



Ngawang Namgyal

The Land of the Thunder Dragon

The Kingdom of Bhutan

- Before the 16th century, the region was a collection of numerous small principalities, practically one in each major valley of the mountainous land. Their chieftains spent much of their energy and means warring between themselves and with Tibetan warlords. Numerous monasteries were competing, for superiority and influence on, and income from, the peasants.
- This changed in 1616 with the arrival of Ngawang Namgyal.
 - He was a descendant of the founder of Ralung (one of the most sacred sites in Tibetan Buddhism), and recognized as re-incarnation of Pema Karpo, the holy ruler-abbot of Ralung.
 - Ngawang was just 23 years old when the powerful deity Mahakala, or Yeshey Goenpo, appeared to him in the form of a Raven and sent him to Bhutan with the instruction to teach Buddhism there. Thus the Raven became a sacred symbol to be integrated into the crown of the rulers of Bhutan, the Raven Crown.



Something to think about . . .

According to a Europe-centred version of the world's history, the modern era started in the sixteenth century, and has largely been a history of the expansion of the Western states and peoples in the world, through military conquest and economic exploitation. This expansion has been legitimized by means of three types of rhetoric championing European, "universal" values (Wallerstein, 2006, p.27), which would bring "backward" societies into the light of "modernity"; the rest of the world had no choice but to accept Western interventions.

First, the idea of "natural law and Christianity" was drawn upon in the sixteenth century, when innovations in shipping and navigation technologies enhanced interconnections among distant societies. It was the vision of the moral order asserting that how human societies are ruled must be rooted in the transcendental wisdom given by God; it would bring all humanity the good life on earth.

Second, the rhetoric of "civilizing mission" came to the fore in the nineteenth century, when industrial capitalism and imperial expansion boosted European control over the world. It was the idea assigning missionaries and colonial administrators the role of guiding non-Europeans toward the attainment of "civilization"; uneducated, unlettered, brute "barbarians" were seen to be at lower stages of a linear, evolutionary progression toward "civilization".

Third, the rhetoric of "democracy" emerged in the twentieth century, as the latest instrument justifying the supremacy of Europe in the world. The liberal-democratic model, upholding "the twin principles of limited government and popular consent expressed at election time", has come to be, and continues to be mobilized as an objectively verifiable benchmark to measure the extent to which a particular society has attained "progress"

Katsu Masaki, *A Proposition "Bhutan is a Democracy": Beyond the Constricted, Popular Wisdom of "Democracy,"* JOURNAL OF BHUTAN STUDIES, VOLUME 29, WINTER 2013



- While teaching untiringly in every possibly dzong and village in Western Bhutan, Ngawang grew in spiritual and political power. Once he had secured the support most of the important families, Ngawang proceeded to construct a chain of large dzongs, the monastery-castles, in the main valleys of Western Bhutan as centres of the religious and civil authority.
- Highlighted in the “History of GNH” at www.gnhcentrebhutan.org **“Bhutan’s ancient legal code of 1629 stated that, “if the government cannot create happiness for its people, then there is no purpose for government to exist”. The code stressed that Bhutanese laws must promote happiness for all sentient beings – as a Buddhist nation, it is clear that the cultivation of compassion stemmed from this ancient wisdom.”**
- But he had rivals. One of them called the King of Tsang in Tibet with his troops to help oust the newcomer. In 1639 Ngawang crushed the challenger and his Tibetan allies. After this great victory he assumed the impressive title of “Shabdrung”, meaning “Precious Jewel at whose feet one prostrates” and opened the lineage of Shabdrungs in Bhutan. From now on, he was the religious and temporal ruler of Bhutan.



Modern flag of the Kingdom of Druk (Bhutan), appears ca. 1949

- While remaining the supreme power, he introduced a dual theocratic system of government: a Head Abbot, the Je Kempo, administered the religious institutions, a high officer with the title Druk Desi or, as the British travelers translated, Deb Raja was vested with the civil powers. He divided the country in administrative regions, headed by a Penlop (Prince-Governor), while at local level Dzongpons executed the authority, delegated from the centre. For the first time, a comprehensive system of laws was codified.
 - The only available written Western account of this era during the time of the Shabdrung is the notes of Father Cacella S.J, one of the two Portuguese Jesuit Priests, who passed through Bhutan in 1627.



Wait! What!?! Two questions:

Why Portugese?

Why Jesuits? (Who were the Jesuits?)

- ❖ The two Jesuits departed Cooch Behar for Bhutan on Sunday 21 February 1627. They journey through the mountains infested with robbers and the intrigue of the local leaders to reach Paro on March 25, 1627 where they were amazed at the sophistication of irrigation channels and architecture.
- ❖ On April 5, 1627 the priests leave Paro to receive a warm traditional reception and their first audience with Shabdrung. *“We found him in another tent, richly ornamented with silk. The King (Shabdrung) was sitting on a high seat, clothed in red silk embroidered with gold.”* This was probably the first time Shabdrung met a foreigner, *“Never any foreigners had come in those mountains and nobody remembered having seen any.”*
- ❖ A monk from Tsaparang (in neighboring Arunacha Pradesh, India) who spoke some Hindustani was the interpreter for the long laborious conversations that were held every day. Shabdrung, impressed with the Jesuits, assigned the Tsaparang lama to them and *“urged us to study the language so we could speak with him clearly.”* At that time of the Jesuit’s visit, Shabdrung was “33 years old” and called the “Dharma Raja”. He was both *“the King and the Head Lama of this Kingdom of Cambirasi (Bhutan)”*.
- ❖ After returning from a tour, in what may be modern day Cheri monastery, Shabdrung accepts and attends the invitation of the priests to attend the feast of St. Ignatius. He is accompanied by *“an old lama, his teacher for whom he has strong veneration, and by other lamas.”* Shabdrung’s subject had great reverence for him who practiced the phowa rituals. *“All have a great esteem for the King and the great lama and give the part of their goods in order to be sent by him to heaven after their death.”* Phowa is a simple Buddhist ceremony to transfer the consciousness after death. The priest record this ceremony as follows: *“When one is near to his last breath the King is called to come to assist him by his prayers and as soon as he dies, the King is pulling the hairs of his head, accomplishing for him this great work of mercy which is called sending the soul to heaven.”* The priests preached Shabdrung about the life of Jesus Christ which Shabdrung showed, *“great pleasure in hearing it.”* However, *“realizing that between himself and us, there was a great difference regarding the truth of faith”*, the priest’s propose to exit the nation. Even with



Shabdrung's support of 2 monks aged 12 and 19 and with a promise of an adult who would become Christians, the Jesuits fail in their mission and leave Bhutan.

- Invasions by Tibetan-Mongolian troops in 1644 and 1647 were successfully repulsed and served to further unite the Bhutanese. When the Shabdrung died in 1651, the major part of Bhutan was united under his authority; five years later, also Eastern Bhutan was under full control of the central government.
- In an intricate power game, the Shabdrung's death was kept a state secret for more than 50 years because the temporal and religious rulers could not agree on a successor. The moment the death of the Shabdrung was made public in 1705, civil wars broke out, spurred by rival claims to the office of the Shabdrung (a role based on the reincarnation of Namgyal). The unity of the country was eroded, the regional princes/governors, the Penlops, now ruled with increasing autonomy, warring against each other. This situation prevailed until the early years of the 20th century

Sources:

Marian Gallenkamp, *Democracy in Bhutan An Analysis of Constitutional Change in a Buddhist Monarchy*, March 2010.

Pro Bhutan e.V. 1, Harald N. Nestroy, Botschafter a.D., Geschäftsführer



Updated May 2018

