

A 17th Century Stone Inscription from Ura Village

John A. Ardussi

In traditional times, Ura was the south-easternmost of the districts of central Bhutan called Bum-thang sDe-bzhi – ‘the Four Districts of Bumthang.’ Within the district are found some of the oldest datable Bhutanese monasteries such as Sombrang, connected to the Drigung Kagyudpa subsect of the Lhapa, constructed ca. 1230 AD by the Smyos Lama named Demchog (1179-1265).¹

Before its incorporation into the Zhabdrung Rinpoche’s centralized Drukpa ecclesiastic state during the mid 17th century, Ura was apparently ruled by a line of petty kings, known as the Ura Gyalpo, barely mentioned in Bhutanese histories and about whom little is remembered today. At other times in Ura’s history it was ruled, or at least dominated by strongmen claiming Tibetan ancestry known as the Ura Dung (Choekey: Gdung).² Remnants of those days are found in hillside castle ruins of Gdung Nag-po and in the traditional nomenclature of several homes in Ura that reflect their past functional relationship to the house that once served as the old royal residency, situated at the top of the hill.³ Today, Ura is located just south of the lateral road leading to Mongar and eastern Bhutan and is perhaps best known to tourists for its annual yak dance (Yag Shoed) festival.

In May, 2002, during a visit to Bhutan for historical research, I had the privilege of staying for a night in the village of Ura.⁴ The next morning we walked along an ancient pathway leading westward through the center of the village. The pathway winds among the homes, connecting them to village fields to the south and west. As we passed by the home of the Ura gup (Ch. Rged po) the traditional headman of Ura, I was surprised to discover ourselves in the presence of a large, well preserved prayer wall (Ch. Ma ni thang) (see Fig. 2, 3). The wall is about 100 feet in length, 7 feet high, and divided into

two unequal sections. In the gap between them is constructed a square chorten or stupa of typical Bhutanese style from earlier centuries. Both the walls and stupa are constructed of traditional piled, whitewashed cemented stone with slate roof. At shoulder height along the wall is a continuous stone lintel on which are inset a series of slate inscription panels, painted maroon. Typically, such slate inscriptions contain Sanskrit and Choekey (literary Tibetan) mantras, especially the six-syllable mani prayer to Guru Rinpoche Om mani padme Hum! Indeed, the splendid Ura prayer wall contains many such panels in various states of preservation. The structure conveys the overall impression of a treasured historical monument that has been carefully maintained by generations of local citizens.

Such prayer walls, though on a lesser scale, are found elsewhere in Bhutan, such as on the way to Kyichu Lhakhang north of Paro, and beside the Chendebji chorten on the roadway to Bumthang. Small prayer walls also dot the traditional foot trails connecting hillside villages and monasteries in eastern Bhutan such as those of Dramitse and Udzarong.

Except for the Chendiji prayer wall, which has an inscription stone, these old monuments are often difficult to date or place in any specific historical setting. Much to our good fortune, however, the Ura mani wall contains a well-preserved dedication inscription (Fig. 4), naming its founder as one of Bhutan's most famous civil rulers of the 17th century, the 3rd Druk Desi Minjur Tenpa (Ch. Mi 'gyur Brtan pa) (1613-1681). The wall with its inscription stone are therefore important historical relics. Although brief, the inscription provides some tantalizing insights into the history of Ura and central Bhutan.

Original Text

ཨོམ་སྐྱེའི། ལྷོན་རས་གཟིགས་དབང་དེ་ལ་བྱུག་བཙུག་ལོ། །ཡིག་དྲུག་ཚོས་སྦྱིན་གངས་མེད་སྒྲེལ་བྱེད་
 དུ། །དཔོན་སློབ་མི་འགྲུར་བརྟན་བས་བཀའ་གདམས་ནས། །ཤར་གྱི་བཙོན་བ་བྲམ་དབང་དང་ལྷོ། །ཀུན་
 བཟང་གསང་བདག་བཙོན་འཛིན་ཚོས་དབང་དང་། །བཟོ་བོ་བཙོན་བྱུ་བྱུ་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་བཏོས། །དོད་མ་
 དཀར་བརྒྱད་བརྟན་འཛིན་རྟེན་གཉིས། །ཡོན་བདག་ལུང་ལྷས་རྒྱལ་བྲོན་རྣམས་ཀྱིས་བྱས། །གཞོན་
 གི་བཟོ་བོ་ཨ་པ་རྒྱལ་མཚན་ཡིན། །དགེ་འདི་འགྲོ་ཀུན་སངས་རྒྱས་ཐོབ་པར་འོག། །བཀྲ་འཕེས།

Inscription (line numbers added):

[1]Om Svasti // spyan ras gzigs dbang de la phyag [2] tsha[1]
 lo // yig drug chos sbyin grangs med spel phyir du // dpon
 [3] slob mi 'gyur brtan pas bkas gdams nas // shar gyi btsun
 pa bla ma dbang [4] dang ni // kun bzang gsang bdag
 bstan 'dzin chos dbang dang // bzo bo btsan (?) [5] khyab gu
 ru rnam kyis brkos // do dam dkar brgyud bstan 'dzin rta
 mgrin [6] gnyis // yon bdag ur sbas rgyal blon rnam kyis
 byas // gzong gi bzo [7] bo a pha rgyal mtshan yin //
 dge 'di'gro kun sangs rgyas thob par shog // [8] bkra shis //

Translation

Om Well-being! I bow in reverence to Lord Chenrezig (Avalokiteshvara). In order to increase the countless number of those reciting the Six-syllable prayer (the mani prayer), at the command of Penlop Mingyur Tenpa, the monks of Shar and Lama Wang, Kunzang, Sangdag, Tenzin and Choewang, together with the craftsmen Tsankhyab and Guru, have crafted (this mani wall and inscriptions). The laborers were the two Kargyud (monks) Tenzin and Tamdin. The patrons were the king and ministers of Ur-sbas (or U-ra sbas). The chisel-scribe (*gzong gi bzo zo*) was Apha Gyaltshan. May the virtue of this (deed) lead all sentient beings to Buddhahood! Good fortune!

Historical Commentary

Other than the famous Desi himself, none of the names in this inscription can be identified. They were local monks and citizens who made no other mark worthy of the history books. The project's financial patrons were, as per custom, the local chieftains, in this case the unnamed "king and ministers of Ur-sbas."

Ur-sbas or *Ur-ra Sba* are variants of an ancient name for Ura, interpreted to mean "Ura the Hidden," i.e. a Hidden Land or "Beyul" (Ch. *sbas-yul*). Long before the advent of Drukpa monks to the area, Bumthang was a center of Nyingmapa Buddhist religious activity. The Nyingmapa were the Tibetan sect that chiefly extolled the teachings of the 8th century Indian saint Padmasambhava. It was his prophecies that ordained the concealment of spiritual texts in such 'Hidden Lands' in the Himalayan valleys as Bumthang, although Ura is not specifically mentioned in any such text known to me. A famous *Eulogy to Bumthang* was written in 1355 by the Tibetan Nyingmapa saint Longchenpa (1308-1363). One century later, Bumthang was also the birthplace of Bhutan's most famous native saint, Pema Lingpa (1450-1521). Local legends also say that a descendant of the Tibetan king Thri Srongdetsen took birth in "the Hidden Land of Ura Sba,"⁵ a notion further hinted at in Longchenpa's *Eulogy*.⁶

The fact that the local king and ministers still apparently held some measure of local authority, even though "at the command" of the Penlop Mingyur Tenpa, tends to confirm what we learn from contemporary Bhutanese sources that such local rulers were generally left in power, having once submitted to the overall authority of the Zhabdrung's government in the west. By contrast, we know that other local lords of Bumthang, such as the Choekhor Poenpo (Ch. *Chos-'khor dpon-po*) refused to submit and were either killed by the Desi or escaped to Tibet.⁷

We know very little about the 3rd Desi Mingyur Tenpa's early

life. Bhutanese sources state only that he was a Tibetan of a family known as Smin-'khyud. Their ancestral estates may have been in Lhobrak, not far from Bumthang.⁸ Like most early Bhutanese officials, in early life he was a monk, and was appointed to serve as resident lama at the monastery of Dargye Goenpa in eastern Bhutan. He rose to initial prominence in 1651, when, on the Zhabdrung's retirement from public life (and probable death), the 1st Druk Desi Tenzin Drukgye appointed him to serve as *Choetse Chila*, that is to say the Chila (Ch. *Spyi-bla*) of Trongsa Fortress, formally known as *Chos 'khor rab brtan rtse* or *Chos rtse* for short.⁹

The title Chila (Ch. *Spyi-bla*) first appears in Tibetan Sakya history, and seems to have designated a monk official deputed to oversee monasteries in frontier districts. During the 16th century, the Drukpa rulers of Ralung also appointed a Chila to oversee their monasteries and estates in Bhutan and S.E. Tibet. Prior to his assumption of the title Choetse Chila, Mingyur Tenpa was also known by the title Mon Drubdey Chila, i.e. 'Superintendent Lama of the Mon Monasteries' in eastern Bhutan.¹⁰

Thus, the position of Chila was originally monastic-administrative in nature. When, as part of the Zhabdrung's initiative to extend government rule and collect taxes in what is now eastern Bhutan, the role of monastic superintendent became expanded into that of district governor, the title Choetse Chila further evolved into that of Choetse Penlop. In 1651, at the time of Mingyur Tenpa's appointment, central and eastern Bhutan were just being incorporated into the centralized Bhutanese state. The initial thrust of the Bhutan government was to found new monasteries in these lands. Indeed, the Zhabdrung's own father Mipham Tenpei Nyima (1567-1619) had been instrumental in the spread of Drukpa monasticism into eastern Bhutan.

Mingyur Tenpa was by disposition a forceful overseer of the Zhabdrung's interests. By 1667, when he was appointed to the highest civil office in the Bhutanese government, that of

Druk Desi, he had already accomplished the subjection of Bhutan's central and eastern districts and founded the great fortress Dzongs from which the east was ruled. The account of these campaigns is briefly recorded in a small 17th century text called *the Clear Mirror of History*, and from a variety of other contemporary sources.¹¹ After 1667, the Desi initiated a similar campaign to subdue territories in the west and southwest, extending into Sikkim and the Chumbi Valley of Tibet.¹²

The era of Mingyur Tenpa's administration were years of continued strife with Tibet. The final 'retreat' or death of the Zhabdrung was known almost immediately to the Tibetan authorities in Lhasa, with whom Bhutan had been at odds since the Zhabdrung's advent to Bhutan. The creation of the mani wall from Ura surely falls within the context of the Desi's deeds to consolidate law and order within the emerging state of Bhutan. We are told most aptly of this in the biography his personal attendant Ngawang Samten (1631-1709), where it is written:

Then for twelve years the great protector of the land Mingyur Tenpa bore the burden of the two-fold religious system [church and state linked together under common rule], sealing up the borders against enemies by constructing strong forts similar to Lcang-lo-can,¹³ such that the enemy could not bear to look (let alone attack). The extent of his authority exceeded even that of the two previous Desi. He subdued malicious beings and established them upon the path of virtue. He filled all the districts beneath his rule with mani walls, chortens, and temples. He produced in the eyes of beings the nectar of merit. With force he placed them onto the path of deliverance. He founded meditation hermitages among the mountain peaks. He provided all manner of gifts of support and sustenance to the monks in various monasteries, just as in the times of King Dharmapāla in India.¹⁴ And at the behest of this great man the holy Dharma of the Buddha was taught widely, most particularly the doctrines of the Drukpa.¹⁵

Conclusion

Given the Desi's long career in eastern Bhutan, from 1651 – 1667, one might be tempted to date the prayer wall to that period. Nevertheless, I am inclined to view its construction as belonging to the years of his service as Desi, 1667-1680. For it was only during that period that Mingyur Tenpa held the title Penlop (Ch. *Dpon-slob*) that is found in the inscription.¹⁶

We may speculate further on his motive for sponsoring the prayer wall, that it was a way to reestablish relations with the village whose king he had recently defeated. Such religious construction projects were a tool of diplomacy adopted also by later Bhutanese rulers. During the 18th century, the 13th Desi Sherab Wangchuk (1697-1765) cosponsored with the 7th Dalai Lama several major temple reconstruction projects, as a way of repairing political relations between Bhutan and Tibet. Their joint restoration of the Drukpa home monastery of Ralung in Tibet was completed in 1749, followed in 1756 by an extensive and costly restoration of Punakha Dzong for which the Dalai Lama contributed about ten percent of the cost, including bullion for a new golden cupola.¹⁶

The study of Bhutanese history is still in its beginnings. Epigraphy, the study of stone inscriptions, while not a major source of historical information for the country, will have an important role to play given the extensive devastation of Bhutan's written archives as a result of periodic fires in the dzongs. The 18th century legal code inscribed on slate outside the Dzong Chung at Punakha is perhaps the most substantial and accessible such monument. We know of a few other dedication inscriptions as well. The passage cited above suggests that Mingyur Tenpa himself ordered the construction of numerous prayer walls. It is certainly possible that some may still remain, with inscriptions useful to historians. We hope that this small article will encourage Bhutanese

¹⁶ *Yon-tan Miha'-yas*: 62.b-70.b). These events are also described in the 7th Dalai Lama's biography (*Dalai Lama 7*: 409.b; 429.a, 439.b-440.a, 460.b). On the 18th century rapprochement between Tibet and Bhutan, see Ardussi (1997).

students of history to tackle these projects at an early date.

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¹*Smyos rabs*: 106-107. For abbreviations, see the Bibliography.

² On the Ura Gdung, see the discussion in Aris (1979):125-133. The earliest surviving version of their ancestry is traced in the 17th century *Rgyal-rigs* by monk Ngawang (translated in Aris 1986: 47-56; Chokey text in Dasho Tenzin Dorje: 64-78); see also Ardussi

(2004). Gdung Nag-po was also known as Ura Gyalpo, during his era.
³ I am grateful to Karma Ura for supplying details on this matter (email dated 10/31/04). This topic is worthy of further ethnographic description for what it may reveal about Ura's past history.

⁴ I stayed at the home of Karma Ura's brother Dorji Wangchuk, a member of the National Assembly of Bhutan

⁵ Lopen Pema, *'Brug gi rgyal rabs*: 69-70. Lopen Pema describes his source as the *Rnam-mgur* or "Biography and Songs" of a certain Lama Karma Thinley of Klu-dga' ra-ba monastery in Choekhor valley.

⁶ Bum thang lha'i sbas yul gyi bkod pa me tog skyed tshal (Gsung thor-bu: 23.b).

⁷ Rje Mkhan-po IX Shākya-rin-chen [1710-1759]. Byang chub sems dpa' chen po kun tu dga' ba'i rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i rtogs pa brjod pa dpag bsam yongs 'du'i snye m: 21.a-22.a. (Biography of Gyelse Kūnga Gyaltzen [1689-1714]).

⁸ In the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography, the Bhutanese Desi's family name is spelled Smon-skyid (*Dalai Lama V*, vol. *Ga*: f. 197.a). A small district of that name is mentioned in the Tibetan *Iron Tiger [1830] Survey Records (Lcags stag zhib gzhung*: 228) within Gri-gu prefecture in Lhobrak. Gri-gu lies just across the Tibetan frontier from Bumthang where the Desi's later career in Bhutan began.

⁹ Rje Mkhan-po VI Ngag-dbang-lhun-grub (1720). Mtshungs med chos kyi rgyal po rje rin po che'i rnam par thar pa bskal bzang legs bris 'dod pa'i re skong dpag bsam gyi snye ma: 68.b, 115.a.

¹⁰ See *Ngag dbang bsam gtan*: 19.b. The term Mon is used here in a poetic sense, meaning inhabitants living in the eastern frontier districts.

¹¹ The *Clear Mirror* has been edited and translated in Aris (1986): 88-120.

¹² *Lho'i chos 'byung*: 95.a. The Desi's expansionist activities in the west are touched on in Tibetan sources, such as the Fifth Dalai Lama's biography, and that of the 'Ba'ra ba incarnation Dkon-mchog rgyal-mtshan (1601-1687).

¹³ Tibetan translation of a place name from Indian mythology, Alakāvati, the fortress of the god Kuvera.

¹⁴ Dharmapāla was the 8th century Bengal monarch and patron Buddhism who constructed the famous temple complex at Paharpur.

¹⁵ *Ngag dbang bsam gtan*: 28.b-29.a. See also *Lho'i chos 'byung*: 95.a.

¹⁶ We cannot rule out, however, the possibility that the wall as we know see it may have undergone renovation over the centuries. The inscription is damaged in places, and shows some evidence of having been reset at some time in the past.