



Royal Thimphu  
College PO Box 1122  
Ngabiphu, Thimphu  
Bhutan  
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*Rig Tshoel* - Research Journal of the Royal Thimphu College

Volume 7 Number 1 Autumn 2024

# རིག་འཛོལ། *Rig Tshoel*



**Research Journal of the Royal Thimphu College**

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A Royal Thimphu College Publication.

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Editor-in-Chief: Jelle J.P. Wouters (PhD)  
Editorial Board:  
Leishipem Khamrang (PhD)  
Tshering Lhamo Dukpa  
Stephen Victor (PhD)  
Sunil Kumar (PhD)

Editorial correspondence may be addressed to: [jjpwouters@rtc.bt](mailto:jjpwouters@rtc.bt)

Rig Tshoel – Research Journal of the Royal Thimphu College is an open-access peer-reviewed journal intended to align with a key mission of Royal Thimphu College “stimulate new ideas, knowledge, and practices that serve to enrich people’s lives and enhance the welfare of society.” The journal aims to issue at least once a year and invites contributions on a wide range of subjects. Authors are encouraged to develop their own scholarship in areas of general relevance to Bhutan, submit work that advances knowledge in their fields, and is written in a broadly accessible manner. High-quality original articles in English and Dzongkha including theoretical and empirical research, commentaries, editorials, and reviews are welcome.

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# Editorial

This marks the seventh volume of Rig Tshoel: Research Journal of the Royal Thimphu College. The title Rig Tshoel can be translated to English as the "pursuit of knowledge," reflecting the journal's foundation and aims, which align with RTC's mission to "stimulate new ideas, knowledge, and practices that serve to enrich people's lives and enhance the welfare of society.' The journal adopts a multi-disciplinary approach, encompassing fields such as the humanities, business studies, and the social sciences. Additionally, Rig Tshoel is committed to inclusivity, striving to offer a platform for emerging and early-career researchers to cultivate and disseminate their scholarly work. I extend my sincere appreciation to the editorial board and reviewers for their invaluable time and expertise in facilitating this endeavor.

This volume carries six articles. We open with an article by the outgoing RTC President Dasho Tshewang Tandin. His article is titled: 'The Forgotten Battle: Unearthing Bhutan's Triumph at Paro', and complements textual accounts on the first Bhutan-Tibet war in 1617 with oral narratives that continue to be told in the Paro Valley. The second is by Chencho Dorji and Sonam Tobgay, both RTC faculty, and historically traces and places Ngabiphu, the site which houses Royal Thimphu College. They argue that while the Ngabiphu monastery has been instrumental in shaping Bhutan's socio-political landscape since at least the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, its importance has been variously overlooked and misrepresented; a deficit they seek to overcome through this article.

The third article is Tshering Yangki and Jigme Dorji of the College of Language and Culture Studies in Taktse and offers a critical study of gender hierarchies embedded in the Dzongkha language. They do so through a compilation and analysis of selected phrases, proverbs, and excerpts of literature. They argue that gender hierarchies within the language are reflecting, and reflective of, existing sociocultural norms and expected roles of women in Bhutanese society. Their article is titled: 'Inherent Linguistic Bias against Women in the Dzongkha Language: An Explorative study on Female Stereotyping and Gender Discrimination.'

The fourth article is by a staff, student, and faculty of RTC, namely Jigme Wangchuk,

Karma Dechen, and Richard Kamei, and carries the title: 'Flow of Liquor Across Time in Bhutan: Culture and Consumption of Liquor.' Through ethnography, including embodied ethnography, the article situates the production, distribution, and consumption of alcohol within the history and culture of Bhutan, also identifying its changes, continuities, and changing continuities over time. The penultimate article is by Kuenzang Dorji, a faculty at Norbuling Rigter College and assesses the faculty mentoring programme at that College. The article is titled: 'Faculty mentoring programme at Norbuling Rigter College – Analysis through the lens of self-determination theory', and applies the theory of self-determination to assess the opportunities, outcomes, and challenges of faculty mentor-mentee programmes to enhance career development and teaching-learning. The final article is by Dawa Tshering, who is the Principal of Lungtenzampa Middle Secondary School in Thimphu and offers an expansive and critical analysis of Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM) strategies to improve students' academic success. Dawa Tshering combines quantitative and qualitative data and insights to trace both the positive impacts and enduring challenges of implementing, and working with, DDDM in the context of Bhutan's educational system and strategies.

Jelle J.P. Wouters  
Editor-in-Chief

# The Forgotten Battle: Unearthing Bhutan's Triumph at Paro

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*Tshewang Tandin*

The Paro Valley witnessed one of the greatest battles fought in the history of Bhutan. The battle took place in 1617 and was fought between Tibetan invaders and Paro farmers-turned-warriors. It was Zhabdrung who the Tibetans were after, but who the Bhutanese defended. Not many details exist of what came to be known as the First Tibet-Bhutan war at Paro. In his comprehensive *The History of Bhutan*, Karma Phuntsho (2013) devotes a couple of paragraphs to this battle under the heading 'Zhabdrung arrives in Bhutan.' He narrates that the invasion ensued as the result of Zhabdrung's rejoinder to the Tsangpa ruler's letter that ordered the confiscation of Zhabdrung's estates in Tibet, while also summoning him to return with the Rangjung Kharsa Pani (the vertebra relic of Tshangpa Jarey) he had taken with him to Bhutan. Karma Phuntsho further mentions the residence of Zhabdrung (Drukchöding) at the time of the attack by Tibetan forces in collaboration with the Lhapa forces, from within. He wrote:

'... While he was in Drukchöding... in Paro town, he received a letter from the Tsangpa ruler informing that all of Zhabdrung's estates in Tibet had been seized and that he should return to Tibet with the vertebrae relic and surrender... Zhabdrung wrote a long rejoinder with a stern warning: "You have inflicted in me all the damages you possibly could. On my part, if I fail to eliminate you and your family line, you may decide that the Drukpa school does not have protecting deities and I am not the true incarnation of the omniscient Pema Karpo.'" (Phuntsho 2013: 218)

The name of the Tibetan General, in charge of the Tibetan forces, was identified as Laguney. The narrative is that, because of the sudden invasion, Zhabdrung had to flee from Paro to Thimphu, and that the Bhutanese chieftains led by Zarchen Chöje

and the scions of Phajo Drugom assembled a local militia to counter the Tibetan invasion. The ultimate outcome was the victory of the Bhutanese force and the killing of the Tibetan General.

In the biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651) written by Dasho Sangye Dorji, as translated by Sonam Kinga (2008), a single page is dedicated to the battle. Complementing Karma Phuntsho's account, Sangye Dorji provides a number of details, such as the name of the Zarchen Chöje as Dorje Gyalpo and his brother Nyenpa. Further, he notes Lungmi Serp as the leader of Wang and Chang, and who with the combined forces of Gon Khapa, Jelela Samten Tsemo, Do Choten, Damchenang, Lateng Gonpa and Chewekha engaged the invaders. He narrates that while Zhabdrung was preparing to perform a religious event (drupchen) at Druk Choeding the attack came. Zhabdrung had to flee to higher grounds of Hungrel Dzong, but which was soon surrounded by the invaders, thus forcing him to flee towards Damchena first and then onward to Thimphu over Jela. Dasho Sangye (2008: 76) invokes some kind of divine intervention:

‘... the moment Zhabdrung Rimpoche made offerings to Yeshe Gonpo at Jela, the Tibetan force saw him dressed like yogi, holding a thigh-bone trumpet wrapped with a blue ribbon and leading an army which consisted of accomplished beings who filled the earth and sky ... they found in front and behind them, an army of ravens cawing aggressively... Besides, Zhabdrung Rimpoche had unleashed a non-human army of eight classes of spirits and deities against them.’

While this account indeed offers further details, all in all only scant information is available on the battle. While, for instance, the year of the battle, namely 1617, is widely agreed upon by scholars, many other details are missing. These include the number of invaders, the kind of weapons they used, the duration of the battle, the number of casualties, the number of militias that engaged the invaders, the circumstances of the battle, and the nature of divine intervention. As textual sources are lacking on this, oral histories and narratives, as they continue to be told in Paro, may be engaged as a complementary source to fill these gaps. The remainder of this article attempts such an exercise.

## Oral Narrations of the Battle

Gathering a group of Paro elders of Horey and Wangchang gewog together, I posed to them the following questions:

“As you were growing up, what kind of stories did you hear?”,  
“Who were the narrators of these stories?”, and “What was the situation like?”

The elders mentioned stories about business trips to Tibet and inter-gewog/chiwog archery matches as the ones most heard about. In addition to these, they had also heard stories about the Bhutanese-Tibetan battle. In fact, all of them had heard about this story when they were young, though details differed in their various narrations. Ap Sangye Dorji, aged eighty at the time I interviewed him, offered the most detailed account. He mentions of a place called Taju (*ta* meaning horse, and *ju* meaning gallop) as a place where the Tibetans galloped on their horses, and about the interference from bees (to the aid of the Bhutanese), and finally the battle ground of *Nangka Tarey Tshey* (Nangka forest). Ap Sangy Dorji also included the part played by Zarchen Chöje in engaging the invading Tibetan forces.



Fig 1: The house of Zarchen Choje, over-looking the valley (Photo by author)



A central place in the battle, as it unfolded, was the Nangkha forest. The Nangkha forest, as explained by Dago Penjor, another elder from Paro and a resident of Nangkha, has been preserved for many centuries. It was considered the garden of Phajo Drugom (1184–1251). Phajo, who established Drukpa Kagyud in Western Bhutan, set up his seat at Nangkha Lhakhang, overlooking the Nangkha forest. Phajo first arrived in Bhutan in 1224. Considering that the battle occurred in 1617, it implies that the forest had been preserved for nearly four centuries. Dago Penjor recounted that the forest had, in fact, remained untouched for over seven hundred years but was cleared in the early 1960s. He mentioned a large fallen tree about fifty years ago, from which his family crafted a bathtub. All the elders I spoke to recalled a dense forest, home to a variety of wildlife, giant pine trees, and thick undergrowth.

## **A Plausible Theory of the Battle**

Oral histories, supported by literature, allow us to assert that there had been a Tibetan invasion of the Paro valley in 1617, and that the Bhutanese successfully thwarted this invasion. Zhabdrung escaped unscathed to build the Bhutan State over the next three decades. This battle was highly significant: Zhabdrung had just arrived in Bhutan and was not yet established as its undisputed ruler. Followers of Lhapa, for instance, opposed the Zhabdrung at that time. This was the only time that the Bhutanese were divided in their allegiance to Zhabdrung. At Tsaluna he had been shot at with the arrow piercing into his saddle. One can sense the frustration and desperation of Zhabdrung, who had to flee from his Ralung seat and thereafter also had to flee in Bhutan. The Tsang ruler did not leave him in peace. Karma Phuntsho (2018: 219) writes:

‘...at Tsaluna, he had a sudden urge to renounce everything... He blew his ritual trumpet three times in the direction of Ralung calling out the names of his father and predecessors out of exasperation and lamented about the difficulty to maintain the Drukpa order.’

Even when the news of the Bhutanese victory reached him at Wachen in Shar, he had nothing to offer to the Chiefs who had come to his rescue. It was only in 1644 (27 years later) that Zhabdrung could reward Zarchen Chöje with an edict freeing his family and heirs from any kind of tax.

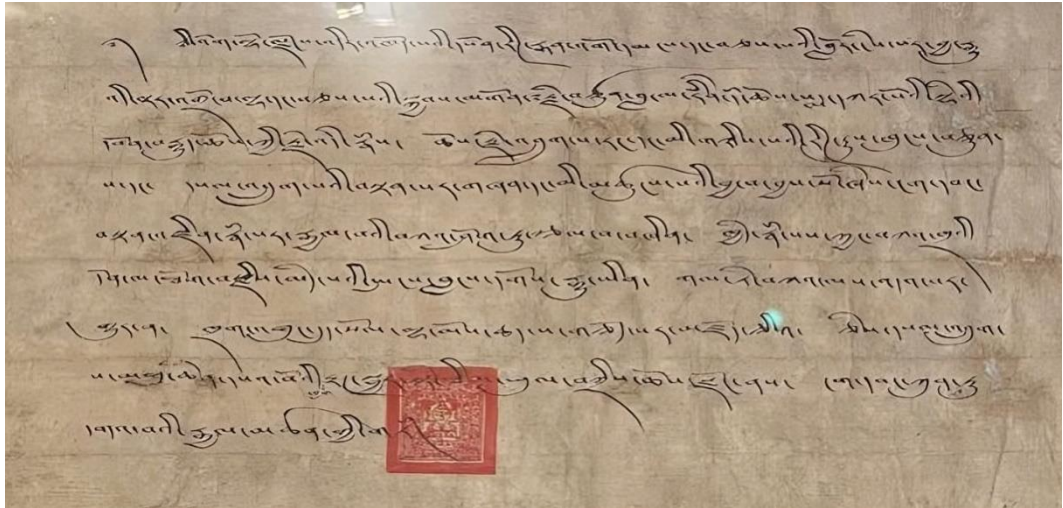


Figure 2: Photo of the Edict (source: Tshering Tashi)

In the context of this battle, a major question arises, namely:

‘How did a small group of unprepared farmers from Paro manage to defeat the larger, better-armed Tibetan invaders?’

By comparing textual and oral sources, a plausible explanation emerges. According to Ap Sangye Dorji, there could well have been over one hundred Tibetan invaders, while the Bhutanese farmer force likely numbered fewer than fifty. He explains that the villages in Paro were scattered along the mountain slopes, and much of the valley would have been forested at the time. This is supported by a reference to a wooden pillar at Duntse Lhakhang, contributed by Damno from Khanku (as inscribed on the pillar) which is now a prime paddy field. He also pointed to the remains of mud walls on the mountain slopes surrounding the Paro Valley as evidence of earlier dispersed settlements. The Tibetan invaders, unfamiliar with the Bhutanese terrain, rode horses and carried long knives, while the Bhutanese farmers, on foot and equipped with shorter knives, had the advantage of knowing the landscape intimately.



*Fig 3: An Imaginary Sketch of the Paro Valley at the time of the battle (painting by Chimi R Namgyal)*

The Tibetan invaders had camped at Druk Chhoeding, which is now Paro Town. The Lhapa base was located at Chang Pelri, on the hill above what is now Bondey Town. The seat of Zarchen Chöje was at Zarcheka, overlooking the area that is the present-day airport. Nangkha Tarey Tse covered about fifty acres, spreading from the north of the airstrip to the end of the Paro College of Education, along the Pachu (Paro River).

Two main paths led to Rinpung Dzong: one passing through Nangkha Tarey Tse and another skirting the base of the cliff extending from Zarchen Temple. The Pachu River divided the two villages, Tarey Tse at Chang and Wang on the opposite side of the river. To the north, Wang connected to Druk Chhoeding, where the first village was Tajü. From Tajü, the footpath ran along a cliff with bee hives hanging deep inside limestone caverns, known as Jong Tsho Bjewa, or the bee hive corner.

The first Tibetan assault on Druk Chhoeding went without any resistance. After all, this was a surprise attack. Zhabdrung barely had enough time to escape to Hungrel Dzong, wearing only his undergarments. No sooner the Tibetan forces had surrounded Hungrel Zong, forcing Zhabdrung to flee further up to Damcheno and

Jela. The military objective of the invaders was never to occupy Paro, but to capture or kill Zhabdrung. While Zhabdrung had some patrons in Paro, there were also people in the valley aligned to Lam Lhapa and who were opposed to Zhabdrung. Zhabdrung's loyal patrons were Zachen Chöje, Dorji Gyalpo, and Nyenpa. They rapidly raised a small force among the farmers of Chang and Wang, probably approximating around fifty men. Few Bhutanese back then had long swords. Most would have been armed with shorter knives and arrows. The freshly assembled Bhutanese forces launched a surprise attack on the invaders at Druk Chhoeding, and they must have shot their arrows while doing so. The invaders then came charging, riding their horses, at the Bhutanese forces, which then withdrew towards Nangkha forest by the river.

The path from Druk Chhoeding towards the south passed the Jong Tsho Bjewa (bee hive corner). Even today, the marble caverns inside the cliff houses bees. There would have been many bee hives there around the time. Powerful swarms of these bees attacked the moving Tibetans and entangled themselves in their long hair. As the bees were stalling the Tibetans, the Bhutanese withdrew further towards Nangkha Tarey Tse, crossing Pachu. The Tibetans chased the Bhutanese in to the Nangka Tarey Tsey, which turned out to be a terrible mistake for them as the thick forest soon entrapped them. The Tibetan soldiers and their horses, accustomed to the barren plateaus of Tibet, were disoriented by their sudden entry into dense forests. The unfamiliar terrain added to their difficulties, and they began to experience what they perceived as apparitions. Their loose garments and long hair became entangled in the thorns and bushes, which also ensnared their long swords.

In contrast, the Bhutanese forces, well-adapted to such vegetation, moved with ease and launched swift attacks on the disoriented Tibetans. The shorter knives carried by the Bhutanese proved more effective in the dense undergrowth than the long swords of the Tibetans. The battle raged throughout the day, culminating in the defeat of the Tibetan forces and the death of their general, Laguney. A few fortunate invaders managed to escape and return to Tibet, recounting their sorrowful tale. They described the Bhutanese defenses with vivid imagery:

‘In Nangka Tara Tsey, the thorns are stronger than iron hooks,’  
and “At Druk Jongtso Jhewa, the bee stings are deadlier than

arrows.'

The battle narrated in this article was hugely significant for Bhutan. Especially also considering that at the time of this battle the Zhabdrung was merely starting his process of uniting Bhutan. The Tibetans saw him as a young, fugitive who needed to be brought to their justice. As such, this was a story of Tibetans on the hunt for another Tibetan. Had they succeeded, the course of history for Bhutan would likely have been entirely different. At the time of the next Tibetan invasion, the Zhabdrung had well established himself as the ruler of Western Bhutan. He had also completed a three year retreat and designed the Nga Chudrungma seal, signifying his maturity and confidence. Moreover, he had raised a sizeable number of *pazabs* (lay soldiers) and had built several Dzongs. At this time, he was much better prepared to ward off any Tibetan invasion.

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- Sonam Kinga, 2008. *Translation of the Biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal by Dasho Sangye Dorji*. Thimphu: KMT Publishing House, Thimphu.
- Karma Phuntsho (2013). *The History of Bhutan*. Delhi: Penguin Random House.

## Interviewees:

- Chimi Dorji, 71, Care taker, Zachen Lhagang
- Drego, 68, Sekona, Wangchang
- Dago Penjor, 74, Chang Nangkar, Wangchang
- Lam Chenchu Nidu, 40, Head monk, Tenchey Goenpa, Gepti
- Namgay, former monk, 71, Jangsa, Dop Shari
- Pem Gyatsho, 71, resident at Jongtso Jhewa
- Sangay Dorji, 81, Horekha
- Sangye Dorji, Dasho, 70, author, Thimphu
- Sangna Zam, 70, Khanku, Wang Chang

# Ngabiphu Monastery Ruins: The Socio-political Significance in Medieval Bhutan

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*Chencho Dorji & Sonam Tobgay<sup>1</sup>*

## Abstract

The Ngabiphu monastery has been instrumental in shaping Bhutan's socio-political landscape since the early 13th century. However, its significance has often been overlooked in historical narratives. Despite this neglect, understanding Ngabiphu is crucial for comprehending the complex socio-political framework of medieval Bhutan and its subsequent role in nation-building. This study seeks to examine Ngabiphu's contribution to Bhutan's consolidation as a nation. It evaluates the relevance of the Ngabiphu monastery in relation to the spread of the Drukpa Kagyud tradition during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which significantly influenced unification efforts. Furthermore, the limited references to 'Ngabiphu' in literary sources have prompted discussions that underscore the need for in-depth analysis. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, this study aims to elucidate the intricate connections among socio-politics, culture and spirituality in the region. By analyzing historical records, conducting site assessments, and gathering oral testimonies, the research intends to clarify how the Ngabiphu monastery impacted local governance structures, customary practices, and spiritual landscapes in the region during medieval times.

**Key Words:** Ngabiphu, Nation building, Drukpa Kagyud, Socio-politics, Medieval Bhutan, Monastery

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<sup>1</sup> Chencho Dorji is a faculty at Royal Thimphu College and can be reached at [chenchodorji@rtc.bt](mailto:chenchodorji@rtc.bt). Sonam Tobgay is also a faculty at Royal Thimphu College and can be reached at: [stob@rtc.bt](mailto:stob@rtc.bt)

# INTRODUCTION

Ngabiphu is a small village located 11 km north of Thimphu, adjacent to the Babesa area. It is distinguished by its rich diversity of flora and fauna, particularly dense population of pine trees. The village is also notable for housing the Royal Thimphu College (RTC), an international educational institution established in 2009 under the patronage of Her Majesty, Azhi



Kezang Wangmo. While RTC refers to both the college and its surrounding area, local residents commonly refer to their village as ‘Ngagpaiphug’ (Wylie: *snags pa’ phug*). Oral accounts typically attribute a pejorative meaning to the term “Ngabiphu,” implying associations with sorcery the adversaries of Zhabdrung during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, prevailing literature suggests that the term “Ngabiphu” has been subject to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Such misconceptions have not only distorted the original significance of the name but have also obscured the historical importance of the site. As a result, local interpretations of “Ngabiphu” remain a subject of considerable debate. From this standpoint, the study will examine four thematic areas: a historical analysis of the term ‘Ngabiphu’; socio-cultural role of deity propitiation text-*Thangkar Jinyingpai Selkha*; and the role of Ngabiphu monastery in shaping religious and socio-political landscape in the region, and the role of Ngabiphu monastery in Bhutan’s nation-building process.

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE VILLAGE NAME ‘NGABIPHU’

མིང་དུ་གདགས་པར་མ་མཛད་ན། འཛིག་རྟེན་ཐམས་ཅད་ཚོངས་པར་འགྱུར།

དེ་བས་མགོན་པོ་ཐམས་ཅད་ལས་པས། ཆོས་རྒྱལ་མིང་དུ་གྲགས་པར་མཛད།

*If things were not given names,  
The world would be bewildered.  
So Lord Buddha, skilled in means,  
Gives names to various phenomena. - Lankavatara Sutra*

The verse highlights how naming helps us understand the world. Without words, reality would seem confusing and unclear. Buddha uses language as a tool to help people make sense of their experiences. It suggests the importance of ‘name’ in understanding and interpreting the world. Even more intriguing is the meaning of a name, which is understood in relation to the individual or groups that chooses to use it.

The Buddhist philosopher Dharmakirti remarked:

‘Name[s] are like sticks. A stick does not hit an object on its own. It follows the person who wields it. Names do not apply themselves to their referents. They only follow the wishes of the users.’<sup>2</sup>

Dharmakirti also observed a lack of inherent connection between a name and its referents. The nomenclature is assigned through two methods: *dengyel* (Wylie. *don ‘gal*), where the name has no intrinsic connection to the object it represents, and *jerup* (Wylie. *rjes sgrub*), where the meaning of a name is based on the object it represents. Both Buddha and Dharmakirti have acknowledged the importance of names in understanding the world, recognizing that the interpretation of a name is influenced by individual perspectives. However, it is not tenable to argue that naming does not result in ambiguity. A single name can have multiple meanings, making it difficult to connect objects solely on the basis of their names. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the historical context of names.

Ngabiphu is the name used by local people and in official documents (*lag thram*/land ownership record & tax receipts) to identify the current RTC (Royal Thimphu

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<sup>2</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013). *The History of Bhutan*. P. 1



College) area. However, the historical connotation of 'Ngabiphu' is used in derogatory sense. Thus, this section will provide a brief analysis of the origin and usage of the nomenclature-Ngabiphu, drawing on biographies, written and oral sources.

Over the centuries, 'Ngabiphu' has been a name of the village with derogatory connotations attached to it and sources suggest a long perceived misconception about the site. It is generally claimed that Ngabiphu was a place (currently there are ruins located at the west of RTC campus) resided in by Lam Khag Nga, a rival of Zhabdrung in 17<sup>th</sup> century, who performed magical spells to obstruct the political influence of Zhabdrung in the western valleys.<sup>3</sup> However, the biography of Zhabdrung suggests that during the construction of Semtokha dzong/Sangnag Zabdhen Phodrang<sup>4</sup> (first dzong constructed by Zhabdrung in Bhutan) in 1629 AD, descendants of Lam Khag Nga were Zhangdrung's rival.<sup>5</sup> While literatures strongly substantiate the claim that descendants of Lam Khag Nga were the contenders of Zhabdrung, the biography contests the current narrative of Ngabiphu (current RTC area) as a place inhabited by Lam Khag Nga. The Zhabdrung's biography by Sangay Dorji vividly mentions that the Lamaist factions built Jemai dzong above Simtokha dzong, and the place came to be known as Ngabiphu.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, 'Zhabdrung's Biography' by Je Geden Rinchen highlights Jemai Dzong as the seat of Lama Neynyingpa (one of the Lam Khag Ngas),<sup>7</sup> which clearly asserts that the successors of Lam Neynyingpa must have resided the place.

Other sources also corroborate the rise of conflict between Zhabdrung and Lamaist factions led by Lama Palden.<sup>8</sup> Severe conflict arose when Zhabdrung constructed his first dzong at Simtokha to strengthen the defensive measures to consolidate the political power in Western Bhutan.<sup>9</sup> During the construction, the dzong was

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with people currently residing in the region

<sup>4</sup> In the 'Biographies of Zhabdrung' suggests Lopen Nado's 1986 book *Druk Karpo*, provides a range of names, including Sinmo Dokha, Sinmo Dokha, and Sinmo Tokha, with explanations provided for the choice of these appellations.

<sup>5</sup> Dorji, S. (1999). Biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Pp.210-212

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Je Geden Rinchen, (2008). 'Zhabdrung's Biography'. 2008. P.154

<sup>8</sup> Zhabdrung's rivals are the descendants of Lam Khag Nga as Lam Palden was the leader of Zhabdrung's adversaries.

<sup>9</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013). History of Bhutan. Pp. 227-229

strategically built within cane woven walls to shield it from potential destruction by the rivals. Despite the protective measures, the wind of magical spells of rivalries blew down the walls during construction, revealing the dzong's progress to the adversaries. In response, Zhabdrung executed magical divination against them, resulting in floods that eroded Jemai dzong. Following Zhabdrung's victory, rivals inhabited a foothill above Semtokha dzong (possibly Jemai Dzong) and performed magical spells in revenge to Zhabdrung.

Since then, the place was known as the *Ngagpaiphug*, the hill inhabited by sorcerers (*ngagpa/ Wylie. snags pa*).<sup>10</sup> The remnants of Jemai Dzong were visible until recent years, resulting to the area's reputation as abandoned due to the presence of malevolent spirits.<sup>11</sup> The oral and written sources provides conflicting historical narratives regarding the nomenclature, 'Ngabiphu.' While unwritten accounts claim Ngabiphu (RTC area) was a place inhabited by sorcerers (enemies of Zhabdrung), biographies of Zhabdrung and other literatures suggest that the predecessors and successors of Zhabdrung inhabited the place. Nevertheless, an analysis of extant biographical accounts and local historical sources reveals a significant misattribution in the collective memory of inhabitants in Thimphu region regarding two distinct locations sharing the name Ngabiphu. The first, Jemai Dzong, also known as Ngabiphu, is historically associated with Zhabdrung's adversaries and their purported engagement in sorcery (*Ngag*) against Zhabdrung. The second is the contemporary site of the Royal Thimphu College (RTC), which housed a monastery of *Ngagpa* (tantric practitioners). This toponymic similarity has led to a conflation of historical narratives, wherein the cultural and historical significance of Jemai Dzong has been erroneously transposed onto the RTC area. This misunderstanding appears to stem from a lack of clear differentiation between the two sites in oral sources. Thus, the implications of this conflation are significant for our understanding of the region's cultural landscape and historical narrative. They also point towards the need for a more nuanced approach to local history, one that carefully distinguishes between sites with similar nomenclature but distinct historical roles.

While some of the historical sources suggest 1222 as the Phajo Drugom Zhipo's

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<sup>10</sup> Biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Pp.210-212

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with inhabitants in a region

arrival in Bhutan, the Biography of Phajo Drugom Zhipo, *Thuje Chujin* (Wylie. *thugs rje chu rgyun*) mentions 1218 as a year of his first visit to Bhutan.<sup>12</sup> Informants also assert that the monastery was established in 1218 AD. From these incidents it can also be suggested that the latter date could likely be the year of Phajo's arrival in Bhutan. While *Thangkar Jinying pai selkha* (The propitiation ritual text of local deity *Thangkar* of Ngabiphu) doesn't provide a time of his visit, however, the text evidences the religious masters including Phajo Drugom Zhipo and Zhabdrung who have visited Ngabiphu. It describes vividly in the deity propitiation text of Ngabiphu:

*Dro gyen Pema Phajo drugom dang. Ngawang Namgyel Tenzin Rabgye dang; Sherab Gyeltsen Dorji Tenpa dang. Ngawang Lhendup Ngawang Theinley dang. Gyud zin lama namki chen nga ru. Gyel ten chi dang jedrag peldrukpa; Tenpa zinchong pelwar zhelzhey zhin. Kadang dam lay ma da thinley zey.*<sup>13</sup>

The aforementioned account is further validated by Phajo's biography. It refers to Ngabiphu as Babechuphu prior to his visit. Subsequently, *Jinyingpai tsan* (the deity of Jinying, a mountain overlooking the Ngabiphu region) and nearby deities such as *Tsan Bumparipa*, along with other deities, pledged their support under Phajo to safeguard and promote all virtuous endeavors envisioned by Phajo in the territory of Babechuphu.<sup>14</sup> Since then, under Phajo's supervision, the meditation center for the *ngagpas* was founded, specifically emphasizing on *shegyud* (Wylie. *shad rgyud*) and since then the place came to be known as *Ngagpai phu*, the hill inhabited by tantric practitioners.<sup>15</sup> Further, 'A brief historical analysis of Ngaiphu' proclaims the Zhabdrung to have taken refuge at Ngabiphu, the monastery built by his predecessors, while descendants of Lam Khag Nga posed a threat to Zhabdrung during the construction of Semtokha Dzong.<sup>16</sup> The sources vividly assert that Ngabiphu (RTC area) is not associated with the inhabitation of adversaries of Zhabdrung. Likewise, there are almost four centuries of chronological discrepancy between the periods when the descendant of Lham Khag Nga, led by Lam Pelden (an opponent of Zhabdrung)

<sup>12</sup> DDC (1999). Biography of Phajo Drugom Zhipo, Thuje Chujin. P. Ca (8)

<sup>13</sup> Druk lug ki dencha. (n.d.). 'The propitiation Ritual Text of Thangkar,' P. 3

<sup>14</sup> DDC (1999). Biography of Phajo Drugom Zhipo, Thuje Chujin. Pp-47.

<sup>15</sup> Tobgay, S. (2017). 'Essential Guide to Sacred Sites.' P. 62

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., P. 64

resided at Jemai Dzong and the founding of Ngabiphu (RTC area) monastery.

Several sources indicate historical discrepancies regarding the presence of Lam Khag Nga during the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Zhabdrung in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Bhutan. This evidence strongly suggests that the rivals of Zhabdrung during the construction of Semtokha Dzong were descendants of Lam Khag Nga.<sup>17</sup> This indicates a significant temporal disparity regarding the presence of Lam Kha Nga and Zhabdrung in Bhutan. The resistance against Zhabdrung was led by Lam Pelden, who was a descendant, rather than by Lam Kha Nga. In this context, the narrative illustrates that Lam Pelden and his followers resided at a structure founded by Lam Ney Nyingpa which was known to be named as Jemai Dzong, located above Semtokha Dzong. Consequently, this site became widely acknowledged as *Ngagpai phug*, a location from which opponents directed magical incantations toward Zhabdrung during the period of Semtokha Dzong's construction in Bhutan. This evidence strongly suggests that the name 'Ngabiphu' is used in two different contexts. Eventually, an ambiguity surrounding the historical interpretation of the nomenclature (Ngabiphu) stems from a lack of comprehension of two distinct historical narratives, as discussed above. It becomes apparent that while Ngabiphu may refer to both Jemai Dzong and the RTC area, each context presents very opposing historical connotations.

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLE OF DEITY PROPITIATION TEXT-*THANGKAR JINYINGPAI SELKHA***

The use of "*Thangkar Jinyingpai Selkha*" text exhibits a geographically concentrated usage pattern, primarily among the populations of the Ngabiphu area. Additionally, its use extends to select familial groups in Babesa (Thimphu region), Nahe (Wangdiphodrang region), Samdingkha and Dawakha (Punakha region).<sup>18</sup> The use of this text across different regions evidences their origins in Ngabiphu. At present, there isn't a single household whose members are of direct descent from the original inhabitants of Ngabiphu. However, the claim of Angay Lelem from Samdingkha regarding her direct lineage from Ngabiphu lam suggests the later migration of

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<sup>17</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013). PP. 176-184

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Penjore, 2013, Sangay Tenzin, 2024; Ap Tshering, 2024; Kencho Tshering, Jamtsho & Angay Lelem, 2024

indigenous settlers from Ngabiphu. Angay recalls that her family initially resided in Ramtoto before relocating to Samdingkha, following one winter when the house caught fire. They still propitiate the Thangkhap using a propitiation text and use to visit the site to worship.

However, Gomchen Penjore, recounted that in earlier times, numerous *Khep* (Wylie. *khyalp*) households resided in the area. By the time of his youth, only three households remained, and eventually, only his family's household persisted. Subsequently, his family migrated to their winter residence in Nahe and Nabi, located in the Wangdi Phodrang district.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, interestingly one of the families in Babesa claims ancestral roots to Ap Thangkhap. In an interview, Sangay Tenzin expressed, *'despite not currently residing in the Ngabiphu area, my family maintains close ties with the place through the propitiation to our ancestor Ap Thangkhap. My great grandfather Changlo Dorji<sup>20</sup> is the son of Ap Thangkhap (tsan gi bu).'*

According to Sangay, Ani Om (Sangay's great grandmother), belonging to one of the wealthiest families in Chang Yuekha (Thimphu region), meditated at Talangkha Goenpa. It was during that time, she became pregnant by Ap Thangkhap, as conceived in a dream, and subsequently gave birth to a son named Changlo Dorji. *'My grandfather Changlo is said to have high recognition for his physical prowess and was appointed as the Dronyer (protocol officer) in Trongsa Dzong by Desi Jigme Namgyel. He is also remembered for his assistance to Jigme Namgyel in defeating the opponents from Thimphu during the battle at Gurkarpang in Wangkha.'* Sangay Tenzin, who is the fourth generation of this lineage, continues to honor Ap Thangkhap as their ancestor. In this context, the propitiation text plays a critical role, particularly in 'appeasing the guardian deity of dharma' /*choesung sol* (Wylie. *chos srung sol*) alongside Ap Thangkhap, and is integral to various rituals aimed at fostering the health and prosperity of a family. This underscores the notion that family rituals are considered incomplete without the incorporation of the deity propitiation text-*Thangkar Jinying pai selkha*.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Gomechen Penjore (who served during the reigns of Bhutan's First, Second, and Third Kings)

<sup>20</sup> He is the son of Ap Thangkhap, who also served as a *Dronyer* under Jigme Namgyel in Trongsa Dzong.

Such an enduring connection between Ngabiphu and other communities is further evidenced by continued pilgrimages and ritual observances. Descendants of Ngabiphu inhabitants from Babesa, Nahi, and Dawakha regions regularly visit Ngabiphu to make offerings to local deities (also known as *kencho choed ni*; Wylie. *dkon mchog mchod ni*), with particular emphasis on the worship of Ngabi gyalp/gyem (one of the deities at Ngabiphu) and Thangkhap.<sup>21</sup> The iconography of Ngabi gyelp can be found on the left side of a wall of the temple ruin, indicating it to be one of the important figures worshiped by locals for the protection. Similarly, marks of offerings such as grains/*druna* (Wylie. *'bru sna*), water offering/*chutor* (Wylie. *chu gtor*), alcohol/*chang* (Wylie. *chang*), butter lamps (*mar mey*), oroxylum indica/*tsampaka* (Wylie. *tsampaka*), five different colors of threads/*kip na nga* (Wylie. *skudp sna lnga*), etc., are still found in the surroundings of the temple ruin. This persistent cultural practice underscores the deep-rooted spiritual and social ties that bind these geographically dispersed communities to their ancestral homeland, Ngabiphu. Unfortunately, an absence of conservation efforts and maintenance of the site has led to the gradual decay of the intricate designs and symbolic imageries on the temple walls. This deterioration has obscured significant portions of the iconography, posing a challenge for researchers attempting to interpret the temple's art and cultural importance.

The propitiation text serves as a mediator, maintaining a strong relationship between migrant families and their place of origin and local deities. This phenomenon not only preserves traditional practices but also reinforces a sense of shared identity among communities separated by geographical distance. The case of the family in Babesa further exemplifies how these spiritual connections can persist across generations, even in urban settings far removed from the ancestral homeland. Additionally, the distribution and continued use of the *Thangkar Jinying pai selkha* text provide valuable insights into historical migration patterns, familial lineages, and the persistence of traditional spiritual practices in Bhutan. This cultural continuity, maintained through ritual and pilgrimage, offers a compelling example of how ancient traditions can remain relevant and vital in contemporary society, bridging geographical and generational gaps.

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<sup>21</sup> Penjore, 2013; Ap Tshering 2024; Penjore, 2013

While oral sources require further investigation through archaeological and scientific studies, the historical migration of people is attributed to unfavorable environmental conditions in the Ngabiphu region. *'The area's harsh climate and infertile soil rendered agricultural works untenable, thereby necessitating outward migration'* (Ap Tshering, 2024; Penjore, 2018). The migration of people from Ngabiphu to lower elevated areas such as Punakha and Wangdiphodrang regions can be seen as a gradual process rather than a sudden shift. Informants highlight seasonal migration practice as the only sustainable means for inhabitants in Ngabiphu due to harsh climatic conditions during winter in olden days. On the other hand, Tshering Yangzom, a granddaughter of Angay Lelem (interviewed, 2024) claims to be an original descendant of the Ngabiphu temple but use to reside in Ramtokto and made offering in the temple through daily visit rather than people having permanently resided around the temple. However, the ruins we can see now near the main temple area were associated with the residence of a *khep* (Wylie. *khyalp*/ tax payer/serfs). Unfortunately, a giant family house ruin of the *chup's* (Wylie. *phyugp*/wealthy family) equivalent to *Nagtsang* (Wylie. *nagtsang/snagtsang*) residence of feudal lords in medieval times) no longer exists due to ongoing construction in the area, which used to be there five decades ago (Sonam Tobgay, 2017; Penjore, 2018; Tshering, 2024). The *chup's* family worked in close collaboration with the Ngabiphu monastery (Tshering, 2024), suggesting an intricate interplay between secular and religious authority in the area's social fabric. According to Tshering Yangzom,<sup>22</sup> her family belongs to one of the descendants of the Ngabiphu lam, who owned the temple. Interestingly, her claim contradicts the former informants, where they asserted the *chups* to be all powerful and took an important socio-economic role in the region, as her Angay Lelem recalls the last lam of Ngabiphu monastery to be her uncle who was from one of the *kheps* family. These accounts suggest that both *chup* and *kheps* were pivotal social actors within the regional power structure, ascribing to them significant influence in decision-making processes and central roles in the organization and execution of religious functions. On the other hand, the resettlement of people from Ngabiphu potentially suggests a significant shift in local socio-religious dynamics, shaping regional cultural heritage and genealogical narratives.

Equally, the historical reconstruction of the Ngabiphu monastery is impeded by a

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<sup>22</sup> Angay Lelem from Punakha, who claims to be the direct descendants of one of the Ngabiphu lam.

paucity of primary sources and demographic flux in the region. Informants, comprising non-original long-term residents and descendants of former inhabitants now geographically dispersed, offer fragmented accounts. The most senior informant, despite four decades of local residency, attests to the site's ruined state upon their arrival, though its continued veneration by pilgrims from Thimphu, Wangdi, and Punakha region suggests enduring cultural significance. The area's reported uninhabited status during the establishment of the Royal Thimphu College further obfuscates the historical narrative. The collective inability of current informants to provide definitive evidence of the structure's original form poses challenges towards constructing a comprehensive chronology. These factors elucidate the methodological intricacies inherent in documenting the evolution of religious sites within regions characterized by demographic transience, archival paucity, and the absence of extant original settlers, thus presenting significant challenges to comprehensive historiographical analyses.

## THE ROLE OF NGABIPHU MONASTERY IN SHAPING RELIGIOUS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE REGION

Temples, churches, and all kinds of religious monuments have played significant socio-economic and political roles across various medieval socio-cultural settings. Evidence from the various sources suggests that the temples and monasteries have evolved into prominent and influential socio-economic and religious institutions throughout medieval India.<sup>23</sup> The hermitages and castles in Tibetan communities reveal strong socio-political ties amongst different social classes since ancient times.<sup>24</sup> Correspondingly, the *dzongs* (fortresses) and monasteries built by Zhabdrung served both the secular and religious function shaping diverse socio-cultural and political landscapes in medieval Bhutan.<sup>25</sup> However, ancient built heritage study in Bhutan is at a very infant stage, hindered by limited material and a lack of documentation on historical ruins. The absence of a comprehensive list of such ruins impedes

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<sup>23</sup> Shah, V. (2009). Study Of Temples Of Medieval Maharashtra (11th To 14th Centuries Ce) A Socio-Economic Approach. P. 5

<sup>24</sup> Cabezón, J. I. (2006). The Hermitages of Sera. P. 4

<sup>25</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013). *History of Bhutan*. P.



understanding of the region's architectural heritage, despite their potential to provide a socio-political and cultural histories. Moreover, these sites remain largely overlooked in both archaeological and historical studies.<sup>26</sup> In consideration of these factors, this section discusses the influence of Ngabiphu monastery in shaping not only a religious but also the socio-political dynamics within the region.

Since the late medieval period, the political unity and cultural identity of Bhutan as a nation have been consolidated through the Drukpa religious hegemony. Eventually, religious activities, such as the institution of monastic communities, assisted in legitimizing the religious consolidation in Bhutan.<sup>27</sup> Amongst the numerous places in Paro, Lingzhi, Punakha, and Thimphu, Phajo Drugom Zhipo also settled in Dodena (a confluence north of Thimphu) with his consort of destiny, Sonam Peldren, and spread his influence in the region. According to oral accounts, Ngaiphu Monastery is one of the Drukpa religious centers in western Bhutan, founded by Phajo Drugom Zhipo in 1218 AD.<sup>28</sup> Ngabiphu is one of the earliest monasteries established as part of a religious mission to the southern land (Bhutan) to spread the Drukpa tradition by Phajo.<sup>29</sup> Phajo's connection to the place is substantiated by his appearance in the propitiation ritual text of the local deity Ap Thangkhap<sup>30</sup> and his biography mentioning the visit to Ngabiphu. These suggests the establishment of Phajo's reputation and influence among the Lhapa lamas<sup>31</sup> in the Paro region, who until then had a significant influence in the western valleys of Bhutan.<sup>32</sup> Undoubtedly, monastic establishment in Ngabiphu has contributed to the development of a saint-patron relationship, shaping the socio-political structure of the region.

The saints and patrons relationship was essential in solidifying authority and establishing dominance in medieval Bhutan. Amongst those social classes prevalent in medieval Bhutan, Ngabiphu notably had *chup*<sup>33</sup> and *Khep* closely associated with

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<sup>26</sup> Yeshi, S. (2019). *Sumthrang Monastic Landscape: Ruins in Bhutan, their Socio-cultural Values and Sustaining their Significance in Modern Times*. P. 23

<sup>27</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013). P.256

<sup>28</sup> Tobgay, S. (2017). P.62

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Ap Penjore (95 years old then). He claimed to be a descendant of one of the original inhabitants of Ngabiphu (*Chub*/wealthy family)

<sup>30</sup> Ngabiphu falls under the protection of deity Thangkhap.

<sup>31</sup> Lhapa Kagyud school lineage holders

<sup>32</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013) P. 144

<sup>33</sup> *Phyups* are claimed to be a descendants of Ngagpa.

the monastery and religious figures. The *chups* (claimants to being the descendants of *Ngagpa*) were patrons of the monastery, while the *khep* served as taxpayers and serfs to both the religious masters and the *chup* family. Like many pastoral communities, the practice of seasonal migration was prevalent in the Wang (Thimphu) region. Inhabitants of Wang villages would migrate to the Wangdi and Punakha regions during winter. The informants accounts that, irrespective of power and wealth, migration could only occur with the consent of the Thimphu Dzongpon (Wylie. *dsongpon*/head of the district) a day before the migration. However, the Ngabiphu *Chups* exclusively received direct approval on the day they sought permission from the Dzongpon.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, one of the community rituals, *Tordhogi* (Wylie. *gtor bzlog*)<sup>35</sup> used to be performed on the 29<sup>th</sup> of the September month of the lunar calendar, required rotational patronage among the *Ngabi kheps*. During this event, *kheps* served meals not only to the *chups*, *ngagpai choegyud*/Wylie. *chos brgyud* (descendants of *Ngagpa*) but also respectfully to their domestic cats and dogs.<sup>36</sup> The religious masters enjoyed a strong patronage of *Kheps* of Ngabiphu, amongst whom the Drukpa Kagyud masters were influential in the region then. Equally, *Kheps* were also burdened with various taxes, including grain tax and labor tax.<sup>37</sup> This system highlights the power of the *chups* and their strong relationships with influential authorities and Drukpa Kagyud masters, which in turn shaped the socio-political structure of the region.

## ROLE OF NGABIPHU IN THE NATION BUILDING PROCESS

Since the post-colonial era, Buddhist principles have also been utilized as a basis for political ideology and the construction of national narratives in South East Asian states (Weiberg-Salzmann 2014).<sup>38</sup> Bhutan has emphasized the promotion and widespread adoption of Buddhism as a pivotal component for the establishment of

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<sup>34</sup> Tobgay, S. (2017). P.65

<sup>35</sup> The ritual performed to avert misfortunes caused by evil spirits.

<sup>36</sup> Tobgay, S. (2017). P.65

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ap Penjore

<sup>38</sup> Miyamoto, M. et al., (2021). Animal slaughter and religious nationalism in Bhutan. P. 122

the nation and the cultivation of conscientious civic engagement.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the state established by Zhabdrung was fundamentally characterized by a religious mission, with the primary objective of safeguarding and advancing the Drukpa religious tradition. Consequently, the political and cultural initiatives undertaken by Zhabdrung were imbued with a profound religious ethos, permeating all aspects of his nation-building endeavors. The religious values served as the driving force behind both the content and style of civil laws, where the monks were administrators.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the entire nation-building process was purely a religious mission. Undoubtedly, the legacies of Zhabdrung's predecessors of the Drukpa tradition, such as Phajo Drukgom Zhipo, played a significant role in garnering patrons and devotees from the western region. Phajo, an important figure in the establishment of the Drukpa Kagyu School in Bhutan, laid the foundation for the spread of the Drukpa teachings in the region. His dedication to the propagation of Buddhism and his establishment of numerous monasteries created a strong base of spiritual and social influence in Western Bhutan.

Phajo played a significant role in garnering a devoted group of followers and propagating Drukpa religious hegemony, resulting in the founding of monastic establishments and noble families. This network of patronage and veneration for Phajo and his forebears greatly facilitated the reception of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and the consolidation of Bhutan following his advent. For instance, the *Changangkha Zhelngo*<sup>41</sup> family offered a bride for Zhabdrung after his arrival in Bhutan.<sup>42</sup> Local accounts indicate that Zhabdrung sought refuge from adversaries during the construction of Simtokha Dzong at Ngabiphu, the establishment of Phajo. While Zhabdrung received strong support from the western region due to the enduring influence of his predecessors, the monastic establishment of Phajo greatly shielded him from opponents.<sup>43</sup> In consideration of these factors, Ngabiphu can be said to have played a significant role in protecting the founding father of Bhutan when he faced substantial threats, thereby contributing to the formation of a unified nation-state.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013). P.259

<sup>41</sup> One of the noble families established by Phajo's Son Nima.

<sup>42</sup> Phuntsho, K. (2013). P. 145

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Ap Penjore

The monasteries and temples established by Phajo and his successors became centers of learning, spirituality, and community life. Ngabiphu was not only a place of worship but also a hub for education and cultural preservation, which endeared it to the local population. Out of two forms of teaching in Buddhism (*Dho*/Wylie. *mdo-sutra* & *Ngag*/Wylie. *sngags*-Mantra), Ngabiphu was established as a center for *Ngag* teachings, and known to be the *Ngag pai phu*.<sup>44</sup> The site features the ruins of a concrete monastery form surrounded by a several extended forms of ruined structures, presenting a comprehensive layout of a medieval Buddhist monastery. The sacred sanctum (*gyenkhang*/Wylie. *mgon khang*) is located to the right of the monastery's entrance, while other identifiable areas include the kitchen, dining hall, and studying or residential quarters for monks. This distribution of rooms and spaces resembles typical Buddhist monastery sites of the era, which were structured as properly planned educational monastic institutes. There is a stupa to the left side of a monastery, and family residences<sup>ii</sup> in ruin at the surrounding enhancing its spiritual significance and close association between the community and monastic institution. However, the structures are completely in ruins, with bushes and trees obscuring much of the site. Interlocutors claims that, overgrowth of trees and bushes, combined with the extensive ruin, makes it challenging for researchers to study and interpret the original layout. Thus, extensive archaeological investigations are necessary to fully understand the monastery's original design, scale, and historical importance within the region.

Such foundational work of Phajo and other early Drukpa leaders sets the stage for the consolidation of power and authority by Zhabdrung. It is evident that had the Zhabdrung not sought refuge in Ngabiphu, he may have encountered significant challenges from his rivals. The dual system of governance and development that exists in Bhutan today may not have been established. Nonetheless, Ngabiphu provided the necessary protection and security for the Zhabdrung to continue building his spiritual authority and cultural unity, which he used to bring together the western regions of Bhutan. Likewise, the narrative concerning the offspring of Ap Thangkhap, Changlo Dorji, who aided Desi Jigme Namgyal, in overcoming opponents to establish his legitimacy and authority, illustrates the considerable

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<sup>44</sup> Tobgay, S. (2017). P. 63

political role held by the forebears of Ngabiphu *Tsan*.

Also Ngabiphu played a significant role in the renovation of Thimphu Tashichhodzong, which became the capital of Bhutan in 1954 during the reign of King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. Over the course of four centuries, Tashichhodzong played a significant role in process of formation of a state and the development of a nation state, eventually becoming a prominent administrative hub and the seat of the monarchy.<sup>45</sup> Originally named Tashichhodzong by Zhabdrung<sup>46</sup> and the old structure was reconstructed in 1771 by the 16<sup>th</sup> Druk Desi Sonam Lhendup (1769-1773) to make it an administrative center.<sup>47</sup> The dzong caught fire and was renovated by The Third King in 1962. *'The successful renovation of Tashichhodzong in 1962 is attributed to the abundant natural resources, specifically the timber sourced from the Ngabiphu area'* (Dorji, C. & Gyeltshen, D. 2017).<sup>48</sup> These oral testimonies are freshly recalled by the two senior citizens who served under the Third King and witnessed the renovation firsthand. It is asserted that timber extraction from Ngabiphu continued until the renovation was completed, and yet the area remained rich in timber.<sup>49</sup> For this reason, Ngabiphu is also regarded as *gter mzod* (a place of treasury) by the Third King.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Tshering, in an interview, stated that, *'the construction of Royal Thimphu College fully relied on the timber extracted from the Ngabiphu area.'* The Royal Thimphu College being one of the thriving international educational institutes in the country and the center administrative structure of a capital city remain the testament to the importance of Ngabiphu in nation building.

From this stand point, Ngabiphu played a crucial role in education, cultural preservation, and providing refuge to the political leaders and resources. In addition, it significantly contributed to the establishment and development of Bhutan's dual governance system. Moreover, Ngabiphu's involvement in the renovation of the Thimphu Tashichhodzong further emphasizes its importance in Bhutan's historical and administrative evolution. Equally, Ngabiphu played a dynamic role in shaping the religious and social landscape that ultimately facilitated the Zhabdrung's

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Nado, L. (1986). *Druk Karpo*. Bumthang.

<sup>47</sup> Penjore, D. (2021). *Zhidar Matters*. P.2

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Chang Dorji & Dorji Gyeltshen, 2017

<sup>49</sup> Tobgay, S. (2017). P.64

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Chang Dorji & Dorji Gyeltshen, 2017

successful unification of Bhutan, and the foundation of monarchical state in succeeding centuries.

## CONCLUSION

This study on the village name 'Ngabiphu' reveals its multifaceted significance in Bhutan's historical, religious, and socio-political landscape. It resolves longstanding misconceptions by identifying two distinct locations sharing the name- Jemai Dzong and the current Royal Thimphu College area. Ngabiphu emerges as a crucial center for Drukpa Kagyud Buddhism, established in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, which played a pivotal role in shaping regional socio-political dynamics and consolidating Drukpa religious hegemony in western Bhutan. Its contribution to Bhutan's nation-building process is evident in its role as a refuge for Zhabdrung and its resources' significance in renovating key administrative structure of the nation. The persistence of associated rituals and pilgrimages underscores Ngabiphu's enduring cultural importance. From this context, Ngabiphu stands as a testament to the intricate interplay between religion, politics, and culture in Bhutan's history, representing a crucial chapter in the nation's journey towards cultural identity and nationhood.

The absence of conservation efforts and maintenance of the site has led to the gradual decay of the intricate designs and symbolic imageries on the temple walls. This deterioration has obscured significant portions of the iconography, posing a challenge for researchers attempting to interpret the temple's art and cultural importance. The progressive loss of these visual elements emphasizes the critical need for conservation measures and highlights the necessity of archaeological research. Thus, we recommend future scholars to take up these valuable opportunities for archaeological investigation of a site, potentially offering deeper insights into medieval Buddhist monastic architecture and socio-cultural practices in Bhutan. Additionally, the efforts by relevant agencies to study and conserve the site would make a valuable contribution to the nation's tangible heritage conservation.

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## Interviews

Angay Lelem & Tshering Yangzom, 2024.

Chang Dorji and Dorji Gyeltshen, 2017.<sup>iii</sup>

Kencho Tshering & Jamtsho, 2024.

Gomchen Penjore, 2013.

Sangay Tenzin, 2024.

Tshering Penjore, 2024.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> In an interview with Sonam Nyenda, president of the Druk Nyo Foundation and Lama of Sumthrang Choje, a hypothesis was proposed regarding the descendants of Ngabiphu refraining from visiting Changangkha temple. This information, originally from Angay Lelem and corroborated by her granddaughter Tshering Yangzom, suggests a potential conflict between the Ngabiphu lineages and Changangkha. The hypothesis is based on the practice of *tordhog* being performed in the direction of Changangkha and vice versa. Nyenda questioned this apparent conflict, given that Ngabiphu is considered the seat of Phajo, while Changangkha temple was founded by Phajo's son, Nima.

Further investigation, including an interview with Tshering Yangzom, confirmed the family's continued practice of not visiting Changangkha temple. However, she started visiting Changangkha later to make offerings. While this situation warrants in-depth historical analysis, it can be speculated that the conflict may not have existed during Phajo and his son Nima's time but potentially emerged later among succeeding lamas and descendants. This scenario illustrates the possibility of discord between two religious seats sharing a common origin. Such conflicts could arise from various factors, including disputes among patrons associated with lamas from different lineage holders. This phenomenon is not uncommon, as evidenced by multiple instances of disharmony in medieval Bhutan's religious landscape. Nevertheless, this requires a further investigation that future researchers can take up.

<sup>ii</sup> The ruins around the monastery are resided in by Khep families. Interview with Ap Tshering Penjore, 2023

<sup>iii</sup> Chang Dorji & Dorji Gyeltshen were important figures who served under the Third King of Bhutan, and physically present during the renovation of Tashi Choedzong. Chang Dorji served as the assistant to Dashi Gyelden Thinley, who was the attendant of the Third King of Bhutan.

<sup>iv</sup> Ap Tshering Penjore has been in Ngabiphu for more than four decades as one of the most senior staff members of Azhi Kelzang Wangmo. He has not only witnessed changes in terms of socio-economic development but also environmental shifts in the region.



# **Inherent Linguistic Bias against Women in the Dzongkha Language: An Explorative study on Female Stereotyping and Gender Discrimination.**

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*Tshering Yangki & Jigme Dorji*

## **Abstract**

Gender discrimination is driven by perceptions and attitudes which are inseparable from the language in which people form their ideas. Language, therefore, is considered to be one of the most powerful means that propagates and reinforces gender discrimination and stereotyping. Language that expresses bias in favor of one sex, and treats the other sex in a discriminatory manner is called a sexist language. In most cases, languages are characterized by the inherent biases against women. Thus, this paper discusses some of the most prominent and common sexism in the Dzongkha Language: sexism in Dzongkha words, proverbs and select-Buddhist texts. Through a feminist stylistic analysis, this paper concedes that the Dzongkha Language, or more specifically certain words, proverbs, and excerpts from Dzongkha literature display an ambivalent attitude towards women – at times displaying patriarchal and even misogynistic views. The findings indicated that gender discrimination indeed remains in the corners of the words and phrases Bhutanese use every day. An observation has also been made on the increasing gender sensitivity in the use of Dzongkha words over the years, which helped to reduce the traditionally super-masculine tendencies in the language. Examples of sexist words and proverbs have been used to illustrate context, and make a case on how language can subtly shape perception. The findings reveal that the sexist tendencies in the national language reflect the existing sociocultural norms and expectations of women in Bhutanese society, with the implications of influencing perceptions regarding women's roles and worth in the society.

# Introduction

The increasing interaction with external cultures is often perceived as a potential threat to Bhutanese culture, as the population appears to be swayed by Western ideals and is seemingly drifting from traditional customs. However, an examination of the national language utilized by the Bhutanese may reveal a different narrative—suggesting that the core values and norms have largely persisted, particularly in relation to the use of language and its implications for women.

Similarly, although reports and research point out that gender discrimination in the country is negligible as compared to other countries or especially to the other South-Asian countries, (e.g., Global Gender Gap Report, 2022; Priyadarshini, 2014) a close examination of the language reveals underlying values that support, portray and propagate men's superiority over women.

Like most languages in the world, the national language of Bhutan, Dzongkha contains sexist words and phrases that devalue women's worth. There is no denying that the country has made significant progress in its efforts to make a gender-inclusive society in workplace and politics including many gender-sensitive policies, (e.g., National Gender Equality Policy 2020) but the language and its sexist nature has not been explored (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017). According to Catalán, the use of language results in influencing how individuals perceive their society and the norms in that particular society (as cited in Umera-Okeke, 2012, p. 4). Sociolinguists have also recognized that people's socio-cultural behaviors and attitudes as well as thoughts are reflected in their use of the language. Therefore, examining sexism will assist in formulating gender sensitive educational materials, and also implicate policies and language usage in the social realm. This article therefore, explores the tendencies in the national language of Bhutan – Dzongkha – towards sexism, and examine the cultural nuances or norms that incline towards the existence of gender stereotyping in the country. This study recognizes the commonly accepted nexus between gender inequality and socio-cultural and religious context and draws from the work of others on linguistic sexism in other cultures and societies to analyze and interpret some of the most prominent and common sexism in Dzongkha Language: in words, phrases, and proverbs, and in Buddhist literature. An observation has also been made on the increasing gender sensitivity in the use of Dzongkha words over

the years, which helped to reduce the traditionally super-masculine tendencies in the language.

## Language and Sexism

Language is a tool for communication; it enables people to express their needs, desires and expectations, making life easier as a result of being able to understand one another. However, language can also be used as a tool to harm a person or a group of people. One area where language is used to such effect is gender discrimination as Menegatti and Rubini pointed out, “language is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced” (2017, p. 1). Thus, uncovering asymmetries and inconsistencies in use of language is a prominent approach in studying sexism in language in the feminist critical linguistic analysis (Simpson, 1993). In many societies, it is found to be the case that language is used in a manner that one sex, usually men, is portrayed as more superior one as compared to the other, the women. According to Lei (2006), any characteristics of men appear to be considered as the complete representation for all other humans irrespective of the sexes, which risks making women “invisible” in language or “excluding” women (p. 1). Penelope (1988) further argued on this point stating that the continuation of the use of such sexist language that supposes “women are included” will only exclude women from the “worldly spheres” (p.7). This biased nature of language, shows the historically evolved ways of defining the limits of femininity and masculinity (Cameron, 1985).

Sexism, therefore, is interpreted as any behavior, written, spoken or anything else that presents one sex as superior to the other (Umera-Okeke, 2012). This portrayal at times is explicit and accepted, while at other times it is subtle and implied; and in many societies this has been overlooked because of its subtle nature. However, it is found that, “language subtly reproduces the societal asymmetries of status and power in favor of men, which are attached to the corresponding social roles” (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017, p. 1).

Sociolinguists acknowledge that individuals' socio-cultural behaviors, attitudes, and cognitive processes are manifested in their linguistic choices. Consequently, the manner in which language is employed to reinforce male dominance can shape

societal perceptions, positioning females as subordinates and males as superiors. Cameron, in support, asserts “our language is sexist: that is, they represent or name the world from a masculine viewpoint and in accordance with stereotyped beliefs about the sexes (as cited in Umera-Okeke, 2012, p. 4)”. Thus, the focus of research on sexist language has been on its role in perpetuating male dominance (Philips, 1980).

Several studies have examined the presence of sexism in the English language. Both He (2010) and Chen (2016) highlight the cultural biases and unjust attitudes towards women that are reflected in the language. Similarly, Penelope, for instance, argues that phrases like "All men are created equal" or "God created man in his own image" (1988, p.7) perpetuate sexist language by effectively excluding women. Such use of masculine generics, according to Todd-Mancillas (1981) can lead to gender-biased perceptions. Similarly, proverbs in the English Language are also found to contain numerous such examples where women are not only excluded but are derogated and are presented as lowly creatures. The English proverb “He who follows his wife's advice will never see the face of god” according to Lei is of men “stretching” their prejudice towards women, that they are not really equals (2006).

Similarly, women are characterized and stereotyped as beautiful, polite, talkative, inferior and less capable than men in Malay and Korean proverbs (Kim et al., 2019) which reflects the widely accepted prejudice and biased against women in their societies. Sanauddin's (2015) study on linguistic sexism and proverbs in Pakistan suggests that proverbs present a ‘patriarchal reality’ as a discourse of sexist and patriarchal ideology which interpret and reinforce the view point of the dominant group. These findings on linguistic biases underscore the need for exploring sexist tendencies in different languages. This article thus explores the sexist tendencies in the Dzongkha language which marginalize and belittle women in Bhutanese society, with the implications that these norms reflect the existing sociocultural views and expectations of women, thus affecting the perceptions regarding women's roles and worth in the society.

## **Methodology**

The research adopted feminist stylistics approach to analyze linguistic sexism in Dzongkha language. The materials collected from 30 students and ten Dzongkha

lecturers of College of Language and Culture Studies in addition to the Buddhist literature texts used for undergraduate programme at the college consisted of Dzongkha words, phrases, proverbs, sayings, verses and expressions representing sexism in Dzongkha language. The materials were analysed by adopting selected features from the feminist stylistic (Mills,1995) at word and discourse level; gendered generic words, naming of females and males and how female and male characters are described. To balance the academic and scholarly analysis with everyday perspectives, further interview with Dzongkha speaking elderly citizens was conducted to draw mundane understanding of the women-concerning Dzongkha words and proverbs.

## Data Findings

### 1. Sexism in Dzongkha Words

- 1.1 མ་རེངས་མོ། (*mo rengsmo*) is the most commonly used synonym for ‘women’ in the Dzongkha language. It literally means ‘single lady’. However, the word is used derogatively to imply that women are “stupid, ignorant, and dependent.”.
- 1.2 བྱ་མེད། (*bud med*); (mi'i gral nas bud cing med pas na bud med). This literally means the ‘one fallen from the human race and that does not exist in the human race’ is the other common word for women. This word portrays men as a norm for the human species, and women as sub-human or a less of a human.
- 1.3 སྐུ་བ། (*skye's bu*) is the Dzongkha word for a person referring to both men and women, the suffix – bu’ in the word means a ‘son’; a male-oriented, presenting men as human default and our collective identity as masculine.
- 1.4 ཁོང། (*Khong*) is the Dzongkha collective pronoun for ‘They’- is a derivative of ‘Kho’, masculine pronoun, ‘he’. Dzongkha does not possess a third person pronoun which is gender-neutral, rendering women invisible in certain linguistic contexts.
- 1.5 བྱ་ཀློ། (*bu gzhi*), Dzongkha word for child is a collective noun with masculine ending.

1.6 འཕྱུལ་སྒྲོར་ཅན། (*phrul skor can*) ; is the dzongkha equivalent word for the English word Minx or Coquettish. This word is often used with another suffix as in *Thrukogyem* meaning the 'queen of coquettish'.

1.7 གཞུང་བཙོང་མ། སྒྲུང་འཛོང་མ། ལུས་འཛོང་མ། (*smad tshong malgzhang bysongmal/lus 'tshong ma*): are the Dzongkha words for prostitute. Driven by the suffix *Ma* the words are female-indicative and means 'she who sells her body'. These words are also used in order to describe women with multiple marriages highlighting their derogatory implication.

## 2. Sexism in Dzongkha Proverbs

Proverbs are said to offer an important set of instructions for members in every culture. Seller underscored the importance of proverbs as a reflection of culture in the line "Proverbs reunite the listeners with his or her ancestors" (as cited in Samovar & Porter, 2004). Bhutanese conversation in Dzongkha mostly also involves drawing references to age-old sayings, and proverbs. Bhutanese, in fact worship these verbal assertions as source of wisdom to reason out situations, as a rationale for different moves and to explain consequences. While there are Bhutanese proverbs concerning all walks of life, the ones associated with women almost always seems to throw sobering light on their worldly pursuits or put them at the losing end of the argument.

The following is a list of proverbs and sayings in Dzongkha, each attempt to reinforce the degree to which masculine or feminine traits are valued or scorned. They are all direct translations of the original Dzongkha phrases.

### 2.1 ཨོ་དང་མེད་བར་ན་སྒྲུ་རབས་དགྲ། སྒྲུ་རབས་དགྲ་གི་ཨོ་སྒྲུས་མཐོ།

*There is a difference of nine births between men and women; Men are higher by nine births.*

This proverb reflects a deeply ingrained patriarchal belief that men are inherently superior to women, suggesting a hierarchical gap symbolized by "nine births." In the Bhutanese cultural context, it reinforces the idea that men hold a higher, more elevated status by destiny, perpetuating gender inequality.

### 2.2 བྱད་མེད་མེད་ན་ཕུང་མེད།

*No women, no dispute*

2.3 བྱང་གི་རྩ་བ་བྱད་མེད།

*The root of discord is women*

These proverbs blame women for conflicts and disagreements, reinforcing the stereotype that they are the source of societal problems.

2.4 སྐལ་བ་ཡོད་ན་བྲ། སྐལ་བ་མེད་ན་བྲམོ།

*If fortunate, boy*

*If unfortunate, girl*

This proverb reflects a deeply ingrained gender bias that assigns value and worth based on a child's gender, reinforcing the stereotype that boys are inherently more desirable than girls. It suggests that boys are seen as lucky or fortunate, while girls are viewed as a burden or misfortune in Bhutan.

2.5 སྐྱོན་རྒྱུང་ངོ་རིས་ལེགས་ཅུང་། བསམ་པའི་དོན་ཉིང་དྲག་མས།

*Although a woman's face is beautiful, her heart is venomous.*

This saying reinforces a common stereotype about women that suggests that a pretty woman might have a deceptive personality beneath her beauty. It's a stereotype that connects physical beauty with inner flaws.

2.6. བྱི་ལུ་མཚོན་ནི་བྱི་ཚོ། བྲམོ་ལུ་མཚོན་ནི་ཁབ་ས།

*Cat only thinks of rat, woman only profit*

This proverb portrays women as inherently self-serving or profit-seeker, equating their motivations to a cat's singular focus on catching a rat. Such a viewpoint perpetuates negative assumptions about women's intentions and capabilities.

2.7 སྐྱོན་རྒྱུང་ལེགས་ཅུང་བྲ་ཐེངས་གཅིག། ཁ་ཤ་ལེགས་ཅུང་འཁྱུ་ཐེངས་ཅིག།

*A maiden's beauty lasts only until her first childbirth, and a worth of a cloth until its first wash.*

This proverb suggests that a woman's value is closely tied to her physical beauty which diminishes after childbirth.

2.8 ཁྱི་དང་བྱ་མེད་ཨོ་རྩོག་གསུམ། ཟස་པ་བཏང་པའི་ཡུལ་ཡིན།

*Generosity is meant for dogs, women, and crows.*

This saying insults women by grouping them with animals and crows, implying they are dependent and inferior. It reinforces patriarchal views by portraying women as reliant on men.

2.9 ཡམ་སྤྱ་གི་མཇམ་འདི་ཐུར་རི་གང་ར་ཨིན།

*Woman's mind is only a fistful*

This proverb suggests that a woman's thought or understanding are limited. It reflects a stereotypical view that a woman's mental capacity is limited.

2.10 བྱ་མངན་བདེ་བ་མང། བུ་མོ་མངན་སྤྱུག་བཟུལ་མང།

*More boys, more joy*

*More girls, more sorrow.*

This proverb encapsulates a stereotype that boys are more valuable and bring more joy to families and communities while linking the presence of girls to suffering and burden.

2.11 རོ་ཁྱི་མོ་གི་མཇུག་མ་མ་གཡུག་ན། རོ་ཁྱི་ཕོ་གི་རྟིང་མི་བདེ།

*If the female dog does not wiggle its tail, the male dog will not follow*

This proverb portrays seduction as a nature of women in the sexual relationships or adultery. It reflects a gendered double standard, where women are unfairly judged for immoral behavior, even when men are equally involved.

2.12 ཡམ་སྤྱ་དྲག་རྩང་ཐབ་ཀྱི་ཆ་བ།

*Even if woman is capable, at the hearth is her place*

This proverb reinforces the traditional patriarchal view that a woman's primary role, regardless of her abilities or potential, is confined to domestic duties, particularly in the kitchen. This implies that even if a woman is more skilled, intelligent, or capable,



her worth and place are defined by traditional gender roles. This narrative sustains sexism by restricting women's roles to domestic spaces, marginalizing their participation in professional and leadership capacities.

2.13 ཟུང་མ་བརྒྱུས་སྒོ་ཙམ་ནས། རྒྱུས་པ་གཅིག་གི་སྒོ་ཙམ་ཆེ།

*Intelligence of one man is better than intelligence of hundred women*

This proverb reflects a deeply sexist belief that inherently undermines women's intellectual capacity by suggesting that even the intelligence of a single man surpasses that of many women. It perpetuates the stereotype that men are naturally more capable, rational, or superior, while promoting the notion that women are inherently less capable than men.

2.14 སྡོ་ལ་གསུམ་ནས་རྒྱ་མེད། མ་ལ་བཅ་ལྔ་གཞིན་རྒྱ་མེད།

*A man isn't old in his sixties.*

*A woman isn't young at fifteen*

The proverb reflects a deeply sexist perspective rooted in gendered double standards regarding age, attractiveness, and societal value. It implies that men retain their youth and vitality longer than women, while women are seen as losing their youthful appeal and value at an earlier age. It reflects a societal hierarchy that devalues women as they grow older, while maintaining a more lenient view toward aging in men.

2.15 མ་ཟེངས་མདེ་ཁྱེས་སྒྲོར་བྱེ་འགྱུར།

*A single lady's plan is counterproductive*

This proverb conveys the sexist notion that an unmarried woman's plans or decisions are inherently flawed or ineffective. It reflects a cultural bias that undermines the competence and agency of single women, suggesting that their ideas or actions are doomed to fail without the guidance of a man.

2.16 བུ་མ་རྒྱ་རྩོད་མ་དགའ་མ་དང་། བྱི་ཤ་ལུ་མ་དགའ་མ་མེད།

*There is no woman who doesn't like wealth and, no dog that does not like meat.*

This proverb portrays women as greedy, implying that all women are materialistic and driven by wealth, similar to a dog's instinctual desire for meat. This reflects a sexist view that reduces women's motivations to superficial and self-serving interests, devaluing their moral values.

2.17 བྱད་མེད་མནོ་རྒྱ་རྩུང་།

*Women's thinking is limited*

This proverb perpetuates the sexist notion that women's intellectual capacity is inherently limited. It justifies excluding women from decision-making roles in society.

2.18 བྱད་མེད་སེམས་ནི་འགྱུར་བ་འཇམས།

*Women change their mind easily*

This proverb reinforces the stereotype that women are indecisive or fickle, suggesting that they are unreliable. It undermines their credibility in decision-making and leadership roles, thereby justifying male dominance in the society.

2.19 ཐོ་ལས་མོ་སྒྲོང་མཐོ།

*Woman sounds louder than man.*

This phrase, on the surface, sounds like a praise to women, but it actually implies that women have got no right to sound louder than man, which is an insult to women who are vocal and outspoken, reminding that it should always be men whose voice should be louder, dictating women's domestic subservience.

2.20 མཁ་སྒྱ་གིས་དཔོན་འབད་མི་མིད།

*Women can never be a leader*

This proverb bluntly asserts a sexist belief that women are inherently incapable of leadership, reinforcing patriarchal norms that confine women to subordinate roles. This suggests that leadership is reserved for men and perpetuates gender inequality by restricting access to positions of power for women.

2.21 དག་གཟུགས་ལྷ་བཏགས་པའི་བྱད་མེད།

*The body of a woman bears its own enemy*

This proverb suggests that a woman's body is a curse. This perspective perpetuates harmful stereotypes that devalue women's physicality and reinforce the notion that their bodies are sources of trouble and shame.

2.22 མ་རང་བཞིན་གྱིས་བཟང་། མ་རང་བཞིན་གྱིས་ངན།

*Men are by nature good hearted*

*Women are by nature evil hearted* (Trans, 2022)

This proverb suggests a strong gender bias by attributing inherent moral qualities to men and women, suggesting that men are naturally kind and virtuous while women are inherently malicious or immoral. It reinforces stereotypes that vilify women and idealize men, creating a moral divide between the sexes.

2.23 མ་ཁ་མ་གཤིས་བསྐྱར། ཏ་ཁ་སྐབ་ཀྱིས་བསྐྱར།

*A woman controls the direction of a man*

*A rein controls the direction of a horse.*

This proverb suggests that women have a manipulative and controlling influence over men. This reflects a sexist view that undermines women's agency by framing their interactions with men as inherently manipulative and perpetuates a stereotype that positions women as deceptive or cunning.

2.24 མཁ་སྤྱ་ལ་འབྲུལ་སྒྲོར་རྩམ་པ་བཙོ་བརྒྱད་ཡོད།

*Women have eighteen kinds of coquetry.*

This proverb implies that women are inherently deceitful or manipulative, suggesting that they employ various forms of flirtation to achieve their desires. It reinforces negative stereotypes that portray women as superficial and focused on seduction.

2.25 མ་འཛུམས་སར་རྫོང་དགུམ། མ་འཛུམས་སར་གཡུ་དགུམ།

*When men gather, they break stone. When women gather, they break turquoise.*

This proverb undermines women's collaborative efforts by portraying them as futile. It implies that women's unity is counterproductive, associated with damaging precious jewels. In contrast, men's unity is shown as being constructive and productive.

2.26 གྱུ་མེད་ན་མནའམ་བཅུགས།

*If you do not have a maid, bring home a bride.*

This proverb suggests that a woman's primary role is as a domestic caretaker. It reinforces traditional gender roles that confine women to household duties, reducing their identity and worth to that of a servant.

2.27 ར་དང་རྩམ་རྩང་བ་ཅིན་ཉན། ཨམ་སྲ་དང་ཨ་ལོ་དང་བ་ཅིན་ཉན།

*Children and women listen better when thrashed*

*Drums and horns sound better when beaten*

This proverb implies that women and children are rightly at the receiving ends of domestic violence, and justifies men physically abusing women to keep her at her best behaviour. This proverb explains Bhutanese society's high tolerance towards violence against women and children.

3. Textual analysis of Buddhist literature texts from the undergraduate Dzongkha course at CLCS. The lines and commentaries from the texts were examined particularly for their portrayal of women and feminine traits. The textual analysis is included because the Bhutanese society places a reverent sacredness on oral communication and people often turn to Buddhist texts for guidance on issues regarding the place of women.

The transliteration of the verses with their direct translation are reproduced below.

### 3.1 Synonyms for Women

There is a famous Dzongkha verse that sums up the synonyms for women from a text called mNgon brJod. The verse goes;

མངོན་བརྗོད་རྒྱ་མཚོ་ཐུ་ཐེག་ལས། སྐྱ་དམན་སྟོབས་མེད་འཛིང་བྱེད་མ། །གཡོན་མ་བགོད་བྱ་བུད་མེད་མེད།

*skye dman stobs med 'ching byed ma g.yon ma bgrod bya bud med ming*

*Inferior, weak and lust binder, manipulator and object of exploitation are the names of women.*

Women are called 'K-maen' meaning inferior by birth than men.

'Thobmaed' is another word to describe women. This word explains the lack of physical strength among women.

Women are also called 'Chin jae ma'' meaning the one that binds men in lust.

'Yoen ma ' is yet another dzongka word, and it means shrewd. It is considered that women folks are shrewd.

'Doe ja ma' which literally means the warmth and they are called so, for women are considered to be an object of exploitation by men. Two of the words from these lines are sexually pejorative terms for women.

### 3.2 Negative Similes and Metaphors

A poetic composition by a well-known Tibetan poet; Bod mKhas Pa uses simile to compare

women to a summer river and disparages women in the following verse;

རང་བཞིན་མི་བརྟན་གྱི་ལྷུང་བ་བཞུགས།  
ལྷན་གྱི་ཐུན་མོང་སྐྱད་བྱུང་གྱི་ལུང་ལྷུང་།  
དབྱར་གྱི་ཚུ་སྐྱད་རབ་ཏུ་རྒྱས་པ་དང་།  
ལང་ཚོ་མས་ཀྱང་སྐྱོ་བ་བྱུང་དུ་འདྲེན།

*Rang bzhin mi brtan gya g.yu'I bgrod pa can Kun gyi thun mong spyad byar gyur pa'I yul  
Dbyar gyi chu klung rab tu rgyas pa dang Lang tsho mas kyang skye bo thur du 'dren  
Unreliable and unstable by nature*

Taking unpredictable course of action  
An object of common use by all  
The rising current of summer river  
And the glowing beauty of female youth  
Can both lead men downhill

### 3.3. Prescriptive Roles

A Buddhist text on treaties on kingship ; rGyal Po Lugs Kyi bsTan bCos offers a blueprint on the right way of being women in the following lines :

བྱམ་མེད་ན་མས་ནི་ ལ་དང་ལྷོ་ ལྷ་མི་མང་བར།  
རང་ཁྱོད་ལྟ་ ལྷ་རྩེ་བ། གཞན་ ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ ལྷ་རྩེ་ འཛེམ་པ།  
ཚགས་ཞིབ་གསོག་འཛོག་ མ་བས་པ། བྱན་གཡོག་ལྷགས་ ཁྱོད་བདར་ལེགས་པ།  
ཁྱེད་ དམན་ས་འཛིན་ཅིང་ ཁྱེད་དང་ངོ་ཚ་ཆེ་བ་ཞིག་ དགོས།

*Bud med rnams ni kha dang blo sna mi mang bar rang khyo lha ltar rtsi ba gzhan khyo dug  
ltar 'dzem pa*

*Tshags zhib gsog 'jog mkhas pa bran g.yog phyugs skyong bdar legs pa  
Chung dman sa 'dzin cing khrel dang ngo tsha che ba zhig dgos*

Women should not have too many words and thoughts.  
Should treat one's husband as a god.  
Should avoid another's husband like a poison  
Should be expert at saving.  
Should be very good at managing domestic affairs  
Should be humble and modest  
And need to be endowed with great sensibility and a sense of shame.

### 4. Occupational nouns and Conventional titles in the Dzongkha Language

Occupational nouns and Conventional titles in Dzongkha Language are all male-indicative:

4.1 Tshongpoen (Shopkeeper)

4.2 Lopoem (Teacher)

4.3 Dasho (High ranking officer)

4.4 Drangpoen (Judge)

4.5 Azhang Gup

4.6. Mangi Ap

Professions involving power and strength are more associated with men, because these high positions are traditionally viewed as ones qualified only by males. It can be clearly seen that men monopolize the high-status professions.

Men are referred to in occupational terms, while women are more often referred to in terms of their relationship to men. For example, as a 'wife':

Dasho Aum

Lobay Aum

Jinda Aum

*5. Observation on the growing gender sensitivity in the use of Dzongkha words*

5.1 Mangmi

5.2 Lopoem

5.3 Aum Dasho

These are some of the visible deliberate changes observed in the use of titles and nouns in Dzongkha Language in the recent years, and as such reflects our growing sensitivity in the use of gender-sensitive words in contemporary Bhutanese society, highlighting gender-based language reform mostly through an informal adaptation driven by evolving needs.

## **Limitation of the Study**

This study is by no means an exhaustive inventory of sexist words, phrases, and proverbs in Dzongkha Language, but only an attempt to analyze and categorize common ones. Authors also acknowledge translation discrepancies and the potential cultural nuances lost in translation because certain phrases and words lacked direct English equivalents. In contrast to what this study presents about portrayal of Women in Buddhist texts, scholars have explored and pointed to materials with positive stance towards women in the Buddhist texts.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The Dzongkha language, particularly certain terms, proverbs, and excerpts from its literature, reveals instances of discriminatory attitudes towards women, often reflecting patriarchal perspectives. It also speculated that the language may have contributed to the persistence of various forms of institutional and societal discrimination against women, shaped by prevailing beliefs and attitudes. Dzongkha language seem to follow a generic masculine framework, reflecting the existing gender-based stereotypes and gendered power structures. The terminologies described above underscore that, while not overt, gender discrimination in Bhutan lies in the words and phrases Bhutanese use every day, and for lack of research, in ways one may not even be aware of.

The data reveals common stereotypes portraying women as weak and incompetent. Dzongkha terms that describe women take the suffix '*Maen*', meaning inferior. The notions of women being inferior and weak physically, emotionally, and intellectually have made way into the linguistic patterns and vocabulary. This, in turn, shapes cultural norms that create "barriers to the broader realization of gender equality" (National Commission for Women and Children, 2020), particularly limiting women's access to leadership roles as evidenced by women's poor representation in politics for instance (Chhoden & Lhamu, 2020). Common expressions such as *Dra Zhu lu tam bai zam bumead* meaning 'inferior being that bears enemy on her body' propagates this stereotype. So strong is this notion that there is a reinforcement to view women's body as its enemy among men and women alike. The enemy that lures sexual harassment, and abuse. The data also show that many Dzongkha words are constructed indicating strong sexist undertone that supports traditional societal values. The Gendered structure of the Dzongkha language that the data demonstrated proved the finding from similar studies that language reinforces historical worldview of male gender as the default.

The mentioned lines from Buddhist literature also insinuates the Buddhist cultures that perceived women as inferior being and lesser birth. It is also common for Bhutanese women to pray for a better rebirth in a male body. One particular



summation that Buddhist Bhutanese make goes, *thus*: 'May I be reborn a male and encounter Dharma'. Although not exhaustive, the presence of the range of pejorative and misogynistic labels in the data suggests a pervasive sense of sexist beliefs and attitudes toward women in the Bhutanese society. As such, it can be argued that the national language Dzongkha has contributed to reinforcing and perpetuating derogatory and stereotypical ideals about women through the generations subtly shaping how Bhutanese perceive roles and abilities based on gender. The list of words, phrases and proverbs in the data indicate subordination and inferiority as they relate to women. These linguistic patterns have huge bearing on people's attitude about men and women, evident in case of Bhutan from the study undertaken by Gross National Happiness Commission in 2001 that reported "Many women believed that it took nine births for a woman to be reborn as a man". They also said that men were relatively 'more free' and did not experience suffering and pain. Almost all the women said that they "preferred to be born male".

Language as the medium through which people conduct relationships, private and public, is said to bear the precise imprint of our cultural attitudes. Studies on gender discrimination and sexist language have noted that the elimination of linguistic sexism lies in social change. Since much of the current gender-related work in Bhutan focuses on institutionalizing gender-sensitive policies and practices, there is a need to place more emphasis on fostering gender-sensitive values and attitudes. Thus, more analysis of our language would raise awareness on gender-sensitive language use. It is essential for policy-making organizations, including the National Commission for Women and Children and the Gross National Happiness Commission, to incorporate linguistic considerations when formulating gender-neutral policies. Additionally, these bodies should launch initiatives aimed at educating the public to challenge gender stereotypes and foster gender sensitivity in their language use. Furthermore, educational institutions can play a significant role by integrating these principles into their curricula and language policies.

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# Flow of Liquor across Time in Bhutan: Culture and Consumption of Liquor

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*Jigme Wangchuk, Karma Dechen, & Richard Kamei*

## **Abstract:**

In this article, we focus on the consumption of alcohol, known as *ara* in Bhutan, and how this is embedded in the everyday lives of Bhutanese. *Ara* plays a significant role in the Bhutanese way of life, from the past to the present. This article attempts to locate the significance of *ara* in a context in when industrially manufactured alcohol abounds. Further, the article pays close attention to the presence of *ara* in social gatherings, cultural practices and rituals for various purposes. This is done by drawing on fieldwork accounts and making a case about the significance of *ara* in the present. We aim to shed light on how *ara* has been intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life for the Bhutanese people throughout history

**Keywords:** Ara, Alcohol, Indigenous, Bhutan, Himalaya, Highland

## **Introduction**

Alcohol consumption is prevalent across the globe, with notable practices among communities residing in the Himalayan region. In Bhutan, the act of consuming and offering alcohol is intertwined with human interactions, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral connections. Its role in the cultural fabric of society extends beyond mere historical significance, deeply influencing various aspects of daily life. Alcohol production and consumption are integral to local breweries, cultural traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and funerary practices. This context prompts an examination of the contemporary landscape, characterized by globalization and commercialization, and invites an exploration of how traditional alcohol practices adapt to these evolving dynamics. This article seeks to elucidate the importance of alcohol within Bhutanese

society, culture, and religious practices, while also addressing the challenges and opportunities for preserving its social, ritualistic, and cultural dimensions.

Brewing and consumption of alcohol are deeply embedded in people's lives, especially among indigenous peoples. They are expressed in their cultures, rituals, and social cohesion. These aspects are related to the writing of Geertz (1973, p.8) on culture where he wrote that "... culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs")—for the governing of behavior...man is precisely the animal most desperately dependent upon such extra-genetic, outside-the-skin control mechanisms, such cultural programs, for ordering his behavior."

From Geertz's (1973) accounts, alcohol serves its function in communities of Bhutan by rendering meaning to social and ritual aspects. Hall (1997) explained that the members of the community share culture in ways how the world is being interpreted similarly in their thoughts and actions, making the culture conducive to every member. Taking these writings into consideration, it is clear that they are embedded in the cultural aspects of alcohol in Bhutan. Through this article, we aim to present how the consumption of alcohol, its significance, and its meanings are the outcomes of a social and cultural process passed down from the past.

## **The Embodied Ethnography of Alcohol**

Coming to the methodology on which this article is based: embodied ethnography was used in conducting this research study in various places, including Thimphu, Punakha, Bumthang, and Trashigang. Embodied ethnography allows immersion both at bodily and psychological levels. Hickey and Smith (2020) note that the self itself is at the heart of embodied ethnography where they point out that the embodiment influences ethnographer and ethnographic writing. Ethnography has now evolved into active participation and meaning-making, with a situated involvement in the processes in the field (Turner, 2000). Tracing the development of embodied ethnography, Monaghan (2006, as cited in Hickey & Smith, 2020, p.4) wrote that embodied ethnography emergence takes place by considering the role of

the body in ethnography and problematising its presence in the field and production of ethnographic writing. Quaranta (2021) adds that in the 1990s, there was a focus on cultural practices as a site for embodied practices for immediate consideration, and sensory perception was incorporated. Problematising of embodiment is also raised by Quaranta (2021, p.282) on “the very role the researcher’s body plays in the process of social participation and negotiation of meanings.”

Embodied ethnography goes beyond participation and treats participation as leading to examining the relationship between ethnography and embodiment and aims to derive meaning from the ethnographic data generated through such participation (Quaranta, 2021). Embodied ethnography is helpful in examining and understanding the processes tied to *ara* through bodily participation in the field, in Thimphu, Trashigang, and Bumthang of Bhutan. Fieldwork was conducted in June, July, August and September of 2023 in the identified places. Participation was actively employed, and 24 interviews were conducted in addition to several conversations. The anonymity of respondents is maintained in this article to protect their privacy and uphold confidentiality. This article examined the cultural significance of *ara* in the present, and traditional liquor preferences among the younger generation and whether the younger generation continues to drink *ara*, *chang*, or other drinks. As part of this article, fieldwork was conducted in Bumthang and Trashigang, considering the popularity of *ara*. Thimphu is another focus area to bring out the significance of *ara* in the lives of its inhabitants.

## **Lifting alcohol for drinking and offering**

"When a man lifts a cup, it is not only the kind of drink that is in it, the amount he is likely to take, and the circumstances under which he will do the drinking that are- specified in advance for him, but also whether the contents of the cup will cheer or stupefy, whether they will induce affection or aggression, guilt or unalloyed pleasure. These and many other cultural definitions attach to the drink even before it touches the lips"

These words by Mandelbaum shed light on varied meanings and cultural values attached to alcohol. Similarly, alcohol carries specific cultural connotations in Bhutan. In this regard, it is crucial to trace the form of alcohol in the past, which, as per the literature, informs that it was in place during the pre-Buddhist Bon religion in its usage for appeasing deities. Later, these practices were carried into Vajrayana Buddhism, where alcohol use is found in Buddhist rituals as an offering to deities (Dorji, 2007). Further, alcohol is considered to be nurturing, having healing properties; the problems attached to it lie with the abuse of it, or the abuser (Dorji, 2007). Consumption of alcohol is widespread in Bhutan, and its prevalence is considered to be very high (Jamtsho & Wangdi, 2019). It is socially and culturally accepted among Bhutanese to consume alcohol.

*Ara* and *bangchang* are home based, produced for consumption within family or for guests, but they are also commercialised, despite prohibition by the state. Commercialised alcohols of this form are cheaper, which is prevalent among low-income groups (Namgyel, 2005). In Bhutan, alcohol also has significance in people's social and cultural lives. It is said that alcohol is present in the form of offerings in rituals, during celebrations and festivals, and in fostering social ties (Jamtsho & Wangdi, 2019; Schrempf, 2015).

Our ethnographic fieldwork in Bumthang attested to these accounts of alcohol use for offering and drinking during the annual festivals observed in Ura, Shingkhar, and Tangsibi. These places have annual festivals- the *Ura Yakchoed*, observed annually in the third lunar month by the Ura community; the *Shingkhar Rabney*, celebrated annually in the eleventh lunar month in Shingkhar; and Tangsibi Mani, observed in Tangsibi, annually in the first lunar month. For various offerings during these festivals, such as *duetse*, *tshokchang* and catered to the participants, including the *lama*, monks, *gomchen* (lay ritualists/practitioners) and mask dancers and other participants, including the spectators, the community people contribute the alcohol or the grains used to prepare the alcohol, which usually takes place a month ahead of the actual festival. Additionally, our conversations with our host in Tangsibi revealed a unique and interesting social event called *changkor* that takes place over the course of the festival. This event entails *lama*, mask dancers and *gomchen* journeying from house to house singing, dancing, and drinking alcohol and other

beverages. According to the locals, this event will sometimes continue until daybreak. While alcohol use during rituals such as *loche* (annual ritual) and festivals is still intact in the communities, our conversations with the locals indicated that its use has declined compared to the past. This change is neatly captured in our conversation with 84-year-old, Dorji from Ura:

“During the *loche* in the past, we had customary of various offerings of alcohol to *gomchens* starting from the morning till the evening. We had practices of offering *zheychang* (alcohol served after breakfast), *bjachang* (served after tea), then before lunch, there was this practice of offering *tohchang* (served before lunch/meals) and after lunch, we used to offer *sheychang* (alcohol served after lunch). We also had practice of offering *tshokchang* (alcohol served when making *tshok*-feast offering). When the *loche* wind up, we had to then offer *deychang* (alcohol served after ritual is ended). Now we do not have most of these offerings during *loche*. In fact, our *lama* has been vocal against these offerings and told us that he will not attend the rituals if still these practices of offering. Except for the *tshokchang* and *marchang*, we do not usually see many offerings these days.”

Likewise, *chang* in Bhutan is also used for daily offerings to deities, welcoming guests, building social ties, and for occasional events and religious ceremonies (Miyamoto, 2020). It is common for *ara* to be used in rituals associated with making offerings. *Ara* is a key component in various types of *chang* that are linked to spiritual activities, such as “*Serkem-chang*, *Tor-chang*, *Tshog-chang*, *Dutsi-chang*, *Sangdze-chang*, *Jinsek-chang*, *Yang-chang*, *Ngo chang*, *Tsan-chang*, *Tshe-chang*, *Khando-chang*” (Namgyel, 2005, p.57). Taking note of the importance of alcohol in Bhutan, here, the writings of Dorji (2007: 65-66) captured the significance of alcohol in the history and rituals of Bhutan. He wrote,

“Specifically in Bhutan, historical texts refer to offering alcohol as *duetsi* during religious ceremonies as early as the seventh century, during the time of Guru Padmasambhava, and in the seventeenth century, during the era of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. This tradition is followed even today. Alcohol offering



is essentially made in two forms; one is rather more subtle, as *duetsi* during ritualistic religious rites while the other is more socialized, as Marching, during ceremonies to evoke deities' blessings when embarking on any new ventures. Duetsi is the sweetened Ara (home-distilled spirit) offered in a human skull cup; at the ceremony end, the *duetsi*, which is believed to have acquired divine blessings, is distributed to worshippers. Marchang ceremonies meanwhile are more commonplace, brief, less complex and usually performed by lay people. Freshly brewed wine from grains is offered symbolically to deities and important people such as members of the Royal Family during the Marchang ceremony held before important social functions."

*Ara* holds a long tradition in Bhutanese life in varied aspects including historical and religious aspects. According to Dorji (2011), offerings of alcohol for deities were in place before Buddhism came to the country. Further, alcohol was mentioned in various historical events, including of Drukpa Kuenlay (Namgyel, 2005; Dorji, 2011). This historical basis informs the Bhutanese way of life. Alcohol has a presence in ritualistic and symbolic functions in the lives of Bhutanese in pleasing deities and averting any illness and evils (Dorji, 2011). Taking note of this, the writings by Namgyel (2005) bring forth the importance of *ara* culture in Bhutan. The preparation, consumption, and cultural significance of *ara* are an integral part of Bhutanese life. To this aspect, Namgyel treats *ara* as an intangible culture of Bhutan as *ara* preparation and drinking patterns evolve over time.

In Bhutan, *ara* and its drinking tradition are prevalent in eastern and central Bhutan. However, *chang* is found in western Bhutan (Dorji, 2011). The people of Bhutan, particularly in the eastern and central regions, are known to consume more *ara*. *Chang* as mentioned by Dorji (2011), is an important component in the observation of *Marchang*, a ceremony for hosting guests with a goodwill message for longevity and well-being. A similar form is present in offering *tshogchang* to extend hospitality to official guests. Namgyel (2005) emphasises about Eastern Bhutan where *ara* plays an important role in the popular cultures of *tshogchang* and *dunchang*. They are traditional Bhutanese social gatherings for relatives, friends, and neighbours, and *ara* is the main alcoholic beverage that facilitates these interactions. In certain customs in

Eastern Bhutan, Namgyel (2005) wrote that there is a tradition where one person holds another person's hands while pouring *arak*, a traditional alcoholic beverage, into their mouth, all while singing a traditional song.

The production of alcohol is carried out mainly through the process of fermentation. Rice is the main product used in this process of alcohol production apart from fruits (Singh & Singh, 2006; Johnstone, 2002, p. 48; Allen, 1905, p. 62; Elwin, 1959, p. 20; Hodson, 1911, p. 60). Behura and Panigraha (2006, p. 128) argue that the basis for the type of raw materials used in liquor production depends on the availability of raw materials in a particular area, especially among tribal communities. This was attested to by our respondents. As shared by a 78-year-old respondent from Shingkar, Bumthang:

“the residents here largely engaged in brewing *ara* and the raw materials used are also grown and available in the locality. Cereals such as *kar* (wheat) *na* (barley), *jo* (bitter buckwheat) and *grai* (sweetbuckwheat) are commonly used raw materials. Similarly, the *pham* (yeast) used during the fermentation process can also be found here. It is called *phabshing*, however, people now used the readily available imported yeast”.

Additionally, the series of interviews from Ura and Tangsibi in Bumthang revealed that locals use similar cereals, such as wheat, to prepare and brew *ara*.

In Bhutan, rural communities produce *ara* from cereals and grains. They have been brewed for many generations and till today (Jamtsho & Wangdi, 2019). . Ingredients in making alcohol are instrumental to the quality of it, *ara* produced from red rice and wheat, known as *changsum*, is considered top quality, followed by *ara* made from white rice, and wheat as third grade. Those *ara* made from maize is considered the lowest quality (Namgyel, 2005). *Bangchang* is a high-calorie fermented liquor, while *Singchang* is typically made from rice brew. Namgyel (2005) presented that rice, maize, wheat, millet, buckwheat and barley are commonly used for brewing alcohol.

In addition to ingredients for making *ara*, the process involved in making *ara* is an ingrained knowledge present among Bhutanese. There are two processes in making *ara*: grain (called *lum* or *yu dama*) is fermented and then distilled (Namgyel, 2005). A

good proportion of grains and yeast plays an important role in yielding the quality and strength of drinks in addition to optimal temperature and the length of fermentation. Sometimes, red sandalwood is added to *ara* for colour and flavour; they are often labelled as special *ara*. In the name of medicinal value in *ara*, there are instances in which people add wasp of pupae, bone marrow of cow, fish, egg, etc. (Dorji, 2007; Namgyel, 2005). The typical duration for the *ara* distillation process to begin is after two to three weeks of fermentation. The brew is then mixed with water and distilled using heat to allow volatile spirits to evaporate, condense, and collect (Namgyel, 2005). In Trashigang, the people primarily use maize, sometimes mixed with wheat, barley, or rice to brew *ara*. As Wangmo, 55 year old, states during our fieldwork,

“In our village, we exclusively used locally produced maize as the primary resource for brewing. Preparation begins with grinding the grains. The ground grains are then boiled in water until they are fully cooked. After cooking, the mixture is cooled on a clean surface. The fermentation process starts by adding local yeast to the cooled mixture. It is then covered with blankets. The fermentation period can vary significantly, ranging from 3 days to 3 months. For distillation, traditional equipment is used, including the *arazang* (a long vessel), *khataw* (steel bowls), and *khang-sum* (three sticks). The setup is carefully sealed to prevent air from entering. During the distillation process, the water is changed 5-6 times.”

However, during distillation, it is imperative to avoid any air intake, as this would compromise the *ara*'s quality, rendering it akin to plain water with a diminished taste as stated by Yeshe Choden during our fieldwork.

*Ara* in Bhutan is consumed by men and women in eastern Bhutan, where intoxication is common (Schrempf, 2015). In addition to this, alcohol in Bhutan is considered to elevate one's mood or, in other instances, for relaxation (Dorji, 2007). This significance does not end here, as alcohol is also counted as an important food item and a good social drink (Dorji, 2007). In other writings on alcohol, Gefou-Madianou (1992) notes that drinking is accompanied by food in many societies; similarly, in the account of Mandelbaum (1965), alcohol is treated as food, not as a stimulant when taken during

meals. The tradition surrounding alcohol is steeped in Bhutanese society, where sharing of alcohol marks the meeting and departing moments (Dorji, 2011). Moreover, alcohol consumption in Bhutan is not attached to stigma; rather, alcohol is widely accepted, and it plays an integral role in everyday lives surrounding social gatherings, leading to the fostering of community bonds (Dorji, 2007).

The drinking of *ara* is an important part of the culture for farmers, during the day or particularly after a hard day's work (Namgyel, 2005). It is seen as a way to relax and recharge after working in the fields, helping the men feel both physically and mentally rejuvenated. *Ara* is commonly consumed after various labor-intensive activities such as house construction, gathering firewood and bamboo, transporting manure, carrying heavy loads, and harvesting crops (Namgyel, 2005). In Trashigang, *ara* is not only viewed as a social drink but also as a traditional medicine with specific health benefits. *Ara* is commonly used to lessen physical discomfort after a day of hard work. It's believed to help relax muscles and reduce overall body pain. As Sonam Norbu explicitly states during fieldwork, "We view *ara* as a form of medicine, as it effectively alleviates our pain and helps relieve tiredness after a day of heavy workload." Yeshe Choden corroborated this: "Within the village, *ara* consumption is prevalent, particularly among those who have had a tiring day and find solace and relaxation in this traditional beverage."

On the role of alcohol in the life of Bhutanese, Dorji (2007) wrote that they are usually exposed to alcohol after they are born during the celebration for newborns wherein '*chhangkhoy*', rice-based alcohol is served to the guests and mother. The offering of alcohol to the mother is intended to alleviate pain and increase strength (Dorji, 2011). This marks the start of alcohol in the life stages of Bhutanese in socialisation, cultural, and ritual aspects. When the life stage comes to an end during the time of the funeral, the mourning moment is constituted of alcohol brought by relatives, friends, and well-wishers. The alcohol present in such a moment signifies offering condolence to the grieving family who are mourning death in their family (Dorji, 2007). Dorji (2011) also wrote that alcohol acts as a consolation in times of bereavement, in addition to providing relaxation and pleasure during festivals, and marks the hospitality aspect and during disputes as a reconciliatory factor. Showing how *ara* is integral in the Bhutanese way of life, Namgyel (2005) presented how the national game of archery begins with a ritual called "*chang phu*," which involves offering a traditional alcoholic

drink called *chang* to the local deity, for protection and safety for the players. During the game, players often bring a bottle of arak to warm up, especially when they are not performing well. In villages, when men play archery, their wives often come to watch the game and bring a barrel of arak (Namgyel, 2005). *Ara* is served to players, spectators, and well-wishers during the game.

Alcohol is also used in other traditional games like *khuru* and *dego* (a traditional game that involves throwing a pair of flat round stones to stick driven into the ground). In the archery game contest called *Chogda* played at village, *geogs* (block consisting groups of villages) or district levels, which lasts from three to seven days, *arak* is the main drink used almost daily (Namgyel, 2005). Using embodied ethnography, one of the authors attended archery matches many times at Royal Thimphu College, Thimphu, in 2023. The author, though did not participate in archery, he did participate in alcohol consumption, was present by observing the archery match. Regarding the alcohol aspect, which was served during the archery matches, he noticed that *ara* was not served in all the archery matches he attended. Instead, it was the factory-manufactured alcoholic beers which were present in the archery game. This represents the changing trend in urban places like Thimphu where alcohols manufactured from the factory are increasingly favoured over traditional drinks like *ara*. However, using embodied ethnography, the author partook in drinking beer at the archery match to get a sense of the participants' mood and passion. He sensed that beer drinking alleviated the interest and zeal of participants at the archery game. This has been the case since before when *ara* was exclusively served at an archery match. The application of embodied ethnography helped the author to go beyond understanding the perspectives around *ara* and immersed into the state of intoxication experienced by participants. This allowed the author to experience socialisation, bonding, and humour properly shared among the participants.

*Ara* is also an essential part of many celebrations, including *Losar* (New Year), *Thrue* (Blessed Rainy Day), *Nyenpa Guzom* (Gathering of Nine Evils), and other events like marriage, baby showers, and *rimdro*. One of the authors, using embodied ethnography, attended various ceremonies in Thimphu, Punakha, and Bumthang in *rimdro* ritual, baby shower, blessed rainy day, and social gatherings where *ara* was served extensively. The author immersed with the host and guests in drinking *ara* in these gatherings. In doing so, it allowed the author to locate the notions and be in the

moment with people sharing *ara*. Through this embodied ethnography, there are various factors that were experienced and perceived, which otherwise would not have been possible without immersing in drinking *ara*. The socialisation aspect became more pronounced as to how drinking *ara* with people led to easing interaction and striking conversations in an unrestrained manner. For instance, in one of the gatherings in Thimphu, one camaraderie with Phuntsho Dorji was in the form of making conversation about personal life on whether the author is married or not; this conversation was not possible in a sober state with Phuntsho Dorji with whom the author shares cordial interface. This account emphasised how *ara* drinking owing to rapport, has the scope to go deeper into personal accounts using embodied ethnography.

*Ara*, in gatherings during celebrations, festivals and other events, acts as a lubricant for socialisation. The author's experiences during the period of research study clearly demonstrated how *ara* plays a significant role in socialisation factors. From one of the authors' observations during the research period, the generosity factor is another important one that came out strongly in any gathering, be it during a festival, social gathering, rituals, etc. This is attached to *ara* during these gatherings. From one of the authors' observation, *ara* in these gatherings in Thimphu, Punakha, and Bumthang flows freely into the bowl being served for relishing *ara*. The host continued to pour *ara* continuously until one's tipsiness hit way beyond the limit. The act here was seen it to be a part of the generosity feature attached to the Bhutanese way of life. During the period of our research study, there was an opportunity to engage in a conversation with one of the hosts, Tenzin Norbu from Punakha, about the prevalence of *ara* in social gatherings. According to him, *ara* is typically produced in large quantities. He added that this is consistent with the longstanding traditions of Bhutanese societies. Furthermore, he emphasised that having a limited *ara* supply at any gathering is highly unusual. Moreover, the degree of sharing *ara* is also what Namgyel (2005) wrote about the accounts of excessive drinking *ara* in Eastern Bhutan.

The application of embodied ethnography helped the author to understand and experience the intoxicated world of alcohol-induced social and cultural lives. On reflection, this comes with a set of challenges. One of them is the exposure to the ill effects of alcohol consumption, where *ara* serving is done in a generous manner, which is cultural, and a refusal to take the serving is discouraged. In such a scenario,

using embodied ethnography can invite the harmful effects of alcohol consumption when consumed in large quantities. The other challenge is that understanding and experiencing the intoxicated world of alcohol-induced social and cultural lives can be relative for researchers as the capacity to comprehend from a state of intoxication is very subjective. The writing by Quaranta (2021) finds relevance here on the researcher's role on their participation and construction of meanings as to how these are subjective. Taking note of these challenges, embodied ethnography, as much as it allows scope for holistic understanding, has its own limitations.

## **Drinking alcohol on Weekends**

In various anthropological literature, it is noted that the concept of responsible drinking has been deeply ingrained in various societies. Researchers such as Garine (2001), Douglas (2002), Chatwin (2001), Palafox (2001), and Subbo (2001) have all noted that while problem drinking is relatively uncommon, mild intoxication and drunkenness are regularly observed within certain limits. Douglas (2002) further emphasises that drunkenness is often tied to acts of celebration and social interactions within specific cultural contexts. Subbo (2001) also highlights the role of alcohol consumption as a socializing agent. Moreover, Gefou-Madianou (1992) observes that different societies exhibit diverse responses to alcohol, ranging from celebrating its consumption to completely prohibiting it. Similarly, Mandelbaum (1965) viewed alcohol as a cultural artefact and argued that, like other artefacts, cultures shape the form and significance of alcohol consumption.

The commonly held notion of alcohol addiction in Bhutan is attached to Karma, leading towards irresponsible behaviour through acquired negative karma. Thus, leading to unhealthiness at the individual level and with surroundings. Dorji (2011) associates the variation of Buddhist practices for accommodating alcohol consumption with responsibility yet with caution of bad karma. These accounts convey the importance of cultural aspects of alcohol in Bhutan and its continuity of *ara* in the present, where globalisation and consumerism abound. This raises a question about the relevance of cultural practices tied to alcohol in the present and how the communities of Bhutan strive to preserve and protect them.

The state takes note of the importance of alcohol in Bhutan, considering its popularity

and significance in the Bhutanese way of life. The state regulates the sale and consumption of alcohol in Bhutan. The Army Welfare Project (AWP) produces and sells alcoholic beverages to generate revenue for the welfare of army personnel. They are counted as industrial alcoholic beverages. Industrially produced alcoholic beverages encompass a wide variety of options. These include beer, primarily made from malt barley, and wine, which includes vermouth, fortified wine, blended wine, and sparkling wine. In addition, there are distilled spirits such as whisky, rum, and brandies. Established in 1976 under the Companies Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, AWP aims to contribute to economic growth and development (Dorji, 2011). However, at present, there is a prevalence of various imported drinks, the likes of Korean and Japanese drinks in the form of soju, sake, or even breezer (fruit-flavoured beverage with mild alcoholic content) from India. These were observed extensively during the fieldwork period. On a blessed rainy day in Bumthang, one host informed that breezer drink is gaining a foothold these days in contrast to how *ara* was popular on special occasions. This is one trend which is becoming common across the country, especially when it comes to choices for drinking alcoholic beverages.

Among popular alcoholic drinks, *ara* and other homemade alcohol are considered the most popular drinks in the country. Common homemade wine varieties - used traditionally as food beverages- such as *bangchang*, *sinchang* and *tongba* - have an alcohol content of less than five percent. *Ara*, the distilled alcohol has a higher alcohol content but was used only for special purposes (Dorji, 2007). However, in the present, industrially produced alcoholic beverages are gaining a foothold in their popularity, dating their production in the country from the early 1970s. According to the Bhutan Living Standard Survey (BLSS, 2003 & 2007 as cited in Dorji, 2011), homebased alcohols such as *ara* (distilled from grains), *bangchang* (fermented and extracted from grains), *singchang* (extracted from grains), *tongba*, and *chang-kyod* are reported to be the main alcoholic drinks consumed in Bhutan. Of them, *ara* is the strongest alcohol (Namgyel, 2005). According to Bhutan Living Standard Surveys (NSB, BLSS 2003 and 2007) data, *ara* and *bangchang* were the most popular drinks in Bhutan; however, they are considered illegal for sale. The DRC conducts field inspections on the illegal production and sale of local brews three times a year without prior notice, in addition to investigating complaints (Dorji, 2011, p.97).

As part of this research, we attempted to incorporate tourism to examine whether the



commercialisation of alcohol, especially *ara*, is also influenced by tourists in the country. We take note of tourist establishments in the town that showcase *ara* as a cultural attraction, particularly in designated tourist spots. In Thimphu, *ara* is now being bottled and sold in select licenses, marking a significant departure from its traditional context where it was primarily brewed and shared within communities. One of us visited the commercial establishment in Thimphu to inquire about the sale of *ara* and its customers. This interaction informs us that the bottled *ara* in Thimphu caters to both tourists and older generations who use *ara* for rituals and other ceremonies. The commercialisation here upholds the cultural aspects of *ara* yet it also caters to draw the attention of tourists in terms of representing Bhutanese culture. However, Thimphu's local bars and restaurants predominantly stock factory-manufactured alcohols and *ara* finds less presence. This emerging dual identity of *ara*—both a commercialised cultural product for tourists and a traditional beverage for ceremonies and rituals—reflects the broader changes in Bhutanese society as it manoeuvres between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to modern commercial pressures.

In Bhutanese society, drinking patterns are witnessing an intersection between the traditional use of alcoholic drinks in rural communities and the growing commercial influence that is expanding the availability of alcohol and drinking establishments into new social settings (Dorji, 2011). Taking note of the shift in drinking patterns in places like Thimphu and Paro where commercialisation is widespread in terms of the popularity of factory manufactured alcohols and the mushrooming of several bars, cafeterias, restaurants and the sale of bottled *ara* in one franchise in Thimphu, and the drinking gathering on weekends, we carried this understanding on the shift in drinking patterns in Thimphu and Paro to our fieldwork in Bumthang.

At Bumthang, we noticed a few shops and bars with factory-manufactured alcohols like beer, whiskey, rum, etc. The bar in Bumthang is akin to *Joujonmei kai* (a house where alcohol is served) of Rongmei Naga of Manipur (Kamei & Majumder, 2019), cantinas of Mexico (Palafox, 2001), and the case of Abagusii of Western Kenya where women use their household spaces as private bars (Subbo, 2001). We asked around for *ara* in these shops and at the bar with the purpose of buying them for our consumption. We failed to find any, though we were aware that *ara* is available in abundance. We are also aware that the state regulates selling of *ara*. As we continued

our visits to the bar, we were served *ara* on a few occasions. We inquired to procure them to buy it for our personal consumption. This was unsuccessful. We managed to get into a conversation about this and were informed that people brew *ara* strictly for serving guests, besides its other purposes for family, festivals, and rituals. This conversation highlighted the deep cultural significance of *ara* in Bumthang. Subsequent interviews and observations in Bumthang, Tansgibi, Ura, Shingkar, Chamkar, and Trashigang confirmed that *ara* plays a significant role in the social fabric of these communities. It became evident that the socialisation aspect of *ara* remains strong in Bumthang and Trashigang, with the emphasis placed on its cultural and communal significance rather than its commercialisation.

In places like Thimphu and Paro, the degree of brewing *ara* is less compared to eastern Bhutan. However, they are still utilised in rituals. When it comes to consumption purposes in gatherings and festivals, the consumption of *ara* is becoming lesser compared to the eastern and central parts of the country. This is informed strongly by our interviews in Thimphu, Bumthang and Trashigang. Moreover, with the new culture of social gatherings and partying on weekends among the younger generation, the preference for factory-manufactured alcohol has become a trend. The commercial entertainment sections, fueled by profit motives, are reshaping the social landscape of drinking. Furthermore, a shift is taking place in Bhutan's contemporary lifestyle, influencing identity, lifestyle, and alcohol consumption patterns (Dorji, 2011). Wealthier individuals tend to lean towards higher quality local brews, beer, wine, and other popular drinks, while those from less affluent backgrounds appear to consume those that are affordable to them. As industrial alcoholic beverages become more widely available, even in the most remote areas of the country, it is likely that rural residents will increasingly spend on these products (Dorji, 2011).

In Trashigang, imported alcoholic beverages are increasingly favoured over traditional *ara*. As Norzangmo shares about this pattern during interview, "Nowadays, it is common to see people predominantly consuming beer, rockbee, coke, and other such beverages." Similarly, Yeshe Choden nods during fieldwork, "The people appear less inclined towards our local *ara*, mainly because they have been exposed to foreign liquors and find them more appealing." The observation in Tansgibi, Bumthang attested to this account from Trashigang. The night we arrived

at Tangsibi, we went to one of the shops in the village accompanied by our host family. We observed that the shop was filled with industrially produced alcohol and beverages such as beer, breezer, whiskey and other fizzy drinks. Our conversations with the locals who came to the shop to drink and relax after a day-long hard labour also revealed that industrial alcoholic beverages are popular among residents and youths in particular. One reason that came out strongly for the preference of industrial alcoholic beverages alcohol among the youth based on our interviews in Thimphu is that they associate these drinks with a "cool" factor, in contrast to traditional beverages.

The Royal Government came up with an effort to boost domestic revenue with regulations on the sale and pricing of bar licenses in 1999. As a result, there is now one bar for every 250 Bhutanese citizens, with an estimated 10 bottles of alcohol per year for every man, woman, and child in Bhutan (Dorji, 2007). Data shows that 50 per cent of the population prefers homemade alcohol, and around 20 per cent consume an average of five bottles per week. Many people carry the perception that homemade alcohol is less harmful to health than commercial varieties. Studies have found that homemade and cheaper alcohol is more damaging to the liver due to its higher aldehyde content. Heavy drinkers often consume cheap alcohol due to economic reasons (Dorji, 2007). Alcohol can harm nearly every organ and system in the body, contributing to over 60 diseases, including liver cirrhosis, heart disease, and cancer. Taking note of this perception, our interview with respondents shared what they make of commercial and homemade alcohol. Most of our respondents from Bumthang and Trashigang shared that they find traditional alcoholic beverages safer than industrially manufactured alcohols. They also hinted that the rising cases of alcohol-related illness are attributed to beer, whiskey, rum, etc.

## **Conclusion**

Alcohol carries with it various meanings and values to Bhutanese from the past and how they are articulated in the present. This article shows that alcohol plays a significant role in the life of Bhutan. The pattern of drinking and cultural practices attached to alcohol are responding to changes taking place in the country. The article implies that alcohol and cultural aspects are sustained, yet people adapt and incorporate new elements into their daily lives. The popularity of industrial-

manufactured alcohols like beer, rum, whiskey, vodka and even imported ones like soju, breezer, etc., suggests the shift in the pattern of drinking, lifestyle, and re-orientation in cultural practices. This was seen conspicuously in urban places like Thimphu, Paro and Punakha; this pattern is also observed and shared with us in Bumthang and Trashigang, yet people in these places still consume more *ara* in comparison to urban places. However, in rural places like Bumthang and Trashigang, based on our field data and secondary data for eastern Bhutan, the cultural practices attached to *ara* are mostly intact. Yet, they are present in urban places, too, in special events like baby showers, festivals, rituals, archery, etc. The significance of *ara* is strong in the country overall, however, a shift is already taking place and people are taking note of changes and incorporating them into their lives while adapting to changes and sustaining cultural aspects present in *ara* and other traditional drinks.

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# Faculty mentoring programme at Norbuling Rigter College – Analysis through the lens of self-determination theory.

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*Kuenzang Dorji*<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study sought to investigate the faculty mentoring programme through the framework of self-determination theory (SDT) at Norbuling Rigter College (NRC). The main goal was to examine how the principles of SDT—namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are expressed within the dynamics of faculty mentoring relationships and their effects on the experiences of mentees. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study utilized semi-structured interviews alongside thematic analysis for data collection and interpretation. Participants, comprising both mentors and mentees, were selected through a purposeful sampling method to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. The interviews concentrated on the roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in shaping motivation, engagement, and overall satisfaction among mentees. Thematic analysis revealed key themes that were framed within the context of SDT principles, providing valuable insights into their significance in the faculty mentoring program. The results underscore the importance of the faculty mentoring program in advancing the institution's mission and fostering the professional development of both mentors and mentees. Additionally, the program has highlighted various challenges faced by early-career academics and has proposed essential strategies to address these issues.

**Keywords:** faculty mentoring, self-determination theory, qualitative research,

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<sup>1</sup> Kuenzang Dorji is an Associate Lecturer at Norbuling Rigter College in Paro and can be reached at: [kuenzang.dorji@nrc.bt](mailto:kuenzang.dorji@nrc.bt)

## Introduction

The faculty mentoring programme at Norbuling Rigter College (NRC) was launched on 29 August, 2023, marking a new beginning for faculty community. At the core of this initiative is the professional growth and development of faculty members with senior faculty providing the essential supports and guidance that the new faculty members need to thrive in their teaching and research. The programme is designed to encourage mutual learning through exchange of knowledge and insights about the institutional standards and best practices. Building upon the vision and mission of the institute, this programme aims to help faculty members, enhance their academic performance, develop their leadership skills, and navigate their career paths with confidence. Faculty mentoring programme is deemed crucial to enhancing the academic and professional growth of tutors.

Beyond the professional development and personal growth, this programme aims to develop a deep sense of belonging and community amongst the faculty based on the belief that high morale enhances motivation and productivity. This ultimately contributes to the student's academic progress as well, and also creates an environment where everyone in the institution feels supported through shared resources, such as research skills and collaboration. Such practice enables faculty members not only to achieve their own academic aspirations but also to contribute meaningfully to the vibrant community at NRC. Thus, the faculty mentoring programme was initiated to create a nurturing environment where ideas can thrive and everyone has an opportunity to grow together.

Launching the faculty mentoring programme is an exciting yet challenging journey for mentors as they take on the responsibility of supporting their colleagues. Mentors can play important role in this programme serving as guide in personal growth and professional development of their mentees. Their commitment to nurturing these relationships is essential for creating a thriving academic environment. In this regard, incorporating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) into the programme can offers a valuable perspective on enhancing engagement and intrinsic motivation amongst the

mentees.

Incorporating the self-determination theory can provide the different perspectives in enhancing the engagement and intrinsic motivation through three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness and competence. Incorporating the principles of self-determination theory can encourage greater intrinsic motivation within the mentees which can help the overall outcomes such as enhancing collaboration, job satisfaction, improved teaching skills and mentoring practices. Encouraging autonomy empowers mentees to take control of their own learning journeys. At the same time, fostering a sense of relatedness helps create strong, supportive connections between mentors and mentees. When mentors actively engage with their mentees and provide constructive feedback along with skill-building opportunities, they can significantly boost their mentees' confidence and abilities. By embracing these principles, we can cultivate a vibrant learning environment that sparks greater intrinsic motivation within mentees. This does not only enrich personal and professional development but also enhance the overall success of the mentorship programme. Ultimately, when mentees thrive, the entire academic community benefits, creating a culture of collaboration and shared growth that uplifts everyone involved.

By exploring Self-Determination Theory as theoretical framework, this paper seeks to understand the factors that contribute to effective mentorship. With this knowledge in hand, mentors at Norbuling Rigter College can refine their approaches, tailoring their support to better meet the needs of their mentees. Ultimately, this exploration aims to enhance the mentoring experience, fostering more meaningful connections and growth for everyone involved.

## **Purpose of the study**

The faculty mentoring programme plays an important role in personal growth and professional development, as mentor provides the guidance and support that enhances the mentees' confidence. This nurturing relationship enables mentees to develop essential skills and emotional resilience which helps them in navigating life's challenges and seize opportunities with greater assurance. This study aims to investigate the faculty mentoring relationship through the framework of self-



determination theory, emphasizing the key components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. And by examining how these elements contribute and shape mentee experience, the study seeks to provide valuable insights that can improve the effectiveness and satisfaction of faculty mentoring program, empowering growth of mentees through usage of self-determination theory within any educational institution. The main research questions that were explored are the following: 1) What are the contributions of faculty mentoring programme to building the sense of community amongst the faculty members? 2) How has the faculty mentoring programme at NRC helped improve professional growth and development of mentors and mentees? And 3) How do the principles of self-determination theory (SDT) leverage mentor-mentee relationships and strengthen mentees' engagement and motivation at Norbuling Rigter College?

## **Faculty mentoring programme: relationship, roles and impacts**

Mentoring is multifaceted in nature with various functions. Kram (1985) identified two functions of mentorship: career and psychological. The career mentorship includes coaching and exposure while psychological mentorship includes role modeling and emotional support. Similarly, American Psychological Association (2006) describes that mentorship encompasses facilitating of numerous emotional and professional supports including but not limited to giving advice, wisdom, counseling, coaching, and professional settings. Mentorship is a reciprocal relationship that involves guidance by the knowledgeable person and contributes in collaborative learning (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). This relationship can help improve not only the performance of the mentees but it also contributes to professional development of the mentors and enhance institutional cohesion as well.

In higher educational institutions, faculty mentorship programme is deemed crucial component of professional development. It has profound impacts on retention, engagement of faculty and the overall success of an institution. A study by Baker and McCluskey (2019) shows significant influence and contribution of faculty mentor-mentee relationship, a formalised process in which less experienced faculty is guided

by experienced faculty as mentor, to the growth of mentees in teaching and research. Eby et al. (2013) asserted that mentorship can help career development of individuals and promote collaboration among faculty which will improve the performances of mentees. In their study, Baker and Lattuca (2010) found faculty improving their instructional methods and research output under such mentorship programme. Further, they argued that faculty mentorship provides mutual benefits through interaction and exchange of ideas and knowledge between the mentors and the mentees. Mentors do not only deliver and share knowledge but also gain fresh perspectives and refine their relationship with newer inputs.

Effective mentorship acts as an agent of personal and professional development which is crucial for retention of faculty members and institutional staffs (Baker & McCluskey, 2019). The early career academics, especially who are disoriented with their roles, require mentorship thereby enhance the potential of retention (Higgins and Kram, 2001). The sense of belonging and commitment to the mission and vision of its institution (Strayhorn, 2012) can uplift the morale of faculty and strengthen the institutional capability to retain the faculty and students.

## **Challenges in mentorship**

Faculty mentoring programme is crucial in tertiary education and academic success, it has a massive influence on personal and professional development of faculty and students. However, there are several challenges that constraint the effectiveness of mentorship. Johnson (2007) noted that communication is one of the most important aspects of mentorship hence miscommunication and lack of clarity can result in disengagement. The lack of clarity in communication can hinder the implementation of successful mentor-mentee programme. More concerning challenge in mentorship as noted by Allen et al. (2007) is the mismatched expectation which undermines the effectiveness of their engagement and level of support that reduces commitment. Generally, this issue of feeling unsupported emerges from the lack of initial consensus on goals and roles (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). The mentorship programme that does not align with the expectation and need of the faculty does not result to successful implementation as there will be lack of participation from both mentors and mentees (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

'Time' is another important factor in faculty mentoring. Especially in educational institution, availability of time is crucial to achieving the objectives of faculty mentoring programme. At times faculty are burdened with heavy research, teaching, administrative task, and other institutional responsibilities, which adversely affect the faculty dedication to mentoring (Higgin & Kram, 2001). In addition to time aspect, sufficient training for faculty mentors and availability of institutional support systems are important factors influencing successful delivery of faculty mentoring approach (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2010). Absence or lack of institutional support can lead to inconsistency in mentoring (McCormack, 2016).

More importantly, psychological factor can greatly shape the mentoring relationship. Zachary (2011) found that the new faculty feels intimidated by their mentors in mentorship programme which results in reluctance in seeking support. Psychological factor, such as self-doubt diminishes the objectives of mentorship as mentee does not engage in the mentorship (Eby et al., 2013). On top of that, lack of systematic evaluation and constructive feedback also hinders the mentorship by not making any progress and adjustment (Tinto, 1993).

## **Best practices in mentorship**

Effective mentorship enriches mentees growth and also contributes to the institutional culture and professional development of mentors. Zachary (2011) noted that one of the fundamentals of effective mentorship is to set well-defined goals to guide the mentorship process and framework of measuring the success, such as mentee expected to acquire specific skills, or knowledge in particular areas, or achieving academic or professional milestones. Similarly, Eby et al. (2013) also stated that the defined goals can help in setting roles and expectation which can result in productive engagement. In addition, the prepared and trained mentors can engage more meaningfully and create supporting environment (Johnson, 2007).

One important practice in mentorship according to Allen et al. (2007) is incorporation of 'motivation and engagement strategy' by the mentors as measures that help mentees to take proactive roles in setting their personal goals and areas to seek guidance. Eby et al. (2013) stated that by empowering mentees, mentees have

autonomy in their choice that results in commitment and greater engagement in mentorship.

Furthermore, mentorship programme is successful when mentees feel they are provided opportunities to develop their skills rather than them feeling being burdened. Crisp and Cruz (2009) also found that the mentees are more engaging in the environment that enable them to build their competencies. In regards to developing mentee's competency, Baker and Lattuca (2010) stated that the building a strong connection between mentors and mentees can enhance the mentorship programme. Hernandez et al. (2016) noted that the informal conversation and interaction can play vital role in strengthening the bond between mentor and mentee which indeed can instill the sense of belonging to the institution. Thus, assimilating the Self-Determination Theory in mentorship can make individual more motivated as it fulfills three important psychological needs of individual: autonomy, relatedness and competence (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

## **Materials and methods**

A qualitative research methodology has been employed to do ethnographic inquiry on faculty mentoring programme at Norbuling Rigter College through the lens of self-determination theory. Ethnographic approach as a form of qualitative research methodology ensures studying of the phenomena or respondents in their natural environment rather than in a laboratory, allowing in gaining insights on the social interactions in a given natural environment. This immersive nature allows the researchers in the mentorship context and gain the detailed exploration of the principles of SDT enacted in interactions between mentors and mentees. This approach provides insights into the social and cultural context, thereby enhancing the understanding of effective mentorship that meets the psychological needs outlined in SDT. Thus, through ethnographic approach, this study examines an in-depth insight of respondents on faculty mentoring programme. The sampling frame includes all faculty members participating in the faculty mentoring programme at Norbuling Rigter College. This group consists of 6 mentors to share their experiences and 6 mentees to express their expectations from faculty mentoring programme.

Semi-structured interviews based on contextual interviews have been chosen as data collection method. For the purpose of study, 6 mentors and 6 mentees were interviewed through a face-to-face interview. The interview was scheduled at the convenience of respondents and provided enough time, approximately around 30 minutes each to reflect on their experiences. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data. This analysis involves a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the interview transcripts. The data were consolidated by focusing on themes that provides insight and understanding on mentoring program through self-determination theory at Norbuling Rigter College.

## **Result and Discussion: Academic community creation**

By assigning experienced faculty members with those seeking guidance, the faculty mentoring programme has cultivated a supportive academic community that encourages collaboration and engagement among the faculty. This initiative has not only strengthened the faculty mentoring relationship but has also enhanced the overall learning experience, which aligns the findings of Crisp and Cruz (2009) regarding the mutual benefits of mentoring. While mentors gain leadership skills, mentees receive valuable insights and guidance that contributes to their personal and professional growth. The mentors and mentees at NRC recognise the value of their engagement, as they learn from one another and grow together in their academic journeys. All the mentees responded that the guidance and the support from their mentors enhanced their skills and knowledge and also inspired them to reach full potential in their career of teaching. One mentee mentioned:

“... the mentoring is not one way flow of information and support. As a mentor I have learned a lot from my mentee such as the importance of adaptability and fresh perspectives that led me to consider in reflecting my own approach of dealing with people. For instance, through mentorship, my understanding of the various challenges faced by students has enhanced my empathy. In a way this enriches not only professionally but also

ensures the inclusive academic community”

The faculty mentoring relationship as a collaborative approach enhances institutional cohesion by boosting stronger engagement among faculty members, ultimately developing a sense of belonging within the institution. For mentees, mentor’s support and guidance are crucial to confidence and capacity building, and also help develop the sense of belonging to institution.

The collaborative relationship between mentors and mentees plays a pivotal role in strengthening a sense of unity within the institution. Faculty members feel more connected to each other, fostering a strong sense of belonging through the guidance and support of their mentor. This is especially true for mentees who are new to the institution; the support and guidance they receive from their mentors greatly boost their confidence and help them feel a sense of belonging to the institution. The faculty mentorship programme is essential for engaging staff meaningfully and also serve as catalyst for retaining them within the institution. A mentee expressed that the supportive network truly made a difference in how individuals connect and thrive in their academic environment. One mentee noted:

“the supportive mentorship programme has boosted my confidence in teaching and over time I developed the genuine sense of belongingness to college. And my mentor played pivotal role in assisting me to resolve the challenges of anxiety and developing the strong commitment to contribute college. I participated in the initiatives that enhances the academic environment and genuinely excited about my career”

## **Improving teaching skills**

According to Baker and Lattuce (2010), mentorship programme can improve teaching skills and research output, and this holds true at NRC as well. Through consultation and engagement, mentor and mentee share their teaching insights and best

pedagogical strategies, encouraging innovative learning-teaching approaches. As a result, the lesson delivery improves leading to an improved student's engagement. New or less experienced faculty gain exposure to new teaching methods, such as educational technologies and blended learning which meet the diverse need of students. One mentee shared that through the faculty mentorship programme, he learned about various integrative educational technologies that promote inclusivity and accessibility in learning. He specifically mentioned platforms like Padlet, Nearpod, and the use of virtual learning environments (VLE) that have enriched his teaching practice.

The emotional support rendered by mentors has a significant impact on boosting the confidence of faculty members in their teaching and classroom management. As highlighted by Kram (1985), mentorship, encompassing dual facets of professional and psychological aspects, and emotional backing from mentors significantly influence mentees' performance. This emotionally supportive environment not only enhances individual confidence but also nurtures a positive institutional culture that prioritises well-being and professional development. A lady mentee also shared that emotionally supportive environment has made a remarkable difference in her teaching experience, emphasising how mentorship creates a sense of security and encouragement that empowers educators to thrive in their classrooms. Further stating:

“the mentorship programme led me feel more valued and accepted which I feel is important in collaboration and sharing of resources. And the collaborative approach enables us to share our teaching ideas and strategies that inspire the students”

Faculty mentorship plays a crucial role in improving research capabilities, leading to greater research output. Through faculty mentoring programme, faculty members have the opportunity to disseminate their insights on research design and methodologies, which do not only support the research process but also boosts their confidence in undertaking research. Mentors highlighted the potential for creating a dynamic research culture through mentorship as it thrives on collaboration. This collaborative spirit does not only enrich individual projects but also strengthen the

overall academic environment, encouraging everyone to push the boundaries of knowledge together.

## **Professional development**

The mentorship programme is important for personal growth and more importantly professional development for both mentees and mentors. Especially for the early-career academics, as noted by Higgins and Kram (2001), mentorship can be a powerful catalyst for personal and professional growth. It boosts the confidence and morale of mentees, encouraging them to fully commit and dedicate to the institution's mission. This programme also creates valuable opportunities for mentors and mentees to learn from each other with new faculty gaining insights from seasoned professionals. Through mentorship interaction, mentees develop essential skills such as effective teaching strategies, innovative pedagogical approaches, and classroom management techniques. For example, a mentee shared that the mentor helped in designing the target setting and work plan for the modules, emphasising the practical support that mentorship provides in enhancing in teaching practice mentioning:

“I was little uncertain and uncomfortable in writing target setting and work plan for the module I teach. I sat with mentor for discussion and mentor helped me to understand the process and component of setting target and work plan. This helped me to structure my ideas in clear and manageable. I can now outline the steps and targets with clarity and confidence. I can now write my document with assurance and structured”.

Mentors assume a pivotal role in encouraging their mentees to participate in professional development activities, such as conducting research and attending workshops. These opportunities not only help mentees connect and expand with industry professionals and professional networks, which can significantly enhance their careers. By facilitating mentees with various development programs, mentors also bridge the knowledge gap of mentees. This support not only enriches the mentees' experience but also opens doors to new opportunities, allowing them to



grow and thrive in their chosen fields.

## **Self-Determination Theory in mentorship**

While the faculty mentoring programme at NRC has many benefits, there are several challenges that hinder its successful implementation. Over time, the relationship between mentors and mentees often declines, primarily due to mismatched goals and lack of clarity regarding their respective assigned roles. When mentors and mentees come into discussions with differing expectations, support and involvement, it can lead to confusion and frustration. As a result, the investment of time and energy in mentorship may start to feel burdensome for both the parties. This feeling of being unsupported often arises from misaligned expectations. To address this, NRC has developed a working document outlining broad terms of reference for mentors and mentees. It is essential for both sides to set clear goals, define their roles, and maintain open communication. This approach can foster a more effective and lasting mentorship experience. As stated by one of the mentors, the establishment of these foundations is a key to enhancing the programme's impact.

“despite faculty mentoring programme guided by the terms of references (TOR), it is essential to set the expectation and goals of interaction between mentor and mentee which may also involve adjustment. I think it is important to have the alignment of mentor’s agenda and mentee’s expectation in which both the mentor and mentee have equal responsibilities. For now, the lack of clarity between mentor and mentee on their interaction is impeding the effective execution as it is confusing”

Furthermore, mentors have expressed that one of the biggest challenges they face is the time limitation to dedicate to mentoring. With their demanding schedules filled with teaching and various administrative responsibilities, it can be difficult for them to focus on their mentees as much as they would like. Even with a strong commitment to mentorship, many mentors often find it hard to strike a balance between their

numerous responsibilities and maintaining a meaningful, impactful relationship with their mentees. In addition, mentors believe that proper training could significantly enhance their mentoring skills. They feel that structured training would provide them with a clearer approach to mentoring, helping to eliminate inconsistencies in guidance and setting clear expectations. This, in turn, would create a more supportive environment for their mentees. Moreover, such training could equip mentors with the tools to implement effective evaluations and provide constructive feedback, fostering growth and development in their mentees while also enhancing their own mentoring capabilities. Ultimately, this would enrich the overall mentoring experience for both parties.

Some of the mentees shared that one of the main challenges they face in participating in the faculty mentorship programme is the lack of confidence when approaching their more experienced mentors. This feeling often emerges from a feeling of inadequacy and the fear of reaching out to the experienced mentors. Such barriers can significantly hinder engagement and communication between mentors and mentees. For mentorship to be impactful and effective, it is essential to create a programme that encourages engagement and empowers new faculty members, helping them overcome their confidence issues to develop their personal and professional growth. One mentee pointed out:

“my mentor has extensive experience; I am indeed hesitant to disturb and take away the time which he may be investing on important matter. Additionally, I often feel that my doubts are minor issues that are not worth discussion”

Mentees, especially with low confidence and self-esteem, often find the mentorship to be challenging, particularly when it comes to approaching experienced mentors unless the mentors actively allot time for them. This dynamic can make the mentorship programme feel ineffective. While mentors are eager to support and guide their mentees by sharing their skills and knowledge, the perceived distance between them can seem insurmountable. Mentees frequently grapple with self-doubt, worrying about being judged based on their mentors' expectations. To enhance the effectiveness of faculty mentoring, integrating Self-Determination

Theory (SDT) which focuses on fulfilling the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (as noted by Deci and Ryan in 1985) is deemed beneficial. By designing their support systems to bridge this gap, mentors can help cultivate the confidence of their mentees, enabling a more positive and productive mentoring experience for everyone involved.

In a way, embracing the principles of Self-Determination Theory in mentorship allows mentees to actively participate in determining the expectations and values of their mentorship, ensuring the experience more engaging and meaningful. This results in boosting the confidence. The NRC's initiative to enhance the faculty mentoring programme is designed to improve academic performance and help mentees navigate their career pathways with confidence. Through the sharing of ideas and skills, this collaborative approach can truly transform the mentorship experience, fostering a supportive environment where mentees feel valued and motivated to succeed.

## Relatedness

The principles of relatedness of Self-Determination Theory can serve a crucial guidance in strengthening the faculty mentoring programme in college. It is because the concept of relatedness focusses on developing meaningful and strong connection between mentor and mentee. Mentees in NRC also responded that they feel more valued and welcoming with the mentors who are sociable and extrovert in nature, building atmosphere of strong sense of community. The sense of family fraternity enables the mentees to share their thoughts and aspiration openly and also challenge the views of mentors, thus creating the high level of engagement. A mentor also mentioned in the interview:

*"I realised that the extroverted and sociable attitudes make much easier for my colleagues to approach me for interaction. I found that the proper rapport can enable conducive environment within which the ideas and concerns can be exchanged between mentee and mentor. I feel that the*

*openness and approachable attitude can lead to more meaningful interaction, without fear or hesitation."*

In academic environment, combination of support and empathy creates a nurturing and welcoming environment that fosters both intellectual and emotional development of mentees. Mentors are of the view that showing genuine concerns for the challenges their mentees face significantly enhances the value of the mentorship experience. In the case of mentors, developing a deeper sense of relatedness with their mentees is crucial. It helps the mentees feel more integrated into the institution and more comfortable in seeking support and guidance when navigating their paths. This supportive relationship empowers mentees to take risks and grow with confidence, resilience, and perseverance, especially when confronted with challenges. Ultimately, the feeling of relatedness does not only enrich their academic journey but also prepares them to tackle future obstacles with determination.

The open discussion through cohesive environment also enables the setting of the expectations and goals of the mentorship together. Through the shared mentorship goals and without fear of judgment, mentees can set personalised goals aligning to improve their teaching styles and also learning needs of the students. The clearer direction and purpose in the mentorship enhance the mentees academic development and also lead to reciprocal enrichment of the mentor's educational experience, which ultimately promotes higher learning-teaching standard in the institution.

## **Autonomy**

The principle of autonomy is essential for creating a supportive environment where mentees feel empowered to take ownership of their learning and growth, ultimately strengthening the faculty mentoring programme. All the mentors expressed preparedness to invest more time in mentorship if they could collaboratively develop goals and areas of support with their mentees. This sense of ownership (autonomy) enhances their dedication and responsibility for personal and professional development, making the mentoring relationship feel like a valuable opportunity

rather than conceiving it as a burden. By allowing mentees to choose their preferences, support and guidance can be developed to align with individual aspirations. This mutual collaboration enables a symbiotic relationship that not only enhances the effectiveness of the programme but also promotes personal and professional growth throughout the institution. A mentor at NRC also observed that the mentees who feel greater freedom and autonomy in their roles tend to engage more openly and initiate conversations and seek guidance regularly. He emphasised on the proactive roles a mentor needs to take create conducive mentoring environment where mentees feel empowered to approach them comfortably.

Honest and open communication flourishes in a faculty mentoring programme that emphasises mutual respect and collaboration. When mentees are given the flexibility and autonomy to voice their thoughts, questions, and concerns, it significantly strengthens their confidence in sharing their perspectives and proposing solutions to challenges they face. This dynamic not only helps fulfill the programme's objectives such as enhancing teaching skills and research capabilities for both mentors and mentees but also fosters a warm rapport that encourages mentees to commit to their mentorship roles. Building confidence through this sense of autonomy is essential as mentees navigate their academic journeys while mentors benefit from the fresh viewpoints that their mentees bring to the table, enriching the entire mentoring experience. A mentee has this say:

“I feel clear communication is important in ensuring the success of faculty mentorship programme as it enables us to develop trust and understanding. And with communication we learn and grow as there is exchange of knowledge and skills.”

## **Competence**

Enabling an academic environment where mentees feel capable and confident in their abilities is vital for the success of the faculty mentoring programme. When mentees believe in themselves, they can approach and tackle challenges with ease and respond towards it with an effective solution. For example, when mentors assign appropriate

challenges and provide constructive feedback, mentees are able to rise and successfully respond to it, developing essential skills and expanding their knowledge along the way. It is important on the part of the mentors to instill a sense of competence in the minds of the mentees as this is closely linked to developing a growth mindset in mentees. A mentee mentioned:

“I am with a firm conviction that the small achievement that I have gained through the mentorship was incredibly fulfilling and also helpful. It has boosted my confidence and motivation to engage more actively in mentorship to make a positive change in my life.”

## Conclusion

Launched in 2023, the NRC's faculty mentoring programme has become a cornerstone for enabling faculty engagement and cultivating a sense of belonging to the academic community. In this collaborative environment, mentors and mentees learn from each other, driving both personal and professional growth. By bringing mentor and mentee together, the programme not only enhances the relationships within the institution but also strengthens its overall cohesion. This sense of community is essential for retaining faculty, as it creates a genuine feeling of belonging that keeps them connected and committed to the institution. Ultimately, the faculty mentoring programme at NRC is not just about guidance; it is about building a supportive network that empowers everyone involved.

Faculty mentoring programme enhances research and teaching skills which further promotes pedagogical strategies and the use of integrative educational technologies. The professional development of both mentor and mentee is another significant benefit as they gain valuable insights from one another and also expand their professional network. However, the faculty mentoring programme is hindered by the challenges such as mismatched goals and lack of confidence for mentee to avail the services.

To tackle these challenges, integrating Self-Determination Theory into the faculty mentoring programme can significantly enhance its effectiveness. This approach can empower mentees who may struggle with confidence and help abridge any gaps in goals and expectations within the mentorship. By emphasising the principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the programme can foster a more supportive and engaging atmosphere where both mentors and mentees can thrive together. This nurturing environment not only encourages mentees to express themselves more freely but also strengthens the bonds between them and their mentors, paving the way for meaningful growth and collaboration.

Several themes emerged from the data analysis, particularly when applying the self-determination theory. Firstly, effective mentoring thrives when mentees feel a sense of autonomy in expressing their preferences alongside a sense of relatedness and competence in evaluating their own progress. Therefore, it is essential for the NRC to prioritise the alignment of mentorship goals between mentors and mentees, ensuring a shared understanding of objectives. Additionally, regular constructive feedback and open communication are vital for building trust within these relationships, an area that currently needs improvement at the NRC. Lastly, all the mentors have highlighted the importance of receiving specific training to enhance their skills in facilitating discussions, supporting mentees' autonomy, and providing effective feedback.

Based on the findings, the NRC can take several actionable steps to strengthen the faculty mentoring programme within the institution. Firstly, NRC management can facilitate workshops focusing on goal alignment, allowing mentors and mentees to collaboratively discuss their expectations, aspirations, and desired outcomes. This approach will help both the parties understand what they aim to achieve from their relationship, which will play an important role in developing the productive mentoring environment. Moreover, engaging in the open conversation about the teaching philosophies and mentorship expectation promotes the supportive environment of continuous improvement, empowering mentees to enhance their teaching methods effectively. Thus, collaborative mentorship goal setting workshop can improve the teaching capabilities of the mentees and also enrich the learning abilities of the students, ultimately improving the educational performances of the institution. A

study conducted by Rehman et al. (2024) also indicated that the goal alignment is a vital component of successful mentoring programme as it creates self-awareness of the programme and also cater the targeted professional development planning, thus, enhancing the learning-teaching effectiveness.

Secondly, NRC management also need to consider implementing the specialised training programme focusing on developing the mentoring skills for mentors, as this would be highly beneficial. This programme should emphasise the importance of providing constructive, actionable feedback and supporting mentees' autonomy, thereby encouraging them to take ownership of their learning and personal growth. Through the encouraging environment, mentees can feel empowered to take ownership of their growth and improvement. The faculty mentoring programme gives mutual benefits to both the mentors and the mentees and has a significant contribution to the overall wellbeing of the faculty members. Horner (2017) stated that a structured mentoring programme positively affect job satisfaction, professional confidence, and wellness, contributing to improved retention rate. Therefore, investment in the mentorship will empower mentor and mentee to become effective in their roles and professional responsibilities. The trained mentoring environment will not only benefit the mentee's growth but also the institution in the long run.

Additionally, NRC management can establish a system of regular reviews to discuss the progress, challenges, and achievements related to mentorship goals. By doing so, management plays an important role in creating a supportive environment that allows faculty mentoring programme to thrive. Furthermore, implementing an anonymous feedback mechanism would enable both mentors and mentees to share their experiences and suggest areas for improvement, helping the college management identify specific needs and enhance the programme. It is essential for all the parties—college management, mentors, and mentees—to promote a culture of open communication, ensuring that mentors and mentees feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns. Therefore, training sessions focusing on the importance of effective communication in building rapport and trust are crucial for the success of faculty mentoring programme at NRC.



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# Data-Driven Decision Making: Principals' Strategies for Improving Students' Academic Achievement

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*Dawa Tshering<sup>2</sup>*

## Abstract

This study explores how principals implement data-driven decision-making (DDDM) strategies to improve students' academic success. Quantitative data were collected from 45 Principals of western Dzongkhags (Thimphu, Paro, Wangdiphodrang and Punakha) and 4 Principals were purposively selected for a semi-structured interview. Both quantitative and qualitative data findings reveal that principals actively use diverse data sources, primarily standardized test scores and student feedback, to inform targeted interventions. While there is a strong belief in the positive impact of DDDM on overall academic performance, challenges persist, particularly in addressing achievement gaps and ensuring equity in data use. Some of the impediments to a successful implementation of DDDM include insufficient training in data literacy and logistical constraints like limited time and resources. Qualitative insights highlight innovative strategies, such as award ceremonies, to foster a positive school culture and enhance collaboration. However, challenges remain in establishing a consistent data-driven culture among staff, which is crucial for the sustainability of DDDM practices. Overall, this study underscores the importance of comprehensive data use while addressing cultural and training barriers to optimize student outcomes.

**Key words:** Data driven decision making, strategies, academic achievement

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<sup>2</sup> The author is the Principal, Lungtenzampa Middle Secondary School, Thimphu, and can be reached at: [dawat@education.gov.bt](mailto:dawat@education.gov.bt)

# Introduction

Data-driven decision-making (DDDM) involves utilizing data to guide actions related to policies or procedures (James, 2010). As noted by Marsh et al. (2006), in the educational context, DDDM encompasses the systematic collection and analysis of diverse data types- such as input, process, outcome, and satisfaction metrics- by teachers, principals, and administrators. This approach aims to inform various decisions that ultimately enhance student and school success. In the education of the 21st century, data-driven instruction is essential to build a culture of continuous improvement. Consequently, data-driven decision-making has emerged as the central focus of education policy (Mandinach, Honey, & Light, 2005). This methodology promotes a culture of growth and a willingness to learn, careful planning and the evaluation of the effects of change. It furthermore helps to enhance a growth mindset and openness to learning that helps students to succeed (Dowling, 2023). Levin and Datnow (2012) further emphasize that effective school administration relies heavily on the implementation of DDDM. In summary, DDDM entails leveraging student data- such as test scores, attendance, and behavioural information- to pinpoint areas of difficulty for students and to devise targeted interventions to address these challenges (Billen, 2009).

According to empirical research, educational institutions that use data-driven decision-making procedures typically have students who achieve at higher levels academically. This is due to the fact that data-driven decision-making enables school leaders to pinpoint problem areas for children and create individualized interventions and instructional plans to address these issues (Hallinger, 2010).

The literature suggests that dramatic increases in student achievement occur in schools that use student data consistently and effectively (Terrill, 2018). A study by Carlson et al. (2011) thus found that schools using data-driven practices showed substantial gains in student achievements and school improvement initiatives. Similarly, Lai and Schildkamp (2012) claimed that data-driven decision-making can enhance teaching practices, curriculum development, and overall school improvement initiatives. Further, Ikemoto and Marsh (2007) found that schools that effectively used data to guide instructional decision-making saw marked improvements in student performance. Similarly, Hamilton et al. (2009) highlighted

that data-driven approaches lead to more focused and effective teaching strategies, as educators are better equipped to address the diverse needs of their students. Moreover, data-informed decision-making has been identified as a primary practice of successful school leaders in enhancing student retention and engagement (Shen et al., 2015).

Despite the recognized importance of data-driven decision-making, there are challenges that principals encounter in effectively utilizing data for school improvement. These challenges include limited access to timely and relevant data, a lack of data literacy skills, and insufficient professional development opportunities for principals to enhance their data-driven decision-making practices (Supovitz, 2016; Marsh, 2017). Principals must navigate various obstacles, including data literacy among staff, technological infrastructure, time constraints, and the need for a cultural shift towards data-driven practices (Datnow & Hubbard, 2016). Lack of training often leads to schools that operate at a surface level of understanding the data they collect (Billen, 2009). DDDM continues to face challenges as it has not been a systematic approach till date. Murray (2014) further emphasizes that Principals and teachers generally lack the knowledge, skills, and time to sort through, organize, and make sense of volumes of data. As a result, it leads to ineffective processes, leading to failure in realizing the potential use of data available.

In the Bhutan context, the Competency Framework for Principals, as per RCSC (2023), refers to the competencies that consistently embrace data-driven approaches. This in itself is a paradigm shift away from conventional educational leadership practices and toward data-driven decision-making. Leaders and educators are better equipped to make decisions about instruction and interventions that will improve overall learning outcomes (Jurgens, 2023). Nonetheless, there are still unresolved problems with education, including student learning gaps, educational access, equity, quality, and system efficiency at all educational levels (Ministry of Education, Bhutan, 2020). These unresolved problems of access, equity, quality, and system efficiency can only be achieved through principals' leadership and decision-making based on data.

Over the past few decades, Bhutan has transitioned from a largely monastic education system to a modern, secular one. This transition has brought about

significant changes in educational management practices. The Ministry of Education, established in 1961, has been at the forefront of shaping educational policies and practices in the country (Royal Education Council, 2012). Recent reforms have emphasized decentralization and school-based management, giving principals more autonomy and responsibility in decision-making processes (Thinley, 2016). This shift has created both opportunities and challenges for school leaders in Bhutan.

As the country strives to improve the quality of education and student outcomes, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of evidence-based practices in school management (Gyamtsso & Maxwell, 2012). While the importance of DDDM is recognized, its implementation in Bhutanese schools is still in its early stages. A study by Dorji (2018) found that while many principals in Bhutan acknowledge the value of data in decision-making, they often lack the skills and resources. Moreover, there remains a significant gap in understanding how Bhutanese principals can effectively implement DDDM strategies to improve student achievement. This study aims to address this gap by examining the current practices, challenges, and opportunities for DDDM in Bhutanese schools, with a particular focus on principals' strategies for leveraging data to enhance student outcomes.

The study seeks to identify the types of data used by Principals, their impact on decision making and the challenges faced by the Principals in implementing data-driven decision-making in their leadership practices which contributes to the growing body of knowledge on educational management in Bhutan. It also has the scope to provide practical insights that can inform policy and practice in the unique cultural and educational context of the country.

## **Methods used**

The study adopted research two instruments namely survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview. A total of 45 Principals from western Dzongkhag were purposively selected in the survey questionnaire and 4 principals of Thimphu Dzongkhag were for the semi-structured interview. The participants for the survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview were selected since these schools have been performing better academically.

The survey questionnaire contains 26 questions, arranged on a Likert scale. Respondents were expected to provide their answers on a 4-point scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, which was coded as 1,2, 3, and 4 respectively. The reliability of the instrument was established through a split-half test using 15 respondents and a coefficient of 0.76 was obtained. Every item on the Likert scale was analyzed using mean, SD and ranking.

The semi-structured interview was employed to obtain qualitative insights from principals' beliefs, experiences, and strategies regarding data-driven decision-making. A total of four principals (2 Higher Secondary Schools and 2 Middle Secondary Schools) from Thimphu Dzongkhag were interviewed. The principals of the four Schools were chosen based on the progressive overall academic performance of the school. In addition to the academic performance, the availability and willingness of the principals to participate, and the proximity of the principals were taken into consideration. Selection of the participants was done using purposeful sampling and the participants willingly accepted to participate in the study. The interview involved semi-structured and open-ended questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participants shared their lived experiences as Principals and the interpretations of their data-driven decision-making. (Creswell,2009). Each of the interviewees is given pseudonyms HSP 1, HSP 2, MSP 1 and MSP 2.

## Result

**Table 1: Current practice employed by principals in utilizing data-driven decision-making.**

S/N	Current practices employed by principals in utilizing data-driven decision making	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Use data to monitor progress towards the school improvement goals	3.56	0.49	3rd
2	Address achievement disparities by using data	3.52	0.5	5th
3	Involve teachers in data collection process	3.46	0.63	6th
4	Ensure that the data collected are accurate	3.33	0.56	8th
5	Help instructors learn data literacy	3.39	0.62	7th
6	Identify trends in making informed decisions about instructional strategies	3.54	0.5	4th
7	Systematically organize/store data for easy access/retrieval	3.61	0.49	2nd
8	Use of various types of data (e.g., student performance, attendance, behaviour) to inform decision making	3.64	0.55	1st
9	Analyse data to develop instructional strategy	3.61	0.49	2nd

Table 1 presents the mean rating, standard deviation (SD) and ranking for different current practices employed by principals in utilizing data-driven decision-making for school improvement and student learning outcomes. The use of various types of data (e.g., student performance, attendance, behaviour) to inform decision-making received the highest mean rating of 3.64 while ensuring that the data collected are accurate has the lowest mean rating of 3.33.



**Table 2: Perceived impact of data-driven decision-making on school improvement and student learning outcomes.**

S/N	Perceived impact of data-driven decision making on school improvement and student learning outcomes	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Improve overall academic performance of students in the school	3.67	0.49	1 <sup>st</sup>
2	Contributed to a more personalized and targeted approach to student support and interventions	3.61	0.49	2 <sup>nd</sup>
3	Improved teacher collaboration and shared accountability in the school	3.55	0.47	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4	Led to improved student achievement in specific subject areas (e.g., math, reading)	3.54	0.57	4 <sup>th</sup>
5	Enhanced the efficiency and effectiveness of school improvement initiatives	3.61	0.49	2 <sup>nd</sup>
6	Improved the decision-making process for allocating resources in the school	3.43	0.56	6 <sup>th</sup>
7	Influenced the overall school culture and climate.	3.43	0.62	6 <sup>th</sup>
8	Address achievement gaps among different student groups (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status)	3.29	0.59	7 <sup>th</sup>
9	Identify effective instructional strategies and interventions	3.46	0.57	5 <sup>th</sup>

Table 2 presents the perceived impact of data-driven decision-making on school improvement and student learning outcomes. The highest mean rating was 3.67 for the statement, "Improve overall academic performance of students in the school" while the “perception of addressing achievement gaps among different student groups” received the lowest mean rating of 3.29. There is not much variation in mean among the items.

**Table 3: Challenges faced by principals in implementing data-driven decision-making in their leadership practices**

S/N	Challenges faced by principals in implementing data-driven decision making in their leadership practices	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Integrating data-driven decision making into existing systems and practices	2.96	0.68	4th
2	Limited capacity to use data to identify and address specific student needs and interventions.	2.89	0.67	5th
3	Concerns regarding student privacy and ethical use of data	3.14	0.64	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4	Resistance to change	2.82	0.6	6th
5	Limited access to high-quality/relevant data	2.96	0.57	4th
6	Difficulty in aligning data-driven decision making with the overall vision and goals of the school	2.89	0.67	5th
7	Insufficient training and professional development opportunities for principals to develop data literacy skills	3.61	0.49	1st
8	Lack of time/resources to collect, analyze, and interpret data	3.36	0.67	2nd

Table 3 presents the challenges faced by principals in implementing data-driven decision-making. The “insufficient training and professional development opportunities” has the highest mean rating of 3.61. The item “resistance to change” has a mean rating of 2.82 which ranks lowest among the challenges.

## Theme I: Data-driven leadership and the challenges

Interview findings relay that principals had different beliefs about Data-driven leadership prior to the reforms of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MOESD) focusing on instructional leadership. Participants perceive data-driven as time-consuming, requiring expertise and difficulty in managing data due to a large number of students. Mr. HSP 1, a senior Principal expressed that “while data collection is important, we require the right kind of training”. According to HSP 2, data management takes a considerable amount of time and impedes other important

programs. As per HSP 1, if any data-driven decisions lack timely support and interventions, the entire process of DDDM loses authenticity. HSP 2 expressed that they become helpless when the relevant agencies ask for too much data at the last minute leading to ineffective data submission. According to this respondent, they seek support from ICT teachers for any data collection or compilation that results in compromising on the quality of teaching.

MSP1 also shared that handling a wide variety of data is cumbersome and it is difficult to reach out to the needy students, thus wasting the time spent on compiling. As per MSP 1, “While we maintain data in many areas of development of students, we face difficulty in updating the information on a timely basis owing to other works.” On the contrary, due to the multi-tasking job, it is cumbersome to do the follow-up programs after the identification of needs (HSP1, HSP 2, MSP 2). HSP 2 and HSP 1 pointed out, “Due to many planned and ad-hoc programs, time constraint is a hindrance to effectively conduct follow-up programs”. According to MSP 2, “Due to the lack of data-driven culture among staff, it is difficult to engage all in data-driven decision-making processes”.

All the participants agreed to the lack of expertise to validate and authenticate the available data compiled. All the participants had the common understanding that when teachers are provided with the task of data analysis, it hinders their effectiveness in classroom teaching thus compromising the student learning which they consider as a priority and when these teachers have to work overtime, it slowly leads to professional burnout.

## **Theme II: Data Used by Principals**

The participants of the interview also shared that quality data-driven decision-making should be emphasised in all schools. According to HSP 1, HSP 2 and MSP 1, “using standardised test scores as the main source of data to improve academic performance of is one they have used so far exclusively.” MSP 1 said, “Quite often, the school collects feedback from students on the teacher’s teaching and considers this way to be effective in improving the academic performance of students.” On the other hand, MSP 2 said that student demography, attendance and behaviour data

play a significant role in planning for the interventions to improve the academic performance of students.

MSP 1 and HSP 2 have been using teacher's competency data, capacity-building data and feedback from the community are the major data for any planning and decision-making purposes to date. HSP 3 highlighted on having multiple data compilations in his school but only result analysis data is considered a priority. As per HSP 2 "As a head of the institution, the most important and the first data we always have in hand readily available is the resource mapping, capacity building and attendance of students".

### **Theme III: Strategies used for implementing data-driven decision-making**

All the participants said that strategies based on the data analysis are used for identifying the gaps and needs of the students for the validation of academic performance. The data analysis, according to them, is required for studying the target group for developing interventions and other plans and programs. According to MSP 2, "This year, the school have used the data for comparing the school's academic performance with the past years to bring about better performance".

As per HSP 2, the best strategy used till date is the use of result analysis data through which he was able to conduct award ceremonies for the performing students. He also emphasized data collection from parents and the community on the school's performance which helped the school to come up with standardized tests. "The collection of feedback from the parents helped develop the interventions to study student's background stories and provide support accordingly," says HSP 2 and MSP 1. Another strategy developed by HSP 2 is, "Extended learning time for students in the morning, three times a week which is one good practice that adds to the steady academic performance."

All participants in the interviews expressed a shared perspective that data-driven interventions facilitate the acquisition of support from various stakeholders. Additionally, such an approach simplifies the identification of students' needs,

allowing for timely and appropriate interventions. Furthermore, when interventions are informed by data, the resulting impacts are significantly enhanced, thereby motivating both teachers and students.

## Discussion

The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in this study provides a comprehensive view of the current practices, perceived impacts, and challenges faced by principals in implementing data-driven decision-making (DDDM) for school improvement and student learning outcomes.

Findings from the survey and the interview reveal that principals believe in the perceived impacts of DDDM in improving academic performance, which supports earlier findings by Denny (2020) that effective data use can significantly elevate student achievement, which is evident from the overall positive mean ratings and the responses from the interview and survey.

While principals demonstrate effective practices in leveraging data for the enhancement of school performance, there remain opportunities to improve teacher involvement, data literacy, and data accuracy. The results further reveal that principals possess a strong conviction regarding the substantial influence of data-driven decision-making on multiple aspects of school improvement and student achievement. The indicator “analyze data to develop an instructional strategy” ranks second among the current practices employed by principals in utilizing data-driven decision-making, suggesting that the use of DDDM is closely associated with planning in schools. Similarly, various types of data such as student academic performance, attendance and behaviour records are already in use in the leadership practices of the principals for decision-making and developing instructional strategies.

However, there are areas like addressing achievement gaps and improving resource allocation and paradigm shift from traditional leadership to instructional leadership that hinder further enhancement of leadership practices. Although Principals recognize the value of data-driven decision-making, they face significant challenges, particularly in terms of training and professional development, time, resources, and

privacy concerns. The indicator “insufficient training and professional development opportunities for principals to develop data literacy” under challenges faced by principals in implementing DDDM in their leadership practices ranked highest in the survey. Similarly, all the principals during the interview stated lack of time, large number of students and lack of expertise in managing data is a hindrance to effective DDDM.

Addressing these challenges through targeted professional development, improved access to data, and supportive policies could enhance the effective implementation of data-driven leadership practices in schools.

## **Conclusion**

This research indicates that school principals acknowledge the considerable advantages of data-driven decision-making (DDDM) in enhancing academic outcomes. Furthermore, the findings suggest that while schools are actively employing DDDM, they encounter significant obstacles, especially in areas such as training, resource distribution, and cultivating a culture that prioritizes data utilization. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data in this investigation highlights the complex nature of executing data-driven decision-making within educational institutions. By tackling these challenges, schools can more effectively utilize data to boost academic performance and promote equitable learning conditions.

For effective data-driven decision-making (DDDM) in educational institutions, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development needs to organize capacity-building workshops specifically for school principals. A robust data management system, complemented by the integration of digital technologies and overseen by a dedicated data manager, is necessary. At present, the responsibilities associated with data management are primarily handled by ICT teachers, which proves insufficient for comprehensive outreach due to their teaching obligations. Furthermore, the Ministry should consider allocating and securing additional funding to encourage schools to prioritize the implementation of digitalized data management systems.

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