

So Old and Yet So New: Buddhist Education and the Monastic Curriculum in Contemporary Bhutan*

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Abstract

The emergence of a modern secular educational system in Bhutan in the 1960s forced the monastic institutions in the country to adapt and change to the new social, political and educational landscape. This article explores the transformation and changes to monastic education in Bhutan during the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century, with a particular focus on the introduction of a new monastic curriculum in the 1980s and the rise of the *Shedra* (Tib. *bshad grwa*) or monastic college as the central religious educational institution in contemporary Bhutan. The article is based on research that took place during the summers of 2018 and 2019, where the authors visited dozens of monasteries, collected various curricula, and talked to monks and officials

* Note: This research is a collaboration project between the New College of Florida (NCF) and the Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law (JSWSL). Prof. Dorji Gyeltshen and I would like to thank all the people who have made this project possible among them, Her Royal Highness Sonam Dechan Wangchuck, the Dean of JSWSL Dr. Sangay Dorjee, Vice Dean Michael Peil, Head of Research Kristen DeRemer, Nima Yoezer, Tshewang Lhamo, and all of the faculty and staff at JSW. We also want to thank the support of the New College Provost Barbara Feldman, and Humanities Chair Miriam Wallace for their financial support. Also, thanks to all of the monks and nuns who talked to us during our research project and made this paper possible, as well as to scholars such as Karma Phuntsho who shared with us his experiences as a monk studying in India. Finally, to Chuki Wangdee and Needup, for all the local support and for their gracious hosting during Prof. Lopez's repeated visits to Bhutan.

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all over the country. We argue that Bhutan is in the midst of a new transformational period in which Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum are being revitalized through a series of innovations and changes that have to do as much with a dialogue with secular education as with the impact of other factors: the influence of transnational Buddhist movements and ideas, the introduction of the commentarial curriculum from Tibetan monasteries in India, and the loss of political power after the introduction of the Bhutanese constitution in 2008, among others. The result is a monastic curriculum that asserts specific Bhutanese sectarian and national identity, and introduces a religious education that is transforming monastic life and education in ways that we are only beginning to see.

Keywords: monastic education, curriculum, *shedra*, Central Monastic Body, Khenpo Shenga, Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies

Introduction

The formal introduction by the government of Bhutan of a secular educational system in the 1950s challenged the monopoly that monasteries had held in the country for centuries as the only places where individuals could receive an education of any kind.¹ After some initial skepticism (Karma Phuntsho, 2000), the positive effects of secular education became evident, with literacy doubling from an estimate of 17% in 1959 to 35.2% in 1991, and reaching 66.5% as of the latest census data (2017).² The first few decades of coexistence

¹ For a discussion on the introduction of secular education in Bhutan see Jagar Dorji, 2003, Schuelka & Maxwell, 2016, Robles, 2016, and Mancall, 2017.

² The most recent data can be found in the World Bank website at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=BT>, retrieved January 11, 2022. Other studies offer slightly different numbers, but all of them point towards a rapid increase in literacy in the country. The *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000*, for example, estimated a much lower level of literacy of 10% in 1970, 21.1% in 1984 and 47.5% in 1994. See Karma Phuntsho, 2000. The standardization of Dzongkha as a national language in the

between the traditional monastic educational system and the new modern secular one were not easy, and constant tensions and conflicts emerged (Karma Phuntsho, 2000; Zangley Dukpa, 2016). According to Karma Phuntsho

Conflicts between the two institutions became more apparent and vehement. While the traditionists continued to see modern education as a profane non-Buddhist pursuit, the new class of modern educated youth looked down on the traditional system as a resilient leftover from the past, rendered inefficacious by time. Monastic communities were viewed in economic terms as non-productive consumers and as social parasites hindering the material progress of the nation. Traditional education, as represented by monastic learning, from their viewpoint, was a repetition of rituals and non-reflective chanting³

For Karma Phuntsho, these “two ways of learning,” as he called them, initially run in parallel tracks looking at each other with suspicion.⁴ Various scholars and intellectuals saw promise in the interactions between both traditions (Aris, 1990; Prakke, 1999; Karma Phuntsho, 2000), but there was also an acknowledgement that compromises needed to be made for the two systems of education to coexist in modern Bhutan. As Phuntsho argued “modernists may have to give their domineering attitude and the view that tradition is a

1970’s (it officially became the national language in 1971) also helped formalize the educational system in the country. Thanks to one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

³ Karma Phuntsho, 2000, p.112.

⁴ These tensions are exemplified in a personal anecdote by my co-investigator Prof. Dorji Gyeltshen. In 1998, when he was a monk at the newly created Tango College, a few monks, including himself, were painting on the side of a van the name of the Tango University, when they were approached by an individual who told them that Tango could not be a college since a university is a place for secular education, and Tango was certainly not such a place, therefore they did not deserve to use that name.

degenerate system to be superseded by [a] more technologically advanced system,” and traditionalists, “may have to come out of their conservative isolation and open up to meaningful dialogue with the modernists.” (Karma Phuntsho, 2000, pp. 119-120). That initial period of suspicion was followed in the 1980s with what Brian Denman and Singye Namgyel, called a period of convergence, a “coming together between the approaches of the monastic order and those of modern education” (Denman & Singye Namgyel, 2008, p. 487). This process was evident in the creation of institutions such as Tango College in 1988, and Sang Chokkor Buddhist College in 1991, which introduced a Buddhist monastic curriculum that was, in part, a response and a reaction to the success of the modern system of secular education that was now well established in the country. This article argues that, after those periods of tension and convergence, now Bhutan is in the midst of a new transformational period in which Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum are being revitalized through a series of changes and innovations that have to do as much with a dialogue with secular education as with the impact of other factors: the influence of transnational Buddhist movements and ideas, the introduction of the commentarial curriculum from Tibetan monasteries in India, and the loss of political power after the introduction of the Bhutanese constitution in 2008, among others. The result is a monastic curriculum that asserts specific Bhutanese sectarian and national identity, and introduces a religious education that is transforming monastic life and education in ways that we are only beginning to see. The article is divided in three parts. The first one, offers a brief introduction to the history of Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum in Tibet, paying particular attention to the development of the commentarial curriculum in the late 19th century. The second part will discuss the introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan in the 1980s, symbolized by the creation of Tango College in 1988 and the emergence of the Shedra or monastic college as the central institution of religious learning in the country. The third part will explore the structural and curricular changes made to the curriculum over the last twenty years that have gradually seen

the emergence of a more assertive and confident monastic institution. For reasons of space, we will not include in this article the current status and parallel transformation of religious education and the monastic curriculum in Bhutanese nunneries, since this is the focus of another piece we have already published.⁵

This article is the result of two research trips in the summers of 2018 and 2019, in which we interviewed leaders of the Central Monastic Body (CMB)⁶, dozens of monks, khenpos, and

⁵ For our research on the transformation of religious education in Bhutanese nunneries see Dorji Gyeltshen & Lopez, 2020. The final goal of our multi-year research project is a book, under the provisional title of “The Monk, the Nun, and the Curriculum: Tensions and Transformations of Monastic Education in Modern Bhutan,” that will explore the current transformation of religious education and the monastic curriculum in contemporary Bhutan by focusing on 1) the introduction and transformation of a new monastic curriculum in the 1980s and the rise of the Shedra or monastic college as the most relevant educational monastic institution in Bhutan, 2) the emergence of a more gender inclusive environment with the construction of nunneries all over the country, and the creation of various monastic curricula for nuns, and 3) the creation of the *Institute for the Science of the Mind*, a three year Buddhist Studies B.A. program sponsored by the Central Monastic Body taught by monks, but intended for a secular audience. The book intends to be a case study that will contribute to our understanding of modern transformations of religious education in a variety of Buddhist countries, as well as an analysis of the social and historical context that has shaped that transformation, including the international networks of Buddhist institutions and ideas that influence them.

⁶ The Central Monastic Body (Dz. *gzhung grwa tshang*), CMB from now on, is led by the figure of the Je Khenpo (Dz. *rje mkhan po*) and it is the religious organization in charge of setting policy for all Drukpa Kagyu institutions in the country. Drukpa Kagyu monasteries and nunneries are organized in a very hierarchical way and they have to follow the rules and regulations of the CMB. The other important tradition is the Nyingma sect, with old roots in the history of Bhutan that stretch back to the 7th century. Most of the Nyingma monasteries in the country (with a few exceptions) are run by independent charismatic lamas and they do not receive funds from the central

Bhutanese scholars. Our interviews were mostly informal, and focused on the personal experiences and recollections of older monks who studied the commentarial curriculum in India as well as the younger ones who are studying it in Bhutan. The CMB provided us with copies of the curriculum used at the Drukpa Kagyu Shedras, and we also collected several curricula from Nyingma institutions such as Phajoding (Dz. *Pha jo sdings*) and Nyimalung (Dz. *Nyi ma lung*). We also collected and examined the curricula of newer institutions such as the Institute for Advanced Vajrayana Studies at Tango (Dz. *Gsang chen rdo rje theg pa'i slob sbyong spel khang*), the curriculum for the three-year retreat (Dz. *Lo gsum phyogs gsum*), and that for the Institute for the Science of Mind (Dz. *Sems rtogs kha sems don rig pa'i spel khang*).⁷ From a methodological perspective, we have approached our study following Justin McDaniel's suggestion that the 'curriculum,' as a concept, as well as a practice, should be explored as an "interpretive category for the history of religion and for South Asian studies," one that can offer an alternative to our attempts to define Buddhism in abstract or absolute terms and, instead, focus on how knowledge referred as 'Buddhist' has been formed and transmitted in very specific local communities (McDaniel, pp. 7-8). A study of the Bhutanese curriculum, therefore, would allow us to examine not only how Buddhism is understood in this unique Himalayan Kingdom, but also how a new form of Buddhism, one shaped by current social, political, and national pressures is being produced in the 21st century.

monastic body and do not have to follow their rules and regulations. This duality (of Drukpa Kagyu and Nyingma) has played an important role in the different speeds at which the monasteries of the Nyingma and those under the CMB have implemented changes to the status and the education of monks in Bhutan. For the history of these two Buddhist sects in Bhutan see Aris (1979) and Karma Phuntsho (2013), among others.

⁷ This last one is particularly interesting since it is the equivalent of a Buddhist Master of Divinity, created and taught by the CMB, but targeted for a secular audience.

Finally, we want to contribute to the research done on Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum in the country over the last few decades by scholars such as Aris (1990), Karma Phuntsho (2000), Denman & Singye Namgyel (2008), Rennie & Mason (2008), Gandhi (2009), Stiles (2010), Schuelka (2012) and Zangley Dukpa (2016). At the same time, though, we also want to participate, offering Bhutan as a case study, in the recent research done on Buddhist education and the monastic curricula in other Buddhist countries, such as the one done by Khammai Dhammasami in Burma and Thailand (2018), Justin McDaniel in Laos and Thailand (2008), Uri Kaplan in Korea (2015), Thomas Borchert (2017) and Douglas Gildow (2016) in China, among others.

Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum in Tibet

The history of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan is deeply rooted in its shared religious history with Tibet.⁸ When Buddhism was first introduced in Tibet in the 7th century, it attempted to introduce and replicate the forms of learning found in the larger monastic institutions in India, such as Nālandā and Vikramaśīla. When Samyé (Tib. *bSam yas*), the first monastery in Tibet, was founded in the 8th century (775-79), the Tibetan Emperor Trisong Detsen (Tib. *Khri srong lde btsan*) invited Śāntarakṣita, the abbot of Nālandā at the time, as well as his disciple, Kamalaśīla, in order to introduce the Indian curriculum into the Land of Snows.⁹

⁸ The early history of Bhutan is, in fact, closely linked to the early history of Tibet, and the oldest historical accounts of Bhutan are connected to the early dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet, with references to temples built in the country by the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (Tib. *Srong btsan sgam po*, 605-649 CE) and the important presence of Guru Rinpoche as a central figure in establishing Buddhism as the most important religion in the region. See Aris (1979), Hasrat (1980), and Karma Phuntsho (2013) among others.

⁹ The history of the foundation of Samyé is much more complex, and there is evidence of competing monastic models coexisting during the early period of the monastery, mostly represented by the tension between Chinese and Indian monastic communities coexisting at

The collapse of the Tibetan Empire in the 9th century gave rise to a more idiosyncratic and diverse form of institutional learning in Tibet with the emergence of a much more fragmented and sectarian landscape.¹⁰ In the aftermath of the Empire, and without a central monastic institution supported by the state, Buddhist knowledge became decentralized, and as Dreyfus points out, monks paid “little attention to sectarian affiliation,” and went “from monastery to monastery to study with teachers of particular specializations regardless of their school” (Dreyfus, 2003, p.139)

One of the most important institutions of this period was Sangpu Neutok (Tib. *gSang phu ne'u thog*), founded in 1073 by Ngok Lekbai Sherab (Tib. *rNgok legs pa'i shes rab*, 1059-1109 CE) in central Tibet.¹¹ This institution became famous for its emphasis on scholasticism and debate, attracting students from a variety of traditions. Scholars such as Ngok Lotsaba (Tib. *rNgok lo tsA ba legs pa'i shes rab*), nephew of Ngok Lekbai Sherab, and Chaba (Tib. *Phwya pa chos kyi seng ge* 1109–1169) developed a curriculum for Sangpu Neutok focused on logic and epistemology (Skt. *pramāṇa*), and while following the Indian Shastric or commentarial model, they also introduced important Tibetan innovations, like the development of outlines (Tib. *sa bcad*) to facilitate the study of Indian texts (Dreyfus, 2003, p. 138). After having studied a variety of texts

Samyé. Those models clashed in what became known as the Samyé Debate, in which according to various sources, the Indian and Chinese models debated each other. The traditional narrative presents the Chinese monks as the losing side and, since then, Tibetan Buddhism has rooted itself in India forms of Buddhism and the Indian monastic tradition. The historicity of the debate has been called into question by some scholars, see (Van der Kuijp, 1984; Ruegg, 1989, who called it a “dehistoricized topos”), but there is no doubt that the narrative about the debate framed what was considered an important tension in early Tibetan Buddhism, mainly the methods by which to achieve enlightenment. Some important sources for the debate are (Demiéville, 1952; Tucci, 1956; Houston, 1980; Faber, 1986).

¹⁰ See Davidson (2005)

¹¹ On the history of Sangpu Neutok see van der Kuijp (1987) and Onodo (1990).

(logic, epistemology, Vinaya, Abhidharma), scholars would tour other centers to be examined on the knowledge of those textual traditions” (Dreyfus, 2003, p. 139). Beginning in the 13th century, various Tibetan sects began granting monastic degrees in order to recognize the intellectual achievements of those who pursued intellectual studies. The early Kadampa (Tib. *bka’ gdams pa*) tradition, for example, created the title of “One Who has Mastered Four Texts,” (Tib. *bka’ bzhi pa*) to those who proved their knowledge of four central topics (Perfection of Wisdom, logic and epistemology, Vinaya, and Abhidharma), and the Sakya developed the title of the “One Who has Mastered Ten Texts” (Tib. *bka’ bcu pa*).¹²

An important moment in the history of the curriculum in Tibet began with the ascent of the Gelukpa (Tib. *dge lugs pa*) tradition in the 14th and 15th centuries. The Gelukpa tradition, founded by Tshongkhapa (Tib. *Tsong kha pa*, 1357-1419 CE) placed particular emphasis on monastic discipline and Buddhist education, and developed a curriculum focused on five primary topics (Perfection of Wisdom, Madhyamaka philosophy, Pramāṇa, Abhidharma, and Vinaya). The curriculum was immediately successful and was introduced in the three main seats for the tradition founded by Tshongkhapa and some of his main disciples, Drepung (Tib. *’Bras spungs*, founded in 1416), Sera (Tib. *Se ra*, founded in 1419), and Ganden (Tib. *dGa’ ldan*, founded in 1409), which soon became the largest monastic institutions in the country. In order to add structure to the curriculum, the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Tib. *Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1672-1682) added a yearly system of exams, and the seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso (Tib. *bsKal bzang rgya mtsho* 1708-1757) codified it with different titles such as that of Geshe Lharampa (Tib. *lha rams pa’i dge bshes*) (Dreyfus, 2003, pp. 144-45). The convergence of religious and political power on the figure of the Dalai Lama during the Ganden Phodrang

¹² For a discussion on the early history of the monastic curriculum in Tibet see Dreyfus’ *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, particularly chapters 4 (“The General Structure of the Tibetan Curriculum”), and 5 “Two Curricular Models” (Dreyfus, 2003).

period (Tib. *dGa' ldan pho brang*, 1652-1959) allowed the Gelukpa to become the dominant sect in Tibet imposing (sometimes by force) their monastic model and curriculum throughout the country.¹³

It will not be until the 19th century when an alternative to the hegemonic Gelukpa curriculum will emerge as part of the non-sectarian movement (Tib. *ris med*) that swept Eastern Tibet in the 19th century, with figures such as Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (Tib. '*Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po*, 1820-1892) and Jamyang Khongtrul (Tib. '*Jam dgon kong sprul* 1813-1899), who revitalize the lineages, ritual, and textual traditions that had been under pressure during the dominant rule of the Dalai Lamas.¹⁴ A central figure in the development of this alternative curriculum was Khenpo Shenphen Nangba (Tib. *mKhan po gZhan phan snang ba*, 1871-1927), most commonly known as Khenpo Shenphen, a Nyingma scholar who wrote what became known as the Thirteen Great Texts (Tib. *gzhung chen bcu gsum*), a series of commentaries to thirteen classic Indian texts.¹⁵

¹³ On this period of the history of Tibet, see Shakabpa (1967). On the Geluk suppression of other schools, see Samten Karmay (1998).

¹⁴ On the history and impact of the Rime movement see Ringu Tulku (2006).

¹⁵ The thirteen texts are: 1) Prātimokṣa Sūtra (Tib. '*Dul ba mdo*), 2) Vinaya Sūtra by Guṇaprabha (Tib. *So sor thar pa'i mdo*), 3) Abhidharma-samuccaya by Asaṅga (Tib. *Theg pa chen po'i chos mngon pa kun las btus pa'i mchan 'grel Nor bu'i me long*), 4) Abhidharmakośa by Vasubandhu (Tib. *Chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi tshig le'ur byas pa'i mchan 'grel Shes bya'i me long*), 5) Mūlamadhyamakakārikā by Nāgārjuna (Tib. *dBu ma rtsa ba'i tshigs le'ur byas pa shes rab zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 6) Madhyamakāvatāra by Candrakīrti (Tib. *dBu ma la 'jug pa zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 7) Catuhasatakashastra by Aryadeva (Tib. *bsTan bcos bZhi brgya pa zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa'i mchan 'grel*), 8) Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra by Śāntideva (Tib. *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 9) Abhisamayālaṅkāra by Asaṅga (Tib. *mngon rtogs rgyan*), 10) Mahāyāna Sūtrālamkāra by Asaṅga (Tib. *Theg pa chen po mDo sde rgyan zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 11) Madhyāntavibhāga by Asaṅga

Since the curriculum was supposed to echo the non-sectarian outlook of the period in Eastern Tibet, it mostly focused on commentaries by some of the most important Indian scholars such as Guṇaprabha, Aśaṅga, Vasubhandu, and Nāgārjuna, among others. The curriculum avoided Tibetan texts and commentaries, as well as Tantric scriptures, in order to avoid sectarian lineages and preferences. The curriculum also avoided Pramāṇa texts, a central feature of the Geluk school, and focused mostly on commentarial and textual interpretation (Dreyfus, 2003; Pearcey, 2015). The curriculum was meant to be studied in five years, and the texts were structured around the categories of Vinaya (Tib. *'dul ba*), Abhidharma (Tib. *mngon pa*), and Sūtra (Tib. *mdo*).¹⁶

(Tib. *dBus dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 12) Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga by Aśaṅga (Tib. *Chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa'i mchan 'grel*), 13) Mahāyānottaratantra by Aśaṅga (Tib. *Theg pa chen po rGyud bla ma'i bstan bcos zhes bya ba'i mchan'grel*). Adam Pearcey has written an excellent article outlining the history of the Khenpo Shenphen's curriculum and its recent adaptations in monasteries in India such as Namdroling and Sakya College. As Pearcey writes in the article, the history of the commentarial curriculum as designed by Khenpo Shenga could be traced even further back to the establishment of Śrī Simha Shedra at Dzogchen Monastery by Gyalse Zhenphen Thaye (Tib. *rGyal sras gzhan phan mtha' yas*) in 1848, although there is little doubt that the content and structure of the curriculum was mostly developed by Khenpo Shenga. Also see Bayer (1999). See also Appendix 1 for a table of collection.

¹⁶ The Sūtra section was divided in two parts, the Profound View (Tib. *zab mo lta ba*) with texts by Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Āryadeva and Śāntideva, and the Great Conduct (Tib. *rgya chen chos pa*), which focused on the five texts attributed to Maitreya. Pearcey argues that this division “represents a progression through the so-called ‘Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma’ (Skt. *tridharmacakra*; Tib. *chos 'khor rim pa gsum*), in which the Vinaya and Abhidharma both correspond to the initial turning (*bka' dang po*), the four treatises of the Profound View to the intermediate turning (Tib. *bka' bar pa*) and the so-called “five treatises of Maitreya” (Tib. *byams chos sde lnga*), here labelled Vast Conduct, to the intermediate and final turnings (Tib. *bka' mtha' ma*)”. See Pearcey (2015, p. 455).

Khenpo Shenga first taught the curriculum at Śrī Simha Shedra (Tib. *ShrI simha bshad grwa*) at Dzogchen Monastery (Tib. *rDzogs chen*), a key Nyingma institution in Kham, and then was invited by Tai Situ Wangchuck Gyalpo (Tib. *Ta'i sit u dbang phyug rgyal po*, 1886-1952) to institute the same curriculum at Palpung (Tib. *dPal spungs*), a central Kagyu institution, which he did between 1910-1918. In 1918, he founded the Khamje Shedra (Tib. *Khams bye*) at Dzongsar (Tib. *rDzong gsar*). The curriculum was also accepted by the Sakya school, although they added five Pramāṇa texts, becoming the Eighteen Texts of Great Renown (Tib. *grags chen bco brgyad*) to it, becoming a sort of compromise between the commentarial emphasis of the non-sectarian movement, and the emphasis on logic and debate of the Gelukpa school.¹⁷

From Tibet to Bhutan (and from ritual to scholastic education)

Before the arrival of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Dz. *Zhabs drung Ngag dbang nam rgyal*, 1594-1651), to Bhutan in 1616 and the formation of the country as an independent polity, the history of Buddhism and, by extension, of monastic education in Bhutan was deeply rooted in Tibetan monastic institutions in Tibet.¹⁸ There are no records regarding the content and structure of monastic education in Bhutan during its early history, and although there is obviously a rich history of Buddhist activity since its introduction in the country in the 8th century, it seems that most Bhutanese monks who wanted to get an education had to cross the Himalayas and study in the most important monastic centers in Tibet.

The arrival of the Shabdrung in the 17th century and the establishment of the Drukpa Kagyu as the dominant sect in the

¹⁷ The five texts are: Pramāṇa-*samuccaya* by Dignāga, Pramāṇavārttika by Dharmakīrti, Pramāṇaviniścaya by Dharmakīrti, the *Treasury of Valid Reasoning* (Tib. *tshad ma rigs gter*) by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen, and the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Sets of Vows* (Tib. *sdom gsum rab dbye*) by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen. See Pearcey (2015).

¹⁸ See Aris (1979,1986), and Karma Phuntsho (2013).

country changed the religious landscape, with the creation of Drukpa Kagyu monasteries throughout the country, beginning with Cheri (Dz. *lcags ri*, in 1619 in Thimphu and then Semthoka (Dz. *Sems rtogs kha*, 1628) and Punakha (Dz. *sPung thang kha*, 1636), where he established the main center of religious and political power for Bhutan in 1636. With very few exceptions, the only other dominant tradition that will thrive in Bhutan until the present will be the Nyingma school, with a network of independent temples and monasteries led by charismatic lamas. In order to govern the country, the Shabdrung wrote in 1629 the Great Code of Law (Dz. *bca' yig chen mo*), which included some rules and regulations for the monastic body. Unlike the monastic curriculum that was being developed in Tibet at that time by the Gelukpa tradition, the focus of the Great Code of Law was mostly on ritual, and was generally more concerned with orthopraxy than with orthodoxy since “active scholarship remained outside the focus of their routines, and most monks became only literate enough to read monastic liturgies and perform rituals” (Lopon Nado, 1986).¹⁹

The success of the commentarial curriculum in Tibet sparked some attempts at introducing it into Bhutan during the first half of the 20th century at some Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu monasteries such as Tharpaling, Nyimalung, Phajoding, and Cheri, which in several interviews were referred to as “proto-Shedras.”²⁰ The non-sectarian nature of the curriculum, and the fact that it had been embraced by all non-Gelukpa sects in Tibet, made it ideal for the religious make-up of the country, officially a Drukpa Kagyu state with a strong Nyingma presence. The lack of traction of this early introduction though can be surmised by the fact that figures like the 69th Je Khenpo (Dz. *dGe 'dun rin chen*), who studied for a year in Nyimalung in central Bhutan in the early 1950s, still went to Tibet to complete his education. Gendun Rinchen played a very important role in laying the foundations for the institutional

¹⁹ For the Code of Law see Whitecross (2007, 2014).

²⁰ Personal interview Karma Phuntsho, June 6, 2018, and Central Monastic Body, June 8, 2018.

introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan. While in Tibet, he studied the Thirteen Great Texts and received important teachings and tantric transmissions by Rahor Palden Chokyi Dragpa (Tib. *Rwa hor dPal ldan Chos kyi grags pa*), a direct student of Khenpo Shenga. Upon his return to Bhutan, he took important positions in Punakha (1960-1970), became the head of Tango Shedra (1970-1980) and Phajoding Shedra (1980-1985), and at all of those institutions, he implemented various versions of the commentarial curriculum, while writing his own commentaries to some of the texts in the curriculum (Schwerk, 2020).²¹

While Gendun Rinchen was a pioneer in the introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan, it would be hard to explain the profound transformation of religious education in Bhutan without discussing three key developments that occurred during the second half of the 20th century that help explain the radical rethinking of religious education in the country: the occupation of Tibet by China in the 1950s, the creation of a strong secular educational system in Bhutan in the 1960s, and the establishment of Tango College, the first Shedra or monastic college in the country in 1988.

The occupation of Tibet by China in 1959 forced many Tibetan religious leaders and scholars to flee Tibet and establish themselves in the exile of India, Nepal, and Bhutan. With the help of the Tibetan Government in Exile (created in 1960),²² many religious leaders from the most important Tibetan Buddhist sects, tried to replicate with significant success some of the most important monastic seats in India, such as the Gelukpa monasteries of Ganden (1971), Sera (1970), and Drepung (1971), as well as Nyingma institutions such as

²¹ Schwerk offers a detailed account of the life of the 69th Je Khenpo in the second chapter of her book *A Timely Message from the Cave: The Mahāmudrā and Intellectual Agenda of dGe-bshes Brag-phug-pa dGe-'dun-rin-chen (1926-1997), the Sixty-Ninth rJe-mkhan-po of Bhutan*.

²² On the history of the CTA see Römer (2008).

Namdroling (1963), bringing with them the monastic curriculum into exile.

Particularly influential was the creation by the Tibetan Government in Exile in collaboration with the Indian government of a new, more progressive and less sectarian institution such as the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in 1967, under the leadership of Kyabje Zong Rinpoche (Tib. *sKyabs rdzong rje*). As stated in their initial mission, their goal was “to take care of the cultural and educational needs of the youth among the Tibetan diaspora in India, and those of the Himalayan regions of India, who earlier had the opportunity of being educated in Tibet, [which] came to be discontinued in the wake of the Chinese occupation.”²³ Since CIHTS was also under the purview of the Department of Culture, Ministry of Education, Government of India, it also attempted to “combine traditional wisdom with modern educational pedagogy, and courses are offered in a graded fashion leading up to M.Phil and Ph.D. levels.” The hybrid nature of CIHTS would be very influential in the creation of most of the Shedras in exile, and it will play a key role in adapting Tibetan Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum to the modern educational requirements as expected under the secular Indian educational system. Some of the changes were structural, adapting the monastic curriculum to resemble that of secular institutions, with semesters, grades, etc., while other changes were in content, incorporating subjects like English and later computer skills. CHITS became a model for what it became, arguably, the single most influential institution for the introduction of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan, the Nyingma Shedra at Namdroling, the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute (Tib. *snga 'gyur mdo sngags rig pa'i 'byung gling*), founded in 1978, with its first monks graduating in 1989. Since Namdroling was the main seat of the Nyingma tradition in exile, its monastic college became one of the most

²³ From CIHTS website. <http://www.cuts.ac.in> and <http://www.cuts.ac.in/index.php?url=content/ab1vcd>.

important intellectual centers for the study of the monastic curriculum in exile.

At Namdroling Shedra, the commentarial curriculum designed by Khenpo Shenga in Tibet was adapted in significant ways to adapt to the new historical and social context of India. Following CIHTS, the curriculum went from five to nine years, and it followed a similar structure. At the same time, important changes were introduced. While the curriculum at CIHTS was intended to be non-sectarian (with tradition specific classes being optional), the curriculum at Namdroling would include important Nyingma texts and commentaries. Although Khenpo Shenga's Thirteen Commentaries would still be an important of the curriculum, now they would be complemented by other commentaries by important Nyingma scholars such as Mipham (Tib. *Mi pham*, 1846-1912) and Longchenpa (Tib. *Klong chen pa*, 1308-1364). Khenpo Shenga's texts were mostly "annotated commentaries" (Tib. *mchan 'grel*), which were intentionally non-sectarian, and proudly tried not to add much in terms of personal interpretation.²⁴ Namdroling leaders decided instead to use Mipham's commentaries, with his unique philosophical depth, to become the central lens through which Namdroling monks would understand the Nyingma tradition. Following the CIHTS format, after the completion of the nine-year curriculum, students receive the title of Ācarya (Tib. *blo spon*), and the title of Khenpo (Tib. *mkhan po*) after having taught at another monastic college for three years after the completion of the curriculum.

The sudden and dramatic influx of religious leaders, as well of hundreds of monks, and nuns into exile, including Bhutan, as well as the development of new monastic institutions in India and Nepal that tried to replicate the Tibetan monastic curricula, exposed Bhutanese monastics to a generation of monks who had been educated using the commentarial curriculum developed by Khenpo Shenga. Many Bhutanese

²⁴ See Pearcey (2015, p. 453). Karma Phuntsho also shared this opinion during an interview (June 6, 2018).

monks began travelling to India, mostly to Namdroling to learn the new curriculum, while figures of the caliber of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a towering figure within the Rimé movement in Tibet who established himself in Bhutan after the Chinese occupation of 1959, introduced a new generation of monks to many of the works in the curriculum.²⁵

The second development that will be central to the introduction of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan will be the creation of a secular universal system of education in the country. Although there were early attempts at introducing modern education under King Ugyen Wangchuck (reigned 1907-1926), it will not be until the 1950s that the educational situation in the country will dramatically change, offering for the first time to many children, the possibility of getting an education that did not involve joining a monastery. The relatively rapid success of the new secular educational system forced the Central Monastic Body (Dz. *gzhung grwa tshang*) to institute reforms to the monastic education in order to modernize it, but also to maintain it relevant and appealing in the face of the success of the secular educational system.²⁶

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many Bhutanese monks went to India, particularly Namdroling, to study the new commentarial curriculum, brought to India by Tibetans in exile, and transformed and restructured to reflect to influence of secular education by CIHTS. After graduating and returning to Bhutan, those educated monks did not have a formal institution in which to teach what they had learned. This situation, combined with the internal pressures monastic education was undergoing in Bhutan after the implementation of modern education in the country since 1959, forced the CMB to rethink religious education and the monastic curriculum in the country. To oversee this transformation, the CMB created in 1984 Council for Religious Affairs (Dz. *Grwa tshang lhen*

²⁵ For a bibliographical account of Dilgo Khyentse's life, including his years in Bhutan see his autobiography (2008).

²⁶ For the history of secular education in Bhutan see Gandhi (2009), Robles (2016), and Mancall (2017).

tshog) which under the leadership of the 68th Je Khenpo Tenzin Dendup (Dz. *bsTan 'dzin don grub*) was charged with the responsibility of reviewing and rethinking monastic education along the lines of modern secular education (Zangley Dukpa, p. 50).²⁷

Finally, the third and last important development central to our understanding of the transformation of Buddhist monastic education in Bhutan is the creation of the first modern Shedra or monastic college in the country: Tango College. The 3rd King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (Dz. *'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug*) and the 65th Je Khenpo (Dz. *Ye shes seng ge*) had converted Tango Monastery into a Shedra in the early 1960s, introducing the commentarial curriculum in the country, although in a less structured way than it was being taught in India. In 1988, though, Tango Shedra was transformed into Tango College, the first monastic college in Bhutan, in order to offer an intellectual and academic alternative to the secular educational system now so successful in the country.²⁸ The new monastic institutions in exile, particularly Namdroling allowed Bhutanese access to the commentarial curriculum developed for non-Geluk schools, once finalized the curriculum it only made sense that many of them returned to Bhutan, only to find that there was no institutional support to share what they had learned. Tango played a central role in the transformation of monastic education in Bhutan by becoming an institutional and educational model that will allow the CMB to train its own monks in a curriculum that over the following three decades will assert a new role for monastic institutions in the country as well as for monks. Tango Shedra will also allow Bhutanese

²⁷ The 68th Je Khenpo had also learned the commentarial curriculum in Tibet, which was also instrumental in its centrality to monastic education in Bhutan in the 20th century. Conversation with Khenpo Sonam Bumden (June 2nd, 2018).

²⁸ There had been some proto-Shedras in Bhutan, such as those of Tharpaling and Phajoding, but it was not until the creation of Tango College (now University) that Bhutan finally introduced the academic curriculum developed first in Tibet and later in Exile into Bhutan. Interview with Secretary, June 12, 2019.

to be trained in their own country, instead of having to leave for India in order to receive a religious education. With the creation of Tango, we also see the beginning of a more assertive religious establishment in Bhutan, which seen the dramatic events that had occurred in Tibet during the second half of the 20th century, will now see its own religious and intellectual history as a source of pride and strength, instead of always looking at Tibet as the source of most, if not all, legitimate religious training.

It is the confluence of those three developments that help explain the introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan, as well as its early structure and content. As we will see though, over the last two decades, very important changes have been introduced to the curriculum that have shaped it to reflect a unique Bhutanese religious and cultural identity.

The transformation of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan: Asserting sectarian and national identity

After centuries of feeling subservient to the historical and political developments of Tibet, the divergent fates of Tibet and Bhutan in the 20th century have allowed Bhutan to become more assertive politically, but also culturally, feeling more comfortable creating and affirming a distinctive religious national identity. This new confident approach can be seen in the many curricular changes, structural as well as of content, that the CMB has introduced in the curriculum over the last few years.

Structural changes to the curriculum

At the structural level, the most important mandate of the Council for Religious Education when it was created in 1984 was to rethink and restructure religious education along the lines of the modern secular system.²⁹ Traditional religious education in Bhutan focused on ritual, which was learned at the Lobdra (Tib. *slob grwa*) or ritual school, and practice in the

²⁹ See Denman & Singye Namgyel (2008).

Dratshang (Tib. *grwa tshang*) or ritual college.³⁰ Under the new plans, the Lobdra education would be followed by the study of the commentarial curriculum at the commentarial college or Shedra. The new educational path was structured in stages that mirrored modern education. An important early effect of the formal introduction of the curriculum was the shift from an overwhelming ritual focus to one that prioritized intellectual and academic learning. If before the establishment of Tango and the introduction of the monastic curriculum, ritual was at the core of monastic education, now it became the early foundation, which is expected to be followed by the rigorous academic training of the Shedra.

The traditional ritual learning that happened at the Lobdra, now takes place in more structured way during the eight years Zhirim Lobdra (Dz. *gzhi rim*) or Primary School.³¹ This is followed by the study of the commentarial curriculum at the Shedra or monastic college which is divided in four years of Dringrim (Dz. *'bring rim*) or Higher Secondary (equivalent of High School), two years of Thorim (Dz. *mtho rim*) or the equivalent of a BA, and three years of Tsuglag (Dz. *gtsug lag*), the equivalent of an M.A. In 2017, the CMB also added three years of optional graduate studies, the equivalent of a Ph.D.

³⁰ Dratshang means monastic (Tib. *grwa*) quarters (Tib. *tshang*), but it generally refers to the place where the monks learn ritual practice.

³¹ For a complete list of all the Zhirim Lobdra institutions in the country see <https://www.dl.gov.bt/monastic-institutions/lobdras/>

Education level	Content	Secular equivalent	Years	Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF)	Institution
Ph.D (Dz. Rigs gcig mkhas pa'i mchog 'dzin) ³²		Ph.D. (Graduate School)	3	8	<i>mkhas pa'i 'byung gnas gling</i> ³³
Tsuglag (Dz. <i>gtsug lag</i>)	Vinaya (Dz. <i>'dul ba</i>)	M.A. (University)	2	7	Shedra (Commentarial School)
Thorim (Dz. <i>mtho rim</i>)	Abhidharma and Prajñāpāra mitā training (Dz. <i>bstan bcos</i>),	B.A. (College)	3	6	
Dringrim (Dz. <i>'bring rim</i>)	Two years of "Higher Madhyamak a" training (Dz. <i>dbu ma gong ma</i>)	Secondary School	4	5	
	two years of "Lower Madhyamak a" training (Dz. <i>dbu ma'i 'og ma</i>)				
Zhirim (Dz. <i>gzhi rim</i>)	Basic Literacy	Primary School	8	3	Lobdra (Ritual School)

Table 1. *Structure of the modern monastic educational system*³⁴

³² At the time of writing this article (September 2019), the program just began the program and no one has graduated from the program.

³³ Although the Ph.D. program takes place at Tango College, there is still no institutional name for the program. See note above.

³⁴ This table outlines the new structure of religious monastic education in Bhutan, and includes an equivalency to the secular educational system, in which it has been formally modeled. The Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF) is a tool developed by the Bhutan Accreditation Council (BAC) to enable the comparison of

Structurally, the curriculum is also different to that of Namdroling in the way content is learned. The one in Namdroling is a nine-year curriculum divided into four years of so-called “Lower Sūtra” (Tib. *mtha bral smra ba'i dbang 'phug*) training, followed by two years of “Higher Sūtra” (Tib. *phar phyin rab 'byams pa*) training, and capped by three years mostly focused on the Tantric textual tradition (Tib. *nges gsang legs bshad mdzod 'chang*).³⁵ In Bhutan, the curriculum is divided into two years of “Lower Madhyamaka” training (Dz. *dbu ma'i 'og ma*), two years of “Higher Madhyamaka” training (Dz. *dbu ma gong ma*), three years of Abhidharma and Prajñāpāramitā training (Dz. *bstan bcos*), which would result in the degree of Shastri, and two years of Vinaya and the “Three Vows” literature, (Dz. *rig gzhung slob dpon*) which would result in the degree of Ācārya (Tib. *A tsarya*). In the case of both

university, vocational, and monastic education. According to the BAC, the BQF has been created to meet the challenges of the 21st century and as a tool to measure the outcomes of various educational institutions in the country. In their own words, “tertiary education, through formal settings as well as continuing education programs, requires a system that is able to facilitate the recognition of diverse kinds of qualifications and create equivalency and professional pathways. A qualifications framework plays an important role in developing degree systems as well as in developing study programs in tertiary education institutions. It not only facilitates the recognition of qualifications, but it is also important for those who make use of qualifications, particularly learners and employers.” In <http://www.dahe.gov.bt/images/pdf/Bhutan%20Qualifications%20Framework%20Inside%20Content.pdf>, retrieved 13 January, 2022. The fact that religious education is part of the BQF framework is telling of the attempts by the Bhutanese government to measure monastic education according to some of the standards and expectations of secular education.

According to the BAC, “it facilitates lifelong learning and enables individuals to pursue their goals according to their aspirations. It supports and aspires to create alternate pathways to the development of human resources with appropriate capabilities and competitiveness.”

³⁵ For a view of the curriculum see their website http://www.palyul.org/eng_shed_popup.htm.

institutions, those degrees were borrowed from CIHTS and reflected a look back at traditional Buddhist education in India. This different division of the material also responds to the fact that in the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, the tantric material is mostly studied and practiced during the three-year retreat (*Dz. lo gsum phyogs gsum*) that is to follow graduation from the Shedra. This change allows the non-tantric material to be spread over the nine-year curriculum.

Over the last few years, the Commission for Monastic Affairs (*Dz. grwa tshang lhan tshogs*)³⁶ has also added other structural changes such as the notion of semesters (two per year), credit hours, and a more transparent system of examination. This last change has been part of a larger plan by the CMB to make monastic institutions part of the university accreditation system, which would mean that monastic institutions under control of the CMB would need to follow some of the same standards of other government institutions such as the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) in order to fulfill the educational requirements of the government.³⁷

The emphasis on the new monastic curriculum has transformed the Shedra or monastic college into the single most important monastic educational institution in Bhutan. While the older generation of monks was not expected to study the new curriculum, all new monks are expected to do so, forcing the CMB to create several monastic colleges throughout the country to allow monks to pursue their studies. The success of Tango college can be seen in the growth of Shedras all across the country which went from one in 1988 to 31 in 2019, with 11 of them as Dringrim (secondary school), four as

³⁶ The Commission for Monastic Affairs is responsible for overseeing the Drukpa Kagyu institutions in the country. It is formed by seven members: the Je Khenpo, five Lopons, and a civil servant secretary. For more information see <http://zhungdratshang.org/>

³⁷ See <http://www.dahe.gov.bt/index.php/governing-boards/bhutan-accreditation-council>

Thorim (College), and with Tango remaining the only one were monks under the CMB can receive the degree of khenpo.³⁸

The impact of Tango has been also felt in the Nyingma monasteries in the country, which are not under the control of the CMB. Following the success, of Tango, several Nyingma shedras opened throughout the country. Gante monastery (*sgang steng*), under the leadership of Gante Tulku, opened its own in 1985, and Lhodrak Karchu monastery (*Lho brag mkhar chu*), under the guidance of Namkhai Nyingpo opened in 1996. Unlike the shedras under the CMB, Nyingma institutions still follow closely the curriculum developed at Namdroling, particularly at the level of structure. As we will see though, at the level of content, Bhutanese Nyingma institutions are also asserting a unique Bhutanese identity by including works by Bhutanese scholars. The Shedra effect has also affected the status and education of nuns throughout the country, with many monastic colleges, Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu alike opened through the country over the last two decades. The particular status of nuns and their fight for educational opportunities though, is out of the scope of this article, although it is part of our larger project in religious education in Bhutan.³⁹

In conclusion, from a structural point of view, the changes to the curriculum mostly reflect the process of convergence with secular education explored by Denman and Singye Namgyel, with the CMB adapting religious monastic education in the country to the current times by replicating some of the structures and processes of secular education.

³⁸ For a list of all the Shedras in the country under the Central Monastic Body see <https://www.dl.gov.bt/monastic-institutions/shedras/>

³⁹ On this topic see Azim (2011), Robles (2014), Pommaret (2015), among others.

Changes in content

The changes to the commentarial curriculum have not only been structural and it incorporates substantial changes in content. The curriculum now includes subjects like English and basic computer skills, something that can also be found in the Namdroling and CIHTS curricula. At the same time, the inclusion of non-religious material is very limited, compared to its Indian counterparts, with no math or science, something that has gradually been incorporated in some of the monastic colleges in Exile.⁴⁰ As Karma Phuntsho pointed out in a conversation, the changes are not as radical as in India, since in Bhutan the CMB has taken a more conservative approach and has not embraced the study of science as the Dalai Lama has done in Tibetan monasteries in India.⁴¹ In this sense, the CMB shows a willingness to incorporate change but always within a fairly conservative framework. As some leaders of the CMB shared with us, a lot of the changes are more superficial than of content, since they always feel the tension of preserving what they consider the essential of the Buddhist tradition without getting swept away by what they consider distractions or radical rethinking of Buddhist education that might have unintended consequences. The changes at Dzongzar Shedra in 2004, for example, with its use of modern style classroom, projectors, and modern pedagogical techniques, is a path they are not considering right now.⁴²

⁴⁰ See Impey (2014), and Gray & Eisen (2019). Some Nyingma institutions in Bhutan, such as Sechen Ugyen Chozong (Dz. *Zhe chen btsun dgon O rgyan chos rdzong*) do include some basic science and environmental courses, although their curriculum is mostly imported from their parent monastery in Nepal, Sechen Monastery (Tib. *Zhe chen bstan gnyis dar rgyas gling*).

⁴¹ Personal interview Karma Phuntsho, June 6, 2018. During a visit to Sechen Monastery in Nepal in May of 2018 it was not unusual to see monks doing math while some others read scripture sitting side by side.

⁴² On the introduction of modern pedagogies into the monastic curriculum at Dzongsar's Shedra see <https://khyentsefoundation.org/dzongsar-khyentse-chokyi-lodro-college/> and <https://khyentsefoundation.org/dkcli-highlights/>

The commentarial curriculum of Namdrooling leans heavily on Nyingma commentaries, particularly the thirteen commentaries by Khenpo Shenga, which form the spine of the curriculum, although it also includes up to nineteen commentaries by Mipham. In contrast, the Bhutanese curriculum as adapted by the Central Monastic Body only includes ten commentaries by Khenpo Shenga, and merely three by Mipham, while including fourteen commentaries by the foremost scholar of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, Pema Karpo (1527-1592, *Pad+ma dkar po*). These are changes that reflect an attempt by the Central Monastic Body to assert national as well as sectarian identity in the new curriculum. The curriculum acknowledges its roots in the Tibetan Nyingma tradition but it is also increasingly asserting a distinctive Bhutanese identity.⁴³

In 2016, the CMB ordered further reform of the monastic curriculum, which very soon will include very detailed syllabi for each of the years of the Shedra, as well as description of goals and objectives and a clear division of what monks are expected to study each semester. The CMB is also creating new documents outlining clear rules and regulations of what is expected by all teachers and khenpos at the various Shedras under the CMB. When asked about the influences behind the new detailed syllabi, the CMB pointed out similar documents at other Bhutanese institutions such as RUB and RTC, as well as Naropa Institute in Colorado, a name that came up in several conversations since some of the current leaders of the Council for Religious Affairs have studied and/or taught there.⁴⁴ Naropa Institute has also been an influence in the

⁴³ On a side note, Nyingma masters, although maintaining most of the curriculum from Namdrooling, have also started to implement some changes to assert their Bhutanese identity, mostly by including texts by local Nyingma masters such as Pema Lingpa (mostly at Peling monasteries).

⁴⁴ On a side but relevant note, Naropa Institute has also been an influence in the creation of the new 3-year academic program at the Institute for the Science of the Mind (ISM) created in 2017 (2016), under the control of the CMB, with monastic faculty, but focused on

creation of a new three-year academic program, the Institute for the Science of the Mind (Dz. *Sems rtoqs kha sems don rig pa'i spel khang*) created in 2017, under the control of the CMB, with monastic faculty, but focused on lay students who want to learn about Buddhism without becoming monks.⁴⁵ The impact of institutions like Naropa, as well as that of the Tibetan monasteries in exile, speaks to a larger trend of influence from a wide network of transnational Buddhist movements, ideas, and institutions. Another example is the recently created three-year Ph.D. program (Dz. *rigs gcig mkhas pa'i mchog 'dzin*) at Tango College. Founded in 2017 with the help of Bhutanese scholar Dorji Wangchuk, from the University of Hamburg, the main goal of the Ph.D. program is to train Buddhist monks who have graduated from the *shedra* in modern academic approaches, focusing less on traditional memorization and commentary, and more in the production of critical and original scholarship.⁴⁶ In order to receive the new degree, monks are not only expected to know the texts of the tradition and being proficient in debate, but if they join the program, they have to work on original research and write a thesis on a specific Buddhist topic. At the time of publication of this article (2022), there were five monks in the program and none of them had graduated. Recently, the CMB has also inaugurated (November 2020) a two-year Tantric College (*sngags grang*) where students who have graduated from the *Shedra* could join as an alternative option to the Ph.D. program to study the contemplative texts and traditions that are part of the tantric

lay students who want to learn about Buddhism without becoming monks.

⁴⁵ A discussion of this new institute is included in our upcoming book *The Monk, the Nun, and the Curriculum: Tensions and Transformations of Monastic Education in Modern Bhutan*.

⁴⁶ It is quite telling, though, that the website of Tango College has a link to the Ph.D. program, but no content in it just yet. <https://tangouniversity.org.bt/academic/academic-programmes/phd-program/> Retrieved 14 January, 2022.

curriculum of the three-year retreat through a more intellectual an academic lens.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Justin McDaniel argued in his study of modern monastic education in Laos and Thailand that “one cannot study the vicissitudes in a religious community unless one studies its forms of education, and any study of education must begin with a mapping and analysis of the curriculum” (McDaniel, 2008, pp. 8-9) The main goal of this article has been to do just that by focusing on the history of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan, as well as in the changes of content and structure that the curriculum has seen over the last few decades. If Karma Phuntsho argued that the emergence of secular education in 1959 was seen as a thread by monastic institutions in the country, and Denman and Singye Namgyel explored the process of convergence that followed that initial tension between both systems, we argue that recent changes to the curriculum, either the structural ones (such as adding a gap year, the new Ph.D program as well as the recently created Tantric College), or those of content (such as the inclusion of texts specific to the Drukpa Kagyu tradition and to Bhutan specific religious or national history) demonstrate also a creative process that goes beyond simply mimicking modern secular education, and it shows a CMB more confident in its place in the social and educational landscape of modern Bhutan. The result is a more assertive approach to religious education one that, while still willing to implement changes learned from the advances of secular education in Bhutan as well as from the reforms to religious education developed in Tibetan monasteries in India, it is also beginning to assert the unique historical and religious legacy of Bhutan.

⁴⁷ The idea of a tantric is modeled on the Gelukpa tantric colleges such as Gyuto, and it also speaks as to the push for an intellectual approach to the Buddhist tradition following the lines of modern secular education.

This transformation of the curriculum, though, having clear positive impact, it is also changing the nature of religious education in the country in ways that we are only beginning to see. One of the most important complaints we heard during our interviews was that the emphasis on the monastic curriculum was driving monks away from their home monasteries in order to study at the few shedras spread throughout the country. That meant that in an era of already decreased interest in joining the monastery, local monasteries have a shortage of monks who can perform the rituals needed on a daily basis by the local community. In order to address this problem, the CMB has implemented a gap year between Dingrim and Thorim education, so monks can return to their home monasteries and help with the ritual needs of their communities. The CMB has also developed a new curriculum for smaller institutions that cannot afford a Shedra that allows monks in those monasteries to fulfill some of the educational requirements of the curriculum without leaving their local monasteries.⁴⁸

But this issue also speaks as to a possible growing gap between the lay people understanding of the role of monks and monasteries in general, and the increasing academic and intellectual education of monks. In other words, changes to the monastic curriculum are not only affecting the content and the structure of monastic education, but also changing what it means to be a monk and the role of monasteries in modern Bhutan.

⁴⁸ The CMB has created an alternative curriculum, the dgon 'dzin, that combines the education of the Dratshang with that of the gZhi rim. It follows a similar curriculum, but it is structured as a different pace, so monks can stay longer in their home communities before they leave, if they so wish, to study at the Shedra. Personal Interview with Khenpo Karma Lhundrup, Secretary of Monastic Education, June 12, 2018.

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Appendix 1

Thirteen Great Texts

གཞུང་ཚན་བཅུ་གསུམ་

The Thirteen Great Texts (Tib. *gzhung chen bcu gsum*) were a series of commentaries to thirteen classic Indian texts written by Khenpo Shenphen Nangba (Tib. *mKhan po gZhan phan snang ba*, 1871-1927). These texts became the backbone of the curriculum for the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya sects.

Collection	Title	Author	ཚོས་སྐད་
Vinaya འདུལ་བ་	Prātimokṣa Sūtra	Guṇaprabha	སོར་མདོ།
	Vinaya Sūtra	Asaṅga	མདོ་རྩལ།
Abhidharma ཚོས་མདོན་པ་	Abidharma-samuccaya	Asaṅga	མདོན་པ་ཀུན་བཏུས།
	Abhidharmakośa	Vasubandhu	མདོན་པ་མཛོད།
Profound View ཟབ་མོའི་ལྷན་བ་	Mūlamadhyamakakārikā	Nāgārjuna	དབུ་མ་རྩ་བ་ཤེས་རབ།
	Madhyamakāvatāra	Candrakīrti	དབུ་མ་འཇུག་པ།
	Catuḥśataka Śāstra	Aryadeva	དབུ་མ་བཞི་བརྒྱ་པ།
	Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra	Śāntideva	སྦྱོང་འཇུག་
Vast Conduct རྒྱ་ཚེན་སྦྱོང་པ་	Abhisamayālaṅkāra	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	མདོན་རྟོགས་རྒྱན།
	Māhayānasūtrālaṅkāra	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	མདོ་སྦྱི་རྒྱན།
	Madhyāntavibhāga	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	དབུས་མཐའ་རྣམ་འབྲེད།
	Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	ཚོས་ཉིད་རྣམ་འབྲེད།
	Uttaratantra Śāstra	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	རྒྱད་སྒྲ་མ།