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An Eighteenth-Century Bhutanese Lama's Journey to Ladakh

John Bray and Chris Butters

Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltsen was a senior Drukpa Kagyu ('*Brug pa bka'rgyud*) lama from Bhutan who visited Ladakh in the early years of the eighteenth century during the reign of King Nyima Namgyal. His visit helped reinforce existing links between the two kingdoms. This account of Ngawang Gyaltsen's travels in Ladakh is based on his biography, a copy of which survives in the National Library of Bhutan in Thimphu.

Ladakh and Bhutan have obvious historical similarities as Himalayan kingdoms sharing a common religious culture but a distinct political status from Tibet. Despite their distance from each other, they shared a further link through their rulers' common allegiance to the Drukpa Kagyu sect, and this connection was particularly important in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This article discusses one episode in the relations between the two countries in the early eighteenth century: the visit to Ladakh of a senior Bhutanese lama, Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltsen (*Byams.mgon ngag.dbang rgyal.mtshan* 1647-1732). The account of his visit is based on Ngawang Gyaltsen's biography, which was prepared by Shakya Rinchen (*Shakya rin.chen* 1710-59), the ninth Je Khenpo of Bhutan. The full title of the biography is: *Sku.bzhi'i dbang.phyug rje.btsun ngag.dbang rgyal.mtshan.gyi rnam.par thar.pa tham.cas mkhyen.pa'i rol.mo zhes.byab*. A copy is held in the National Library of Bhutan in Thimphu, and this is all the more valuable because the original woodblocks were destroyed in a fire at Punakha about a century ago. The section of the biography which is concerned with Ladakh is contained in folios 126b to 174a.

The article has its origins in a brief visit I (John Bray) made to Bhutan in 1994. I took the opportunity to make informal enquiries about historical links between Bhutan and Ladakh, and was advised to consult Lobpön Pemala (*Slob.dpon padma tshe.dbang*), the distinguished Bhutanese historian, who was

then living in retirement in a monastery at Zungey (*Zung.nge*) in the Chumey valley near the road to Bumthang.¹ Lobsön Pemala in turn referred me to Ngawang Gyaltsen's biography. I had no opportunity to consult the biography during my visit, but Chris Butters and Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi of the National Library of Bhutan subsequently made an extended summary of the relevant chapters on my behalf.

The first part of the article consists of a discussion of the links between Ladakh and Bhutan which form the historical context of Ngawang Gyaltsen's visit. The second part is based on the summary prepared by Chris Butters and Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi, and I gratefully acknowledge their kindness in preparing it.

1. Historical context

As Dieter Schuh (1983a, 1983b) has shown, the Drukpa Kagyupa had established their influence in the Ladakhi court by the late sixteenth century. In the early seventeenth century the Drukpa Kagyupa split into northern and southern schools because of a dispute over rival candidates to succeed the Drukpa leader Padma Karpo (*Padma dkar.po* 1527-92). One of the candidates, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (*Zhab.drung Ngag.dbang rnam.rgyal* 1594-1651?), became the leader of the southern (*Lho.'brug*) school. In 1616 he withdrew from central Tibet and moved south. The Shabdrung subsequently consolidated his authority over the whole of the area which now makes up Bhutan, and is generally regarded as the founder of the Bhutanese state.²

Ladakh maintained close links with both the northern and the southern Drukpa Kagyu schools. Stagtshang³ Raspa Ngawang Gyatso (*Stag.tsang ras.pa ngag.dbang rgya.mtsho*, 1574-1651), who founded Hemis, Wanla and Chemre monasteries and became the chief religious adviser of King Sengge Namgyal of Ladakh, was affiliated with the northern school. However, Sengge

1. Lobsön Pemala had recently completed a detailed history of Bhutan (Pemala 1994). At our meeting in Chumey, I produced a copy of the book which I had purchased in a Thimphu bookshop, hoping that he would refer me to the passages most relevant to my enquiries. To my surprise, Lobsön Pemala looked somewhat agitated and demanded to know where I had found the book. It emerged that he had not yet received a copy himself. I ended up presenting him with mine, an unusual reversal of the normal procedure.

2. For the early history of Bhutan see *inter alia* Aris 1979, 1994.

3. I have followed Ladakhi rather than standard Tibetan usage when giving phonetic versions of Ladakhi names: 'Stagtshang' rather than 'Tagtshang', 'Standzin' rather than 'Tenzin'; Stagna rather than 'Tagna'.

Namgyal, who reigned from 1616 to 1642, also retained contacts with the Shabdrung, and sent his younger brother Standzin (*Bstan.'dzin*) to help Bhutan in the fight against Tibet. Standzin rose to become the governor (*rdzong.dpon*) of Wangdi Phodrang (*Dbang.'dus pho.brang*) in Bhutan, and in 1639 helped defeat a Tibetan army at a battle at Punakha.⁴ There must have been other personal contacts as well. For example, two brothers from Zangskar had fled with the Shabdrung from Tibet, and one of them became the Shabdrung's representative in Paro.⁵ Stagna (*Stag.rna*) monastery in Ladakh remained affiliated with the southern school, together with its two daughter houses in Zangskar, Bardan (*Ba.gdan*) and Stagrimo (*Stag.ri.mo*).

Later, in 1677, Ladakh took Bhutan's side in a further war against Tibet.⁶ The consequence was that Tibetan armies invaded Ladakh, defeated King Delegs Namgyal (*Bde.legs rnam.rgyal*) and forced him to cede the territories of Guge, Rudok and Purang in Western Tibet to the Dalai Lama under the terms of the treaty of Temisgang (*gTing.mo.sgang*) in 1684. Despite this setback, Bhutan and Ladakh continued to maintain friendly relations, and again there may have been a number of significant personal contacts. For example, in 1683 the chamberlain of Ladakh sent one Ngari Ladakspa Ngawang Paljor (*mNga'.ris la.dvags.pa ngag.dbang dpal.'byor*) to Bhutan, and he was appointed governor of Paro: he was still in this post in 1687.⁷ Ngawang Gyaltsen's visit to Ladakh consolidated and reinforced those contacts.

Ngawang Gyaltsen came from Seolpa (*Bsre'u.la* or *Bse'u.lha*) monastery in Punakha district. He was regarded as an incarnation of Maitreya, and his reincarnation lineage continues to this day. He was particularly famous for his ability to predict the future, and was much revered in Bhutan. As will be seen, the Bhutanese initially were reluctant to allow him to leave for Ladakh.

Ngawang Gyaltsen was called to Ladakh when he was 59, and stayed for six years: his travels must therefore have taken place in approximately 1706-12. At the time, the King of Ladakh was Nyima Namgyal (*Nyi.na rnam.rgyal*), Sengge Namgyal's great grandson, who reigned from 1694 to 1729. Nyima Namgyal subsequently acted as host to two other religious visitors:

4. Pemala (1994: 151) cites the *Lho'i chos.byung*, fo. 37b as the source for this episode. I am grateful to Michael Aris for assistance in reading Lobsön Pemala's text.

5. Aris 1986: 183, endnote 6.

6. Petech 1947, 1977; Ahmad 1968.

7. Ibid. 1977: 87.

the Jesuits Ippolito Desideri and Manoel Freyre, who passed through Leh in 1715.⁸ Desideri records that the King was hospitable and pressed the two Italian priests to stay: they were tempted, but decided to press on to Lhasa.

According to Ngawang Gyaltsen's biographer, the Lama impressed the Ladakhi court through his sanctity, learning and ability to perform miracles. Referring to Prince Standzin's presence in Bhutan during the reign of the Shabdrung, he suggested that the King should send another representative to Bhutan. The King duly sent his younger brother, Ngawang Standzin Norbu (*Ngag.dbang bstan.'dzin nor.bu*), and he later rose to become the Eighth Je Khenpo, the senior monastic figure in Bhutan, during the years 1738-44. Ngawang Gyaltsen was also able to confirm the southern Drukpa Kagyu school's links with Stagna monastery. In this respect Ngawang Gyaltsen was a link in a continuous tradition which survives to this day: the monastery continues to preserve his image along with those of Padma Karpo and the Shabdrung.⁹

2. Summarised extracts from the biography of Ngawang Gyaltsen

The call to Ladakh

When Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltsen was 59 years of age, he was sent to Ladakh at the request of King Nyima Namgyal, to be head lama at the palace in Leh. The King sent messengers to Bhutan bearing golden flowers and saffron with an invitation to send an excellent and appropriate lama. They came to Punakha, and Ngawang Gyaltsen was proposed, but the people did not want him to leave. However, the messengers stayed on in Punakha. Realising how highly esteemed the Lama was, they were keen to secure him for Ladakh and repeated their requests, adding that his presence would demonstrate the high quality of the Bhutanese lamas to all the Ladakhis. Finally, the regent of Bhutan appointed Ngawang Gyaltsen, and sent him off, together with many precious things.

The party set out in the fourth month, via the Phari region in Tibet, and arrived in Ladakh in the seventh month: the journey therefore took about three months.

Arrival in Ladakh

In Ladakh, Ngawang Gyaltsen was received with great honour by the chief treasurer (*phyag.mdzod*) of Hemis monastery; he and his retinue then rested for a few days at Stagna monastery. Later Sonam Lhundrup (*Bsod.nams lhun.grub*),¹⁰ the King's kalon (minister) came to see the Lama and invited him to his own residence. Other ministers in turn also came to see him.

After a week, Ngawang Gyaltsen went up to the King's palace in Leh. The King received him with a long scarf near his throne, and the Lama was seated on the left and the ministers in a line on the right. Kalon Sonam Lhundrup led the discussion, enquiring about the journey to Ladakh; others asked about religious matters. The Lama's excellent replies made a good impression on all. Finally, the King made offerings of 100 plates of various fruits to the Lama, and of 30 plates to each member of his retinue.

After a few days, the King said that Ngawang Gyaltsen had been invited to Hemis monastery, but first he should undergo a retreat for the long-life deity at Shey palace. The Lama carried out this request.

A few months later, the head of Hemis came to receive the Lama. During his subsequent stay at Hemis, Dung (*Thug.sras*) Rinpoche and other disciples asked him to give empowerments (*dbang*). He gave empowerment ceremonies into profound Drukpa Kagyu teachings for more than a year. The King and his ministers were among those who attended, and at the end they gave many offerings by way of symbolic payment.

Ngawang Gyaltsen demonstrates his powers

Later, Ngawang Gyaltsen visited Karsha (*gar.zha* - Lahul) for a pilgrimage together with Dung Rinpoche before returning to Hemis. He was subsequently invited to spend the whole summer at Leh palace, doing prayers and rituals such as the long-life prayers. The King was very impressed and pleased with the Lama. The King himself then wished to receive further empowerments and dharma instruction from the Lama, but the ministers objected, saying that the King should not bow before the Lama since he had not yet shown any miraculous powers and had not been proven fit to be 'root lama' to the King.

Eventually, Ngawang Gyaltsen became aware of this criticism and said, 'If the disciples are not loyal and faithful, they would not recognise the

8. Desideri 1931.

9. Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977: 131.

10. Sonam Lhundrup appears to have been instrumental in securing the Bhutanese copy of the Kanjur which is among the treasures of Stog palace. See Skorupski (1985: xi).

Buddha even if he were standing in front of them.' For the first time, the Ladakhi people began to have a little less faith in him but later, when they came to know his powers, they became fully committed followers.

Later, Ngawang Gyaltsen went on pilgrimage to Kashmir, and spent several months there. On his return, he stayed at Stagna for some days, then went to the palace at Leh where he was again received with great honour. During his stay at Shey palace, he made the long life prayers for the royal family, and manifested great powers, so that the holy water vase overflowed of its own accord, and the King was fully confirmed in his faith together with his ministers. Gradually, Ngawang Gyaltsen became renowned, and gave Drukpa Kagyu empowerments to many of the population.

One day, the kalon wished to build the Lama a house, but the workers found the earth impossibly hard to dig. They needed rain to soften it, so the kalon's wife Tashi asked the Lama to pray for rain, and he did so successfully. He also stopped the rain when there was too much of it, and made more later. Again, when a sister of the kalon was disturbed by an evil spirit, many lamas tried to cure her, but she remained possessed and half mad. However, when the Drukpa lama was brought in, she recovered fully as a result of his prayers. Thus Ngawang Gyaltsen proved his excellence and became famous.

Requests to return

While Ngawang Gyaltsen was in Kashmir, Kutshap Chogden (Kalon Sonam Lhundrup's younger brother) had taken a letter to Bhutan asking if the Lama could resign from his responsibilities there and stay in Ladakh indefinitely. This request was not accepted, but King Nyima Namgyal and all his subjects beseeched the Lama to stay. He decided to stay for a while longer, but again asked to return to Bhutan since his mother was getting very old. The King did not know what to do. At last Kunga, one of the most senior kalons, suggested the following: 'We have to obey our Lama's advice. On the other hand a king should not be disobeyed. Let us therefore make a compromise between *chos* and *srid*.¹¹ So let the Lama stay for one more year, for the benefit of King and people'. This proposal was discussed, and both the King and the Lama agreed.

11. This is the dual religious/secular system, which still forms the basis of Bhutan's present system of government.

The King's younger brother is sent to Bhutan

In the course of that year, the King learnt more about the relations between Bhutan and Ladakh during the time of King Sengge Namgyal and Bhutan's Shabdrung Rinpoche. Sengge Namgyal had sent his brother Standzin to Bhutan, and he had become the governor of Wangdi Phodrang. He had been a good ruler, and the Lama suggested that this precedent should be repeated. The King agreed, saying, 'Let us continue and cement our relations with Bhutan'. At the Lama's suggestion, the King's younger brother Ngawang Standzin Norbu came to Bhutan.¹² He studied Buddhist philosophy and later became head lama of Rinchenpong (Paro Dzong) before being enthroned as the eighth Je Khenpo.

The King was concerned about the safety of his brother and the Lama on the journey to Bhutan because at that time relations between Bhutan and Tibet were poor. He hesitated to agree to their departure, but Ngawang Gyaltsen reassured him, predicting that all would go well and giving his personal guarantee. The Lama also gave the King's brother a protective amulet, and made prayers to his guardian deities.

Preparations for the journey home

Before leaving, Ngawang Gyaltsen went on pilgrimage to Zangskar. He was received with honour by the King and people there, and offered land and houses. The Lama made donations to Stagrmo monastery, and gave teachings to the people of Zangskar. He also went to visit Naropa's cave.¹³ Then he returned to Leh, where he was received with the same honours as before.

He consulted the oracle Phola Nagpo for a prediction of the outcome of the journey to Bhutan. The oracle said that the voyage could be made in the present year, but that it would be impossible in the following years.

Then the departure was prepared. The King showed the Lama all the precious and holy things of Ladakh. When they were about to leave, the

12. Petech (1977: 89-90) says that the prince is 'variously described as the son of the King of Ladakh and a descendant (*dbon.brgyud*; grand-nephew?) of Sengge Namgyal'. He cites as his source the *Lho'i chos.byung*. Standzin Norbu retired from the post of Je Khenpo in 1743, and died at the age of 58 in 1746.

13. The great teacher Naropa (1016-1100) is said to have meditated near Dzongkhul monastery in the gorge leading down from the Umasi pass in Zangskar. See Crook (1994: 449).

King offered nine sets of nine items,¹⁴ and presented the Lama with Barden monastery, the *chos.gzhis dung.ring*,¹⁵ 23 households,¹⁶ and the mountain forest lands of *Stag.sna'i klu.dbang*. The King also re-offered the lands and settlements which had previously been given to the religious leader Chosje Monzinpa (*Chos.rje smon.'dzin.pa*).¹⁷

The King vowed not to hunt wild animals any more, and to make 20,000 recitations of the *Manjusri Sangita* (*'Jam.dpal mtshan.brjod*). Similarly, the ministers vowed to recite the 100-syllable mantra 100,000 times, to do a month's retreat every year, and to recite the six-syllable mantra for all time as their devotion prayers. Kalon Sonam Lhundrup vowed not to kill any member of the bird family, and to make 100,000 *tsha-tsha* images¹⁸ a year. Rinchen Sherab promised to make a thousand recitations daily of the six-syllable mantra, and Lyonpo (minister) Phuntsog promised to make a thousand *tsha-tsha*. The rest of the people made similar vows to devote themselves to religious activity, each according to their capability.

The return journey

Finally, the King, Dung Rinpoche of Hemis, the ministers and subjects all followed the Lama for a distance of five days' journey to a place where there is a miraculous self-formed image of Avalokitesvara.¹⁹ At that point Ngawang Gyaltsen told them to take leave, and with great sadness they bade him farewell. Then he and his followers set out on their journey to Bhutan via the upper Stod region.

At that time there was no treaty between Bhutan and Tibet. The Tibetan government came to know that the Ladakhi prince was being sent to Bhutan, so they stopped the Lama and detained him for some time. Since the water in that place was bad, the Lama became very ill. However, he never stopped his devotions, and the local people were fascinated by him. The Dhapon Samlingpa, a Tibetan government official, assisted the Lama by sending a doctor. Finally, he recovered fully and was allowed to proceed to Bhutan.

14. *Dgu.tshan dgu.gang*: silks, fruits, cloths etc.

15. *Chos.gzhis* refers to a settlement; *Dung.ring* is a place name.

16. The phrase is *sbyin.bdag kha.ru khral.pa nyi.shu.rtsa.gsum*: these were 23 estates who would henceforth pay their taxes to Bhutan.

17. A late sixteenth/early seventeenth century abbot of Stagna, thought to be the monastery's founder.

18. Miniature clay images, typically of bodhisattvas or the Buddha, cast in moulds.

19. This is probably an image in a rock: there are several such images in the region.

The party arrived via Paro, visited the Paro Taktsang temple,²⁰ and at last in the third month of the water male dragon year, Lama Jetsun Ngawang Gyaltsen arrived at Paro Rinchenpung, and was received by the head lama and the people.

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20. A famous cave temple where Padmasambhava is said to have meditated.