

The Traditional Institutions of Governance in Bhutan Before 1907 and their Modification with the Coming of the Monarchy

John Ardussi

History of Governing Institutions Before the Zhabdrung Rinpoche

The governing institutions of any country are rooted in the founding principles and social history of its people. Prior to the country's unification during the 17th century, Bhutan consisted of numerous independent communities of diverse origin. Governing institutions from that era reflected such diversity.

As a whole, however, Bhutanese society has always looked favourably upon Tibetan Buddhism and the tradition of monks. The influence of Buddhism on Bhutan was felt not only in religious terms, but also in its pre-unification political structure. Regardless of which Tibetan sectarian tradition they followed, relationships between Bhutanese patron families and religious masters of local monasteries formed an important nexus of local governance.

Zhabdrung Rinpoche Ngawang Namgyal and the Establishment of the Bhutanese State

Much has been written about the 17th century founding of Bhutan by the Tibetan monk Zhabdrung Rinpoche, Ngawang Namgyal. He was an extraordinary individual with a commanding personality who was forced into exile by political rivals. As a reincarnate monk and erstwhile head of the Drukpa sect in Tibet, he brought to Bhutan a vision for a state that closely reflected the governing institutions of his home monastery, Ralung.

In the Zhabdrung's new government established in 1625 there was no concept of a secular state in the modern sense. His was a Buddhist spiritual court, headed by himself as a reincarnation of the Buddha. Its constitutional basis derived from Buddhist canonical sources such as the following verse, which describes the ideal relationship between a ruler and his citizens in terms of mutual obligation:

The happiness of sentient beings is dependent on the teachings of the Buddha, whereas the teachings of the Buddha are dependent on the happiness of the world.

The Zhabdrung appointed a civil administrator or *Desi* to manage secular affairs. This position evolved over time into the office of *Druk Desi*, which continued in existence until 1907. The first civil administrator was Tenzin Drukgye (1591-1655), a Bhutanese student of the Zhabdrung from a prominent family in upper Punakha valley.

The primary duties of the *Desi*, as described in contemporary texts, were to safeguard the laws of the monastery and to administer the laws of state on behalf of the hierarchy, Zhabdrung Rinpoche. The Zhabdrung's civil law code was carved by the *Desi* on slate panels mounted on the wall of the *Dzong chung* at Punakha, in about 1652.

The Zhabdrung's court included personal assistants such as the man named Drung Damchoe, a *Zimpon* or chamberlain, and the *Zhung Dronyer* or government steward responsible for managing state and monastic properties. There were also other ministers, more or less informally consulted as the need arose. They included the heads of the various Dzong, the *Dzongpon* or *Dzongda*. Below these men were a host of orderlies, horsemen, soldiers, and attendants loyal to their individual masters.

All of the key state officials at that time were either relatives of the Zhabdrung or members of politically close families such as that of the *Desi* or the *Desi's* relatives. They were appointed officials, not elected. The exception to this rule was the position of *Je Khenpo* or head of the state monasteries. The *Je Khenpo* was selected from among the senior monks of eminent learning, generally, but not exclusively, from prominent Bhutanese families.

The Post-Zhabdrung Governing Structures of Bhutan

After the Zhabdrung went into meditation in 1651 (and presumably died), his death was kept secret due the ongoing troubles with Tibet and his failure to establish a viable order of succession. The first *Desi* dutifully administered the state in accord with its enlightened provisions of the Zhabdrung's law codes. Two more *Desi* came and went, expanding the state and its institutions while holding off Bhutan's Tibetan adversaries. The Zhabdrung's only living male relative, his distant nephew Tenzin Rabgye, was appointed to rule Bhutan as the fourth *Desi* from 1680 until 1694. In about 1695, a year before his death, Tenzin Rabgye proposed that in the absence of legitimate male heirs, the Bhutanese state should thereafter be ruled by reincarnate successors of the Zhabdrung Rinpoche.

From 1697 until 1907, Bhutan was in theory ruled by reincarnate successors of Ngawang Namgyal, a position called *Gyaltshab*, meaning 'Ruling Successor'. Inevitably, the change from lineal to reincarnate succession meant the introduction

of significantly different networks of power. The *Desi*, who had until 1697 functioned as civil administrators appointed on the authority of the Zhabdrung, thereafter became true regents, ruling with full powers of state during the minority of reincarnate hierarchs. In consequence, they gained access to state resources that previously had been closed to them.

Ideally, the successive *Desi* should have been appointed by the reincarnate hierarchs upon reaching their majority. Practically speaking, however, there were few periods during these 210 years of the country's history during which religious heads of state were in total and undisputed control of the government. In exceptional cases, although their stories are important to Bhutanese history, little change seems to have occurred in the basic governing institutions.

The Institutions of Governance During the Reign of Desi Sherab Wangchuk (r. 1744–1763)

The thirteenth *Desi*, Sherab Wangchuk, was a remarkably capable ruler. The influence of his regime reached beyond Bhutan and, I would argue, beyond his era, through its example for future ruling regimes in Bhutan. His biography is particularly important in being based on original state records, unlike any other surviving Bhutanese historical account from earlier centuries. From its description of the 1747 coronation ceremony for Gyaltsheb Jigme Dragpa (1725-1761) we obtain a detailed enumeration of the officials of state and their rank within the bureaucracy headquartered at the twin capitals of Wangdue Phodrang and Punakha.

At the top of the list of civil functionaries were nine men called *Kalyon*, or 'Counselors' whose actual role in the government is only faintly known from the literature. Below the *Kalyon* were several ranks of lesser officials and their attendants whose titles reflect the quantity of commissary perquisites to which they were entitled. There were twenty men with the title *Nyikem* or Holders of the Red Scarf, positions which still exist in the Bhutan government, followed by 160 officers at the rank of *Chibzbon* or 'Horseman'. Each of these mid-level officials had a retinue of attendants and servants, supported out of government tax revenues. When read alongside the accounts of 18th century British envoys to Bhutan, George Bogle and Samuel Turner, Sherab Wangchuk's account provides a fairly nuanced picture of the structure and operation of governance in Bhutan during that era.

Bhutan Approaches the 20th Century

A decade after the thirteenth *Desi*'s death, the British East India Company began to play an expanded role in Himalayan affairs. During the century prior to 1773, the Bhutanese had gradually extended their influence over minor kingdoms and

peasant farmers living along the southern frontier in Assam and North Bengal, and westward in the direction of Sikkim. Bhutanese leaders were unprepared for the East India Company's firm resistance in that year to Bhutanese encroachment in what had recently become their common border. The central government of Bhutan did not directly manage frontier matters, rather delegating them to various *Drungpa* or agents who resided in the area. The quality of this management varied with the abilities of the agents. After a brief skirmish, Bhutan and the East India Company signed a 'Treaty of Peace' in 1774, outlining conditions for the management of their mutual interests in the area.

An early outcome of these events was the dispatch by Gov. General Warren Hastings of a diplomatic mission to Tibet via Bhutan. The envoy was George Bogle, a Scotsman of shrewd observational skills. His report on his mission to Tibet and Bhutan provides an outstanding view into the political affairs, the personalities of the rulers, and the tense standoff between Bhutan and Tibet. A subsequent diplomatic mission in 1783 was undertaken by Samuel Turner. However, neither envoy was able to convince conservative Bhutan to agree to their primary goal, which was access by European traders to Tibet via Bhutan. What they learned instead was that virtually all trade between Bhutan, Tibet, and India was in the hands of the powerful ruling families, in particular whichever *Desi* or major *Dzongpon* were then in office. Bhutan's dependence on trade and her extraction of agricultural revenue from loosely managed estates in India would soon become a weakness exploited by British India.

The 1865-66 War with British India and Its Impact on Bhutan

In 1858, the British government assumed control of the East India Company's ruling powers. Through gradually encroaching power, by 1863 the borders of British India extended to the entire frontier of Bhutan. Given the Bhutan government's customarily loose administration of its southern border areas, it is not surprising that there were increasing occurrences of what British officials called 'depredations' and 'incursions' by Bhutanese on the British side of the border. Similar 'depredations' along the border with Sikkim had led the British to impose a treaty on Sikkim in 1861, the Treaty of Tumlong. The chief British negotiator of that treaty, Ashley Eden, was next dispatched in 1864 as special envoy to negotiate a similar treaty with Bhutan. Eden had studied the envoy reports from Bhutan by Bogle and Turner, and apparently imagined that he could achieve a better outcome than they had.

But Bhutan was not Sikkim. Eden was unprepared to deal with a country in the midst of a civil war with no established leadership. His meetings in Punakha went badly. By his own report he was mistreated and returned in disgrace to India. In

late 1864 the British launched a punitive invasion against Bhutan, the so-called Duar War. After suffering initial losses, the British imposed a treaty between the two countries in 1865 and confiscated all of Bhutan's lands below the Duar valleys in the south, all of her properties east of the Teesta River on the Sikkim side, which were thereafter called British Bhutan, plus the hill forts of Damsang, Dalimkot, and Dewangiri.

Establishment of the Monarchy in Bhutan (1907)

For all of its immediate ill effects, the Duar War ultimately served several useful purposes. It taught the British in India to be very cautious in their dealings with Bhutan. Although they had 'won' the war, there were many casualties.

In Bhutan, the outcome of the war can be best viewed in hindsight from events of the early 20th century. More capable leaders came into power, men who understood the political transformations that had taken place in British India and Tibet. Bhutanese rulers could no longer view their situation through the lens of 17th century policies. The Zhabdrung Rinpoche, for all his talent and vision, could not have envisioned the challenges now facing the country. It would not be unreasonable, these new leaders must have speculated, to change the governing institutions of Bhutan to better conform to modern conditions.

Factors Underlying the Transition to Monarchy

In historical hindsight, we can identify several factors that contributed to the ultimate success of the Bhutanese transformation to monarchy.

The decade 1895–1905 was pivotal in the Himalayas. It witnessed the 1903–04 British Younghusband expedition to Lhasa, attempting to impose commercial treaty terms favouring Britain against an imagined counterforce from Russia. This extravagant military venture was the culmination of many decades of unsuccessful British attempts to gain trade access to Tibet. Although the expedition's commercial success was ultimately rather minimal, its grandiose scale amply demonstrated Britain's formidable military power to the authorities in Tibet and the neighbouring Himalayan states. It also gave the British an opportunity to become personally familiar with two rising leaders in Bhutan who helped mediate their negotiations with the Tibetans.

These new leaders were Gongsu Ugyen Wangchuck (1862–1926), who was the Trongsa *Penlop* from central Bhutan and his cousin Ugyen Dorji from Paro and Ha valleys of western Bhutan. Trongsa *Dzong* had been built during the Zhabdrung's days to control eastern Bhutan. It was impossible to travel between the east and

west without passing through Trongsa. Whoever controlled Trongsa controlled the eastern half of the country.

The *Penlop*'s cousin, Ugyen Dorji, on the other hand, did not at that time hold any political position. He had succeeded his own father in running a successful trading business between India and Tibet from their headquarters in Kalimpong. The British frontier officials established in Sikkim and Darjeeling after 1865 came to know and appreciate Ugyen Dorji and his father as honest men who understood the languages, politics, and cultural norms of the region. In the late 19th century, they appointed him as British agent to Bhutan, granting him political standing in his attempt to negotiate with Tibet on their behalf.

Gongsa Ugyen Wangchuck's Rise to the Throne

By 1900, *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck had successfully wrested the key centres of power in Bhutan into his own hands or those of his trusted relatives and supporters. But he was not another *Desi* like those of the past, with high ambition and limited vision. He was committed to significant change that would establish governance in Bhutan on a more solid basis. It seems clear that many of his ideas for institutional change arose after discussions with British frontier officials whom he met during the Younghusband expedition and years thereafter. These were men such as White and his successor Sir Charles Bell who became Political Officer in 1908.

Recognising how episodes of lax border management had damaged Bhutan in the past, Ugyen Wangchuck appointed Ugyen Dorji to serve as Bhutan's *Kutshab* or Representative to oversee the country's commercial matters and prevent lawlessness along the southern frontier. In 1905, J.C. White was appointed by the British government to travel to Bhutan to award Ugyen Wangchuck the insignia Knight Commander of the Indian Empire, for his services during the Younghusband expedition. It was a generous measure, which as time would show, helped his standing among other Bhutanese officials.

During the weeks that White spent in Bhutan, he came to know Sir Ugyen and his family very well. He accompanied the *Penlop* to Trongsa where White recounted their discussions about what would today be called infrastructure improvements in Bhutan, for the betterment of the country and its people. They discussed the construction of roads, and the need for introducing education and medical facilities that could supplement Bhutan's own traditional methods.

In 1906, Sir Ugyen Wangchuck and Ugyen Dorji accepted an invitation arranged



Trongsa Penlop Sir Ugyen Wangchuck. (Photographer J.C. White, 1905, from the collection of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok).

by White to attend the Calcutta Durbar of the Prince of Wales, who was soon to become King George V. For the first time, a Bhutanese ruler visited India and was able to be introduced to the upper echelons of British Indian society, including the future monarch and his spouse, and to gain a personal appreciation of what could be accomplished in a well-run modern state.

Meanwhile, in 1905 the *Druk Desi*, who was also the fifth Speech reincarnation of the Zhabdrung, had retired from office. The sixth Mind reincarnation of the Zhabdrung died in 1904. Decisions had to be taken for the future leadership of Bhutan. Would yet another *Desi* be appointed, continuing a system of the past with all its known problems, or might a new way be forged? Returning from Calcutta towards the end of 1906, *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck and Ugyen Dorji must have discussed the alternatives. Could the system of monarchy, so obviously successful for the British, also be adopted for Bhutan?

It cannot have been coincidental that Ugyen Dorji, now the personal attendant on Sir Ugyen, submitted at this time a thoughtful proposal to the collected religious and secular officials of Bhutan, urging their unanimous support for the appointment of Ugyen Wangchuck as the first hereditary king of Bhutan. The matter was deliberated and the critical decision was taken. As described in J.C. White's book, *Sikkim and Bhutan* (1909), the coronation ceremony took place on 17th December, 1907, with White and other British officials in attendance.

Changes in the Institutions of Governance After 1907

Some might argue that the governing transformation of 1907, from the embers of the old Zhabdrung system to a monarchy, represented a very abrupt change. But in reality, practical changes seem to have been introduced more gradually. It was important to maintain continuity with the past. The civil ruler's title changed from *Druk Desi* to *Druk Gyalpo* i.e. from Regent of Bhutan to King of Bhutan. But what did this mean in practice?

Under the monarchy, the legacy of the Zhabdrung Rinpoche would continue to be honoured. An important part of the royal investiture ceremony was an audience of the monarch before the Zhabdrung's cremains in a special Chorten at Punakha Dzong. In effect, this rite would represent the Zhabdrung Rinpoche's symbolic blessing upon the incoming ruler. Also, the office of *Je Khenpo* and the state monastic system would become more vigorously supported. Ugyen Wangchuck, now with the title *Gongsa*, was a devout Buddhist who made major contributions to the monastic system of Bhutan. He supported and took religious teachings from several important Buddhist teachers of the era, including not only Bhutanese *Drukpa* scholars but also masters of the Nyingma establishment of eastern Bhutan (to some of whom he was related), and the Tibetan mystic Shakya Shri (1853 – 1919).

The system of *Dzong* administration and of *Dzongpons* was left basically as it had been. Virtually every key position of government was made by appointment of *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck, however, often from among his own relatives and the family of his chief advisor *Gongzim* Ugyen Dorji. The process of state decision-making still involved working through personal and trusted relationships. It would be many decades before a trained civil service would be established with appointments based on technical education and competitive examination.

Other improvements begun during his first years in office as *Druk Gyalpo* included land and taxation reforms which would, over several decades, reduce the high burden of taxation on the people. A system of land surveys was undertaken, original records of which are now kept in the National Library and Archives of Bhutan.

The Education Programme

As Gongsa Ugyen Wangchuck began work on his improvement programme for Bhutan, he recognised the need for an educated citizenry. It would be the basis for beneficial change in all other areas and represented an expansion of government into the area of social welfare. After consulting with the monastic authorities, schools were set up in selected monasteries, an expansion of the *Shedra* system to include

both a Buddhist and a secular curriculum. Groups of monks were sent to study in Tibetan monasteries to later return as teachers.

Even more innovative was *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck's gradual introduction of western-style schools into Bhutan. He benefited from an educational initiative then taking place just outside Bhutan. Shortly after the British set themselves up in Darjeeling and Kalimpong in the mid-19th century, a substantial missionary effort began in those hill towns led initially by the Church of Scotland. Although their principal goal was the spread of Christianity, they saw the means to that end lay in establishing a school system for the practical and moral training of young people from the surrounding districts. Within a few decades, boarding schools for both boys and girls were built with funds donated by the Christian faithful back in Scotland and with support from the Government of Bengal. Over time, this enterprise would also receive substantial private support from important British officials in India, many of them Scotsmen.

The most successful Scottish mission school was founded by Dr. John Graham (1861-1942), who with his wife Katherine began work at Kalimpong in 1900. The curriculum focused on basic skills in literacy and mathematics. Soon, nursing skills were also taught in the girls' schools. Bhutan's involvement with Dr. Graham's Homes began with His Majesty's advisor, *Gongzim* Ugyen Dorji, the innovator here as in so many other areas. *Gongzim* Ugyen Dorji met Dr. Graham in Kalimpong and they remained friends for 27 years. Ugyen Dorji wished to have his own son educated in the school and recommended that *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck launch a regular programme for Bhutanese boys to enter Dr. Graham's Homes.¹ The tradition of Bhutanese youth studying in the Scottish mission schools in Kalimpong and Darjeeling began at that time and continues to the present day.

In 1921–22 Dr. Graham traveled to Bhutan at the invitation of the king, with whom he had developed a correspondence. Like White, Graham also recorded in his diaries his conversations with His Majesty about schemes for modernisation. A key difficulty throughout his reign was the lack of financial resources to implement them. Graham notes his personal involvement in helping *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck compose a letter in 1921 to the Viceroy of India, elaborating on his commitment to a plan for national improvement, including an appeal for increased financial assistance.²

¹Chief Justice Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye (ret.) has written an interesting article on the founding of education in Bhutan called "The Heroes Buried by Time" (*Kuensel*, Nov. 2011) in which he accomplished through interviews to document the names and families of the first students who entered Dr. Graham's School in 1914/15.

²James Minto (1974). *Graham of Kalimpong*. Edinburgh. p. 172; see also Tshering Tashi. "Druk Gyalpo Ugyen Wangchuck's Twenty Points Proposal to the British India to Modernise Bhutan" (*Journal of Bhutan Studies*, vol. 19 pt.1).

Western medicine was also introduced to Bhutan at roughly the same time as the schools. Other missionary schools in Darjeeling, such as St. Helen's of Kurseong, and the Jesuit St. Joseph's College founded during the late 19th century as boarding schools, have continued to provide quality education to elite students from Bhutan and throughout Asia.

The Councils of State

An important state institution in Bhutan was the ministerial council. How such a body began during the 17th century and eventually evolved into more democratic forms is a topic of great interest. Although the Zhabdrung Rinpoche and his *Desi* appointed various ministers and officials and consulted with them on various matters, there is scant evidence from pre-modern literature describing how ministerial councils were formed or functioned. The lack of transportation and a highly decentralised governing structure would have made such practices very difficult, except within the core Paro–Thimphu–Punakha region. The various *Desi* generally appointed close relatives or supporters to positions such as *Dzongpon*, *Zimpon*, and *Dronyer*, but there was no concept that these positions were democratically representative of the people.

In this as in other areas of governing improvement, *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck was keen to discuss ideas with trusted foreigners such as members of the British frontier corps stationed in Sikkim and the Chumbi Valley. One interesting conversation is recorded in the papers of Dr. Graham dating from his visit to Bhutan in 1922. His biographer, James Minto, cites a passage from a letter that Graham wrote to His Majesty which, under the heading 'Government', states:

I would only respectfully suggest to Your Highness that in Your Highness' life time you should secure the formation of an effective Council of State which should hold regular meetings to discuss matters affecting the country, and that this Council should not only include the chief Provincial Rulers and the chief Lamas, but also representatives of the humbler classes.³

Conclusions

Bhutan's traditional institutions of governance went through numerous transformations over the centuries. Through it all, Bhutan managed to remain as aloof as possible from outside political forces. It could be argued that this was critical to maintaining her independence and unique religious traditions.

³Minto. *Graham of Kalimpong* (p. 176).

When changes occurred, they were in response to circumstances of necessity. The advent of the Zhabdrung Rinpoche in 1616 ultimately unified the country under very different governing structures than ancient Bhutan. However, it also placed Bhutan directly within the centre of Tibetan political affairs. The unexpected termination of the Zhabdrung Rinpoche's family line forced Bhutan to make alternate governing arrangements, which took decades to finally materialise. The transformation from a diarchic system based on a secular *Desi* linked with a spiritual hierarch to a monarchy, took another 200 years.

The institution of monarchy began to break the model of aloofness and to open the window of opportunity for the Bhutanese people. *Gongsa* Ugyen Wangchuck with the assistance of *Gongzim* Ugyen Dorji looked proactively though cautiously to outside models. The evolution of traditional Bhutanese institutions of government, increasingly focused on service to its people, continued to evolve into the 21st century.