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Chapter 16

BHUTAN

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BHUTAN

History, scholarship and emerging agency in the Bhutanese narrative

Yedzin Wangmo Tobgay

Introduction

The Western Bhutanese districts of Haa and Paro share several similarities with the contiguous territories of Sikkim, India, and Xizang, China. An ancient trade route through the Dromo Valley or Chumbi Valley, a narrow stretch of China between Bhutan and Sikkim, allowed for much interethnic cooperation and mobility for centuries until the closing of the Tibet-Bhutan border in 1960 (Theirry 2004: 581–595). The proximity resulted in the development of shared cultures such as a dialect of Dzongkha, spoken by the peoples of Upper Paro and Haa that closely resembles Tibetan, and a mutual celebration of *Loba*, a new year celebration that precedes the common Bhutanese new year. Roughly 90 per cent of the working population in the 20th century were subsistence farmers, often combining agriculture and animal husbandry. Aside from the few members of Bhutan's elite, a small segment of this farming population also participated in trade from one valley to the next (Phuntsho 2013: 36).

An autobiographical account by one such trader, Phuntsho Wangdi, then 85 years old, provides a brief yet intimate glimpse into a subaltern perspective from when Bhutan premiered on the world stage in the late 1940s. In his words:

My zodiac sign is year of the wood pig. I was born in the year 1935 in Haatay Ghechukha in the house of my father. Both my parents are from the dzongkhag of Haa, in Bae gewog. The village that they reside in is Haatay Ghechukha. At the age of fourteen my mother bought a mule, called Kezang Hori. I began trading salt and tea leaves from Phari [in Tibet] for rice and grain from Punakha [in Bhutan]. Back then for one *dé* [traditional measuring cup] of salt, we got thrice the amount of rice in return. A single *dé* of tea leaves equated to two *dé* of rice. And for a single Ngultrum, one could get three *dé* of rice. We continued trading like this for a year, and in my second year, my mother bought me a second mule, Tenzin Jyam.

(Wangdi 2018)¹

The cross-valley trader, Phuntsho Wangdi, passed away in 2019. He was my maternal grandfather, and I spent much of my life at his side. In late 2018, after rendering his words in Dzongkha with a pencil in an old journal that was sitting half used, he asked me to translate his story into

English and to set in motion the process of passing on his experiences for future generations. He wanted it to be read and remembered by those in his family who did not have an opportunity to listen to him reminisce on cold winter nights when we would sit by a heater and revel in the adventures of an adolescent merchant in the 1940s.

Accounts like this one form a myriad of migration stories that reveal much about the aspirations and cultural values of the Bhutanese people. When discussing the origins and migrations in the extended Eastern Himalayas, Geoff Childs (2012: 61) notes that extraordinarily little of the existing scholarship on Himalayan migrations has so far been articulated with formal theories that attempt to explain migration. This issue stems from a larger yet unfortunate problem of negligible decolonisation efforts in the systems and networks of academia in the Eastern Himalayas. The sad reality of having to have one's story translated so that one's own kin can understand and acknowledge their existence and history is one of the more intimate and foremost consequences of losing authenticity and legitimacy in a world where even isolated mountain kingdoms like Bhutan cannot keep their value systems and cultural practices inoculated from the clutches of a hyperglobalised international system.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the wider literature on Bhutan. Upon examining its scholastic history, it is evident that the Bhutanese state, with its shifting politics and policies, produced distinct bodies of scholarship; from the 'golden age' of the traditional religious era when Bhutan was primarily a theocracy, the earliest works in English during the heights of the British colonial regime in South Asia, the rise of 'homegrown orientalism' as proposed by Poddar and Subba (1991: 79), post-1947 with an influx of regional academic interest on Bhutan, to the new and rising wave of Bhutan's own cohort of local scholars who continue to break new ground in combining traditional sources and archives with Western research methods. State policies of incorporating Western education schooling models and the adoption of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a measure of holistic development have significantly opened the door to exciting new and distinct bodies of scholarship on Bhutan. Contemporary research on Bhutan has also expanded to include a stronger local, authentic voice with a greater agency but still struggles to be seen as entirely legitimate by the larger international academic audience.

Bhutan: A brief profile

Historically, Bhutan has been a cultural contact zone for trade between the mountain ranges of the great Himalayas and the plains of Assam, serving as its own minor silk route. A closer look at the country's geography places it north of Tibet (China's Xizang Autonomous Region), west of Sikkim, and in the east and south of the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal. The small kingdom occupies 18,000 square miles on the world map and stretches approximately between 26°45' and 28°30' north latitude and 88°45' to 92°10' east longitude (Coelho 1971: 57; Singh 1972: 3; Mehra 1974: 1). Bhutan is an ecological hotbed and hosts a range of topographical features from its subtropical lowlands that rise from about 100 metres in the south to the temperate midlands with altitudes ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 metres, and alpine highlands that rise 7,000 metres above sea level (Phuntsho 2013: 16).

Often marketed as a 'Shangri-la' or discussed as a frontier state that acts as a buffer between the regional hegemony, China and India, Bhutan's politico-administrative counters are divided into 20 districts known as dzongkhags. The division of these dzongkhags broadly correspond with the ethnic and linguistic diversity in the country and serve as broad indicators of different ethnic communities as civic and religious leaders identify themselves with the respective toponym for their districts.

When reconstructing Bhutanese history, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's presence in its national history is seamlessly woven into Bhutan's national narrative as the father of Bhutan. He is projected as the rallying protagonist with his success in consolidating the feudal polities (that constitute modern Bhutan) in the 17th century regarded as the 'unification' of Bhutan. Zhabdrung, a prince-abbot from the Drukpa Kagyu school of Ralung in Tibet, sought political refuge in Bhutan from the rising and dominant Gelugpa sect early in the 17th century. The political ascendance of the Gelugpa sect in Tibet prompted the escape of many lamas of other old and newer sects to Bhutan and elsewhere in the Southern Himalayas. He is accredited with installing the Drukpa Kagyupa school as the state religion and is customarily regarded as the founder of Bhutan by ruling as the supreme spiritual and temporal head of the country known as the *Choesid* (dual) system in 1636 (Aris 1994: 12).

Zhabdrung's rule varies from being categorised as a theocracy to an ecclesiocratic state because of his late policies that established a temporal office of *Druk Desi* (also referred to as *Deb Raja*), separating it from his spiritual office (later referred to as *Dharma Raja*) that would be inherited by his reincarnations (Kinga 2009: 5). The legitimacy of Zhabdrung's expanding Bhutanese state can be noted in the voluntary nature of submission made by local inhabitants, based on his growing prestige rather than acts of coercion. Scholars allude to the tribute missions made from both within the country and external parties from neighbouring Indian states, Nepal, and several Tibetan principalities as constitutive of Bhutan's early status as a nation-state (Aris 1994: 28). The magnitude of power tied to his authority is reflected by frequent mentions of the tale of his passing; his death in 1651 was disguised through the hoax of a religious retreat in which meals and music were served regularly and in which a surrogate would pretend to receive and give out blessings behind a curtain. The simulation of his continuing presence lasted for almost half a century, and all complicit keepers of the secret did so in order to sustain the cohesion of his newly formed state (Sinha 1991: 88; Aris 1979: 235; Phuntsho 2013: preface).

Two and half centuries post-Zhabdrung witnessed the fragmentation of the ecclesiocratic state, but Sonam Kinga (2009: 9) has noted that the polity did not regress back to multiple village-based politics, but instead,

a national polity continued moored around the figure of Zhabdrung Rimpoche and his reincarnations who served as heads of state. But the actual power was vested in regional governors who enjoyed considerable control over both material and human resources of the state.

Kinga (2009: 9)

Aris' (1994) commentary on the enduring presence of Zhabdrung's pre-eminence in the evolution of the Bhutanese state is relayed back to the derivation of religious values rooted in the heart of Bhutan's unification.

Nomenclature

There was a time when Bhutan was referred to as *Lhomankhazi*, the mon of four approaches.² *Lhomankhazi* is recorded to have been used as a toponym for Bhutan long before the unification of the country in the early 17th century, exemplifying the pronounced and formidable character of the polity even before the mainstreaming of Westphalian sovereignty and culture of nation-states diffused into the Himalayas (Phuntsho 2013: 4; Van Driem 2015: 61–67). A strong sense of belonging to the hills in contrast to their neighbours from the Indian plains promoted a sense of ethnic identity before Western conceptions of the nation-state were even received.

There exists a rich tradition of using toponyms to tell historical and religious narratives, and many stories of people's origin and local cultures are told by evoking the context of place names. Karma Phuntsho (2016: 61), in his seminal book, *The History of Bhutan*, states that these many colourful names for the country itself do not 'string together to provide a fabulous national narrative, but they do provide us some specific insights into how the Bhutanese and their neighbours perceived the country, which we call Bhutan today'.

The early Bhutanese polity negotiated its identity apropos to Southern Tibet. From the earliest terms, *Monyul* and *Lhomon*, we are reminded of how Bhutan and its etymology are heavily influenced by a Tibet-centric worldview. These terms refer to those populations that were considered to occupy the southern borderlands of Central Tibet and lived in a state of sociospiritual darkness (Aris 1979: xxiv). *Menjong*, the medicinal country, the country bestrewn with *tsanden*, cypress trees, and *Drukylul*, land of the thunder dragon, are both monikers used to identify the country. Unfortunately, today we attribute the modern name 'Bhutan' to the ignorance of a British officer, George Bogle, who ventured into cartographically uncharted territory in 1774 and chose to distinguish the country by the name of 'Boutan' in 1775.

Ethnic breakdown

Bhutan's linguistic diversity boasts of 19 indigenous languages along with numerous dialects. The Bhutanese have often amazed visitors with their polyglot abilities (Van Driem 2015: 61), hosting a range of different tongues under the central Bodish group, the east Bodish group, other Bodic languages, and Indo-European languages. Bhutan's multitude of languages is ascribed by Phuntsho to geosocial segregation in which much of the Bhutanese population lived and functioned in relative isolation for centuries due to the country's topographical countenance.

Although the literature broadly divides the country along three ecological zones, the southern, the central, and the northeastern zones, its population is generically divided into three major ethnic groupings: the Tsangla-speaking Sharchop 'easterner', the Ngalong of Central Bhutan in the west, and the Lhotshampa, 'southern borderlander' (Aris 1994).

The in-depth study of each district's population and indigenous groups remains largely exiguous except for a few standout studies such as Françoise Pommaré's chapter on 'Ethnic Mosaic: Peoples of Bhutan'; Jagar Dorji's *Lhop: A Tribal Community in South Western Bhutan, and its Survival Through Time* (2003); B. Deben Sharma's *Lhops (Doya) of Bhutan: An Ethnographic Account* (2005); Sita Giri's *The Vital Link: Monpas and Their Forests* (2004); Raghuraj Chand's *Brokpas: The Hidden Highlanders of Bhutan* (2004); and *Love, Courtship and Marriage in Rural Bhutan: A Preliminary Ethnography of Wamling Village in Zhemgang* (2009) by Dorji Penjore (2013). This dearth of ethnographic inquiry can be attributed to the fact that Bhutan only introduced formal Western education in the late 1950s and that its isolationist disposition has made the bureaucratic procedure required for foreign scholars to conduct research within the country rather difficult. Religious Buddhist texts and hagiography constitute Bhutan's more prolific genres.

Contextualising the scholarship on Bhutan

Bhutan remains the least anthropologically studied area in the entire Himalayan belt of territories heavily influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and cultures (Mehra 1960: 195). There are a handful of works that study and discuss ethnographic accounts with distinct Bhutanese communities and a modest body of literature that sings praises of a uniquely 'happy kingdom' nestled away in the Himalayas.³ Yet, there remains a lacuna of knowledge in contextualising and exploring

the diverse experiences of the Bhutanese. Much of Bhutanese history is heavily reliant on early accounts of British officials and political leaders with corresponding commentaries on the isolationist and exclusivist nature of the secluded kingdom.⁴ This trend continues to be entrenched even in contemporary publications. Such a parochial construction of the political development of Bhutan exhibits either a narrow Euro–American gaze or a jingoistic national narrative, both limiting the opportunities to grant an organic and genuine facet to ethnographic discourse on Bhutan.

Traditional religious literature

Works produced during Bhutan's ecclesiocratic period (1651–1907) are usually overlooked when discussing the literature on Bhutan. In this era, formal education was available to a few male elites through state and private monastic institutions. Corollary to these circumstances, intellectualism and academia persisted within a Buddhist paradigm exclusive to male Buddhist lamas and monks (Penjore 2013).

In contextualising the traditional Bhutanese education system, Dorji Penjore (2013: 148) expounds on a dichotomous dynamic between narratives of the state, where 'the term "folk" or "secular" (*jig tenpa* or *mi nagpo*) is always differentiated from the religious (*damcho*)'. Even though scholarship was severely limited to the confines of religion, Françoise Pommaret (2002) dubs these works as constituting the golden age of Bhutanese historical literature. These historical works were usually biographies of religious figures and political authorities produced by Bhutanese scholars in the 17th and 18th centuries. The most prominent characters would be those who held the spiritual throne of Zhabdrung, or the political seat of the earlier mentioned temporal seat, the Druk Desi, and the religious hierarch, the Je Khenpo, all rendered in classical Tibetan (Chökey).⁵

Prominent works that are often cited when discussing the medieval period of Bhutanese national history are the biographies of the fourth Desi Tezin Rabye by the fourth Je Khenpo, the thirteenth Desi Sherab Wangchuk and tenth Je Khenpo Tenzin Chogyal by his eventual successor, the thirteenth Je Khenpo Yonten Thaye (Pommaret 2002: 128). These works provide glimpses into the politico-economic conditions of the early Bhutanese state post-Zhabdrung.

The orientalist gaze of the colonial era

The influence and power that colonial processes wield over knowledge production and the legitimacy of scholarship in the modern era are evident in the current state of academia in Bhutan today. From the earliest accounts of the administrative structure and lifestyles of people to the inadvertent naming of the country with a foreign appellation, the British missions have provided us with a substantive historical perspective (Deb 1971: 5–14).

What is known about the societies and cultures in Bhutan during the height of the colonial era, even though Bhutan itself was not a colonised territory, is greatly derived from the written records made by foreign visitors from the late 18th century onwards. Subba and Wouters (2013: 195) state that the relationship between colonialism and ethnography of the Indian Northeast was 'fairly straightforward as ethnographers were at the same time colonial administrators'. The information derived from the reports of the colonial officers is still routinely used by scholars to reconstruct aspects of Bhutanese society and polity until the mid-20th century.

Warren Hastings, the governor general of India in 1774, initiated formal overtures for friendly relations with Bhutan and Tibet that had far-reaching economic results. Hastings was shrewd in his efforts to expand colonial economic interests by initiating trade with the immediate Tibet/

Bhutan region to the north and aspired to establish a new trade route to China (Phuntsho 2013: 369). Under Hastings' order, Scotsman George Bogle was instructed to find out and record the geography, agriculture, livestock, culture, governance, and so forth of Bhutan. This report is one of the earliest and most informative records of Bhutan in English and thus initiated a genre of travelogues that constituted colonial ethnography.

Bogle, a rather progressive character probably influenced by the contemporary age of Enlightenment, is celebrated for his diplomatic triumph in fostering amiable relations with the sixth Panchen Lama of Tibet and the Desi of Bhutan. Upon reflection, his interactions with the Bhutanese are often a neglected episode, but his fondness for the country and people is evident in his writings. He wrote,

The more I see of the Bhutanese the more I am pleased with them, the common people are good humoured, downright and, I think, thoroughly trusty. The statesmen have some of the art which belongs to their profession. They are the best-built race I ever saw; many of them very handsome.

(Lamb 2002: 128)

Camman Schylur (1951) dubbed Bogle's mission as commercial reconnaissance, and although Bogle elucidated the futility of military conquest of Bhutan because the advantages to the company would not be 'beyond what is already enjoyed', through the recently signed Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1774.⁶ Schylur (1951: 50) observes that 'whether or not these observations actively influenced the rulers of India, they expressed a point of view that was held towards the northern states for many years to come'. In fact, they were the first enunciation of what was to become almost a permanent policy. Bogle's recommendations of cordial relations based on trade with Bhutan guided the British Raj's foreign policy for roughly a century.

It took a few decades of raids by petty officers, land managers, and lawless gangsters along the Duar borders, faithfully recorded by British frontier officials, and two official missions to Bhutan with the humiliation of Ashley Eden, to arrive at the conclusion that for the security of the Bengal Duars, an invasion of the Himalayan Kingdom was worth undertaking.

(Deb 1971: 10)

With the British annexation of Assam in 1826, ambiguities regarding the management of the remaining Duars and fears of Chinese presence in Bhutan prompted the Pemberton mission in 1838. Succeeding Pemberton in 1863 was Ashley Eden, the British envoy to Bhutan. Eden was sent to renegotiate a new treaty in which new territories from the Duars were to be added under complete British control. In return, Bhutan would receive a portion of the revenue generated from the area.

Negotiations and diplomatic conduct by both parties during Eden's visit to Punakha were appalling. Eden's 'supercilious attitude and negative opinion of the Bhutanese' (Phuntsho 2013: 473) resulted in his ridicule at the court of the de facto leader, Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal, in 1863. This altercation bruised the British imperial ego and eventually led to the Anglo-Bhutanese Duar War of 1864 (Phuntsho 2013: 454–461).⁷

Aside from these noteworthy missions into Bhutan that documented not only various aspects of Bhutan but also dictated the general orientation of Anglo-Bhutanese relations, British political officers of Sikkim, the territory adjacent to Western Bhutan, also shed much light on the development and proceedings of the Bhutanese state. Particularly, the names Charles Alfred Bell

and John Claude White are prominent because they recorded their journeys and interactions with the newly formed hereditary monarchs, Ugyen Wangchuck and Jigme Wangchuck. These works capture the general mood and insecurities of the withdrawal of Britain from India and the trepidation regarding the impending status of those states that were yet to configure their sovereignty in the post-World War II arena.

The rise of homegrown orientalism through regional cultural hegemony

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed an opening of Bhutanese doors to the rest of the world, and with that, the doors to research Bhutan began to open as well. Two major scholars who had intimate ties to Bhutan are Michael Vaillancourt Aris (1946–1999) and Leo E. Rose (1926–2005). They stand out as some of the earliest expatriate scholars invited to the country through royal patronage for the Wangchuck Dynasty. A pre-eminent Tibetologist, Aris tutored members of the royal family in Bhutan, where he spent six years learning Dzongkha and authored a number of relatively comprehensive books in English on the history and religious background of Bhutan in English (Hoge 1999).⁸ Aris became the leading Western authority on Bhutanese, Tibetan, and Himalayan cultures, and his legacy would eventually be carried on by his mentee and later close friend, Karma Phuntsho. Similarly, Rose (1977) also authored a seminal study on Bhutan as part of a series on *South Asian Political Systems*.

The past 50 years resulted in research on Bhutan fashioning a new type of regional orientalism. Preyma Po'dar and Tanka Subba (1991) call this a 'homegrown' orientalism in the way these scholars look at the tribal societies of the region. In 'Demystifying Some Ethnographic Texts on the Himalayas', Po'dar and Subba (1991: 79) argue that

in corollary to Said's Orientalism, there is a further division of the Orient (in this case, India) where the dominant Hindu society in India extends the received dominant discourse from the West to the study of tribes, which are their objects of enquiry, without challenging it.

Po'dar and Subba (1991: 79)

The Sino-Indian rivalry that had been going on for centuries had sharpened with the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the incorporation of Tibet, which increased Indian security interests in Bhutan. Shifting political relations post-1947 between an independent India and Bhutan came with its own shift in scholarship. In the process of modernisation, Bhutan relied heavily on its latest ally, an independent India, for much needed financial and human resource aid.⁹ Constructing a strong foundation for Indo-Bhutan diplomacy, a sizeable number of Indians were stationed in Bhutan to fill a crucial human resource shortage in implementing Bhutan's five-year plans from the start of its first plan in 1961 to 1966 (Dhakhal 1987: 219). This period of expatriate-produced writings oversaw a general theme where several Indian scholars authored either introductory books or political analysis studies on Indo-Bhutanese relations. Ram Rahul (1980; 1983), Nagendra Singh (1972), R. S. Chauhan (1977), and A. C. Sinha (1991) are a few of many Indian scholars who have studied and published on the subject of Bhutan.

Author of *Struggle and Change in South Asian Monarchies*, Chauhan (1977: 4) criticised most earlier prescribed models and theories for explaining new processes of development in 'Third World' countries as 'complex, contradictory and even defective that they can hardly serve as an effective instrument to analyse their intricate socio-political systems and the process of transition through which they are passing'. In addressing the deficiency of scholarship on understanding change and struggle in South Asian monarchies, Chauhan (1977) identified the processes of

external (foreign states such as China and India) and local actors (religious hierarchs, feudal elites, etc.). Although this was significant in identifying major contributing factors that helped comprehend the changing political order, it has dated markedly since it was published in 1977, and there is also the glaring issue of its diligence over orientation towards studying Nepal. Researchers' lack of attention to Sikkim and Bhutan in this era can also be attributed to the fact that most researchers simply did not have access to these kingdoms.

Chauhan's ethnography, if we are even permitted to deem it that, deliberately lumps populations of the Himalayas and northeast of pre-partition India into a 'primitive culture of barbarian and marauding Tibeto-Mongoloid [sic] tribes who dwelt on both the sides of the Himalayas' (1977: 5). There exists an obvious 'othering' of Bhutan and its people in their ethnographies.

In contrast, Nari Rustomji, a political administrator of Sikkim during the slow withdrawal of the British in India and a close confidant of the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, and the first Bhutanese prime minister, Lyonchen Jigme Palden Dorji, deviates from the earlier described category of expatriate authors. Rustomji was an influential administrator within the wider Himalayan region (ArZan 2016). He played a significant role in advising the king and Lyonchen during a turbulent chapter of post-World War II history. Rustomji (1971: 188) extended much more agency and respect when he wrote about Bhutan:

The more I move, the more impressed I am by the qualities of this virile people. Their policy of isolation may have stood in the way of the country's development according to the commonly understood standards of today, but it has also enabled their culture to retain its vitality ... While therefore, the Bhutan authorities are anxious to develop their country, they would be well advised to move with caution so as to ensure that such development is consonant with the true needs of their people and not a mere importation or imposition of ideals suited to countries where conditions are entirely and fundamentally different.

(1971: 188)

Bringing the narrative back into the hands of the Bhutanese

The implementation of a formal national education system in 1955 and the decision to provide free universal modern education in 1959 set in motion a monumental break away from the traditional framework of education in Bhutan. Although this did not render monastic institutions obsolete (the Bhutanese state is heavily reliant on the monastic body for ritual and religious purposes), it did facilitate a shift in status quo and value systems from the traditional religious model to the modern Western model to which the rest of the world was already subscribed or was beginning to subscribe.

In Pommaret's (2002: 131) discussion of recent Bhutanese scholarship, she articulates that those

historians who wrote in Dzongkha or in Choke are prestigious models for the present generation. Educated in English, the new historians now write in this language with a vastly different style, more inspired by Western methodology and modern narrative approaches. As they write about history, they provide the socio-economic and cultural background that was often lacking in the works of their predecessors.

Pommaret's (2002: 131)

The 21st century hosts a new cohort of Bhutanese scholars who are beginning to explore secular themes, and those who wrote in English developed a 'quasi-religious' genre as well (Penjore

2013: 150). Karma Ura, who would eventually become a pioneer in promoting scholarship and research on Bhutan, as well as a leading GNH expert, authored the first novel on Bhutan's social, political, and economic lives and institutions during the reigns of the second and third kings, *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes: A Historical Novella* (1995). Kunzang Choden pioneered the compilation of Bhutanese folktales by transcribing and translating Bhutan's rich repository of oral history. Her *Folktales of Bhutan* (1993) and *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti* (1997) opened the doors to a plethora of publications on Bhutanese folktales.

Michael Aris's mentee, Lopen Karma Phuntsho, trained in both traditional Buddhist monastic education and in Western institutions, published the first comprehensive study on Bhutan's history. His *The History of Bhutan* is a seminal piece that both built on the works of earlier scholars and incorporated an organic and intuitive perspective derived from his religious training. Now a leading authority on the study of Bhutan and Buddhism, Phuntsho's book is an essential textbook in most higher-level classes and modules on the study of Bhutan. An example of Phuntsho's contributions to Bhutanese scholarship includes supplementing earlier works such as A. Deb's research on the variety of Tibetan Buddhism called the Drukpa sect that permeated into Bhutan in the early 16th century by later verifying this timeline. His historical prowess and strong background in Buddhist religious studies offer a tone of greater Bhutanese agency for many students who study the history of their country.

There are a growing number of scholars and academic interests in Bhutan, especially with the adoption of the GNH policy by the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in 1972. Bhutan's four-decade-long journey in actualising GNH resulted in the creation of an entire body of state and nonstate institutions and actors. As a pivot in Bhutanese development strategy, the GNH has arbitrated its own place in development discourse and escorted Bhutan's unique history of comprehending 'happiness' through Buddhism into the literature. Much of the research focused on GNH remains within a bureaucratic framework in the form of reports or in development studies, but it is a major topic that will impact and influence future ethnographic works.

Penjore (2013: 151) explains that because the Bhutanese government was biased toward science, technology, engineering, and math subjects, the humanities was systemically disregarded and considered less valuable. This systemic bias severely disadvantaged the incorporation of the social sciences, specifically anthropology, into research and academic institutes. Recent ethnographic publications are largely auto-ethnographies, whereby many emerging scholars are also studying their own communities. We can see this in Dorji Penjore's (2009) auto-ethnography on the focus on a traditional courtship custom practised widely in Eastern and Central Bhutan. This trend of auto-ethnography or self-culture studies brings much promise towards enforcing a stronger Bhutanese presence and agency in the literature of Bhutan.

Challenges to Bhutanese scholarship in the 21st century

When I read for my Master's in Philosophy in Modern South Asian Studies in 2018, my thesis on 'Himalayan Intrigues: the Role of Monarchies in Transition to Democracy' was heavily criticised and penalised for harking an 'eerie ethno-nationalist subtext' and its reliance on the state narrative. I thought I had been practising as much caution and reflexivity when addressing my positionality as a Bhutanese studying her country of origin, but the feedback I received said otherwise. This triggered a reflection of my methodology and sources, and it highlighted a common obstacle that most Bhutanese scholars currently face.

The first is the paucity of Bhutanese scholarship. While I have listed works throughout the last two millennia, the resources are minute in contrast to the libraries of other nations

and communities that are studied around the world. Lacking Bhutanese agency and control of the narrative have profoundly affected the way we Bhutanese perceive ourselves and how the observations of outsiders have been internalised and projected by the people.

A prime example of this is the case of GNH. GNH pitched Bhutan into the international consciousness as an anomaly due to its reluctance to place economic growth at the heart of development and launched Bhutan on a path toward exploring multidimensional measures of evaluation. Many noted the contrasting nature of the Bhutanese development path to conventional Western conceptions of development but it is also acknowledged that it offers a possible alternative for the Global South, as well as, ultimately, the Global North (Brunet et al. 2001). Although GNH is a dinner conversation topic for the intelligentsia of the country, much of the population is unaware of the true meaning of GNH or how its institutions function within the country. Nonetheless, the Bhutanese are proud to claim that they are the happiest country in the world and that the Bhutanese are customarily 'happy and simple' people to all those who visit the country. Such internalisation of the external perceptions of others and what the state promotes are not only detrimental to the Bhutanese character but also restricts it from being a multifaceted and dynamic subject. Although there seems to be a relative fracture in the conceptualisation of GNH between the Bhutanese state and its citizens, it is plausible to also construe it as an organic consequence of the rapid pace and manner in which Bhutan is modernising.

I am part of a generation trained in Western education. While my command of Dzongkha is nominal and Choke quite limited, this immediately constrains my peers and me from only being able to seriously study the modern and contemporary periods (the 1950s onwards) of Bhutan. Insufficient fluency in classical Tibetan immediately cuts off an entire genre, if not the whole of the Buddhist canon, as sources. The limitation of the traditional archive is not just a simple issue of language incongruence but is also a consequence of poor decolonisation efforts and the cultural hegemony that the English language and Western academia possess over knowledge production globally.

The archive is a site of power and a means of reinforcing power dynamics. A conscious effort must be made to use non-English language sources and cover neglected aspects of Bhutanese academia. Bhutan is rich in its tradition of oral history, and we should channel active strategies to reject the notion that European epistemic traditions are superior to those indigenous forms of knowledge and knowledge production that have been relegated to the background with the acceptance of modernity. This need to challenge orientalism and occidental narratives and methodology will open the doors to a diverse way of understanding the country and its people and allow Bhutanese scholars to contend with the Western gaze. We are now at a wonderful juncture where greater interest and investment in academia are growing, so opportunities to initiate new approaches and explore understudied narratives are abundant.

Narratives, like other cultural practices, help to reinforce social hierarchy, to negotiate alliances with sometimes hostile neighbours, to define identity and to position ethnic groups in rapidly changing political contexts. At the same time, these stories assist scholars to grasp the historical process of social and identity formation ... There is little doubt that language, identity and narrative are key to understanding the Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples in the extended eastern Himalayas.

(Huber 2012: 8)

Phuntsho Wangdi's biography is an atypical source to be found in Bhutanese literature, but its inclusion is done so with a strong desire to subvert conventional methodologies learned in Western-modelled schooling and to assert a stronger subaltern dynamic to the Bhutanese narra-

tive machine. This piece itself represents a larger and growing body of literature that builds on the foundations of a nascent body of work that has been produced by Bhutanese scholars themselves.

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Notes

- 1 This is a translated excerpt from the autobiography.
- 2 The ethnonym 'Monpa', 'one from Mon', is widely used to designate very different societies and groups living on the southern, and southeastern slopes of the Himalaya, especially in parts of Eastern Bhutan, the neighbouring West Kamen district – including Tawang, Diran, and Kalaktang – of present-day Arunachal Pradesh (Grothmann 2012).
- 3 Being dubbed the 'fairy-tale kingdom', and 'the last Shangri-La', and even having the Bhutanese Tourism Council use the slogan, 'Happiness is a Place', has given Bhutan the pedestal to become the posterchild of happiness and alternative development. Numerous foreign articles that cover Bhutan describe it as a fairytale kingdom, a Shangri-la. There are also multiple books such as *Radio Shangri-la*, *A Field Guide to Happiness*, *What I Learned in Bhutan: the Happiest Kingdom in the World*, etc.
- 4 Refer to texts by George Bogle, R.B. Pemberton, Ashley Eden, Charles Bell, J.C. White and earlier accounts of political officers of Sikkim.
 - 5 Traditional Bhutanese scholars made a huge contribution to the scholarship in the form of *namthar*, a hagiographical genre, which literally means 'liberating through hearing'. The main end of this corpus of writing is spiritual, not secular. However, many non-spiritual matters can be culled from these writings to construct the past and understand socio-political and religious milieu during which they were written.

(Pommaret 2002)
- 6 One of the main terms of the Anglo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1774 had secured the territory of Cooch Behar for British control and was a guarantee against future Bhutanese aggression (Phuntsho 2013).
- 7 Upon the conclusion of the Anglo-Bhutanese Duar War of 1864, the Treaty of Sinchula was signed on 11 November 1865. Under this treaty, perpetual friendship between the two countries, the permanent British annexation of all Duars were some of the main points.
- 8 Refer to *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives: A Study of Pemalingpa (1450–1521) and the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1706)*; *Bhutan, the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*; *Views of Medieval Bhutan: The Diary and Drawings of Samuel Davis 1793*; and *Sources for the History of Bhutan*.
- 9 The biggest geopolitical factor that must be kept in mind is the burgeoning Indo-China rivalry that backgrounds the political environment during the 1950s, which many referred to as the 'Great Game in the East'. The crushing and humiliating defeat India suffered in Sino-Indian war of 1962 shaped the foreign policies of Bhutan as well. It further increased the geopolitical significance of countries like Bhutan and Nepal as frontier states by making relations with them a high priority on India's national security agenda.

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