

Stone Inscriptions: An Early Written Medium in Bhutan and its Public Uses

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Historical Background

Public culture in Bhutan has since the earliest historical times revolved around community life and religion. The two were interlinked in Buddhist teachings brought to Bhutan from Tibet by monks in search of converts in what were once wilderness areas of the Himalayas. The 13th and 14th centuries saw periodic episodes of civil warfare in Central Tibet, sparked off by the inroads and depredations of the Mongols from Central Asia. Many Tibetan monks viewed these events as the culmination of prophecies urging men of religion to flee to so-called Beyul, or serene Hidden Lands along the Himalayan fringe, of which a few were rumored to exist in Bhutan.

However Bhutan in those days was not the idyllic place of these men's imaginations. Their biographies show that upon arrival, they found Bhutan to be a rather rough, illiterate and rural culture, full of dangers. Hence they employed the teaching of Buddhism as a tool to 'pacify' the land and people.

For example, the famous Tibetan Drukpa monk named Lorepa came to Bumthang in 1248 AD. There, he addressed a crowd of 2,800 people whom he described as "beastlike" (*dud 'gro dang 'dra ba*), "wild, and temperamental" (*rgod-gtum-po*).¹ The local people were said to be fond of eating meat and sacrificing animals.

One century later, the Tibetan Kagyudpa monk named Choeje Barawa fled to Bhutan from the civil disorders in his native

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¹ *Lo ras pa*: ff.67.b-68.a; Shḍ-la, *Chos rje lo ras-pa'i nam thar*, ff.24.b, 26.b.

homeland of Gtsang, as described in one of his religious songs:

The powerful (families) are now mostly robbers;
There is no hope for those who want peace and happiness.
Capture, beatings, torture! Oh, what will happen?
It is time to go to Bhutan (Lho Mon), a land without strife!²

This image of early Bhutan comes to us not only from Tibetan sources. The 18th century history of Bhutan called *Lho'i chos 'byung*, completed in 1759 by the 10th Jey Khenpo Tenzin Choegyal (1700-1767), presents a vivid picture of the social chaos that characterized western Bhutan prior to the coming of the Zhabdrung Rinpoche and his establishment of law and order:

After the manner of the proverbial big fish eating the little fish, vicious men rose up to fight and kill one another. Escorts were needed to go from the upper part of a village to the lower. The rich robbed the poor of their wealth and homes, and forced them into involuntary servitude. Family feuds, fighting, and injury went on unabated. 'The Wang fighting the Dgung,' and 'Fighting between the large and small factions' were common sayings, as enemy factions reduced the country to splinters. What was given to a Lama in the daytime was stolen again at night, while holy men in retreat in the mountains and forests were attacked by robbers. Visiting yogins from India were seized and sold into slavery, religious images were destroyed and made into women's ornaments. By these and other kinds of barbaric behavior were the holy sites in this Hidden Land destroyed. On account of this, the local spirits rose up against the people, bringing strife and death, so that they took to placating them with offerings of meat and blood. All of these things characterized this land in that era of strife

² 'Ba'-ra Rnam-mgur 112.a: dbang ches 'phrog 'joms byed pa'i mang lugs la // so gsod bde skyid re ba'i snying med po // bskyigs brdungs tshan chu byung na ji 'dra 'ong // lho mon gnod 'tshe med sar 'gro re ran //.

and the Five Defilements.³

The Zhabdrung Rinpoche and the Establishment of Social Order

As is well known, the Zhabdrung Rinpoche came to Bhutan in 1616 as a political refugee from Tibet, and within a decade he had founded the first unified state government in western Bhutan. One of his most important achievements was the imposition of law and order. In contrast to the anarchy thought to have prevailed before the Zhabdrung's coming, his biographer, Tsang Khenchen writes:

He suppressed all robbery, banditry, and other malicious behavior including disrespectfulness, lack of compassion, ungratefulness and disregard for fear and injury caused to others. By these [acts of the Zhabdrung] the entire country became peaceful and prosperous; it was like a proverbial Era of Good Fortune.⁴

Government Media in 17th Century Bhutan

Every government in history faces the task of communication with its people. The question may well be asked, what means did the Zhabdrung's fledgling government employ to publicize even the fact of its existence? What were its governing policies, and how did it communicate them, to residents within the country and to states on the frontier? I would argue that the formation of a public media in Bhutan began in the 17th century with the Zhabdrung Rinpoche's need to communicate these messages. It is instructive to consider what forms this took, and how it developed.

In the first place, we must remember that the governing

³ *LCB* (completed in 1759) 7.a-b, repeating, *verbatim*, a passage composed ca. 1675 by Gtsang Mkhanchen in his biography of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (*Dpal 'brug pa rin po che ngag dbang nam rgyal gyi nam par thar pa rgyas pa chos kyi sprin chen po'i dbyangs*, folio *Nga* 2.b-3.a). The Wang and Dgung are believed to have been ethnic groups of earlier centuries.

⁴ *LNDRR Nga*: 146.a-b.

model adopted by the Zhabdrung was the so-called ‘two-fold’ system wherein religion and the state were conceived of as being linked together, as parallel entities of government. The Zhabdrung was first and foremost a religious figure. He was the exiled head of Ralung monastery in Tibet together with its monastic patrimony of monasteries and estates that had accumulated since the time of his ancestor Tsangpa Gyare (1161-1211). The original governing structure adopted in Bhutan, I have argued elsewhere,⁵ was based in part on this monastic precedent. For the monks in his entourage, in residence at the state monasteries and who were literate, the Zhabdrung composed a written code of behavior called the *Tsayig Chenmo* (Ch. *Rtsa-yig chen-mo*).

But there were, obviously, no modern means of mass communication. Neighboring states could thus be contacted only by official letter, carried by emissaries or runners. We know from his biography written by Tsang Khenchen (1610-1684), our primary source on the Zhabdrung’s life, that following his decision to found a new government congratulatory gifts were sent to him from places on all sides of Bhutan. We have several references to such communications between the Zhabdrung and rulers in both India and Tibet.

But within Bhutan, personal written communication with the ordinary, illiterate citizenry would have been impractical. Instead, we see from the Zhabdrung’s biography that he spent a great deal of time moving his camp from place to place, meeting people and giving blessings and lectures on religion. The Jesuit monks Cabral and Cacella who visited the Zhabdrung in 1627 traveled with his entourage for more than two months before reaching his monastery at Cheri.

But verbal communication was also limited in its reach. For example, the Zhabdrung never seems to have traveled east of

⁵ John Ardussi, “Formation of the State of Bhutan (‘Brug gzhung) in the 17th century and its Tibetan Antecedents,” p. xxx.

Wangdiphodrang. To extend his message to other parts of Bhutan he appointed personal emissaries and teachers, including his own father Tenpaí Nyima who was sent to eastern Bhutan about the time that the Zhabdrung himself first came to western Bhutan.

The Introduction of Stone Inscriptions as a Medium of Public Communication

What might be called the second phase of the Zhabdrung's programme for governing Bhutan began with the period of dzong construction, beginning with Semtokha in 1629, and ending with Lingzhi and Gasa in about 1646.⁶ The two capital fortress-monasteries of Punakha and Tashichho Dzong were founded in 1637 and 1641 respectively. The rationale for these massive buildings was initially defensive, to withstand invasion from Tibet, a purpose for which they were singularly successful. No Tibetan or Mongol army ever gained a foothold in Bhutan during the lifetime of the Zhabdrung or his immediate successors.

From sometime between the completion of Punakha Dzong and the Zhabdrung's final retreat (and probable death) in 1651, we become aware of a new form of public communications medium having been launched in Bhutan, which introduces the main topic of this paper, namely the inscription of public messages on stone.

The first such document to which I call attention is one of the most remarkable physical remains of Bhutanese history, the slate inscription containing the Zhabdrung Rinpoche's written law code. It is a unique monument that has remained nearly intact for more than 350 years, and yet has attracted almost no attention from historians of Bhutan. However, time prevents me today from going much beyond its bare description.

⁶ The founding of Tongsa was the work of the 3rd Druk Desi, Mingyur Tenpa, at an uncertain date ca. 1650.

Unlike the Tsayig Chenmo, the code of behavior prescribed to the monks living in monasteries, the Zhabdrung's law code was written to publicly broadcast the rules of behavior imposed primarily upon the ministers of state and their deputies. No contemporary paper copies have come down to us, and it is preserved today only in the form of the stone slate (rDo-nag) inscription panels outside the Small Dzong or Dzong-chung of Punakha. The inscription contains clear evidence of its having been dictated by the Zhabdrung Rinpoche himself. For instance it bears the title *Khams gsum chos kyi rgyal po dpal ldan 'brug pa rin po che ngag gi dbang po phyogs thams cad las rnam par rgyal ba'i bka' khrim*s gser gyi gnya' shing zhe bya ba'i gnam: "The Golden Yoke of Legal Edicts', [as dictated] by the Dharmarāja of the Three Realms, the Glorious Drukpa Rinpoche Ngawang Namgyal." Further on in the same preamble the author clearly states that "I, the Glorious Drukpa Rinpoche, the Dharmarāja, He who is Possessed of Magical Power, Destroyer of Enemy Forces, have erected this of my own intent."⁷ Regrettably, I do not yet have a photograph to illustrate the Zhabdrung's slate inscription, and I thank His Excellency Supreme Court Justice Sonam Tobgye for providing me with a Chokey copy of the transcription.

Later versions of the Zhabdrung's legal code had other titles, such as 'The Pure Mirror of the Two-Fold System [of religious and secular law]' (a document so far still lost), mentioned in a text completed in 1720, and finally the expanded law code promulgated by the 10th Druk Desi Mipham Wangpo which survives in an appendix to the 1759 history of Bhutan by the 10th Desi Tenzin Chogyal.⁸

⁷ *Nged dpal ldan 'brug pa rin po che mthu chen chos kyi rgyal po bdud dpung 'joms pa'i rdo rjer bsam bzhin du bzhengs pa yin pas /*. The names Mthu-chen and Bdud-'joms rdo-rje were epithets of power that the Zhabdrung used of himself in his various writings and letters.

⁸ See *BDRR*: 278.a where the title of his law code is given as "The Pure Mirror of the Two-fold System [of religious and secular laws]"

Stone Inscriptions on Prayer Walls

The law codes to which we have referred are rather complex documents, containing many obscure terms and ministerial titles. One would assume that they were not easily understood by commoners, at least in all their ramifications. And yet, at their heart, there remain the fundamental moral injunctions common to all Tibetan cultural milieu, such as the prohibition against theft, murder, etc., harking back to the law code attributed to Tibet's first great ruler, Srongtsen Gampo. Furthermore, all of these legal documents presumed the universal applicability of Buddhism and its moral teachings. They served the public purpose to promote law and order, and constitute a clear statement to the reading citizenry of how governance under the so-called 'Two-fold' system was meant to occur.

There is yet another, related form of stone inscription found much more commonly throughout Bhutan, that also served as a medium of public communication. This took the form of inscriptions carved on stone prayer walls, called Mani Dangrim (*ma ñi dang ring*). As we shall see, some of these inscription walls long predate the coming of the Zhabdrung. They are also an architectural form and communications medium in use in neighboring countries sharing Tibet and Bhutan's Buddhist socio-political heritage. They merge in form and purpose with the Chhorten, and in most instances the two types of structure are found together.

A surprising number of Mani Dangrim, of all shapes and sizes, have survived in Bhutan from centuries past. They line the old public by-ways in both the east and west, sometimes in hidden places along near-forgotten tracks. They were

(*Lugs gnyis kyi bka' khrims gtsang ma'i me long*). Independent MS copies of the 10th Desi's law code are also in circulation in Bhutan. Their relationship to the version in the *Lho'i chos 'byung* remains to be established.

clearly meant to be touched and read by passers-by, and so a comprehensive survey might reveal much about the location of Bhutan's pre-modern paths and roadways. These monuments, too, have been almost entirely neglected by students of Bhutan history, at least in formal publications.⁹

We estimate that the construction of these quasi-religious structures was generally sponsored by a local ruler or other village governing body. They contain written prayers exhorting people to moral behavior, or at a minimum the six-syllable Mani prayer or other power mantras, repeated many times. In effect, they continued the 'pacification' process and the promotion of law and order, begun by the early traveling monks and later through government sponsorship.

We see in these stone monuments, in my view, the earliest public written medium in Bhutan, in effect a form of government injunction to the citizenry: "Recite the Mani Prayer, 'Om mani padma hum', and you will bring good fortune upon yourself and upon the land." A seventeenth century biography of the monk Ngawang Samten, who was a life-long attendant upon the 3rd Druk Desi Mingyur Tenpa (r. 1667-1680), tells us how this ruler famously sponsored the construction of many such prayer walls.

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 [Alakāvati in Indian Buddhist mythology], such that the enemy could not bear

⁹ The first to deal with the topic would appear to be Mr. Dorji Namgyel, in a paper presented at a seminar held in March, 2005 by the National Museum of Bhutan, of which the final proceedings are not yet published. His paper was entitled "*Mani Dangrim: An endangered Tangible Cultural Heritage.*" The only other published study that I know of to date is my own article "A 17th century Stone Inscription from Ura Village, *Journal of Bhutan Studies* vol. 11, 2005.

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.¹⁰

In the balance of this paper, I shall survey several Mani Dangrim, drawing some conclusions based on their common and unique characteristics.

Examples of Prayer Walls from Eastern and Western Bhutan

The oldest of these inscription walls that I am aware of come from eastern Bhutan. To begin, I show a Mani wall from a ruined village near Trashigang, identified as Jamkhar, which I take to be identical with the place called Byams-mkhar or 'Jam-mkhar in the history of eastern Bhutan called the Rgyal rigs.¹¹ The site is connected with the legendary 9th-century refugee prince from Tibet known as Lhase Tsangma, who became the founder of ruling lineages in eastern Bhutan. The site is located on a low ridge west of the main roadway, about three miles north of Trashigang and south of the modern hillside village called Jamkhar. Alongside the pathway through the site are found old Chorten structures, recently vandalized, and a small prayer wall illustrated here (Fig. 1).¹²

A much more important castle site, brought to my attention some years ago by Françoise Pommaret, is the ruined bastion

¹⁰ *Ngag dbang bsam gtan*: 28.b-29.a. See also *Lho'i chos 'byung*: 95.a. I wish to correct a statement in my *JBS* article on the stone inscription of Ura, that was not changed during the final edit. The most likely date of this inscription in my opinion is 1651-1667, i.e. the period of the Desi's rule as Chos-rtse Dpon-slob, not the years 1667-1680 as stated in the article.

¹¹ *Rgyal rigs*: 12.b. The date of this source is given by Aris as 1728, but in my view dates from 1668, i.e. sixty years earlier.

¹² I cover this site in more detail in my forthcoming article entitled "A Preliminary Investigation of Bhutanese Castle Ruins and Caves associated with Lha sras Gtsang ma, in *PIATS 10*.

known Tsenkharla (Ch. Btsan-mkhar or Btsan-mkhar-la), lit. the “fortress of the Btsan, the king.” It is located on a high ridge above the Kholong river, about ten miles northwest of Trashigang (Fig. 2-3). This ruin is situated in a clearly defensive location, and could well be the bastion known as Mizimpa in eastern Bhutanese history and legend, as local traditions hold it to be. Other than the Rgyal rigs this bastion or castle is referred to in only a single historical source known to me, namely the biography of the Sixth Dalai Lama, whose mother’s family claimed descent from the exiled Tibetan prince who built it. In that text written by the famous Tibetan Desi Sanggye Gyamtsho (1653-1705), however, it was not Lhase Tsangma but rather his uncle, the legendary dog-faced ‘prince’ named Chikharathoe who built the castle that this author calls Mi-zim mkhar, which is to say an abbreviation for Mi-zim-pa’i btsan-mkhar.¹³

In 2002, together with professor Ugyen Pelgen from Sherubtse College, I collected a small wood sample from the window frame of Tsenkharla and had it dated in the USA by Carbon-14 method. The results show that this mountain-top bastion dates with high probability to the period 1425-1440,¹⁴ and not to the 9th century. As I have proposed in another article, this construction may be tied to the arrival of still another refugee from central Tibet, one of the defeated princes of Phagmodru who then ruled Tibet. It remains to determine if the Mani wall located on the trail nearby is from the same era as the bastion itself.

My last examples from eastern Bhutan (Fig. 3) come from the steep, wooded slopes below the monastery of Dramitse. As is the case throughout these eastern valleys, all transportation was formerly by walking or horse along mountain trails connecting the hillside villages and monasteries. The valley

¹³ Dalai Lama VI: 149.

¹⁴ The dates refer to the year when the wood stopped growing, i.e. was cut down. We may suppose that the construction took place within five years or so of these dates.

floors are steep and subject to annual floods. The old trail up to Dramitse from the valley floor is now bypassed by the motor road, and one would otherwise miss these old prayer walls. The inscription wall shown here is highly dilapidated. Yet the decaying artwork exquisitely illustrates the Buddhist notion of Impermanence. None of the walls shown here, however, contain any inscriptions other than the six-syllable Mani prayer and other mantras.

As we survey prayer walls from the 17th century and later, we find that their inscriptions begin to contain more historical information: the names of people, rulers, and clues as to the date of creation. It is as if the wall's message has evolved along with the sophistication of government, "Recite the Mani prayer! Behave in a moral way! But remember, also, who sponsored the wall, who built it, and who paid for it!" Recently I have written about the beautifully preserved 17th century Mani wall found within the village of Ura. (Fig. 4-6). The inscription tells us that wall was created at the behest of the famous Penlop Mingyur Tenpa (r. 1651-1667) and funded by the local ruler of Ura during that era. It also tells us the names of the artisans who carved the inscription and who built the structure as an act of religious piety. This inscription is one of the earliest known to me that can be dated, but our discovery of such walls is just beginning.

Further to the west, and skipping some other interesting inscription walls in the east, for lack of time, I will focus for a moment on the grand Chorten and prayer wall at Chendebji, which is located east of Pelela on the roadway to Trongsa (Fig. 7-9). This large monument is said to date from the 18th century, as can be gleaned from its large dedication inscription which mentions a nearby monastery and its patrons. The inscription has yet to be properly studied or published. The text is difficult to decipher due to the heavy protective white-wash, common to these inscriptions.

Numerous large prayer walls are located in the Thimphu valley, including the relatively new one located near the

monastic training college above Tashichho Dzong (Fig. 10-11).

An enormous prayer wall, with numerous dedicatory inscriptions, lies along the roadway north of Paro. The distinctive feature of this wall is the numerous slate panels which are individually inscribed by a different stone carver, several of which are illustrated in these slides (Fig. 12-15). None are dated, however, but local experts may be able to provide further insight into the circumstances of the wall's construction.

A similar prayer wall along the river bank south of Paro contains similar dedicatory inscriptions (Fig. 16-18), though lacking a precise date.

Lastly (Fig. 19-22), I show here several sections from a massive prayer wall located along the pathway to the now abandoned Dobji Dzong on a high promontory approaching the Ha valley above the roadway south of Paro. I am in the process of translating the inscriptions, which name the sponsors and local officials. It seems to date from the 18th or 19th century, although the Dzong itself was first constructed in the 16th century.

Conclusions

The Mani Dangrim or “prayer wall” is an architectural form having the purpose to communicate prayerful wishes to the traveler. Its architectural roots lie in the Buddhist chorten traditions common to Bhutan, Tibet, and other nearby Buddhist countries. To take but a single example, I show here (Fig. 23-25) pictures of an enormous prayer wall located near Gami in Mustang, along the Tibetan border of northwestern Nepal. Some of its inscriptions, of which I do not have photos, are said to recite episodes from the history of Mustang. An anthropologist studying Mustang has recently informed me,

The positionality of the wall in Mustang's landscape speaks also to a certain type of territorial marker, one

more temporal and political than the place it also occupies within the myth of subduing of the *srin mo* (demoness) - the Mustangi iteration of the archetypal Tibetan myth about Buddhism (and Guru Rinpoche) subduing more indigenous traditions and practices. (This particular mani wall is said to be the intestines of the demoness.) Gami marks one of the borders of Lode Tsho Dun (*glo sde tsho bdun*), the seven principalities of the kingdom of Lo. So, it would make sense that social geography and political territory was marked in this particular way.¹⁵

The Mani wall is, altogether, a form of public work, a medium of communication created by local communities to cement the social fabric and to articulate a common dedication to the principles of Buddhism. It is a kind of public message board that communicates an essentially Buddhist theme of mindfulness, devotion, and community spirit. The inscription stones may contain simple prayers, or in their later forms significant historical information about the sponsors, creators, artisans, and their times. It is an endangered cultural heritage worthy of study and preservation.



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¹⁵ Communication of Sienna Craig, 8 May, 2006.

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