

PATAG-THE SYMBOL OF HEROES

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Introduction

This paper attempts to describe the typology, process of manufacture and symbolic status and honouring system of swords and scabbards particularly of ceremonial *patag* cast and used by the Bhutanese. *Patag* symbolises authority and recognition of high honour and is therefore highly regarded and valued. This study is purely based on the findings of interviews held with retired civil servants, government officials, blacksmiths, and from a few available literature, and physical observation of *patags*. Photographs of swords and scabbards are used to the extent possible to give pictorial ideas and provide basis of comparison for similar researches. *Patags* are no longer cast in Bhutan. The Bhutanese blacksmiths cast only knives and short swords used for domestic purposes.

Types of Swords

Different types of swords were cast in different localities in Bhutan. Unlike some Chinese and Tibetan swords which are sharp, and have double-edged blade, curved sharp tip, and long double-edged tapering blade, Bhutanese swords are all straight and single-edged blade, with sharp arc tip.

Following are the swords cast in Bhutan:

- i. Paksam Tenzin
- ii. Chukhap Tenzin
- iii. Bumthang Tsen-dri
- iv. Nagphala

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- v. Dungsum Thum
- vi. Barshongpa
- vii. Thum
- viii. Chhu chenm
- ix. Lungdri

It is believed that the first six swords were named according to the names of the blacksmiths and the locality where they were cast, and the rest, according to their appearances, designs and performances.

Paksam Tenzin

It derived its name both from the blacksmith, Tenzin, and local area Paksam, the present Pasakha town near Phuntsholing. The surface area of *paksam tenzin* is very smooth and shiny like a mirror and its blunt edge is round unlike other swords.



Hoshu chenm and paksam tenzin

Except for the blade, the sword becomes thinner from its hilt towards tip like 'the tail of an ox' (*langju*). The sword is approximately 610 mm long from hilt to tip. The width of the blade is about 40mm at the hilt and about 33mm at the tip. The thickness of the edge is 5 mm near the hilt and 2mm at the tip. On the blade, it has usually three pairs of grooves (*washos*) running through the entire length of the blade.



Blade of paksam tenzin

The *washo* covers about 2/3rd portion of the width of the blade. The blade is approximate 1mm sharp. The spaces between *washo* are larger compared to *chukhap tenzin* which make the sword lighter in weight.¹ The blade and the blunt edge are cast out of hard iron (*khado*). The *washo* is a mixture of both hard and soft iron (*nyencha*). These mixtures make the sword resistant to high temperature, humidity and corrosion. The sword can be bent to meet both ends without breaking. It is therefore, considered the best among all swords in Bhutan. Being very special, it is generally put on by kings and nobles.



Grooves (washo) engraved in paksam tenzin

Chukhap Tenzin

The derivation of the name of this sword is similar to that of *paksam tenzin*. Tenzin referred here is the younger brother (?) of the one who cast *paksam tenzin*. The shape and size of the sword is identical to *paksam tenzin*, except that it's surface is not as smooth as *paksam tenzin* and it does not have a projecting *washo* like *paksam tenzin*. In the olden days, blacksmiths worked near the old Chukha dzong, which was located near outdoor 220KV switchyard at Chukha Hydro Power house.² Many agree that this sword was cast later than the *paksam tenzin*. *Chukhap tenzin* and *paksam tenzin* can be differentiated from other swords by their sharp arc tip, the edge that looks like a tail of an ox and prominent *washo*.



Buepa chen and chukhap tenzin

Contradictory information from available literature describe that two brothers named Paksam and Tenzin from Dungsum in eastern Bhutan emerged as the best blacksmiths though the period is unknown. The swords cast by them at Khaling and Dungsum were named as *paksam tenzin*.³ According to another source⁴ *paksam tenzin* and *chukhap tenzin* were neither cast in Pasakha, nor in Chukha. Paksam is the name of the blacksmith and Tenzin, the supervisor. Hence, the name *paksam tenzin*. And Chukhap is the name of the blacksmith and Tenzin the same supervisor.

Bumthang Tsen-dri Nagpophala

*Terton*⁵ Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), a Bhutanese treasure discoverer from Bumthang, learned the skill of blacksmith from Yonten Jangchub and cast different size of swords and Phurbas.⁶ The ruin of his forgery and unused irons can still be seen at Gartsang, near his seat at Kunzang Drag in Tang, Bumthang. *Bumthang tsendri nagpo phala* is his own work cast out of iron uncovered from the same place. It is distinct from other swords because it has a distinctive imprint of his thumb near the hilt.⁷ Having been forged by a *Terton*, it is considered the most sacred sword.

Nagphala

It was cast during the reign of *desi* Jigme Namgyal (1870-73).⁸ The sword derived its name from *desi's* nickname, *Nagphala*.⁹ It is characterised by its black metal tone (nag) and is reputed to be hard as *dorji phalam*¹⁰ referring to '*phala*'. But other mention that the blacksmith was black in appearance and that he cast a sword which was like *phalam*. Hence the name *nagphala*. When it is bent and released, the blade oscillates.¹¹ This gives an impression of how thin and light the sword is and it is equally considered best. The width of the blade is greater than *paksam tenzin*.

Dungsum Thum

It is not known from where the iron was extracted. But the remaining of forging of *dungsum thum* is still seen around the shore of a lake *Dungtsho Karma Thang* located at southeast of Deothang.¹² *Terton* Pema Lingpa discovered the treasure of *Dungkar Shogpachen* from *Dungtsho Karma Thang*. It is believed that his followers cast it. But other source mentions that it was cast at the site of Polytechnic Institute of Deothang when *desi* Jigme Namgyal camped there to fight against British soldiers stationed at Assam.¹³ It is also reported that it was cast in Chimong, Dungsum Dosum.¹⁴ It is hard and shorter (*thum*) than other swords, and was

therefore named *dungsum thum*. The thickness of the edge does not vary like *paksam tenzin*.



Dungsum thum



Blade of dungsum thum

Barshongpa

Barshong at Khaling, Trashigang, was the main source of iron-ore for eastern Bhutan and bordering state of India. Many equipment made of iron in eastern Bhutan were cast in Barshong. People from Barshong traded home made agricultural and domestic tools for edible items like rice, maize, cheese, oil etc. with the people of neighbouring villages. The iron-ore were extracted from the upper and lower valley of Barshong. Barshong *bechen* and *giring* have slightly thinner edges and were cast by heating in the charcoal of *Sisi*¹⁵ and *Gum*¹⁶ to give strength to the sword. According to oral tradition, it is believed that they were cast after Dubthop Thangthong Gyalpo, commonly known as Chakzampa (1385-1464) built iron chain bridges in Trashigang.

Dungsum thum and *barshongpa* were reportedly famous in Kham, Tibet. Khampas purchased them, and the ones cast in

Barshong were believed to bless users with protective powers in warfare.¹⁷

Thum

It is plain without any *chu*.¹⁸ It is not as strong as *paksam tenzin* because it does not have a mixture of soft and hard irons. It can be easily broken if hit on a hard object.

Type of Swords	Items of dimension	Dimension	Special Characteristics
<i>Paksam tenzin</i>	Blade	1 mm	It has <i>langju</i> and deeper <i>washo</i>
	Length	610 mm	
	Thickness of edge*	5 mm/2 mm	
<i>Chukhap tenzin</i>	Blade	1 mm	It has <i>langju</i> but does not have <i>washo</i> like <i>paksam tenzin</i>
	Length	680 mm	
	Thickness of edge	6 mm/2 mm	
<i>Chhu chenm</i>	Blade	1 mm	It has <i>chu</i> instead of <i>washo</i> .
	Length	642 mm	
	Thickness of edge	8 mm/2 mm	
<i>Jadri washuchenm</i>	Blade	1 mm	n.a
	Length	594 mm	
	Thickness of edge	6 mm/2 mm	
<i>Boedri</i>	Blade	2 mm	n.a
	Length	610 mm	
	Thickness of edge	7 mm/2.5 mm	
<i>Bumthang tsendri</i>	Blade	n.a	It has <i>Terton's</i> thumb imprint.
	Length		
	Thickness of edge		
<i>Nagphala</i>	Blade	n.a	Black and hard like <i>plalam</i> .
	Length		

Type of Swords	Items of dimension	Dimension	Special Characteristics
	Thickness of edge		
<i>Dungsum thum</i>	Blade	n.a	n.a
	Length		
	Thickness of edge		
<i>Barshongpa</i>	Blade	n.a	n.a
	Length		
	Thickness of edge		
<i>Thum</i>	Blade	n.a	Plain with out any <i>chu</i> .
	Length		
	Thickness of edge		
<i>Lungdri</i>	Blade	n.a.	Very light like air.
	Length		
	Thickness of edge		

* The first dimension represents its thickness at the hilt and the second for its thickness at the tip.

Chhu Chenm

It is crude and stained. It has lines that run through the entire length of the blade and forms hexagonal shape. It is also cast out of hard and soft iron.

Lungdri

It is very thin and light like *lung*¹⁹ and named *lungdri*. It can cut objects into pieces very swiftly.

Patag Giring

It is a ceremonial sword stuck horizontally across the belt at the back of attendants accompanying the king. It was customary for the attendants to put on this sword after they

have reached the *tabab-chorten*²⁰ and carry till lunchtime and it is put off when they arrived at *tabab-chorten* again.

Jadri Washuchenm

Jadri literally means Indian sword. It has comparatively a bigger *washo* and greater width of the blade. During His Late Majesty's time, tenzin swords were sent to Calcutta for replication. However, replicates were light and of lower quality. Besides this information, nothing else is known.

Boedri

Boedri literally means Tibetan sword and was used in Bhutan. Except for the fact that some have *washo* while others don't, no other characteristics or features are known.

Scabbards

Bhutanese swords like *churi chenm*, *ben chang*, *belpa chenm*, *hoshu chenm* etc. derive their names from the descriptive designs of the scabbards. The main body of scabbard is made of wood usually *Bashing*²¹ and *Dungshing*.²² It is usually covered with silver case and with different colours of pelt: black, green and red. The silver cases of some scabbards are plated with gold. The scabbard is divided into three parts. Some do not have any designs while others have a wave-like or knitted design usually gold plated between each interval or partition.

Churi chenm

It has a silver scabbard and three layers of *churi*²³ design in the middle. Hence the name *churi chenm*. The *churi* design is gold plated. This is considered one of the best scabbards. Although the *changap*²⁴ of the king particularly wore it in olden days, many high officials today wear it during important occasion. Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck wore it as is evident from his earlier group picture.



Churi chenm

Ben chang

It possesses all the components of *churi chenm*, except the *churi* pattern. It is plain without any design. *Zimpon*, *changap* and other attendents generally wear it.



Ben chang

Belpa chen

It is similar to *churi chenm*, except that it has the frog's skin instead of the wavy design in the middle of the scabbard. *Belpa* means frog's skin and hence the name *belpa chenm*. The two other parts of the scabbard are covered with silver cases.

Konag chenm and *sernag chenm* are similar to *belpa chenm* except that they are of different hide with different design. Officials of old age put them on. It is evident from the

following excerpt from the 'Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi: A Wind Borne Feather' that Pemi Tshewang Tashi, Chamberlain to Dzongpon²⁵ Angdruk Nim used *belpa chenm* when he went to the battle of Changmanyik, 1876 (?)

I need not tell the tale of my sword.
Should I tell the tale of my sword?
This sword that is like thunderbolt and diamond,
Was given as a gift by Lord Angdruk Nim
When the quillon of the sword is seen
The quillon is like rays beaming down the mountains;
When the gobur of the sword is seen
The frog skin is like blossoms of holly-hock;
When the sword is drawn across the sky
It pleases both Lha Tshangpa and Jain;²⁶
When the sword strikes against the earth
It pleases Lu Tshukna Rinchen;²⁷
When the sword is brandished through the space
It pleases Lha Sin De Jay.²⁸

Hoshu chenm

It is different from other scabbards. The first and the middle parts of the scabbard are covered with pelt painted with red and green respectively. The remaining part covering the tip portion of the sword is covered with silver case. The portion between hilt and the opening of the scabbard and between second and the last portion are decorated with gold designs. Senior officials and elderly men wear it.

Zhangshi chenm

Zhang refers to bronze. The scabbard is all covered with bronze with out any decoration or design. Hence named *zhangshi chenm*. *Ardung* and the lower rank attendants of the king wore it before.

There is no standard requirement for a particular sword to be put inside a particular scabbard. It depends on one's wealth and affordability. Some are inherited. A *churi chenm* may

contain *paksam tenzin* or *chukhap tenzin* and *hoshu chenm* may contain *nagphala* or vice versa.

Metallurgy

Chakor La at Geynekha in Thimphu and Barshong at Khaling in Trashigang were the main source of iron ores for the Blacksmiths of Bhutan. Chakor La literally means hill surrounded by iron ore. The people of Geynekha continued paying taxes in the form of pig iron until 1950. Barshongpas also paid taxes in the form of iron that was used to forge swords during the reign of Bjakar Dzongpon, Pema Tenzin.²⁹ Iron ore is reportedly difficult to find. A depth equivalent to the height of at least one- storied traditional Bhutanese house inside the earth must be dug to extract iron ore. It is found mixed with blackish soil. People dug the earth with crowbars and pickaxe. The crude iron ore is carried in a bamboo basket from the extraction site to the blast furnace. The furnace varies from household to household according to their preferences. It is usually square in shape. At different corners of the blast furnace, a circular hole is dug to hold the melted iron. Above the main fire hole, a layer of hard wood is piled. On top of it, soil containing crude iron ore is spread and the process is repeated until the blast furnace is full. Fire is lit continuously. It takes anywhere from one week to ten days or even one month to complete the process of melting iron depending upon the size of the blast furnace. The melted iron that is collected in different holes is only soft iron, called *nyen cha*. These iron balls are then put inside charcoal and heated continuously to make it hard. Swords and other domestic tools are then made out of this iron.

Different grades of iron can be smelt by using different types of woods. A better quality of iron can be obtained if it is burnt with *Sisi shing*, *Sokey shing*³⁰ and *Thom shing*.³¹ A medium quality can be obtained if it is burnt with *Etho metho*³², *Tarshing*³³, *Tsu-tsu shing*³⁴ and lower quality from *Choka shing*³⁵ and *Murshing*.

Process of making Scabbard and Handle

Dungshing is usually preferred for making scabbard because it can be cut straight with out getting cracked in between. Planks of two equal sizes are planned after taking measurement of the sword. It is curved inside in equal proportion to the sword. They are fixed together with fevicol after they are planned and kept for few hours to dry. It is then ready for covering. The scabbard is covered with different colours of red, green, black etc. pelt. It is also covered with silver and bronze cases. It is about 1.5 cm longer than the sword.

Pelt is mostly of wild animals, frog and cow. It is dressed and then smoothened for dyeing. Indigenous dye is mixed with milk extracted from *Seyshing*³⁶ and glue made out of cow's hide. They are stirred thoroughly and applied uniformly on the pelt. After it is dried, it is then put on the scabbard and stitched tightly. Today dyeing is no longer done because pelts are readily available in different colours from India.



Hilt with cover of intricately knitted silver thread

Hilt is made of willow or walnut or others. Both the hilt and *gobur* are eight sided. Hilt is about 12cm long and is mostly knitted with *ngyulkid*.³⁷ *Gobur* is about 2.5 cm and is fitted with iron, bronze or silver cases. Some are decorated with gold plated designs. The economic value of *gobur* was very high in Tibet. One *chagtey*³⁸ *gobur* fetched one mule.³⁹



A special hilt of paksam tenzin

Process of Polishing Swords⁴⁰

The stained and newly cast swords are rubbed on a *shobda*⁴¹ to remove stains and other marks. Then it is rubbed with hide and sand soaked in water to remove satins and marks between grooves and narrow depression created while casting. Thereafter it is rubbed on *dreyda*⁴² to give ash-black colour to the sword. *Chagchey*⁴³ wrapped in a piece of hide is then used to rub the sword in order to increase its lustre. It is further rubbed with green artemesia leaves and soot to remove dirt and patches created in earlier processes. Finally it is rubbed with powdered charcoal of pinewood wrapped in a piece of cloth, and with a soft and dry cloth to remove moisture from the sword.

Honouring System of Contemporary use of Patag

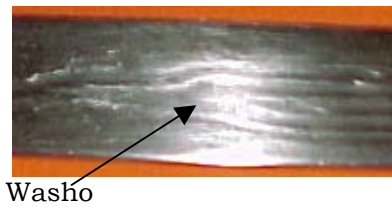
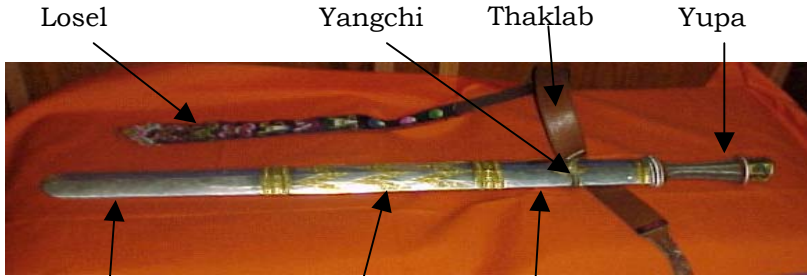
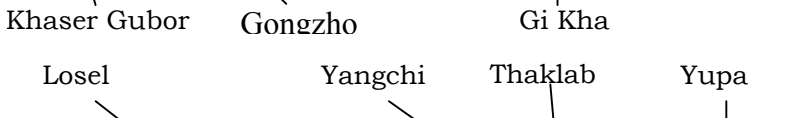
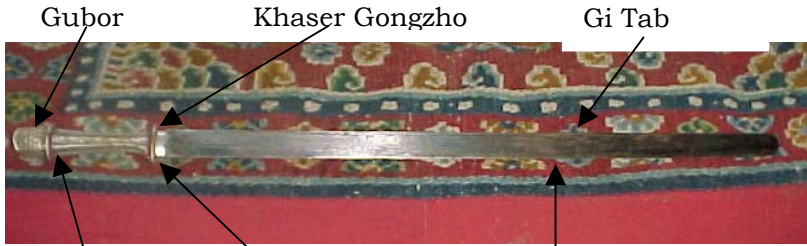
Initially His Majesty the King conferred *patag* and scarf to all the government officials even below the rank of red scarf officials. Although His Majesty continues to confer red, blue and orange scarves, the Minister for Ministry of Home Affairs was empowered to confer *patag* and scarf with stripes and fringes to *Ramjams*⁴⁴ and *Dungpas*.⁴⁵ Besides he also confers *patag* to Dzongdags who wear white *kabneys* (without fringes). Like wise, the appointment of the judges was

delegated to the High Court in 1976 through the promulgation of *Kadyort*⁴⁶ 'Nga' by His Majesty the King. Thrimpons⁴⁷ of dzongkhag thrimkhangs are appointed on the recommendation of the Chief Justice. If His Majesty does not award red-scarf to the Thrimpon, the Chief Justice awards a white *bura kabne* without fringes. His Majesty the King also commanded the Chief Justice to appoint Thrimrab during the 75th session of the National Assembly. The Minister for Foreign affairs also confers *patag* and white scarf to *kutshab*⁴⁸ since the inception of the new system of government in 1998.

Conclusion

Different types of swords were cast in different parts of the country. They were used extensively for different purposes and are the symbols of reverence today. However, the culture of casting of traditional swords has deteriorated over the years. Swords have become relics for the Bhutanese family and are often inherited. Many of the swords worn today by high officials are mostly family inheritance. During the reigns of desi Jigme Namgyal and Tongsa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuck, swords that killed people during wars were marked plus (+) on the blunt edge near the hilt and were preserved and revered as *dripcha* (defiled sword). Some of these swords were given to their best and most trusted attendants in recognition of their outstanding and loyal services.⁴⁹ *Patag* still symbolises *paw*⁵⁰ and is awarded as a symbol of honour.

Anatomy of Patag



Notes

¹ Personal Communications: Jangwob Namgay Tshering, former teacher of Bronze Casting Unit, Thimphu.

² Personal Communications: Dasho Khandu, High Court, Thimphu.

³ Lopen Nado. 1986. *Druk Karpo*, Tharpaling Monastery, Bumthang, pp.241-242.

⁴ Personal Communications: Kado, Former Dzongpoen of Tashigang Monastery, Thimphu.

⁵ Treasure discoverer. It is believed that he used his right hand as hammer and left knee as anvil while casting sword.

⁶ The triple-bladed dagger, nail or spike-known as a *kila* in Sanskrit and a *phurba* in Tibetan and Bhutanese is used as ritual dagger.

⁷ Lopen Nado, *Druk Karpo*, p.164.

⁸ Father of the first king of Bhutan, His Majesty Ugyen Wangchuck.

⁹ Information provided by Duba Yonten, Planning Officer, Pema Gatsel. (He communicated with Phuntsho Wangdi, Chungkhar, Pema Gatsel, 13.04.000). It is doubtful if Jigme Namgyal was known as Nagphala. However, he was known as Deb Nagpo because he was dark in complexion and rode on *tanag tingkar* (black horse with white hooves) with black *gho* and black hat.

¹⁰ The adamantite stone, which cannot be cut or broken.

¹¹ Personal Communications: Dasho Shingkar Lam, Former Secretary to His Majesty the King and the Speaker of National Assembly.

¹² Personal Communications: Chorten Norbu, Lecturer, Sherubtse College.

¹³ Duba Yonten, *Ibid*.

¹⁴ Jigme Chogyel. 1997. *Druk Yul Lamsel*, p.49. In *Proceedings of the first colloquium on "Dawn and Early History of Bhutan"*. National Museum of Bhutan, Paro.

¹⁵ Oak.

¹⁶ *Quercus Lanata*.

¹⁷ Chorten Norbu, *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Like washo but very narrow lines.

¹⁹ Air.

²⁰ A chorten located a few yards away from the dzong. Every rider including the king must alight here.

²¹ Spruce.

²² Fir.

²³ Wavy appearance.

²⁴ Chief attendant to king.

- 25 Fort-governor.
- 26 Brahma and Indra respectively.
- 27 King of Nagas who is fabulously rich.
- 28 They are *nyen, tshen, sadag and lu* who govern the world.
- 29 See Phuntsho Wangdi's article, a forgotten metal industry, buried in the past in Kuensel dated January 15, 000.
- 30 Castanopsis.
- 31 *Quercus glauca*.
- 32 *Rhododendron*.
- 33 Walnut.
- 34 *Myrica*.
- 35 *Rhus simialata*.
- 36 *Rhus Scandens*.
- 37 Silver thread.
- 38 Gold plated iron pommel.
- 39 Personal Communications: Dasho Tashi Phuntshog, Secretary of National Assembly.
- 40 Personal Communications: Pab Dorji, Ugyen and Pema, Bronze Casting Unit, Thimphu.
- 41 Hard and white whet-stone.
- 42 Black gravel whet-stone.
- 43 Small fragments and scales of iron which fall off in the process of hammering of hot iron.
- 44 Officers assisting Dzongdag or Thrimpon.
- 45 Head of sub-district.
- 46 Royal Edict.
- 47 Head of the district court.
- 48 Ambassador.
- 49 Jangwob Namgay Tshering, Ibid.
- 50 Hero or Excellence.

Annex

Owner's Imputed Price of different Patags

Sl.No.	Owner's Name	Type of swords	Type of scabbards	Imputed price
1	Dasho Ugyen	Pasak Tenzin	Hoshu chenm	60,000.00
2	Dasho Tashi Dorji	Jadri	Benchang	50,000.00
3	Dasho Pemba	Chukhap Tenzin	Churi chenm	60,000.00
4	Dasho Jambay	Chukhap Tenzin	Buepa chenm	30,000.00
5	Dasho Phenchung	Dungsa Thum	Benchang	50,000.00
6	Dasho Nob Tshering	Chukhap Tenzin	Benchang	40,000.00