulate the ground around the grand cypress. A prowling rhythm is set as the *paow* begins his exuberant declamation of the *dra-lha* script.

The propitiation begins by describing the *dra-lha*. He is benign in his outlook, amicable in disposition and gracious to his adherents as he is a Bodhisattva incarnate. He is the son of the triumphant Drukpa order and is its professed protector. The order of Drukpa hierarchs are then enumerated in some details and the south-bound mount of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel is mentioned<sup>16</sup>. In his wrathful form though, which he can assume on provocation of his self and the adherents under his protection, he can unleash

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<sup>15</sup> The narrative on the formation of the Drukpa order is a fine blend of classical and colloquial Dzongkha.

<sup>16</sup> This reference not only shows that the festival was a visionary handiwork of Zhabdrung and/or his adherents, but it also goes on to implicate that Zhabdrung's grand design and adventures in the Southern Land as a fulfillment of a destiny with the able aid of his retinue of deities and the *dra-lha* that will be subsequently born for this very purpose in the course of the narrative.

untold destruction on the offenders. He is deadly to his foes as his prowess stands unmatched.

Then the *paow* goes on to describe the birth of the *dra-lha* which made the Drukpa destiny possible. At this point, the declamation resonates with episodes from the life of the almighty Tonden Phajo. He came to the southern ravenous land of four passages to fulfill the destiny of the Drukpa state and bring order in the fractious land. Upon his advent, he systematically instituted the Drukpa order by winning over the people with his benevolence even as he prevailed over his enemies. To perpetuate the lineage of the Drukpa holders, he copulated with his extraordinarily gifted consort Sonam Palden from the valley of Wang. The process is described in graphic details adding a blatantly bawdy folk element to a saintly biography.

The narrative at this point dwell on subjects that are usually considered taboos. The narrative points to the worldly preoccupation of Tonden Phajo and how he is accosted for it by the people who naturally see his sensual engagements as going against his spiritual ideals. On his parts, Phajo defends himself by arguing the need to spread the Drukpa race, in unabashed terms. He says that to beget a great progeny, one needs great appetite and prowess at intercourse, and he got just those qualities<sup>17</sup>.

Of the seven sons born to Phajo by Sonam Palden, only four went on to prove their Bodhisattva mettle. The *Dra-lha* is thus born. He is identified as the Lineage Prince Wangchuck who

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<sup>17</sup> The *Dra-lha* must be conceived and born. For that purpose, a worthy parents must be besieged. Thus, the *Dra-lha* is born to Tonden Phajo and his consort Sonam Palden. The narrative identifies the child born thus as the persuasive Prince Wangchuck who is ultimately appointed as the combined lama and administrator of the Punakha region.

was entrusted with the tutelary of the Wang, Punakha and Shar valleys as their combined spiritual and temporal head. Thus in times of need, Prince Wangchuck is defied and called upon to come as the *dra-lha* and asked to take charge of the *pazaps* fighting to defend and propagate the cause of the Drukpa establishments.

As the *dra-lha* is symbolically invoked, he is made oblations of wine, water, flour and meat of the finest vintage. The declamation goes into great details describing how each of these offerings are prepared with diligence, dexterity and absolute good fate. They are nourishments befitting the highest order. Then the *dra-lha* symbolically dawns on the ground and the assault begins on the malignant forces impinging upon the Drukpa order and the village of Shar Chungsekha.

### **Exorcising the (Malignant) Spirit**

The *paow* begins with an offer of magnanimous pardon for anybody willing to submit before the wrath of the *dra-lha*. With his pure scarf, he then symbolically brings to bear the full force of the *dra-lha* on those still harbouring evil intents and designs against the Drukpa order and the hamlet of Shar Chungsekha. At around this time in the narrative, the spirit of the *dra-lha* possesses the shaman and he breaks into the *pazap* rank. As the tension heightens, the prowl of the *pazaps* give way to a full-blooded assault drill following the *paow's* fiery elocution of the *dra-lha's* strong-arm strategies. A virtual battle pervades as the *paow* exorcises every potentially malignant source. Flashing swords, piercing war cries, jubilant exclamations and fireworks rent the air.

The possessed shaman and the *paow* break the line and charge towards the fringe end of the village in pursuit of the evil spirit that is by now in full flight. A barrage of people prevent these men from self-annihilation and hold them back

ceremoniously in the nick of time. As some sense of order is restored, a rice effigy symbolizing all that is evil is placed at the feet of the shaman. Then the final rite begins by the shaman commanding the fleeing evil not to bother the community and the Drukpa order again. He says that the force of the Drukpa guardians blessed by the triple gem, Buddha, Sangha and Dharma will level the mountains and churn the ocean should ever such a need arise, effectively deterring any potential designs in the future. With a swift kick, the effigy is floored and the *pazaps* pounce on it in a coup de grace. A final *bey* is performed by the *dhar-pon* who assigns the malignant spirit to the limits of the world where it will be safely sequestered, browbeaten as it is by this show of strength.

### **Retaining the Bounty of the Ceremony**

The jubilant *pazaps* and the community then prepare for the celebratory reception at the house of the chief patron. The boys carry the Wangchuk Chengpo as the booty of the day's efforts and take the lead on the march back to the house. The women sing the song of joyous fruition called *Tashi Leg-pay* (*bkra shis legs pas*) and follow suit. The *pazaps* gloat over their day's exploits and sing songs of joyous gratitude with prayers for enduring peace and prosperity<sup>18</sup>.

As the women continue their cheerful songs and dances, the men prepare to receive the talismanic Wangchuck Chengpo into the house. Much like the ceremony of *zur chen* elevation

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<sup>18</sup> The *Ley-so* as the paeans are called, here, offers thanksgiving to the seat of Zhabdrung in Punakha. This not only establish *Lo-ju* as a post Zhabdrung ritual but also as an extension of his deeds. The *Ley-so* are beautiful verses in praise of the Drukpa hierarchs. At one point, these verses were standardized across the valleys of Shar and Wang. However, much of the standards are lost now as no text exists.

for a newly constructed house, the Wangchuck Chengpo is tethered to a rope and pulled through the oriel of the altar room to the accompaniment of its paeans. The *pazaps* are hierarchically seated in the room and felicitated with wine, tea and other aliments. The ceremonial headgears of the *pazaps* are then presented to a member of the household as a token of their appreciation for a period of three days. The *tendar* is also kept in the safekeeping of the patron. The patron thus effectively reaps the bounty of the festival. On the fourth day, the *tendar* is returned to the *Goenkhang (mgon khang)* and the patrons of the *pazaps* take back the headgears. This tradition of lavishing bounties on the patron may be an indication of the appreciation and gratitude that the community had for the patron in a hard pressed economy. The patron receives the fortune of peace, stability and prosperity for the whole community.

### **Expunged Existence: A History of Poor Documentation and Scholarship**

It is almost impossible to establish conclusively when the festival of *lo-ju* came into existence. There is no record to that effect. Inferences drawn from a manuscript of the rituals that had been appropriately corroborated by oral sources suggest that the *lo-ju* must have been established around the same time as the Punakha *Domchoe*, the more illustrious of the two *pazap* festivals. Many aspects of the *lo-ju* are based directly on the *Domchoe* and the *Dra-lha* propitiation ritual is the same as the one conducted in the Punakha and Thimphu Dzongs.

Punakha *Domchoe* and the *Dra-lha* propitiation ceremony are believed to have been instituted as a celebration of Zhabdrung's victory against the Tibetan aggressors and other internal factions based on verbatim accounts of the series of battles and the grand invocations of the protective deities. Along with the *pazaps* of the eight great regions of Wang, the Shar people contributed to the force raised by the Zhabdrung in ensuring the Drukpa triumph. While the people of Wang

must have led the celebration of the *Drubchen* as they were the natives of the Punakha region, the Shar people must have replicated the national celebration across their villages with their own version of the ritual.

These festivals are essentially folk in nature unlike the more ecclesiastical *Tsechu* (*tshes bcu*) that is a largely monastic exercise. At a time when literacy was low among the lay population, it could possibly have happened that the need for proper documentation of this important historical development must have been overlooked. Like every folk pursuit, a set of traditions passed down the generations must have served for the need of paper works. Even for the *Drubchen* which has been an important national event, the documentation is rather poor. Apart from a precept guiding the *pazap* code of conduct, hardly any other record of significance are available today, notwithstanding some stray references. Even though the *Dra-lha* propitiation is an artistic mix of colloquial verses and hagiographical accounts, a standard text has not been maintained. Its survival hinged on the ingenuity of the *paows* to be able to recite them by heart and pass them onto apprentices from succeeding generations.

The apparent lack of archival source makes it impossible to standardize the spelling of the ceremony, named and pronounced in different ways across different villages. It is variedly called *Lo-ju* (*blo 'gyur*), *Shar gi Lo-chok* (*shar gyi glog skyor*) and in some instances, *Bon-kor*. *Lo-ju* (the Chungsekha version) would probably mean an articulate expression of a deep-seated consciousness, commonly associated with the people of Shar who are attributed with the authorship of the two best known ballads in the national language Dzongkha. This would imply that the ceremony is an articulate colloquial expression of thanksgiving and propitiation following the victory of Zhabdrung. This would seem to fit in with the argument that *Lo-ju* is a national narrative of Zhabdrung's state formation based on supposed divination of Phajo and the other great Drukpa Hierarchs.

If we take the standard pronunciation as *lo-chok*, as is the case elsewhere in Shar region, then it would imply a protective enclosure safeguarding a people, place or an entity. This would mean that it is an appeasement ritual for the tutelary of a particular region or a nation, in this instance of the Shar valley and the nation of the Drukpas. *Bon-kor* with its Bon connotations may seem out of place and probably just an aberration as the narrative itself is about the Drukpa order. However, the concept of the *Dra-lha* is itself borrowed and adapted from the Bon naturalist tradition, as are many traditions in Buddhism including the customary death rituals. It seems then that the festival is essentially Bon<sup>19</sup>, though the narrative and its format have been adapted to form a Drukpa expression of nation formation by creating and invoking deified spiritual protectors who symbolically safeguard the people caught in issues of survival and legitimization.

While the two former appellations would suggest that it is a ceremony of celebration, gratitude and appeasement, we may never know what the exponents of the festival actually had on their minds. Some even suggest the festival might have been called *lue-tor* after the ritual of casting a sacrificial ritual cake called *lue*. The varying names of this festival arise from onomatopoeic corruptions of the original name that is unfortunately lost to us. There exists a vast gap between the well versed exponents who articulated the Drukpa epoch in creative ceremonial narratives and their ill-informed descendents who hang on to the tradition more out of habit than for a true appreciation of its intrinsic wisdoms.

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<sup>19</sup> The name *Bon-kor* is thus suggestive of the origin of the festival in the Bon tradition of invoking *Dra-lha* as a living entity which becomes an object of respect and refuge. The long colloquial segment on the sacrificial animal and offering of the various parts of its anatomy can be seen as remnants of the animist belief.

### **What does the future hold?**

In a nihilistic world where too often things are numerated on their monetary value alone, people may eventually decide to sidestep this festival as a detritus of an arcane past that is anachronistic at best and redundant at worst. Lack of a concerted preservation effort has already made the ceremony an exotic and arcane pursuit. It prevents us from seeing the festival as an extension of a watershed moment in our history when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel successfully overcame the challenges of unification and formed the Druknyul (Land of the Drukpas).

Only a cursive manuscript of the ceremony survives today. Much of the original expertise on scriptures and choreography hangs on the senile acumen of a few stalwarts who traditionally depended on the availability of ready apprentices willing to partake of their reservoir of knowledge as a vehicle of transmission. This has naturally led to an adulteration of the rituals by ill-informed people who make shoddy work of them. The text of the *dra-lha* propitiation, with an artistic mix of colloquial expressions and versified historical accounts, runs into hundreds of pages and could easily take upwards of five hours to be fully recited. Today the *paows* render them ineffectually in a couple of hours.

The conduct of the *lo-ju* depended on an abiding communal bond along traditional division of responsibilities and reciprocal entitlements. However, with the introduction of modern development and an accompanying proliferation of foreign influences, organization along traditional lines is becoming difficult. The organization of the 2011 edition of *lo-ju* hit rough weathers when disputes ensued between the organizers. They could not agree on a few organizational niceties, with the nomination of the candidates for the ceremonial positions being chief among them. Traditionally, three of the four ceremonial posts, a *Dar-pon* and two *Yang-*

*pons*, were held by three leading households as a reciprocation of their contribution to village welfare.

In recent times, some segments of people have challenged this tradition and wanted to be able to partake of these posts for the blessing and fame that come with them, real or perceived. On the other hand, the households who hold these traditional rights are unwilling to relinquish them for the contributions that their ancestors made. Rifts are beginning to show and they are made worse by the fact that the traditional working relations are beginning to disintegrate in the face of people leaving their ancestral homes and with it, their values.

## **Conclusion**

For umpteen generations, people of Chungsekha (as with every person in the great regions of Shar and Wang) would look forward to the year of the *Lo-ju* when they would congregate amidst much fanfare and festivity on the lawn outside their village temple to celebrate the formation of the Drukpa state and the proud tradition of the *pazaps* who helped in bringing it about. Apart from being an occasion to invoke the protection of the pantheon of Drukpa deities for the perpetuation of peace and prosperity, the festival is an expression of gratitude where it is due. At a stretch, it is also a show of strength and preparedness against hostile designs and pursuits, symbolic, as well as, real.

Although, this paper cannot conclusively establish the exact year of the festival's institution, it does manage to suggest that the *lo-ju* was an extension of Zhabdrung's state building process that included, but not limited to, the inculcation of a sense of national identity in the Bhutanese psyche. From the ceremonial social order of *Zhugdrel Phunsum Tshogpa*, to the national code of etiquette *Driglam Namzha* and the other socio-religious landmarks like *Tsechu* and *Domchoe*, Zhabdrung has entrenched traditions of the high and popular

culture in our society which went a long way in strengthening the Bhutanese nation and its sovereignty. *Lo-ju* celebrates the formation of these epochs in our evolution as a nation.

*Lo-ju* is a festival for peace to ward off all manners of misfortunes leading to social unrest. For a nation fixated on the tutelary of its deities, *lo-ju* serves to fill a special spiritual need. It gives us the strength of knowing that our fates are in the safe hands of a power higher than ourselves. Our lives will continue to revolve around the ritual prayers of *lo-ju* so long as we continue to believe in the wisdom and grace of our forefathers to keep us secure in our homeland. Even in the unlikely event of turbulence and warfare, the people will be better off with the martial exposure of *lo-ju*.

The rationale for the institution of the festival continues to hold good to this day. Firstly, it is the need to keep unrest at bay. Then it is the need to be prepared should such a situation arise. If anything, there is a need to strengthen this security masterstroke. For if maintaining a huge standing army was difficult in the past, it is no easier now with our economic potential still largely unrealized. The pragmatism and efficacy of the *pazap* force whose tradition has been kept alive in this festival will be an answer to much of our security needs in the future.

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don grub zhes pas sa mo lug lor shar mtsho brgyad kyi khral  
zhing [ |khra[l] khyim gyi deb gter gsal ba'i me long zhes  
bya ba bzhugs so//

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**Appendix I: The Lo-ju verses**

The *legs-so* paeans are colloquial compositions in glorification and gratitude of the order of Drukpa institutions, iconic figures and deities who are invoked. Variations are introduced to suit different occasions.

This *legs-so* is sung as the *pazaps* emerge from the *Goenkhang* of Dargay Goenpa submitting their beings to the various kinds of protective deities.

༄། །སྲོ་སྲོ་ །སྲོ་པ་མཉོ་བར་བསམ་གྲུབ། ཨ་ལས་མེ་ལོ་མོ།  
 དགའ་སྦྱིད་མཉོ་བར་བསམ་གྲུབ། ཨ་ལས་མེ་ལོ་མོ།  
 དགའ་སྦྱིད་བསམ་གྲུབ་ཕྱུན་ཚོགས། དཀོན་མཚན་ལ་འབྲུལ་ལོ།  
 བདེ་སྦྱིད་དཔལ་གྱི་མཚོད་པ། ཡི་དམ་ལ་འབྲུལ་ལོ།  
 དམ་ཚིག་གཙང་མའི་མཚོད་པ། མཁའ་འགོ་ལ་འབྲུལ་ལོ།  
 དག་དཔུང་འཛེམས་པའི་མཚོད་པ། དག་ལྷ་ལ་འབྲུལ་ལོ།  
 ཤ་ཆང་ཕུད་ཀྱི་མཚོད་པ། དུལ་ལྷ་ལ་འབྲུལ་ལོ།  
 དགའ་སྦྱིད་ཕྱུན་སྲུང་ཚོགས་པའི། དེས་གྲུབ་གཅིག་ལྷ་ན།  
 ད་་་་དགའ་བ་ཡིན། སྦྱིད་པ་ཡིན།

This *leg-so* is sung as the *pazaps* make their entrance into the village. The order of Drukpa deities and iconic figures are invoked for protection as the *pazaps* symbolically goes into battle.

ལེགས་སོ་ལེགས་སོ་.....བརྒྱད་པ་ལས་ལྷན། རྗེ་འཆང་ཆེན་ལས་ལྷན།  
 དྲུག་པོ་བཀའ་བརྒྱད་ལས་ལྷན་པའི། ལྷ་རྒྱུད་མི་མེད་ཡ།  
 ལྷ་མ་ལས་ལྷན། དག་དབང་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་ནས་ལྷན།  
 ལྷོ་གཏད་གཞན་ནས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 ཡི་དམ་ལས་ལྷན། འཁོར་ལོ་སྤོང་པོ་ལས་ལྷན།  
 དངོས་གྲུབ་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 དམ་ཚོས་ལས་ལྷན། ལྷག་རྒྱུ་ཆེན་པོ་ལས་ལྷན།  
 འབྲས་བུ་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 གདམས་དག་ལས་ལྷན། རྒྱ་རོ་ཚོས་རྒྱལ་ལས་ལྷན།  
 ཐབས་ལམ་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 ཚོས་སྐྱོད་ལས་ལྷན། ཡི་ཤེས་མགོན་པོ་ལས་ལྷན།  
 ལྷགས་རྒྱལ་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 གང་འདོད་དངོས་གྲུབ་ལྷན། རྣམ་ཐོས་སྤྲས་ལས་ལྷན།  
 འོར་ལྷ་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 དབྱ་ལྷ་ལས་ལྷན། རྒྱ་པ་མེ་ལེན་ལས་ལྷན།  
 ལྷག་སྐྱོར་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 པོ་ལྷ་ལས་ལྷན། ལྷུང་གསུམ་རྗེ་ལེགས་པ་ལས་ལྷན།  
 དབྱ་ལྷ་གཞན་ལས་ལྷན་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་སྤྲོད་སྤུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 དཔོན་པོ་ལས་ལྷན། དཔལ་ལྷན་འབྲུག་པ་ལས་ལྷན།

ཁ་དབང་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་ཕྱན་སྲུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 གཞུང་ཡུལ་ལས་ལྷན། རྒྱ་ཡུལ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་ལས་ལྷན་ཡ།  
 ཡུལ་ཕྱོགས་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་ཕྱན་སྲུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 ལྷག་ཤར་ལས་ལྷན། ལྷོ་བས་ལྷན་དཔའ་བོ་ལས་ལྷན་ཡ།  
 དངོས་སྲུབ་གཞན་ལས་རེ་དགོས་པའི། ཤེས་རབ་ཕྱན་སྲུང་ཚོགས་མེད་ཡ།  
 ད་.....དགའ་བ་ཡིན། རྒྱུད་པ་ཡིན།།

This paean is sung as the *pazaps* come back after lunch and head towards the ceremonial ground for the *dra-lha* propitiation rite. It is a composition glorifying the Drukpa order and is a source of pride for the *pazaps* to be associated with it.

།།ཐོད་དཀར་ལས་ལྷན་གངས་ལས་ཉི་ཤར་ཅིག་འདྲ་ཡོད།།  
 གྲི་མོ་ལས་ལྷན་གནམ་ལྷགས་དབང་པོའི་རལ་གྲི་འདྲ་ཡོད།  
 གཞུ་མོ་ལས་ལྷན་ལྷ་དབང་གཞུ་རིང་ཅིག་འདྲ་ཡོད།  
 མདའ་མོ་ལས་ལྷན་ཟབ་རྒྱས་ལས་ལྷགས་ཅིག་འདྲ་ཡོད།  
 ཁམས་གསུམ་ལུས་ལ་ཚང་ཚོ་ལྷ་མའི་དམག་དཔོན་འདྲ་ཡོད།  
 དཔའ་རྩལ་ལུས་ལ་ཚང་ཚོ་དྲངས་སེང་དཀར་མོ་འདྲ་ཡོད།  
 ལྷོ་བས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 དཔའ་རྩལ་ལྷན་འབྲུག་པའི་བྱ་བརྒྱུད་སོགས་ལྷོ་བས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 ལྷ་མ་བཟང་པོ་གྲུ་བཅུན་སོགས་ལྷོ་བས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།

དཔོན་པོ་བཟང་པོ་སྟོབས་ལྡན་སོགས་སྐྱབས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 དམ་ཉམས་དག་པོ་བཤན་པོའི་ཚོགས་སྐྱབས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 དག་ཤམ་བའི་སྲིན་པོའི་ཚོགས་སྐྱབས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 དག་ཁུ་འཕྱུང་པའི་རྒྱ་སྲིན་ཚོགས་སྐྱབས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 དག་པོ་བསྐྱལ་བའི་བཤན་པོའི་ཚོགས་སྐྱབས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 དམ་ཉམས་བཤན་པ་དམར་ཁའི་ཚོགས་སྐྱབས་ནས་ཡོང་བ་ཡོད།  
 ད་.....དགའ་བ་ཡིན། རྒྱུད་པ་ཡིན།།

This paean is sung at the end of the day as the *pazaps* proceed to the patron's house for the final reception. This composition is a prayer for peace and harmony offered to the institutions, iconic figures and deities of the Drukpa order.

གདན་ས་སྤུངས་ཐངས་བདེ་ཆེན་ལ། བརྟན་བཀུགས་གཅིག་འབྲུལ་ན།  
 མི་འགྲུར་གཡུ་རླུང་ལྟ་བུའི། བཀ་ཤིས་སྟོན་ལམ་ལུ་གོ།  
 འགྲུག་པ་ལྷ་ཡི་གདུང་བརྒྱད་ལ། བརྟན་བཀུགས་གཅིག་འབྲུལ་ན།  
 ལམས་གསུམ་དབང་དུ་འདུས་པའི། བཀ་ཤིས་སྟོན་ལམ་ལུ་གོ།  
 དཔལ་ལྡན་འགྲུག་པའི་ཚོགས་ལ། བརྟན་བཀུགས་གཅིག་འབྲུལ་ན།  
 ལམས་གསུམ་ཟིལ་གྱིས་གནོན་པའི། བཀ་ཤིས་སྟོན་ལམ་ལུ་གོ།  
 ཡི་དམ་མཁའ་འགོ་འི་ཚོགས་ལ། བརྟན་བཀུགས་གཅིག་འབྲུལ་ན།  
 དེས་སྐྱབ་གདུ་འདོད་པའི། བཀ་ཤིས་སྟོན་ལམ་ལུ་གོ།

ཚོས་སྐྱོད་སྤྱང་མའི་ཚོགས་ལ། བརྟན་བཟུགས་གཅིག་འབྲུལ་ན།  
 བ་ཚོ་བར་ཆད་མེད་པའི། བཀའ་ཤིས་སློན་ལམ་ལུ་གོ།  
 ཁྲོམ་ཚོགས་ལྷ་ཡི་ཚོགས་ལ། བརྟན་བཟུགས་གཅིག་འབྲུལ་ན།  
 བདེ་སྐྱིད་ཚོ་རིང་ནད་མེད། བཀའ་ཤིས་སློན་ལམ་ལུ་གོ།  
 ལུང་གསུམ་དག་ལྷ་འི་རྒྱལ་པོ། བརྟན་བཟུགས་གཅིག་འབྲུལ་ན།  
 ས་སེར་ལྷ་གོར་མེད་པའི། བཀའ་ཤིས་སློན་ལམ་ལུ་གོ།  
 ད་དགའ་བ་ཡིན། རྒྱུད་བ་ཡིན།

This is a wine libation hymn called the *bje-pai chang choe* recited by the *Yang-pon* on offers of wine by the patrons. This composition propitiates the various tutelary deities of the Drukpa order and the other minor deities who protect strategic locations across the country.

བྱིས་པ་འཆང་མཚོད་ནི།

མཚོད་མཚོད་མཚོད་གནས་འོག་མིན་ཚོས་དབྱིངས་པོ་བྱང་ནས།  
 ཚོས་སྐྱོད་མེད་འཆང་ཆེན་མཚོད། བསྐྱབ་སྐྱོར་གངས་ཀྱི་རིའོ་ནས།  
 བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་གསེར་གྱི་སྤེང་བ་མཚོད། སྤིང་ག་ཚོས་ཀྱི་འཁོར་ལོ་ནས།  
 ཡི་དམ་དཔལ་ཆེན་ཏུ་མགྲིན་མཚོད། ཡུལ་ཉི་ཤུ་བཞི་གནས་མཚོག་ནས།  
 གནས་གསུམ་དཔའ་བོ་མཁའ་འགྲོ་མཚོད། སིལ་བ་ཚལ་གྱི་དུར་ཁྲོད་ནས།  
 དཔལ་མཐོན་མཚུ་ཀལ་མཚོད། དུར་ཁྲོག་ལུས་པ་ཏུ་རིན་ས།

མ་ཅིག་དཔལ་ལྷན་ལྷ་མོར་མཚོད། གནས་ལུང་ལོ་ཅན་གྱི་ཕོ་བྲང་ནས།  
 འོར་ལྷ་རྒྱལ་ཆེད་རྣམས་སྤྲུལ་མཚོད། རྒྱ་བོད་གཉིས་ཀྱི་ས་མཚོམས།  
 ལམས་གནས་ས་གཉིས་ཀྱི་བདག་པོ། གངས་མཐོན་མཐོང་རིམ་འཛིན་ལྷོ་ནས།  
 ལྷ་དབྱངས་ཅན་རྩོམ་བཞིན་ཆོ་རིང་མཚོད། ཐིམ་ཕུལ་བདེ་ཆེན་ཕྱག་ནས།  
 སེར་མཁའ་རྒྱལ་པོའི་ནང་ནས། བམ་རོ་བརྟེན་པ་པའི་ཁྲིལ།  
 ལྷུང་མཚོགས་ཏུ་དམར་ཚེབས་ནས། མདུང་དམར་དགའ་ལ་བསྐྱོལ་ཞིང།  
 དག་པོའི་གྲོ་སྤོག་སྤུལ་ནས། ལྷིང་ལྷག་ཞལ་དུ་གསོལ་མཁའན།  
 རིག་འཛིན་གྲོ་མའི་བཀའ་སླུང། ལྷག་ཤར་ཡོངས་ཀྱི་དགའ་ལྷ།  
 དཔའ་པོ་ཇག་པ་མེ་ལེན་མཚོད། གངས་རི་གསུམ་འཛོམས་པའི་ཕྱོལ་ས།  
 འཇམ་མགོན་གྲོ་མའི་བཀའ་སླུང། ས་སེར་ལྷ་གོར་བརྗོག་པའི།  
 ལྷག་ཤར་རྣམས་ཀྱི་དགའ་ལྷ། ལྷོ་མོ་ལྷགས་ཀྱི་རལ་པ་མཚོད།  
 དབྱེས་པའི་མཚུམ་ཞལ་ལྷན་ནས། གང་འདོད་དཔོན་གྲུབ་སྤྱོད་ཞིང།  
 རི་གསུམ་འཛོམས་པའི་ཕྱོལ་ས། ལྷ་ཆེན་རྒྱལ་གསུམ་མཚོད།  
 རྒྱལ་ལྷ་བརྗོད་སྤྲ། བོད་ལྷལ་རྩོམ་ལེགས་པ།  
 ཅོ་རི་གནས་ཀྱི་ཞིང་སྐྱོངས། ལྷོ་བ་དཔོན་པད་མའི་བཀའ་སླུང།  
 ཕོ་ཐོག་ཡོངས་ཀྱི་ལྷ་སྐྱེས། ལུང་པར་སྤྲོད་ལྷོངས་འདིལ།  
 གཡུ་ཐོད་རིམ་འཛིན་ལྷོ་ནས། ཞོན་གཏོར་ཕྱག་འགྲིམ་ཞིང།  
 ལུང་ཆེན་གསུམ་གྱི་མངའ་བདག། ལྷག་གདོང་ཅན་གྱི་དགའ་ལྷ།

ན་རྒྱུད་ཡོངས་ཀྱི་དབྱངས་ལྷན། རྒྱུད་པར་ཡུལ་ལྷོངས་འདིལ།  
ལོ་ལེགས་དངོས་གྲུབ་གཏེར་མཁན། ས་སེར་ལྷ་གེར་ཁས་ལེན།  
མི་ནད་ཕྱག་ནད་བརྗོད་མཁན། ལུང་གསུམ་དག་ལྷ་འི་རྒྱལ་པོ་མཚོད།  
ཉེད་དང་རྗེ་མིའི་མཚམས་ནས། དག་ལྷ་མ་སངས་རྒྱུད་འདུད་མཚོད།  
གདན་ས་བྱིན་རླབས་ཆེབའི། རྒྱུད་གནས་གནས་ཀྱི་བདག་པོ།  
དཀར་ཞིང་མཚུམ་དང་ལྷན་པའི། ཉ་དཀར་སྟེང་ལ་ཆེབས་མི།  
དར་དཀར་ཕྱག་ལ་བསྐྱམས་མི། བསྐྱེད་སྐྱོངས་འཕྲིན་ལས་བཟང་པོ་མཚོད།  
གཞུང་ཡུལ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་གནས་པའི། གནས་བདག་གཞི་བདག་ཐམས་ཅན་མཚོད།  
དག་དཔུང་ཟེལ་གྱིས་མཐོན་ཞིང་། བྱམས་ལྷན་གདུང་སེམས་ཆེབའི།  
ཡུལ་ལྷོངས་བཟང་པོའི་སྐྱག་ཤར།  
སྐྱོབས་ལྷན་གྱི་དཔའ་པོ་རང་ཡང་མཚོད་ཟེར་ཞུ་ནི་ཡིན་ལགས།།

## Appendix II: Lo-Ju Photos



Photo 1: The pazap procession at Dargay Goenpa



Photo 2: The shaman leads the pazap procession after he receives them



Photo 3: The Yang-pon presides over the marchang ceremony



Photo 5: Boys carrying the Wangchu Chengpo



Photo 4: Girls receive the pazaps with wine and rice nutriments



Photo 6: A patron offers money as dar



Photo 7: A fiery scene from the dra-lha propitiation ceremony



Photo 9: The shaman performs the final exorcising rite



Photo 8: The Dar-pon performs the final bey



Photo 10: Pazaps receive the talismanic Wangchu Chengpo.