

Oral Construction of Exile Life and Times of Künkhyen Longchen Rabjam in Bumthang*

*Dorji Penjore***

Background

Common people who have been often left out of monastic and modern education systems have their own rich literary traditions which serve similar socio-cultural, education and entertainment functions. Bhutanese oral literary genres like *srung* (folktale), *glu gzhas* (folksong), *gab tshig* (riddle), *dpe gtam* (proverb, saying, maxim, and adage), *dgod bra* (joke), *gtam rgyud* (legend, fable, tale), *blo ze* (ballad) are some of the rich oral traditions. Modern education was introduced only in the late 1950s, and before that the monastic education system, which provided Buddhist education, was accessible only to a few privileged families. Women were excluded, with exception of a few nuns. But folk composition, narration, acquisition, memorization, and the daily use of indigenous knowledge through oral mediums have been a continuous process. It is the today's equivalent of universal education. Children who could not avail either monastic or modern education for various reasons have always resorted to the traditional education system.

This paper attempts to construct the exile life and times of Künkhyen Longchen Rabjam in Bhutan through use our rich oral tradition (*kha rgyun rtsom rig*) and what people on the

* This paper, presented in the Fifth Colloquium on Tangible and Intangible Culture, National Museum of Bhutan, February 2005, is based on oral information provided by 73-year-old Meme Ngonjungla alias Sonam Tshering of Samling village. It was recorded from 5-7 November 2004 in Tharpaling and Samling. There may be different oral versions. Where available, I have referred some written sources to crosscheck oral sources.

** Researcher, The Centre for Bhutan Studies

ground find affinity or affiliation, indifferent to what inaccessible scriptures inform. The information was drawn largely from the oral sources.

Künkhyen Longchen Rabjam (1308-1363) was one of the most important Buddhist luminaries to visit Bhutan. He was the greatest Dzogchen ‘adept, meditator, philosopher, and writer’ after Guru Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra. Born in 1308 to Tensung, a son of Lhalung,¹ he was the incarnation of Thrisong Deutsen’s daughter, Princess Pemasal, to whom Guru Padmasambhava entrusted with transmission of Nyingthig, the Innermost Essence teachings of Dzogchen² when she was dying. Guru Padmasambhava gave the transmission of Khandro Nyingthig in Longchen’s vision and named him Drimed Odzer. Tertön Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) was one of his incarnations. Longchen is known by different names: Kunkhyen Longchen Rabjam (*kun mkhyen klong chen rab ‘byams*), Samyepa Tshulthrim Lodro (*bsam yas pa tshul khrims blo gros*), Dorji Zijid (*rdor rje gzi brjid*), Drimed Odzer (*dri med ‘od zer*), Kunkhyen Ngagi Wangpo (*kun mkhyen ngag gi dbang po*). Dorji Zijid was given by Khadro Yeshe Tshogyal while Longchen Rabjampa, meaning ‘Possessor of the Great Expanse of Knowledge’ was given by Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltshen, ruler of Tibet, after they were reconciled.

Longchen Rabjam came to Bumthang on ‘self-exile’. His exile years are important since he lived for 55 years only and spent his last and most productive years in Bhutan. Spiritual matters completely overshadow secular matters in any biography of great Buddhist figures, and so it is with Longchen where the available literatures (*rnam mthar*) contain little or no information on his ‘other’ life. But Samling village in Bumthang, the place where Longchen is believed to have settled first, has preserved a rich account of his life in exile more than 644 years after his visit. This account has been preserved and passed orally through the generations. His religious and secular activities continue to influence the people’s way of life. Different places around Samling village and nearby areas such as Tharpaling, Domkhar, Urok,

Gyalsa are associated with his life. Samling households still farm the land offered by his patrons and devotees. It is not important to question the authenticity of the oral account of Longchen's life and deeds; that the people believe it to be true, and that it continues to influence their life is adequate to put aside our rational minds and suspend our disbelief.

Longchen came to Bhutan following his conflict with Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltsen (*ta'i situ byang chub rgyal mtshan*) of Phagtru who became the ruler of Tibet in 1349. Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltsen and his officials disliked Longchen after he became a teacher of Gumpa Kunrig of Drikung – the most powerful rival of Tai Situ. Once when Longchen was traveling to Lhasa, the hostile forces of Yarlung attempted to assassinate him, but he became invisible to his foes because of his enlightened power. Longchen indeed averted a war in Tibet by winning Kunrig to the Dharma, and prevented the invasions of Ü and Tsang provinces by Kunrig.

The exact arrival and return years are not known. Perhaps, Longchen arrived in Bhutan towards the end of 1350 because the main reason for his exile was his conflict with Tibet's ruler Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltsen who became a ruler in 1349, and at 42 (1350) he repaired the ninth century monastery Zha Pema Wangchen at Dra, Tibet. The beginning of 1351 is the next most probable year since a daughter was born to him in Tharpaling in 1351, followed by a son Drakpa Odzer in 1356. The second reason was to avoid the war of 1359 which he had predicted. So the probable year of his return seems to be 1360 at the earliest; he died in 1363.

In Bhutan Künkhyen Longchen is known for establishing the eight lings (locations where he meditated on, taught, and wrote the Dzogchen): Babron Tharpaling, Shingkar Dechenling and Tang Ugyencholing in Bumthang, Kunzangling in Lhuntse, Kothang Pemaling (or Rinchenling) and Menlok Kunzangling in Wangdue, Nyenlong Drechagling, and Paro Samtenling. Perhaps, his exile years in Bhutan gave him peace in contrast to Tibet which was then rife with

conflicts and strife. He was known to have written and composed his major sacred and scholarly works in exile. Right on the summit of a mountain overlooking Tharpaling and Samling, there is a rock where Longchen was believed to have composed and written almost half of Longchen Dzod Dun (*klong chen mdzod bdun*).³ While Longchen composed and dictated the texts, Drasung Za Rahula (*gza' ra-hu-la* - the sage of the Za (class), the mantra protectress Ekajati (*e-ka-dza-ti*, *sngags-srung-ma*) and Vajrasadhu (*rdo rje legs pa*) wrote the text, and prepared ink and paper, all seated on that sacred rock now known as Longchen Zhugthri (*bzhugs khri*).⁴

In Bhutan Longchen's well-known religious establishment is Tharpaling (*thar pa gling*) - the land of liberation. Approximately one hundred thousand devotees who had a wish for liberation gathered to receive his teachings. The eyes of Longchen's statue in Tharpaling (called *bar dgon pa*) were deliberately made to look up to the sky after a popular lore. It is believed that more than one hundred monks attained enlightenment in one day, and Longchen who was meditating in the lhakhang looked up to the sky from the window to see where his monks had reached. He saw a hundred of his monks soaring in the sky.

It is said that the name and fame of Tharpaling spread throughout Tibet, and many Tibetan devotees joined him at Tharpaling. The Tibetan border guards disallowed Longchen's devotees to go to Bhutan (then Monyul) if they simply replied they were going to Bhutan; but the moment they heard the word Tharpaling, guards would take out their tongues in respect and allow them to proceed. In Tibet even a simple monk coming from Tharpaling was entitled to a seat since he was considered a geshey (*dge bshes*). Such was the extent to which the fame of Tharpaling resonated even after Longchen returned to Tibet.

We will show you the way to water

Longchen arrived at Bumthang from Tibet and took up a residence at the present day Samling village below Tharpaling

monastery. Many disciples accompanied him, including his syce (a drung) who looked after his horses. He soon discovered that there was no water around Samling, and he thought of moving to another place. But one night five girls (mkha' dro) appeared in his dream and said:

Your aspiration is to live in this place; but the lack of water should not deter you from staying. At dawn walk out of the house, and we will show you the way to the water.

Longchen remembered the dream in the morning and followed the girls' instruction. To his surprise, he saw a yellow flower in front of the door, though it was not a flowering season. He walked towards the flower only to find another flower ... and then another. Following a series of flowers led him along the ridge above Samling. When flowers suddenly disappeared he looked around and found footprints of cattle beneath a tree (*sangmaiseng*). As he removed the leaves, water oozed out of the ground and soon filled the site like a lake (*mtsho*). Longchen named it Nyenlam Zangmoi Tsho (*rmi lam bzang mo'i mtsho*, a lake of auspicious dream). Also known as a mochu it is as large as a size of average Bhutanese house. About 100 meters from Nyenlam Zangmoi Tsho in the direction of Urok, Longchen found a waterfall cascading from a small cliff and named it phochu. Today phochu is very frightening and only a few people can approach it alone. It is a water source for villages of Urok, Rangbi, and Thrunbang, whereas mochu serves as water source for Samling village.

Longchen brought water to Samling through a canal. Waa were used along ridges where canals could not be dug. The remains of old rotten or decayed waa can be seen even now. Today, at least 13 water bubbles can be seen in the lake, signifying 13 water sources. The nearby areas shake with the force of water bubbling from beneath the lake.

I never knew you were Rahula

Longchen entrusted the care of his horses to his adrung.

Looking after horses was a difficult job since Longchen did not have any grazing land. Lands of Domkharpa, Urokpa and Gyalsapa surrounded Samling from all directions. Adrung would carry a packed lunch and go out to look after horses every day while Longchen went with his own work. Surprisingly, the people of Domkhar kept on complaining that his horses had been destroying their wheat crop in Pangri,⁵ the land east of Samling. He found the complaints incredulous since his adrung was taking care of his horses. Cha-ralpa (the Curly-Haired One) was then the ruler of Domkhar.⁶

However, Longchen wanted to find out the truth of the allegation. One morning when adrung was about to leave with horses, Longchen struck the end of thread ball on back of adrung's attire using a needle without his notice. As he travelled with horses unaware of the thread on his back, the thread ball began to unravel until it stopped. Longchen then followed the thread. Surprisingly the thread did not lead to the east where his horses were supposed to graze but along the ridge above Samling. The thread took him to a small lake called Shawabumpai Tsho above Urok. He saw various ritual objects and instruments around the lakeshore and his adrung who was swimming. His lower body had been transformed into a snake. Longchen immediately recognized that his adrung was not a man but the Nyingma drasung Rahula. When Longchen accidentally stepped on some dry leaves, Rahula (adrung) threw all objects into the lake on hearing the rustling sound. All Longchen could get was a cymbal (rol mo). Today the same cymbal is kept in Samling as a ter. Prostrating before Rahula, Longchen explained that he had never known the true identity of his adrung. The lake came to be known as Drasung Latsho (bla mtsho). Longchen built a Zakhang (*gza' khang*) for Rahula in Samling. There is a *debri* (painting) of Rahula painted by Longchen using his own blood in the zakhang. Rahula is a wrathful protector of the Nyingma Treasure Tradition who seizes the sun and the moon, and eclipses planets. Also known as the eclipse maker, Rahula is green in colour with nine heads, two hands and the

lower body that of a serpent and upper body that of humanoid.

It will be better for me to return than for all of you to die

The complaints made by the people of Domkhar were true. Following that, the people of Domkhar disliked Longchen's neighbourhood and started to revolt, much against the advice of the people of Urok who revered him. Their king Charalpa led the revolt. Longchen fled to the Dakpa region in eastern Bhutan. Before he left, Longchen made a prayer against the people of Domkhar. Following his departure, it so happened that for ten days and nights it was neither day nor night in Domkhar. Charalpa made astrologers divine the cause, and every divination pointed to Longchen.

At that time there were nine tax-paying households (khral pa) in Domkhar. Charalpa summoned a man each from every household and sent them to receive Longchen from Dakpa. The king threatened to throw them from Kayteygangzam, a bridge across Chamkharchhu below Zhurkace village in Chumey, if they failed to bring Longchen back.

As commanded, nine men went to Dakpa and prostrated before Longchen.

"Why did you come here?" Longchen asked.

"Our king requests you to come back to Bumthang and we came to receive you," they submitted.

But Longchen refused, saying that the people had revolted against him and that his life was in danger.

"If you refuse, then we all are going to die before you; please make a prayer for us," they said, and explained their king's threat. They threatened to commit suicide and asked Longchen to conduct mi shi dbang skur after they were dead.

"It is better for me to return than for all of you die," Longchen finally agreed.

But if I take it, I will suffer this pain

Longchen returned to Tharpaling following the Dakpa-Bumthang traditional route. Before Longchen escaped to

Dakpa, he had appointed a gomchen (a lay monk) as his representative (bla tshab) in a small monastery he had built in Tharpaling. When bla tshab heard about Longchen's return, he became envious and feared the loss of reverence and privileges he had enjoyed as bla tshab. So he requested a nun (ani) to kill Longchen by offering him poisoned tea and promised to give her a yu or turquoise as a bribe. The nun agreed.

When Longchen was approaching Tharpaling, the nun crossed the gorge of Zanglaiteg and waited at Zanglaitegi Gor (stone of Zanglaiteg) where the main road branches into two – the first one leading to Chudrag Goenpa and the second one to Tharpaling. Ani received Longchen and offered the poisoned tea on a huge flat rock.

"I will have to drink your tea. If I don't, you will not get a yu. But if I take it, I will suffer this pain," Longchen said, throwing the tea on the rock.

The rock instantly split into two. A huge rock split from the middle can still be seen today.

They promised never to revolt in future

After Longchen's return, the people of Domkhar and their ruler Charalpa took an oath in a place called Portopong and swore that they would never revolt in future. There is a Naa-do (oath stone) submerged beneath the earth in Portopong today. The king and the people offered Longchen their land (Pangri and Najong) where his horses once grazed on their wheat.

A white-faced snake looked back at Longchen

The whole valley, what is now Urok village, was beneath a big lake (mtsho). Its tshomen (mtsho sman) affected the people, and no one even dared to go near it. There were a total of 100 tax-paying households who had settled along ridges and slopes above the lake. The people of Urok requested Longchen to subdue the tshomen. Longchen meditated on a ridge called

Portopong between Urok and Samling. After nine days and nine nights of meditation on tagchung nyanpa (rta khyung bsnyen pa) a horse's neigh was heard coming from the body of Longchen's horse standing beside him. The neigh reverberated across the valley and frightened the tshomen to run away. Longchen watched the tshomen escape towards Chumey. When it reached at a place called Tonglakhag (below Sonam Kunphen School), it looked back at Longchen. The tshomen (snake) had a white face – so the place was named Dongkar (gdong- face, dkar - white). So Domkhar is the corruption of Dongkar. The grateful Urokpas became Longchen's patrons.

No more Drupchen (*sdrub chen*) in Samling

Longchen started the annual Drupchen (*sgrub chen*) in Samling. It was held on the courtyard of Samling Nagtshang and it lasted for three days. On the second day, the cymbal (*ter*) was shown to the public. The cymbal was beaten to divine the luck of the people for the coming year. Good sound foretold an auspicious year for the people and cattle free of epidemics and diseases, and good harvest.

Lamas and monks who came from Samling household were also the hosts (*tso wa*); Domkharpa provided dancers, Gyalsapa provided firewood and water, while workers such as cooks came from Urok. Champon (lead dancer) had to be from Samling Chhoje or lama, and Chamjug from drapa (slaves). People who came for the Drupchen had to be provided with free food. Later Samling Nagtshang and Buli Lhaxhang took turns to conduct the Drupchen. It continued to be held alternately in Samling Nagtshang and Buli Lhaxhang until Samling stopped the practice in the early 1960s. Today, Buli Drupchen is held every two years. A ritual called kangjug was held for seven days until it was discontinued in 1982.

No dirty water from above, no smoke from below

Longchen later offered to build a new zaxhang for Rahula and asked him to give any preference for the place. Rahula demanded that it should be build in the place where there

was no dirty water from above, no smoke from below, and in a place where there is a *do-yurung* (stones structure in shape of a swastika) in the western direction. The choice fell on Shingkhari village. The caretaker (*sku nyer*) of Shingkhari Lhakhang was sent from Samling, including phod and ration. The oral account only mentions that a Zakhang was built by Longchen. The present Shingkhari Dechenling Lhakhang was built by Tsezang Thaye Drakpa, Longchen's great grandson, who was the first Shingkhari Lam. The throne of Longchen was discovered in the basement of the monastery while it was being renovated. The throne measuring 5.5 square feet and 1.7 feet in height was found when the soil of the basement was dug to prevent the decay of planks.

We have nothing , but the land to offer you

When Longchen was visiting the Mon region of Mangdey (Trongsa), he arrived at the present village of Shengleng in Baleng. There he gave teachings to the devotees, performed *mi shi dbang skur* for the dead, *rim gro* for the sick and other spiritual services. He built a lhakhang in Baleng as his winter residence and named it Shengleng Goenlha (*dgun lha*) or winter lhakhang. The local people who were practicing Bon became his patron and offered him about 20 langdo (*glang dor*) of *chu zhing*. Longchen was to reciprocate the offer by visiting and staying in *dgun lha* in winter months. Moreover, Longchen had to sponsor the annual Samling Drupchen with the rice harvested from the land offered to him. As agreed, Longchen visited the village in winter and sponsored Samling Drupchen with the rice. The lhakhang can still be seen today.

From there, he went across a river to the next Mon village called Wangleng. His visit coincided with death of a man, and the people requested him to conduct *mi shi dbang skur*. The people did not find anything of worth to offer as *yon* (fee) and offered some of their farmland and *tsamdo* (*rtsva 'brog*).

This was how the Samling household came to possess some *chuzhing* and *tsamdo* in Trongsa. The cattle of Samling migrated to Wangleng in winter until the early 1980s before

the ownership of tsamdo was reverted to the local people after they complained that they cannot grow any winter crop due to the presence of Samling cattle in winter months, and that their ignorant fore-fathers had offered the tsamdo to Longchen in return for his religious service. There were two tsamdo in Wangleng – a smaller one on a mountain slope surrounded by cliffs on three sides, and a bigger one near the village. Chuzhing at Shengleng is still owned and farmed by Samling household.

Wear this Longchen's Seal as protective talisman in the war

An oral source has it that Samling Ashi Choiten Zomba was a distant relative of the first Deba? (Jigme Namgyal?). Before he left for the war at Sharcho Dewathang, Samling Ashi asked him to wear the Seal of Longchen (phyag dam) as mtshon thub (protective talisman), to which the Deba agreed. It is said that Deba refused for the seal to be sent through a garpa and he personally rode to Samling, saying that 'whatever I want for my personal use must be acquired personally'. The Duar War, 1864-65 was led by the Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal. Ugyen Wangchuck (b 1862) was then only 3 years old.

Deba gave Samling Ashi all types of lands (*chu zhing*, *skam zhing*, *tshod bsre ldum ra*, wetland, dryland, vegetable garden) belonging to six khral pa (taxpayers) in Tashiding and four khral pa in Baling, Trongsa, after he returned victorious. The household of Samling still own and farm those lands. The chuzhing at Baling (20 langdo), which used to yield 6 nyishu (120 dre) of rice was sold to Trongsa Dratshang. The names of the dead taxpayers and details of lands can be found in the old sathram.

Later when the Kurjey Lhakhang was being built by the Deba, Samling Ashi contributed dolma gsung byon ma'i sku (the Tara statue which spoke) as its zung as per the divination. The second Kurjey Lhakhang known as Sampa Lhundup – complete fulfilment of one's mind and thoughts or Anabhog bhavana – was built in 1900 by Gongsa Ugyen Wangchuck

when he was the Trongsa Penlop.

Fire burned Samling Nagtshang, not Longchen's Seal

In 1351 Longchen had a daughter born to Kyidpala (skyid pa lags) and a son Trulku Tragpa Odzer (*sprul sku grags pa 'od zer*) or Dawa Drakpa (*zla ba grags pa*, 1356-1409?) born in the year of the fire-monkey. Dawa Drakpa or Thugsey Dawa as he is popularly referred now was the manifestation of Tadrin (*rta mgrin*) who later became a great scholar and a holder of the Nyingthig lineage.

Longchen built a residence (*nag tshang*) for his son Thugsey Dawa in Samling, followed by a lhakhang. Samling is the alteration of Samterling (*bsam gter gling*). It is believed that nag tshang used to house a zot-full (a big wooden box) of Longchen's ter such as rol mo, bla rdo, statues and scriptures. Some of the ter can be seen even today in Samling. When Dorji, the only son of Samling Ashi Choiten Zomba was recruited as a garpa to serve in the court, and it is believed that Samling Ashi gave Longchen's ter, one after another, as gifts to the court so as to relieve her son from garpa duties. Nagtshang caught fire in 1982 (15th day of 11th Bhutanese month) but luckily, the most important ten of the Nagtshang, the seal of Longchen, was saved.

Stream which never freezes in winter

Longchen's son Thugsey Dawa was born inside a cliff below the road between Tharpaling and Zanglaipogto. Ani used a large stone bowl (*zhong*) to wash the baby with the water flowing from the cliff. The large stone bowl can still be seen today. The water flows down between Samling and Zhitsar. There was a water-mill on the stream near Chumeychhu. When all streams in the area freeze during winter months and watermills are idle, this particular stream which has its source in the cliff surprisingly never freezes and the watermills works all the year round. It is believed that the stream does not freeze after it was blessed by bathing of Thugsey Dawa in the upstream. The ruin of the mill is visible even now.

Household that inherited Longchen's property

Oral memories can trace the ancestors of Samling Ashi house as far as Ashi Choiten Zomba who was perhaps a contemporary of Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal. It is also said that she was related to Jigme Namgyal through a marriage. It was Ashi Choiten Zomba who offered the sacred Seal of Longchen as protective talisman to Jigme Namgyal during the war with Phelingpa (British) in Dewathang (Duar War). Oral account has it that she was the direct descendent Longchen's son and inherited Longchen's land, property and samter. The main Samling household owns Longchen's Seal and other sacred objects, though the fire burnt most belongings.

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gangs can mkhas grub rim byon ming mdzod by ko zhul grags pa 'byung gnas and rgyal ba blo bzang mkhas grub

¹ Lhalung was a son of twenty-fifth descendant of the nephew of Gyalwa Choyang - one of the 25 chief disciples of Guru Padmasambhava.

² Pema Ledreltsal (1291?-1315) the incarnation preceding Longchen discovered the Nyingthig teachings, and it was later known as Khadro Nyingthig.

³ The rest were written in Mount Kailash (Personal communication, Dr. Yonten Dargye, National Library of Bhutan; February 2005). The seven mdzod are: Yid bzhin rinpoche'i mdzod, Mang ngag rinpoche'i mdzod, Chos dbyings rinpoche'i mdzod, Grub mtha' mdzod, Thegs mchog mdzod, Tshig don mdzod, and gNas lugs mdzod.

⁴ "In many instances, his disciples saw Dharma protectors in his room. Ekajati, Vajrasadhu (rdo rje legs pa) and Rahula used to prepare paper and ink for his writing." Harold Talbott edition (1996), *The Practice of Dzogchen*, p.155

⁵ Now it is called Zhisar (new settlement) after the Tibetan refugees had settled in the area.

⁶ People refer to him as Domkhar Dungpa. Domkhar was named only after the revolt, while Dungpa was a later coinage.