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VISIONS OF THEOCRACY: THE RISE OF ECCLESIASTICAL POWER IN TIBET AND  
THE FOUNDING OF THE BHUTANESE STATE

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Dedicated to Her Majesty the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan,

Ashi Kesang Choeden Wangchuck.

May any merit that is generated through this study be dedicated to her long life.

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## TECHNICAL NOTE

Because not all my readers are familiar with Classical Literary Tibetan, I have rendered all Tibetan terms and personal names in a simplified phonetic system rather than the Wylie system of transliteration except when citing the title of works and when referring, in brackets, to particular technical terms, personal names or the names of locations at their first occurrence. For the sake of consistency, my transcription of Tibetan follows the schema employed by Wisdom Publications.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1616, a religious hierarch by the name of Ngawang Namgyal (Ngag dbang rnam rgyal 1594-1651) fled the seat of his monastic estate in the southwest of Tibet out of fear of an impending assassination following a dispute over his status as the reincarnation of the celebrated Buddhist scholar Pema Karpo (Padma dkar po 1527-1592). The king of Tsang (Gtsang), who officially supported another claimant to the reincarnation of Pema Karpo, a child born to the powerful Chongyé ('Phyongs rgyas) family named Paksam Wangpo (Dpag bsam dbang po 1593-1641), was rumored to have sent an army to Ngawang Namgyal's estate. Following a series of visions in which the protector deity of his religious lineage advised him to found a new religious estate in the Southern Valleys of Medicinal Herbs (Lho sman ljongs), Ngawang Namgyal packed the most precious religious relics and artifacts of his monastery and, under the cover of night, fled south with his most trusted attendants. Within two decades of his arrival in the southern valleys, Ngawang Namgyal was able to accomplish the remarkable feat of consolidating under his single authority the various political and religious factions of the land, repel a number of military attacks from his Tibetan adversaries and found the state known today as the Kingdom of Bhutan. Some thirty years after Ngawang Namgyal's flight to the southern lands, another religious hierarch, recognized as the

reincarnation of a monk belonging to the nascent Geluk sect of Tibetan Buddhism and bearing the Mongolian title of Dalai Lama, seized political control of the Tibetan plateau and founded the Tibetan state that lasted until the Chinese communist takeover of 1959.

The birth of these two political systems in the seventeenth century is usually interpreted as representing a watershed moment in Tibetan history by introducing novel understandings of political and religious governance through the establishment of theocratic governments. The qualifier 'turbulent' is often added to scholarly references of Tibet's seventeenth century and both systems emerged through their own share of violent struggle. That said, the relative stability and endurance shared by both institutions (lasting until the twentieth century in both cases) are illustrative of their congruity with larger societal shifts that materialized in this period of Tibetan history. Indeed, the Drukpa and Gelukpa theocracies of Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1617-1682) represent the culmination of a long process through which the religious elite of Tibet was able to assert itself and rise to a place of dominance over the social hierarchy of the plateau. Although historians of Tibet have begun to map the various events and interventions that led to the rise of both theocracies, they have yet to reach consensus on the larger societal shifts that permitted it. While some scholars have pointed to the rising sectarian polarization of Tibetan Buddhist society, others have suggested the economic erosion of Tibet's ruling aristocratic families and growing foreign intervention

in Tibetan affairs as catalysts for the birth of new political movements. While such theories certainly go some way in making sense of the multivalent and complex nature of the period, they however remain partial and tentative. One area lacking analysis, in particular, concerns the ideological tools employed by the religious elite itself in order to advance its position in the political sphere. When they seized control of the Bhutanese and Tibetan regions, Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama were each effectively recognized as the earthly embodiment of a transcendent bodhisattva endowed with the mission of creating a Buddhist realm for the benefit of all sentient beings. Such a position reflects the thorough success of Buddhism in becoming a hegemonic force on the Tibetan plateau, shaping and conditioning the very possibilities of envisioning and articulating political projects.

Considering the relevance of these theocratic movements to our understanding of the modern states they eventually became, the paucity of scholarship on the period of their founding is surprising. While a number of studies of the rise of the Ganden Phodrang government are beginning to surface,<sup>1</sup> our understanding of the founding of the Drukpa theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal remains very limited. Besides some pioneering work done by John Ardussi on the theoretical foundations of the Bhutanese state,<sup>2</sup> there remains to date no single work dedicated to an examination of the overall

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Schaeffer 2005 and 2006; Schwieger 2015; Gyatso 2015; MacCormack 2018 and 2020; Ishihama 2015; and Lin 2017, amongst others.

<sup>2</sup> See Ardussi 2004.

trajectory that led to its founding. Most scholarly references to the creation of Bhutan recount the above-mentioned narrative of Ngawang Namgyal's dispute with the Tsangpa king Karma Phuntsok Namgyal (Karma phun tshogs rnam rgyal 1587-1620) as the rationale for the former's nation-building. While this narrative does go some way in explaining the initial impetus for Ngawang Namgyal's flight southward, it is squarely insufficient to understand the larger dynamics of his theocratic project. The Drukpa theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal was neither born nor articulated overnight. The usual attribution of the founding of the Bhutanese state to his sheer charisma and visionary character alone has the unfortunate effect of effacing some of the most important dynamics and key players of the period. In many ways, Ngawang Namgyal was a product of his time; a figure emerging out of the social structures set in place by his predecessors and molded by the interventions of a number of his contemporaries. The question here is not whether Ngawang Namgyal had any historical agency per se - a subject that will be explored more at length in chapter one - but rather regards the complexity and multivalence of the period of Bhutan's founding and articulation. What were the larger historical dynamics that allowed for a religious hierarch like Ngawang Namgyal to emerge and consolidate the political and religious factions of the land under his single authority? What were the necessary material and ideological conditions for the religious elite of seventeenth century Tibet and Bhutan to assert itself and rise to a place of dominance over the social hierarchy of the region? What were the

mechanisms through which Buddhist hierarchs were able to enact a Buddhist theocratic vision of government? How was the Bhutanese articulation of theocracy any different from that of the Ganden Phodrang?

I will argue here that the answer to these questions entails the study of the interaction between Tibetan Buddhist institutions and their social, political and economic contexts across time. By applying a *longue durée* approach to the rise of ecclesiastical power in the Tibetan region, a clearer image of the processes and underlying structures that conditioned the events of the seventeenth century will surface. Again, the theocratic governments of Ngawang Namgyal and Ngawang Losang Gyatso were not born in a vacuum. Rather, they represent the culmination of a long trajectory involving the incremental reordering of the Tibetan social sphere by way of redefining the role and place of the religious hierarch in Tibetan society. As I hope this dissertation will demonstrate, a macro study of the trajectory of Buddhist and political institutions leading up to the enactment of theocratic governments will simultaneously reveal the continuities existent between new and earlier models of governance and underline the profound rupture that these new systems occasioned to the social order of the region. While on the one hand the continuities between the articulation of theocratic rule in the seventeenth century and earlier models of governance are such that one can veritably speak of a theocratic movement across Tibetan history - one whose traces can be found in the political economy of Tibet as



early as the twelfth century - on the other, the articulation of the theocratic regimes of Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama entailed a radical reenvisioning of the Tibetan social world. The study of such a theocratic movement across Tibetan history and its seventeenth century manifestation in the Drukpa theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal form the subject of this dissertation.

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At its heart, this dissertation is concerned with what Tibet and Bhutan can teach us about the intersection of religion and politics on a broad theoretical plane. It takes as its point of departure the symbiotic and often antagonistic relationship between these two spheres in the enunciation of social worlds, and interrogates why and how the Tibetan region sought their collapse into a single articulation of government. Tibet is often referenced in brief and passing notes in the literature on theocracy as the lone and somewhat anomalous Asian example of a premodern theocratic state. What is unique about the Tibetan region in relation to other Asian Buddhist states? What can the Tibetan experiment with theocracy teach us more broadly about theocracy as a system of government and organizing principle for social and political life? While this is by no means a comparative study, it is intended to produce broad enough conclusions about the nature of a Buddhist theocratic state such that these can in turn shed further light on contexts other than Bhutan or Tibet. As I will argue in chapter one, there is at first very

little to differentiate the Tibetan case from other premodern Buddhist polities. From its very inception, Buddhism has had a long history of intermingling with political formations and most premodern Buddhist states can be said to have had a theocratic bend to them. That said, the Tibetan region developed a unique and special set of circumstances that opened the window for religious hierarchs to collapse the roles of king and prelate into their own person. A study of these specific circumstances may shed further light on some of the reasons why these did not develop in other premodern Buddhist states and/or how they display similar patterns outside of the Buddhist world.

Investigating the articulation of the kind of social world occasioned by theocratic government entails addressing a fundamental and perennial set of questions that continue to animate the social sciences as well as the field of religions studies: what are the causes for social stability and/or change? What is the relationship between social structures and individual agency in effecting such stability and/or change? How do we, as historians of religion, account for the role that religion may play in the formation of social and/or political configurations in the world? The challenge here is to identify and employ a theoretical apparatus that helps us locate historically contingent structures and mechanisms that would otherwise not be immediately apparent in an instance of historical change. By this I mean that ability to reach a certain level of abstraction from historical detail such that we may observe broader historical processes with greater

clarity and systematism. I do not advocate here a positivist approach, aiming at some universal theory of social life to be tested against historical data. Rather, my proposed use of theory is in line with the tenets of critical realism, the application of an inquiry into the complex, layered and contingent social structures that underly and condition a given historical phenomenon. In other words, my methodological approach is one in which theoretical abstraction is employed as a means to make sense of the complexities of social life and its various manifestations. In this regard, this dissertation will rely heavily on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, among others, focusing especially on his notions of symbolic capital and habitus, and theory of strategic action fields. One of the benefits of Bourdieu's sociology is its emphasis on the relational and shifting conditions of the social order. His discussion of symbolic capital and its modes of production draw attention to the representational dynamics involved in the reproduction of power within the social world. Such an emphasis in turn opens the possibilities for examining the ways in which objects of symbolic labor, in our case here religious literature, becomes a site for the articulation, production, contestation, and/or legitimation of social orders.

A central argument of this dissertation will make the claim that in the case of Tibet, a particularly potent agent of symbolic labor was the development of literary forms which recognized and reconfigured the role and place of the Buddhist hierarch in Tibetan society. As Buddhist sects institutionalized on the Tibetan plateau and became

invested with representational power over the social order, Buddhist authors began infusing the figure of the religious hierarch with forms of charisma and authority that directly challenged indigenous models of power and governance. With the efflorescence of the genre of Buddhist life-writing or biography (*rnam thar*) in the fifteenth century, Buddhist hierarchs gradually became the region's primary locus of authority, embodying a set of characteristics that enveloped both worldly and otherworldly domains. As I will argue in chapter two, the medium of Buddhist biography introduced in Tibet models of authority in which mobility within Tibet's social order was determined not by clan-affiliation or ancestry, but by the capacity for an individual's life to be modeled according to a set of idealized Buddhist truths, of which the Buddhist hierarch stood as a paradigmatic example. Such a reconfigured position of the religious hierarch through literary modes was accompanied by the introduction of alternative institutional models of succession and inheritance, causing a further restructuring of the social order. By the seventeenth century, the successful transition of the majority of Tibetan Buddhist institutions from indigenous clan-based models to the *tulku* (*sprul sku*) mode of succession entailed a major rupture in Tibet's social sphere and charged the religious hierarch with the ideological and material conditions necessary to envision a Buddhist state in his own image.

Much of the pages of this dissertation will be exploring one such vision articulated through the medium of biography in the work of one of Tibet and Bhutan's

most remarkable intellectual figures and contemporary of Ngawang Namgyal, the great seventeenth century polymath Tsang Khenchen Jamyang Palden Gyatso (Gtsang mkhan chen 'Jam dbyangs dpal ldan rgya mtsho 1610-1684). As I will argue through much of this dissertation, Tsang Khenchen's celebrated biography of Bhutan's founding figure, entitled the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, sought the enunciation of an idealized Buddhist state which called into being a distinct and novel subjectivity on the part of its members. Still till this day considered an enduring emblem of the Bhutanese state, Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre stands as the primary source for an investigation of the early theoretical underpinnings of the Bhutanese state. As is evidenced by Tsang Khenchen's work, Buddhist biography became a primary site for authors in the Tibetan region to express their views on political philosophy and articulate distinct visions of power. Such visions themselves draw on a complex web of Buddhist canonical and non-canonical sources, and often present creative and challenging hermeneutical strategies on the part of their authors. My approach to these materials largely consists in reading these narratives against their historical context, paying close attention to the ways in which the text is engaged in a dialectical relationship with the material reality standing outside of it. Such a reading, going against the grain of the text, draws attention to the notable gaps, silences, inconsistencies and ellipses of the author as constitutive elements of the reality that the text conjures. As I will discuss in chapters four and five, the theocratic vision articulated by Tsang Khenchen conjures and fashions an idealized

Buddhist world set against the backdrop of the complex realities of a nascent state. I characterize such a vision a *theotopia*; a utopian perfect moral commonwealth ruled and embodied by an unmediated and omnipotent *theos*. An investigation of Tsang Khenchen's *theotopia* and the conditions that allowed for its expression, I contend, will yield not only valuable insights into the nature of the early Bhutanese state and the Tibetan region's transition to theocratic forms of government, but enlarge our understanding of theocracy as an organizing principle lying at the intersection of religion and politics in an overall enunciation of power.

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In an effort to trace theocracy as both a movement traversing Tibetan history and a distinct enunciation of the social and political world which crystallized during the seventeenth century, this dissertation begins with a discussion of this multivalent term and its purview to the Tibetan context in chapter one. Entitled "Theocracy in Tibet and Bhutan," chapter one functions as the theoretical backbone of the dissertation, exploring the value of theocracy as an analytical term and its applicability to the Tibetan and Bhutanese contexts. Part of the chapter's focus is the delineation of a typology of theocratic arrangements and their analogs in Tibet, before moving on to a discussion of the mechanisms through which the contrastive domains of the religious and the temporal engaged and competed in the Tibetan social arena. Such a discussion turns to

the sociology of Bourdieu as a productive space to explore questions related to social stability and/or change, drawing especially on his notions of habitus, symbolic capital, and strategic action fields. Drawing on Bourdieu and later theorists sharing similar intellectual affinities, I propose in the chapter to observe religio-political rule in Tibet, articulated as the abstract theory of 'the union of religious and temporal domains' (*chos srid zung 'brel*), as a distinct strategic action field.

Chapter two, entitled "The Rise of Ecclesiastical Power in Tibet: Clans, Monasteries and Competing Models of Authority," turns to the early period of sectarian institutionalization in Tibet when the field of religio-political rule emerged as a stable reproductive system and traces the broad trajectory of the field leading up to the emergence of hierocratic governments in the seventeenth century. The chapter engages in an examination of the historically contingent structures and mechanisms through which participants in the field, members of Tibet's clan-based nobility and nascent sects of Tibetan Buddhism, navigated and strategized their positions through the production, investment and manipulation of various forms of capital. As is characteristic of any strategic action field, the field of religio-political rule in Tibet was never static and subject to a number of crises and transformations. The primary concern of the chapter is thus to observe some of the overarching material and ideological mechanisms through which the field and its original settlement gradually shifted and ended up experiencing the kind of rupture necessary for a radical reenvisioning of the Tibetan social arena in

the seventeenth century. I argue in the chapter that two major elements that contributed to the gradual rupture of the field's settlement were the emergence within the religious establishment of competing institutional models of succession encapsulated in the *tulku* institution and the cultivation of novel understandings of authority advanced through the medium of biography. The chapter grounds such processes and their historical consequences by observing the religious institution of Druk Ralung, the seat of the Drukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism in Southwestern Tibet, and its associated temporal estate managed by the Gya (Rgya) Clan, leading up to the life of its hierarch and founding figure of the Bhutanese state, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

Chapters three, four, and five, in turn zoom into the specificities of the transitional period immediately preceding, in conjunction with, and following the founding of the Bhutanese theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal. Chapter three, entitled "The Great Scholar from Tsang: Tsang Khenchen Jamyang Palden Gyatso (1610-1684) and the Tsangpa Hegemony of Central Tibet," introduces the life of Tsang Khenchen, Bhutan's literary architect, and the environment in which he came to prominence. The chapter begins with a claim that any serious investigation of the founding of the Bhutanese state has to take into account the short-lived and little-studied Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet. As the ideological milieu in which both Tsang Khenchen and Ngawang Namgyal were conditioned, the Tsangpa hegemony's cultivation of novel understandings of governance and the union of religious and temporal domains (*chos*



*srid zung 'brel*) exerted a powerful influence on their perspectives on state-building. I argue in the chapter that far from the prevalent narrative of the period, the Tsangpa hegemony largely stood at the forefront of the powerful ideological movement associated to the birth of the theocratic regimes of the seventeenth century by successfully embracing and incorporating such elements in its institutional frame.

Chapter four, entitled “The *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* and the Construction of a Literary *Theotopia*,” proceeds with a close reading of Tsang Khenchen’s *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, paying particular attention to the multivalent style, tone, modalities, strategies and epistemologies of the work, all in an effort to characterize the nature of Tsang Khenchen’s literary vision of a Bhutanese *theotopia*. Through his masterful use of language and what I term an aesthetic of excess, Tsang Khenchen’s edification of Ngawang Namgyal as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara incarnating in human form during a degenerate age and guiding sentient beings on a soteriological path through the activities of kingship constructs the newly founded Bhutanese state as a destined earthly paradise and social utopia deeply connected to his divinity. In many ways, Tsang Khenchen’s account of the figure of Ngawang Namgyal not only participates in the new Buddhist models of authority described in chapter two, but very much exemplifies it, constructing Ngawang Namgyal as a perfect archetype of the reconfigured role and place of the Buddhist hierarch in the Tibetan social world.

Chapter five, entitled “Situating the Bhutanese Theocracy,” contextualizes Tsang

Khenchen's theocratic vision within the immediate historical context of its composition and the broader structural developments taking hold of the Tibetan region. Part of the chapter argues that the picture of Bhutan's founding is substantially more complex than the historiography tends to portray, involving multiple and contending views of the theoretical nature of the state. Even though Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre was largely canonized as the state's blueprint by later Bhutanese authors and historians, I argue that it nonetheless represents a distinct perspective that encapsulates both the subjective idiosyncrasies of its author and the broader structural changes of the period. The chapter returns to the language of Bourdieu and the field of religio-political rule, examining how the enunciation of the Bhutanese theocracy figures within the overall trajectory of the rise of a theocratic movement in the Tibetan region, paying particular attention to the ideological continuities between the Bhutanese state and the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet, the striking parallels between the state-building projects of Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama, and other conditions unique to the Bhutanese region. The chapter represents an attempt to draw broader conclusions on not only the remarkable vision and experiment conducted in Bhutan during the seventeenth century, but, just as importantly, on the project of theocracy itself.

Finally, this dissertation concludes with a discussion of how, from one perspective, Tsang Khenchen's idealized vision of the Bhutanese theocracy never succeeded, and how, from another, it continues to inform modern subjectivities in the

Kingdom of Bhutan today in significant ways. Such a discussion returns to theocracy as a configuration of the social world and what the Bhutanese transition to modernity can tell us about Tsang Khenchen and Ngawang Namgyal's premodern visions of the state.

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The concluding remarks of this dissertation, exploring the ways in which the idealized Buddhist social order envisioned by Tsang Khenchen in the seventeenth century continues to inform modern subjectivities in the region, address an important, yet implicit, intention behind this project. As one of the world's youngest democracies which only began its transition to modernity in the late twentieth century, Bhutan has captivated many in the Western hemisphere as something of a model for the modern world. Bhutan's governing policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), conceived as an alternative to Gross National Product as a metric of a country's successes, or its stringent environmental protection laws, registering the country as the only carbon-negative nation in the world today, have significantly contributed to Bhutan's status as an example of enlightened leadership and the possibilities of a sustainable approach to development. I am not interested here in discussing the merits of these claims, which, in many respects, I subscribe to myself. Rather, I would like to point to what I see as a somewhat unfortunate and impoverished modality through which Bhutan and its institutional character are discussed in popular discourse today. Often couched as an

answer to the various ills of the post-industrial modern world, Bhutan, the world's "last Shangri-La," has come to occupy a space in the western imagination that, in many respects, speaks more to developments in the Western hemisphere than they do to the small Himalayan nation. What this dissertation seeks to implicitly advance, therefore, is a more nuanced and informed discussion about Bhutan's national identity and experience with modernity by making the simple claim that we have much to gain from an examination of premodern articulations of the state and its associated subjectivities.

This concern, in turn, addresses broader questions with regard to our analyses of modern Buddhist states. For too long, studies of Buddhist modernism have tended to focus their enquiry on the ways in which Buddhist communities have grappled with, assimilated, and transformed themselves and Buddhist traditions in order to conform to Western-centric models of modernity. Bhutan is no stranger to this phenomenon, with its philosophy of Gross National Happiness or environmental policies more often than not couched firmly within discussions of global disenchantment with modernity and the perils of an impending climate crisis. That is not to say that Bhutan does not participate in these discourses; its environmental policies, for example, are in some significant ways informed by Bhutan's fragile ecosystem as a Himalayan nation heavily dependent on fast-melting high altitude glaciers. But a singular focus on Bhutan's institutional character from Western-centric perspectives and discourses on modernity would be to miss out much of the complex trajectories and processes through which it

has emerged as a distinct modern nation in the twentieth century.

My study of the period of the founding of the Bhutanese state in the seventeenth century, when the state's institutional character and identity were first articulated, thus also represents an attempt at bringing to light some of the multivalent continuities between premodern and modern subjectivities in the region. As I hope to implicitly demonstrate in the pages of this dissertation, Bhutan's deep concern for its natural environment is as much a product of its long trajectory of cultivating distinctly Buddhist understandings of the relationship between humans and the natural world as it is a concern with climate change. Similarly, its concern for happiness as a metric of social wellbeing can be found in plain sight in Tsang Khenchen's utopian enunciation of the founding of Bhutan as the introduction of a new fortunate eon of happiness in the region; one that is intimately connected to the flourishing of Buddhism. Despite Bhutan's assimilation of modern and western-centric paradigms of political governance, including becoming a parliamentary democracy in 2008, fundamental elements of premodern conceptions of the state and its institutions endure in the modern era, including the conception of Ngawang Namgyal as a Buddhist divinity governing over the whole region and acting as its ultimate referent of authority.

Such observations challenge unidirectional and Western-centric paradigms of modernity in our studies of modern Buddhist states by pointing to the ways in which Buddhist understandings of the social world continue to inform, and in some ways

transform, the experience of modernity in Asia. My work on the premodern Bhutanese articulation of theocracy thus seeks to demonstrate how we, as scholars of religion and Buddhism, not only can, but ought to trace the genealogies of thought and practice that constitute the modern Buddhist subject. Such a prospect, I believe, will ultimately bring much needed breadth and nuance to our notions of modernity by expanding the possibilities of alterity and, in tandem, allow us to speak of not Buddhist modernism but modernisms.

## CHAPTER ONE. THEOCRACY IN TIBET AND BHUTAN

### **Introduction**

An investigation of the rise of ecclesiastical power in Tibet and the founding of theocratic governments in the seventeenth century with a focus on the Drukpa ('Brugpa) theocracy known today as the Kingdom of Bhutan must begin with a discussion of the scope and import of theocracy as a guiding analytical term throughout this dissertation. What applicability does this term have to the Tibetan and Bhutanese contexts? What would be the Tibetan language analog to this term? What explanatory purview does this term have to our case study? As I will observe below, there is significant enough deviation in scholarly understandings and definitions of theocracy as to render the term so loose and imprecise that its theoretical import and veracity may be questioned altogether. That said, it is perhaps precisely the looseness of the term that makes it especially applicable to the Tibetan and Bhutanese contexts. In any case, it will prove paramount to describe in precise terms what theocracy, as a descriptive and analytical term, can help elucidate in the historical phenomena at stake here. Doing so will require developing a loose and preliminary typology of theocracy such that it can

be examined against Tibetan conceptions of the relation between religious and temporal domains.

Additionally, this dissertation's effort to investigate complex and disparate historical phenomena over a *longue durée* requires the development of a robust theoretical framework to make sense of the historical data observed. The challenge here is to identify and employ a theoretical lens that will help us locate historically contingent structures and mechanisms that would otherwise not be immediately apparent. By this I mean that ability to reach a certain level of abstraction from historical detail such that we may observe broader historical processes with greater clarity and systematism. In this regard, a considerable amount pages in this chapter will be dedicated to evaluating the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, among others, and its utility to the complex historical phenomena observed here. As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, investigating the kind of social world occasioned by theocratic governments in the Tibetan region entails addressing fundamental questions related to the causes for social stability and/or change, and the relationship between social structures and individual agency in effecting such stability and/or change. Bourdieu's notions of habitus, symbolic capital and strategic action fields have the merit of directing our attention to the relational and shifting conditions of any given social order. His discussion of symbolic capital and its modes of production, for example, draw attention to the representational dynamics involved in the reproduction of power



within the social world and helps us locate some of the important mechanisms through which the Tibetan region experienced a radical rupture in the seventeenth century. Observing the social landscape of premodern Tibet as a set of complex and dynamic strategic action fields, I contend, allows us to focus on the particular processes associated with the emergence, stability, or transformation of fields that straddle the religious and political spheres. Questions ranging from who are the key actors within a given field to the mechanisms revolving around the construction or contestation of a field, such as the allocation of resources and the investment of various forms of capital by social actors, will allow for a clearer picture of the dynamics at stake in the trajectory of a theocratic movement in the Tibetan region leading up to its emergence as a system of government in the seventeenth century.

### **Theocracy**

The last decades have seen a renewed interest in theocracy as a form of ideology and political system largely owing to various geopolitical developments taking place in the late twentieth century. The catalyst for this renewed interest is arguably the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which established an Islamic republic often characterized as a “populist theocracy” under the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In the decades following the Iranian Revolution, a growing sense of religious fundamentalism in various regions of the globe have further drawn the interest of political scientists and historians towards

theocratic conceptions of government. From the rise of Sunni Islamist fundamentalism in the Middle East with its goal of establishing an Islamic state, to the rise of the Hindu right in India, Buddhist fundamentalism in Sri Lanka, and what political scientist Brendan O’Leary calls the “de-secularization of some Western liberal states, or the re-fundamentalizing and re-politicization of Christian and Jewish believers in settled democracies,”<sup>1</sup> theocracy has emerged as an important subject of academic discussion. The unique contexts of each of these models has however produced very different understandings of the way in which religion affects and conditions the political sphere. Similarly, a historical look at theocratic forms of government of the past, such as the Israelite theocracy, the Papal state in Italy, the Muslim caliphates, Calvin’s rule in Geneva, or Jesuit missions in Central America, to name just a few, reveals an equally remarkable variation in the configuration of the place of religion in politics. In an article on the “Economics of Theocracy,” Mario Ferrero argues that the only safe generalizations one can make about historical theocracies are their relative rarity and remarkable permanence once established. He writes,

“This is one of the very few safe generalizations one can make about historical theocracies; otherwise they can be warlike and aggressive as well as peaceful and benign, revolutionary as well as conservative, self-enclosed and defensive as well

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<sup>1</sup> O’Leary mentions the case of the United States as an example of the de-secularization of Western democracies, where fears of the influence of the Christian religious Right, with its significant efforts to outlaw or prevent abortion, make any form of euthanasia illegal, stop teaching Darwinian evolutionism in schools etc..., have helped books such as *American Theocracy* reach the bestseller lists for non-fiction. O’Leary 2009: 10-11.

as expansionary and proselytizing, run by a hierarchical clergy as well as by an egalitarian community of 'saints' or a charismatic leader."<sup>2</sup>

The task at hand here will thus be to make sense of these varied understandings of theocracy with the aim of establishing some form of a preliminary typology such that the term's applicability can be evaluated in the Tibetan and Bhutanese contexts. In this vein, we begin with an investigation of the term's origins and etymology, as well as standard definitions.

The coinage of "theocracy" is usually ascribed to the first century Jewish priest and historian Flavius Josephus. Etymologically, the term suggests the rule of *theos* (God or gods) as opposed to the one, few or many, and was used by Josephus to describe the peculiar nature of Jewish government as devised under divine direction by Moses. Josephus writes, "Our legislator (...) instituted the government as one might call — to force an expression — a "theocracy," ascribing to God the rule and the power..."<sup>3</sup> Josephus' term appears to have been coined in contrast to the standard ancient Greek classifications of political regimes codified by Aristotle. As is well known, Aristotle's sixfold classification distinguished regimes on two dimensions: the degree of participation in government, and the interests served by government. On the first dimension, he distinguished government by the one, the few and the many, which he

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<sup>2</sup> Ferrero 2009: 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, *Contra Apion*. 2.165. See Josephus 2007: 261-263.

codified as kingship, aristocracy, and polity. In the second he distinguished between right rule, concerned with serving common interest, from deviant rule, concerned with serving the interests of the ruler(s). Thus, the perverted or defective form of kingship, aristocracy, and polity, were codified as tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. Here we can see that right from its inception, the term theocracy was intended to represent a category of rule that stood outside of common understandings of government. For Josephus, the ancient Hebrews regarded God only as their ruler and, as a result, their system of government could not be encapsulated by Aristotle's typology. For Josephus, God's manifestations of divine power at the Red Sea proclaimed Him as the sole ruler, with Moses acting only as the intermediary between the people and Yahweh.

Josephus' restrictive notion of theocracy as the sole rule of *theos* poses an important problem: the rule of God, or gods, however total, still requires the mediation and intervention of humans. Such an admission has often led scholars to define theocracy not simply as the rule of God or gods, but rather a system of government in which humans rule in the name of God or gods. As Ferrero puts it, "Since, however, God is not known to have ruled worldly government directly, the word is usually understood to mean government by a clergy, or a self-appointed group who claim to speak and act on God's behalf."<sup>4</sup> In this understanding, theocracy typically refers to a political arrangement - sometimes termed "ecclesiocracy" or "hierocracy" - in which the

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<sup>4</sup> Ferrero 2009: 31.

main functions of secular government are discharged by a priesthood who double as secular officials. Perhaps the most famous example of this understanding of theocracy are the Papal States, territories in modern-day Italy (and for a period the city of Avignon in France) over which the pope, as Bishop of Rome, was the temporal ruler from the eighth century till the late nineteenth century unification of Italy.<sup>5</sup>

But, as is well known, the power and influence of the pope, as the leader of the Latin Church, stretched far beyond the confines of the Papal States. As discussed by Luisa Giuriato in an article on the canonical succession rules of the Latin Church, the institution of the pope during the high Middle Ages laid claim to both spiritual and temporal power over much of Western Europe. Following the Investiture Controversy of the eleventh century between Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII, a series of reforms were enacted by the Pope with the aim of emancipating the clergy from the control of emperors and feudal lords and sharply setting the Church as an autonomous political and legal entity.<sup>6</sup> Basing himself on St. Augustine's theory of the two Cities, in which the fifth century theologian argues for the supremacy of the church over earthly kingdoms, Gregory VII insisted that owing to the Church's responsibility for world salvation, temporal power was subordinate to spiritual power and the Church had the duty to control the moral behavior of temporal authorities, judging both their

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<sup>5</sup> At its height, the Papal States included the modern-day regions of Lazio, Marche, Umbria, Emilia-Romagna and Avignon.

<sup>6</sup> Giuriato 2009: 143.

private life and political actions. Such duties included the excommunication of temporal authorities, an outcome that Henry IV met twice before being deposed in 1080.<sup>7</sup> The theocratic doctrine of the supremacy of the Church over the temporal domain continued to gain traction with the successors of Gregory VII and reached its height during the tenure of Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303). According to Giuriato, some of Boniface VIII's dogmatic statements amounted to the following claims:

“God is the only source of authority, the Church is God's city on earth and its chief, the vicar of Christ, is the master and judge of the temporal princes. The independence of the temporal power is heretical as it would imply the dualism of the sources of authority. Therefore, the supremacy of the Church is not just *ratione peccati*, as it has *plenitudo potestatis* on the whole temporal and spiritual governance.”<sup>8</sup>

While the theocratic doctrine of the supremacy of the Church waned soon after the tenure of Pope Boniface VIII, the Latin Church in fact never exercised the kind of power it laid claim to in the first place. The reforms of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries certainly bolstered ecclesiastical independence and influence over temporal matters in Western Europe, but never succeeded in subverting temporal authorities altogether. Rather, the period is marked by protruded conflicts and mutual disavowals between emperors and popes. Even in the Papal States themselves, temporal power was largely in the hands of local princes with the pope mostly holding only nominal

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<sup>7</sup> Giuriato 2009: 149.

<sup>8</sup> Giuriato 2009: 150. Boniface VIII is known to have said, “Emperor, I am the emperor!” See Chamberlain 1969: 115.

authority.<sup>9</sup> This brings us to an important point about the understanding of theocracy as sacerdotal government organized by a priestly ruling class: such a political arrangement is extremely rare, even putting one at great pains to point to a single instance of a historical theocracy ruled by priests alone.<sup>10</sup> As the case of medieval Latin Europe illustrates, power within the theocratic model was usually shared between priests and kings or other temporal leaders. One possible way to explain the rarity of pure sacerdotal government is the hypothesis of Brendan O'Leary, who argues that fundamental pressures internal to any textually based theocracy in the form of sacerdotal government necessitate and engender a separation of powers, making a priestly monopoly of power nearly impossible.<sup>11</sup>

It is perhaps owing to the difficulties of identifying theocracy with sacerdotal government run solely by a clergy that some scholars have offered more broad definitions of the term. A standard formulation of a more loose understanding of theocracy will usually reference a form of government whose rule is in accordance with religious prescriptions, with the specification that the implementation or satisfaction of

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<sup>9</sup> Whittman 2009: 173.

<sup>10</sup> In his *The History of Government*, Samuel Finer could only think of the modern Vatican state and Tibet between 1642 and 1949 as the sole examples of a polity ruled exclusively by a church with no admixture of other elite elements. (see Finer 1997 vol. III: 1478). As this dissertation hopes to make clear, the situation in Tibet was certainly much more complicated than what Finer would seem to suggest.

<sup>11</sup> O'Leary identifies the combination of anti-relativism, hermeneutical difficulties with sacred law, and the routinization of charisma after the exit of a religion's founder, as major factors that jointly destabilize the prospects of a sustainable theocracy in the form of sacerdotal government. O'Leary 2009: 24.

these prescriptions should be public rather than private.<sup>12</sup> The major difference between this understanding of theocracy and those presented above is that a priestly class need not be the only ones who rule on God or gods' behalf. The most common example of this type of theocratic regime in the premodern context is the case of the anointed king ruling on God's behalf. In his influential monograph on English medieval political theology, Ernst Kantorowicz has traced the degree to which theological conceptions of Christ and the church were transferred to the image of the king and the state by medieval jurists. By way of the theory of the king's two bodies, the king was endowed with a body politic, an immutable and mystical identity of christological character that drew on such theological concepts as the *corpus mysticum* or *character angelicus* of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Through the theory of a body politic and its association to Christ, medieval jurists in England at once edified the person of the king as an agent of God. Similarly, the Byzantine emperor was understood to rule over the empire as God's regent on earth and it is fair to say that the majority of the medieval monarchies of the Western world all espoused the doctrine of the divine right of kingship in some form.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Salmon's definition of theocracy. Salmon 2009: 57.

<sup>13</sup> Writing about the transfer of theological concepts to the political sphere, Kantorowicz writes, "In fact, we need only replace the strange image of the Two Bodies by the more customary theological term of the Two Natures in order to make it poignantly felt that the speech of the Elizabethan lawyers derived its tenor in the last analysis from theological diction, and that their speech itself, to say the least, was crypto-theological. Royalty, by this semi-religious terminology, was actually expounded in terms of christological definitions. The jurists, styled by Roman Law so suggestively "Priests of Justice," developed in England not only a "Theology of Kingship"—this had become customary everywhere on the Continent in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—but worked out a genuine "Royal Christology."" Kantorowicz 1997: 21.



As is well known, the Indian subcontinent is no stranger to the concept of divine kingship. From the celebrated utopia of Vālmīki's Rāmarājya to the many eulogies of kingship in Sanskrit and vernacular poetry, the concept of *devarāja* or "god-king," whereby the king is perceived to be an emanation of a Hindu god, is pervasive enough. Of particular interest here, however, is the Buddhist formulation of religious kingship in its characteristic form of *dharmarāja*, or king ruling in accordance with the Buddhist dharma. From its very inception, Buddhism has developed an integral understanding of and relationship with the ideals of kingship. The sustained references to righteous rule in both canonical and non-canonical Buddhist literature reveals the extent to which early Buddhist authors viewed the ideals of kingship as essential to the sustenance of the dharma. The *Aggañña Sutta*, a canonical text often cited for an early Buddhist exposition of social order, for example, emphasizes the role of kingship as a corrective to the disorder of human affairs.<sup>14</sup> According to Buddhist literature, the just or righteous king who rules in accordance to the Buddhist dharma forms the basis for a good society; he is the propagator of the Buddhist precepts *par excellence* and guardian of the morals of his subjects. The epitome of such a ruler is the *cakravartin* or Wheel-Turning king who externally conquers the world non-violently and rules internally according to Buddhist principles.<sup>15</sup> As discussed by Stanley Tambiah and others, extensive parallels exist

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<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the *Aggañña Sutta*, see Collins 1998: 448, and Tambiah 1976: 49.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the etymology of the term *cakravartin/cakkavatti*, see Collins 1998: 473.

between a Buddha and *cakravartin* such that the latter is often described as essentially the temporal counterpart of the Buddha.<sup>16</sup> Here is not the place to delve into the complexities of the characteristics of the ideal Buddhist ruler and it will suffice to mention that Buddhism is no stranger to the understanding of theocracy as kingship in accordance to religious prescriptions. The historical archetype for this understanding of Buddhist kingship is of course the great emperor Aśoka, whose rule became a template for many subsequent Buddhist monarchies in South and Southeast Asia.

As these various examples of medieval kingship in Western Europe and South Asia indicate, the loose understanding of theocracy as a system of government ruling in accordance with religious prescriptions is broad enough to include a large majority of premodern political regimes. In many ways, the interpretation of the political sphere through theological concepts was more often the rule than the exception in the premodern context. One may wonder, as a result, if such a loose interpretation of theocracy is so encompassing as to have any analytic payoff. In an article on rivalry and cooperation between church and king in what he terms “largely theocratic societies,” political economist Pierre Salmon argues that such a loose interpretation has the advantage of allowing us to conceive of theocracy as a continuous variable; “some regimes are very theocratic and others are so only to a degree or in some respects.”<sup>17</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> See Tambiah 1976: 43. For a rich description of the parallels between the “two big men” see Collins 1998: 470-476.

<sup>17</sup> Salmon 2009: 57.

this perspective, it is not the configuration of government that becomes a criteria for theocratic nomenclature, but rather the extent to which religious perspectives and ideals condition the political sphere. Taken to its extreme, such an understanding of theocracy has provided the analytic space for some to identify even explicitly atheist regimes, such as Soviet communism, for example, as theocratic.<sup>18</sup>

As this brief survey of various uses of the term theocracy indicates, three broad categories can be identified: 1. a restrictive understanding of theocracy as the rule of *theos* originally formulated by Flavius Josephus, 2. a broader understanding of theocracy as a form of hierocratic government run by a clergy, and 3. a loose understanding of theocracy as a system of government whose rule is in accordance with religious prescriptions. Needless to say, the vast majority of historical situations typically described as theocratic fall squarely in the third and, to some degree, second category.

Additionally, an important distinction can be made between the first category (restrictive theocracy) and the latter two (hierocratic and loose). Contrarily to Josephus' use of theocracy as a term to identify a form of government that fell outside the purview

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<sup>18</sup> The identification of communism as theocratic of course rests on an inclusive definition of religion. For an example of this view, see Donald Whittman 2009: 175. "By a similar logic, communist countries can also be seen as theocracies in that they had their own sacred texts interpreted by a priestly class (the Communist party) that were taught in schools and supported by a large set of believers (at least initially). Again, there are differences in the "religions." Communism was about the evils of a class society. The Christian view that the meek would inherit the earth was not left to God, but to the communist revolutionaries."

of Aristotle's classification of political regimes, the various political configurations illustrative of hierocratic and/or loose understandings of theocracy fit very well within Aristotle's system. A sacerdotal government run by a clergy would, in Aristotle's terms, simply consist of an aristocracy, and kingship, divine or otherwise, a monarchy. This distinction sets apart Josephus' understanding of theocracy as a singular political system that defies common assumptions of government. For Josephus, only a political system in which *theos* is recognized and invested as the complete and total sovereign without any human representatives can be described as theocratic, invalidating both sacerdotal government run by a clergy and monarchy in the name of God or religion. As was mentioned above, such a definition poses the important problem of human mediation and representation and, in this sense, Josephus' definition of theocracy is perhaps less about describing an empirical reality than the conjuring of an ideal world. I will argue here that such an ideal world, where an omnipotent *theos* is sovereign ruler over a perfect commonwealth, is akin to Thomas Moore's original coinage of the term *utopia* in 1516, intended to be a Greek pun on the words *eu-topia* meaning 'good place,' and *ou-topia* meaning 'no-place.' In other words, the restrictive understanding of theocracy as iterated by Josephus represents an ideal system of government that can only be envisioned or imagined. If the concept of theocracy, in all its intended uses, was to be represented on a scale, Josephus' definition would lie at one extreme, describing an aspiration rather than a reality; a *theotopia*. As I shall explore in this dissertation,

however, it is precisely this understanding of theocracy that Ngawang Namgyal and his apologists sought to conjure and, remarkably, realize.

As will become evident over the course of the following pages, all three understandings of theocracy discussed above played a significant role in the developments that led to the founding of the Bhutanese state of Ngawang Namgyal. Herein lies the usefulness of theocracy as an analytical term in this dissertation: theocracy refers simultaneously to the utopian vision of Ngawang Namgyal and his apologists as well as the range of situations in Tibet leading up to the seventeenth century that approximated that ideal. My use of the term is thus in reference to a range of historical phenomena in which a constellation between religious and temporal spheres was achieved with the express vision of a utopian ideal. As I will discuss below, the characteristic Tibetan conception of government, articulated as a synthesis between the religious and temporal domains and encapsulated in the phrase *chösi sungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'brel*) or “union of religious and temporal spheres,” closely approximates this understanding of theocracy.

### **The Union of Religious and Temporal Domains (*chos srid zung 'brel*)**

As discussed by Ardussi in his pioneering article on the theoretical foundations of the Bhutanese state, although the phrase *chösi sungdrel* became widely invoked as an abstract theory of governance in Tibet with the establishment of the theocracies of the

seventeenth century, the phrase finds older antecedents in Tibetan sources describing the Sakya-Mongol government of the fourteenth century and the early Tibetan monarchy.<sup>19</sup> The phrase makes a distinction between the two spheres of *chö* (*chos*) or “dharma” and *si* (*srid*), a term used in contradistinction to *chö* which has a broad semantic range that includes existence, the temporal order, *saṃsāra*, society, and politics.<sup>20</sup> As discussed by David Seyfort Rugg in his *Ordre Spirituel et Ordre Temporel dans la Pensée Bouddhique de l’Inde et du Tibet*, the most extensive study to date of such a theory of governance in Tibet, the Tibetan notion of the two distinct spheres of spiritual or religious (*chos*) and temporal (*srid*), designated by the Tibetan phrases *lugs gnyis* (“two orders”) or *tshul gnyis* (“two modes”), takes root in the contrastive opposition between the activities of the lama (*bla ma’i bya ba*) or of the dharma (*chos kyi bya ba*) and those of the world (*’jig rten kyi bya ba*) or of the government (*khriims kyi bya ba*).<sup>21</sup> Such an opposition in turn takes inspiration in the classical Buddhist classification of the mundane or worldly (skt. *laukika*, tib. *’jig rten pa*) and the supra-mundane or otherworldly (skt. *lokotarra*, tib. *’jig rten las ’das pa*). While the supra-mundane was always understood to be the purview of the lama or religious virtuoso, the mundane was unambiguously the domain managed by kings and temporal rulers. Such a

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<sup>19</sup> Ardussi 2004: 34.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the term *srid* and the notion of the secular in Tibet, see Gayley and Willock 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Rugg 1995: 18.

distinction between these two spheres is attested as early as the second half of the eighth century by the Doring (rdo ring) inscription of Samyé (bsam yas) attributed to King Tri Songdetsen (khri srong lde btsan c.742-c.797).<sup>22</sup> Another important source for the Tibetan distinction between religious and temporal spheres, which would appear to be of a strictly Tibetan provenance and of even greater ancestry, is the classification between *michö* (*mi chos*), understood as a body of ‘man-made’ norms, customs, or moral axioms, and *lhachö* (*lha chos*), understood as norms or customs of a ‘celestial’ character and which, in time, became synonymous with the Buddhist dharma.

While the Tibetan classification of social phenomena into the categories of spiritual/religious and temporal by way of the terms *chö* and *si* is rather unambiguous, the union or synthesis (*zung 'brel*) of these two into a distinct formulation of Buddhist government is more open to interpretation. What exactly is implied by the term *sungdrel*, a verbal compound having broad enough semantic range to describe a number of scenarios including the pairing of two distinct entities, the union of two entities into one, or even the subsumption or integration of one entity by another? Ruegg frames this question by asking whether the phrase *chösi sungdrel* refers to a coordination or syzygy between the two distinct orders of *chö* and *si* or if, rather, the phrase refers to a subordination of the temporal by the religious?<sup>23</sup> The implications of this distinction are

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<sup>22</sup> See Ruegg 1995: 25-26.

<sup>23</sup> See Ruegg 1995: 46, 74.

significant. If the union of religious and temporal spheres is understood as the coordination between two separate yet equal entities, the model that arises is a diarchic one, with typically two figureheads representing each sphere and sharing equal power in the enunciation of government. If, on the other hand, the union of religious and temporal spheres is understood as the subordination of the temporal by the religious, the model that arises would be a hierocratic one, with a religious figure-head invested with both religious and temporal functions at the helm of government. Vice versa, if the union of religious and temporal spheres implies a subordination of the religious by the temporal, the model that ensues, as observed above, is divine or religiously-sanctioned kingship.

As I shall explore in this dissertation, the classical Tibetan conception of government as the union of religious and temporal spheres under the banner of *chösi sungdrel* was never singular and has, depending on the period, referred to each of these three scenarios individually or in conjunction. During the Sakya-Mongol government of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the model espoused was largely a diarchic one; the Phakmodrupa and Tsangpa dynasties of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries emphasized the model of religiously-sanctioned kingship; and the Gelukpa and Drukpa theocracies of the seventeenth century essentially functioned as hierocratic governments. That is not to say, however, that each of these periods of Tibetan rule absolutely espoused one model at the expense of another. Rather, and as this



dissertation will aim to demonstrate, the various possibilities in the interpretation of the union of religious and temporal spheres were conjured and employed depending on the context and circumstances. For example, while the Sakya-Mongol partnership of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries can be unambiguously described as diarchic with the figures of Drogön Phakpa ('Gro mgon 'Phags pa 1235-1280) representing the religious sphere and Khubilai Khan (1215-1294) representing the temporal, as his often employed title of *Chögyal* (*chos rgyal*) or *Dharmarāja* indicates, the Sakya administration of Phakpa equally invested in its hierarch the qualities of temporal ruler. In other words, the relationship between the religious and temporal under the banner of *chösi sungdrel* was always dynamic and oscillating, or as Ruegg describes it, kaleidoscopic.<sup>24</sup> In order to fully appreciate the complexities of such a kaleidoscopic relationship, the three possible models invoked by *chösi sungdrel* discussed above (diarchy, hierocracy, and religiously-sanctioned kingship) need to be observed as ideal types; organizational models constructed not to represent but only to approximate reality by highlighting certain decisive elements. By way of recognizing the various prominent characteristics of each of these in and of themselves fictitious models, we may then approach the 'messiness' of historical phenomena with greater clarity and focus. With this caveat in mind, we turn to the model of religiously-sanctioned kingship, the contours of which were already introduced above.

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<sup>24</sup> Ruegg 1995: 46, 74.

The Buddhist ideal of kingship in accordance with the dharma, epitomized in the figure of the *dharmarāja* (*chos kyi rgyal po*) or *cakravartin* (*'khor lo sgyur ba'i rgyal po*), has had a profound influence on Tibetan conceptions of governance. Following the dissolution of the Tibetan empire during the ninth century, as Matthew Kapstein has claimed, Tibetans were faced not only with a practical political and economic crisis, but also with a crisis of understanding, with Buddhist cosmology and soteriology providing important ways of making sense of the Tibetan world as a domain of meaningful agency.<sup>25</sup> While Buddhism was already instated as the state religion during the reign of Tri Songdetsen in the eighth century, it is only after the fall of the empire a century later that Tibetan authors began in earnest to evaluate their subjectivity in the world through the medium of Buddhism. As Fernanda Pirie has argued in an article on the emergence of Buddhist law in early Tibet, up to the ninth century, ideological accounts were not presenting the imperial order in terms of the ideas offered by the new religion. By the mid-ninth century, however, some writers would begin to make an explicit link between the ruler's activities and laws, on the one hand, and the moral principles of Buddhism, on the other. According to Pirie, this linkage would eventually become the basis of a new religious legal ideology that would persist well into the twentieth century and retroactively placed Buddhism at the very center of Tibetan notions of governance

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<sup>25</sup> Kapstein 2000: 36-37.

during the Tibetan empire.<sup>26</sup> Such an ideology would eventually become ubiquitous in Tibetan Buddhist historiography, casting Tibet's early emperors as Buddhist rulers *par excellence*. Because the characterization of Tibet's early emperors as the ideal Buddhist kings was to have such a important influence on all subsequent understandings of kingship throughout Tibetan history, it will prove worthwhile here to sketch some of their most important features as developed in Tibetan Buddhist historiography following the dissolution of the empire.

First, the Tibetan emperors were portrayed as Wheel-turning kings or *cakravartin*.<sup>27</sup> As was mentioned above, the image of the *cakravartin* as the epitome of the Buddhist king (*dharmarāja*) who conquers the four corners of the world non-violently and rules internally through the dharma was already ubiquitous in India, with the emperor Aśoka acting as its paradigmatic example. As discussed by Georgios Halkias, the idea of a universal monarch may be framed as a response to the territorial extension and growing power of monarchies in India that subsumed in their fold smaller village republics.<sup>28</sup> As Buddhism traveled across Southern Asia, the image of the *cakravartin* ruling over a universal empire emblazoned by the universal truths of Buddhism provided a useful encompassing template for monarchs across the region. The

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<sup>26</sup> See Pirie 2017: 406.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis Doney 2015 traces a prayer from Dunhuang (IOL Tib J 466/3) in which, as early as the ninth century, Tri Songdetsen is explicitly compared to Aśoka. See also Halkias 2013: 504.

<sup>28</sup> Halkias 2013: 499.

*cakravartin* model presented a system in which a king assumed power on the basis of being born a “Great Being” (*mahāpuruṣa*); an ontological status homologous to that of a Buddha and manifest in bearing the thirty two major and eighty minor bodily marks of a Great Being (*mahāpuruṣa lakṣaṇa*).<sup>29</sup> As was mentioned above, the Wheel-turning king was largely understood as the temporal counterpart of the Buddha, with both Great Beings charged with the dispensation of the universal principles of the dharma in the world. That is not to say that both Great Beings were understood to have equal hierarchical footing, however. As Collins rightly points out, while both a Buddha and a *cakravartin* are understood as dharma kings (*dharmarāja*) and the Buddha is sometimes referred to as a “Wheel-turning king of the excellent dharma” (*saddharma-cakravartin*), a *cakravartin*’s power is clearly subordinate to that of a Buddha.<sup>30</sup> The complimentary yet asymmetrical relationship between Buddha and *cakravartin* is sometimes illustrated in commentarial traditions by making a distinction between the wheels (*cakra*) that are turned by each. While the Buddha’s wheel is usually glossed as the *wheel of dharma* (*dharmacakra*), the wheel that the *cakravartin* turns is more often glossed as the *wheel of command* (*aṅgacakra*).<sup>31</sup> The implication here is that although both individuals are equally

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<sup>29</sup> See Collins 1998: 471. “The same amount of merit must be accumulated in previous lives by both, the same miracles occur at the birth of both, and both have the thirty two and eighty minor bodily marks of a *mahāpurisa*.”

<sup>30</sup> See Collins 1998: 472, 474.

<sup>31</sup> See Tambiah 1976: 44; and Collins 1998: 473-4.

invested in their joint roles as universal benefactors, their capacities and means are quite different. While the scope of a Buddha's field of action is virtually unlimited, a *cakravartin's* characteristic means of dispensing the dharma is by ruling justly through the establishment of laws that are in accordance with the dharma.

It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the major attributes of Tibet's early Buddhist emperors as characterized in later Tibetan historiography was their establishment of Buddhist laws. As Pirie has argued, in the new religious legal ideology that emerged in Tibet following the dissolution of the empire, law-making became central to the activities of a good ruler and acted as a potent symbol of imperial greatness.<sup>32</sup> Post-imperial chronicles like the *Dbal bzhed* or *Maṇi bka' 'bum*, amongst others, directly equate the successes and glories of the Tibetan empire to the establishment of laws based on classical Buddhist moral formulations such as the *Ten Virtues* (*dge ba bcu*)<sup>33</sup> by the Buddhist kings Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po c.569-650) and Tri Songdetsen. In these narratives, both kings' commitment to Buddhism is expressed through legislation pertaining to the lay and monastic populations in the form of royal laws (*rgyal khrims*) and religious laws (*chos khrims*)

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<sup>32</sup> See Pirie 2017: 418.

<sup>33</sup> The *Ten Virtues* (*dge ba bcu*) consist in the abandonment of the Ten Vices: the three bad deeds of the body (killing, stealing and sexual misconduct), the four bad deeds of the mouth (lying, double tonguedness, defamation and flattery), and the three bad deeds of the mind (greed, anger and lust). For examples from the *Maṇi bka' 'bum*, see Ishihama 2004: 17-18.

respectively.<sup>34</sup> In sum, in their characteristic depiction of Songtsen Gampo and Tri Songdetsen as idealized *dharma kings* or *cakravartin*, Tibetan historians portrayed these rulers not only as instruments for the propagation of Buddhism to Tibet but the very source and arbiters of moral efflorescence in the empire through Buddhist legislation. This, of course, perfectly fits the mold of classical Indian depictions of the righteous *dharmarāja* or *cakravartin*, understood as the guardian of his subjects' morality and whose rule forms the basis for a good society.

The idealized depictions of Tibet's early monarchs as *dharmarāja* or *cakravartin* on the one hand and the pragmatic realities of royal jurisprudence on the other bring about an important tension, discussed at length by Collins in the context of the *Pali imaginaire*,<sup>35</sup> in understandings of the role and function of kingship for Tibetan Buddhist authors, particularly with regard to the administration of violence. In an article on the Buddhicization of imperial law following the decline of the Tibetan empire, Lewis

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<sup>34</sup> As Pirie has argued, although these two sets of laws are usually presented as distinct, they are nonetheless understood to be complimentary and at times likened to a single sun. Pirie 2017: 420.

<sup>35</sup> In his discussion of the figure of the *cakravartin* in the *Pali imaginaire*, Collins identifies what he terms 'two modes of *Dhamma*,' or two conflicting attitudes with regard to kingship and the use of violence. According to him, Pali texts espouse in some instances an understanding of '*Dhamma*' or 'what is right,' as (i) an "ethics of reciprocity, in which the assessment of violence is context-dependent and negotiable," and in others as (ii) an "ethic of absolute values, in which the assessment of violence is context-independent and non-negotiable." Qualified as '*Dhamma Mode 1*' and '*Dhamma Mode 2*' respectively, one prescription allows the king to pass judgment and use violence under the principle that "good is to be returned for good and bad for bad," while the other does not, because "any act of violence, in any circumstances, is wrong." Collins then proceeds to identify a textual mode in which kingship was made compatible with *Dhamma* in *Mode 2*, what he terms "the utopian paradox of the non-violent king." He refers here to the literature on the concept of the *cakravartin*, a Wheel-turning-king who externally conquers the world non-violently and rules internally by making his Perfect Moral Commonwealth such that no one does wrong and the law courts stand empty. See Collins 1998: 420-422.

Doney has traced the tendency among Tibetan authors to reframe the juridical activities of Tibet's early kings in line with what Collins has termed 'the paradox of the non-violent king.'<sup>36</sup> To be sure, the question of violence and its commensurability with Buddhist tenets remained an important facet of Tibetan conceptions of religiously-sanctioned kingship throughout subsequent Tibetan history. As I shall explore in this dissertation, depending on the context, the use of violence, to which medieval Tibet was certainly no stranger, was at times rationalized through an ethic of reciprocity and at others condemned by means of an ethic of absolute values. An important dimension of this discussion was the gradual reframing of Tibet's early Buddhist kings as emanations of important bodhisattvas whose various actions could be conceptualized and legitimated along Buddhist lines. The *Maṇi bka' 'bum* stands out as a paradigmatic example of this trend, with Songtsen Gampo identified as an emanation of the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *Spyan ras gzigs*) and his reign framed as the product of the bodhisattva's compassionate mission. Later monarchs such as the King of Tsang Karma Tenkyong Wangpo (Karma bstan skyong dbang po 1606-1642), for example, were identified as emanations of more wrathful bodhisattvas, representing attempts to rationalize some of their more militant activities.<sup>37</sup>

More importantly, however, the identification of Tibetan kings as emanations of

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<sup>36</sup> See Doney 2017: 17-18.

<sup>37</sup> Karma Tenkyong Wangpo was identified as an emanation of the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi.

what had by then largely become deified bodhisattvas further accentuated their religiously-sanctioned status. While Tibetan kingship by no means repudiated indigenous conceptions of power and authority, largely defined by bloodline and clan-affiliation, the deification of the king by way of the introduction of a distinctly Buddhist cosmology placed him at the pinnacle of both temporal and religious orders. Kapstein writes of the conflation of Songtsen Gampo and the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the *Maṅi bka' 'bum*,

“the mythical portions of the Mani Kambum develop a distinctive view of Tibet, its history, and its place in the world. Three elements that inform this view are outstanding: the belief that Avalokiteśvara was the patron deity of Tibet; the legend of King Songtsen Gampo and his court, in which the king is represented as being the very embodiment of Avalokiteśvara (...); and the cosmological vision of the Avalokiteśvara cult, whereby the king’s divinity, and the divinity’s regard for Tibet are seen (...) as matters grounded in the very nature of the world.”<sup>38</sup>

As this brief summary of some the major characteristics of Tibetan kingship as an ideal type indicates, following the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, Tibetan authors heavily drew on classical Buddhist formulations of kingship as well as mythology associated to celestial bodhisattvas in order to formulate a distinct vision of the Tibetan monarch. As a *cakravartin*, the king was seen as the temporal counterpart to a Buddha; a universal monarch and paragon of virtue instituting laws based on the moral prescriptions of the Buddhist dharma. As the embodiment of a transcendent

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<sup>38</sup> Kapstein 2000: 147.



bodhisattva, the king further laid claim to a status of divinity that commanded over the religious institutions of the kingdom. As was mentioned above, although *chösi sungdrel* emerged as an abstract theory of governance only after the establishment of the Sakya-Mongol partnership of the thirteenth century, lying at the heart of immediate post-imperial accounts of the reigns of Tibet's early Buddhist kings was the marriage of religious and temporal spheres in the figure of the king. It would be difficult to overestimate the level of influence that these early conceptions had on later monarchical systems. As I will explore in chapters two and three, the Phakmodrupa (phag mo sgrub pa) and Tsangpa (gtsang pa) dynasties of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries directly drew on these conceptions of Tibet's early kings as normative archetypes of kingship and as the basis for their formulation of *chösi sungdrel*.

The next model of *chösi sungdrel* as an ideal type to be observed is the notion of a diarchic system of government, whereupon the union of religious and temporal spheres is represented by a partnership between religious hierarchs and temporal rulers. Although the archetype for this system is of course the Sakya-Mongol partnership established by the Sakyapa hierarch Drogön Phakpa and the Mongol chieftain Khubilai Khan, this model was already widely replicated at the regional level amongst local rulers and hierarchs. As I will argue in chapter two, the diarchic model of government in many ways represents the rise in the Tibetan social arena of a specialized virtuoso class of Buddhist practitioners. Lying at the root of conceptions of this system is what

has often been referred to as the “patron-priest relationship” in Tibetan political theory, a translation of the Tibetan contraction *chöyön* (*mchod yon*) for the terms *mchod gnas* (skt. *dakṣiṇeya*) or “object of gift/alms,” and *yon bdag* (skt. *dakṣiṇāpati*) or “giver of gift / alms.”

The Indian categorization of the figures of patron and beneficiary, most often represented by the householder (skt. *grhapati*, tib. *khyim bdag*) giving alms (sk. *dāna*, tib. *sbyin*) to members of the ordained saṅgha (tib. *dge 'dun*), into a paradigmatic representation of normative Buddhist conduct long predates the arrival of Buddhism to Tibet, providing Tibetan authors with many accounts of this relationship in both canonical and non-canonical literature.<sup>39</sup> It would be a mistake to understand the relationship between patron and beneficiary as unidirectional, however. As is well attested in classical Buddhist literature, the relationship between monk and lay patron is a reciprocal one, involving the exchange of material goods and the ‘gift of the dharma’ (skt: *dharmadāna* tib: *chos kyi sbyin pa*). The patron/beneficiary relationship encapsulated in the term *chöyön* was eventually formalized into Tibetan conceptions of political organization and codified into the figures of temporal ruler and lama (*bla ma/ bla mchod/dbu bla*), with each individual representing a respective sphere of influence and governance; ie. the temporal (*srid*) and the religious (*chos*) respectively. While on the

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<sup>39</sup> Some characteristic examples of this relationship include the merchant Anāthapiṇḍaka or the king Bimbisāra’s support of the Buddha, and Aśoka’s patronage of the mahāsāmī.

one hand the temporal ruler was understood to govern over the temporal or worldly affairs (*'jig rten pa*) of the realm, on the other he was ritually bound to the injunctions of his tantric lama, who was understood to have a privileged access to and mastery over the supramundane or otherworldly (*'jig rten las 'das pa*).<sup>40</sup> As mentioned above, such an arrangement reflects the growing influence of a religious virtuoso class in the Tibetan social arena following the fall of the Tibetan empire. As Carl Yamamoto has argued in his study of the twelfth century figure Shang Yudrakpa Tsöndrü Drakpa (Zhang G.yu brag pa brtson 'grus grags pa 1123-1193), part and parcel of the success of the Buddhicization of Tibet during the so-called "Renaissance" period was the recognition of the religious virtuoso as an indispensable binding force in the social, cultural, and physical environments of Tibet.<sup>41</sup> It should therefore come as no surprise that the period following the fall of the Tibetan empire saw a growing body of literature turning not to the figure of the king, but to the figure of the tantric master as the primary locus of religious authority. Most famous here is the *Padma Bka' thang terma* (*gter ma*) literature, portraying the Indian tantric *siddha* Padmasambhava as the emperor Tri Songdetsen's

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<sup>40</sup> In his study of the period, Yamamoto identifies three types of mastery that propelled the tantric lama in the socio-political arena: mastery of space: "annexing, marking off, and sealing territory through magic and force, subduing both human and non-human enemies, and offering protection from physical danger, social disorder, and spiritual malaise"; mastery of time: "linking his community, through narrative and trope, to a rich and authoritative past of powerful adepts and Buddhas, to a legitimizing and identity-supporting lineage"; and mastery of discourse. See Yamamoto 2012: 32.

<sup>41</sup> See Yamamoto 2012: 5, 45.

tantric *guru* and object of reverence.<sup>42</sup>

The elevation of the religious virtuoso in the social hierarchy of Tibet placed him as a counterpart to the temporal ruler in the enunciation of power. As I shall explore at length in chapter 2, such an arrangement entailed a careful balancing act between the two groups and involved the investment of various forms of capital on the part of each. Soon, the diarchic model of government, in which the complementarity between the temporal and religious spheres was often illustrated by the harmonious relationship between the sun and the moon,<sup>43</sup> became the dominant model throughout the Central Tibetan region. Although there certainly is some truth to Ruegg's claim that Phakpa's recourse to characterizing the Sakya/Mongol relationship along the lines of a *chöyön* diarchy was probably a creative means to make sense of and confront the geopolitical realities that faced the Tibetan region in the late thirteenth century,<sup>44</sup> in truth such a model was already the predominant one at the regional level. Following the dissolution of the Tibetan empire and the fracturing of the Tibetan region into various clan-ruled polities, rulers and religious hierarchs entered a strategic partnership wherein both

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<sup>42</sup> The story of Padmasambhava and King Tri Songdetsen's first encounter, as recounted in the *Padma Bka' thang* literature, is a case in point. As Padmasambhava approaches Tri Songdetsen's palace, where the king and his court are waiting to receive him, the king is reported to think to himself that owing to his being a great ruler who upholds the dharma, the visiting yogin will surely bow to him. Padmasambhava proceeds to sing a song praising his own mastery over the phenomena of samsāra and admonishing the king's pride and conceit. Padmasambhava then performs a miracle and the king immediately prostrates to the master. See Bogin 2005: 69-70.

<sup>43</sup> See Ruegg 1995: 72.

<sup>44</sup> See Ruegg 1995: 83, 86-87.

factions relied on one another for the articulation of social order and government.

The final ideal typical model of the union of religious and temporal spheres to be observed here is that of hierocracy, whereupon the temporal (*srid*) is subordinated to the religious (*chos*) and both spheres are integrated into the person of the religious hierarch who stands at the helm of a clerical form of government. As I have mentioned above, this model famously emerged in the seventeenth century with the installments of the Gelukpa and Drukpa governments of the Fifth Dalai Lama and Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal respectively. Much of this dissertation will be dedicated to illuminating the multivalent characteristics associated to this system and it will suffice to mention here that, in essence, the hierocratic model relied on the capacity of collapsing the attributes of kingship into the by now towering figure of the religious hierarch.

As was observed above, the ideal of divine kingship similarly sought the merging of religious and temporal spheres into a single figurehead (i.e. the king), making both systems at first glance analogous. A closer look at the hierocratic model however reveals a number of fundamental differences between both systems, rendering them largely incongruous. For one, the model of divine kingship never developed the kind of religious virtuosity that was attributed to the religious hierarch. While kings were commonly identified as emanations of transcendent bodhisattvas whose rule was framed along moral or even soteriological lines, kings were never attributed with the mastery over otherworldly phenomena characteristic of the religious hierarch.

Furthermore, the institution of kingship, however divine, was still deeply indebted to restrictive understandings of authority and succession. As I will discuss in chapter 3, the introduction of the *tulku* (*sprul sku*) mode of abbatial succession in Tibet opened the door for alternative understandings of authority and kinship that redefined the terms of succession and patronage writ large and propelled the religious elite in divergent ways from kingship.

If, as I have argued above, the *chöyön* diarchic model of government signifies a rise of the position of the religious hierarch in the social hierarchy of Tibet, the hierocratic model points to its apogee. By the seventeenth century, the figure of the religious hierarch had become imbued with so much capital and charisma that it could easily envision a world where, to use Yamamoto's words, "worldly and spiritual power were but two inseparable aspects of a single mastery."<sup>45</sup> From an ideological perspective, the hierocratic model did not so much reconceive the characteristics of the ideal ruler as reorganize them in the figure of the hierarch. As I will explore in chapter 5, the figure of Ngawang Namgyal became a locus for all of the previously discussed characteristics of the ideal ruler, temporal or religious: he was considered a *cakravartin* and *dharmarāja* who instituted laws based on the moral precepts of Buddhism; he was an emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara whose mission was to found an earthly realm for the propagation of Buddhism; he was simultaneously a patron (*yon bdag*) and a beneficiary

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<sup>45</sup> Yamamoto 2012: 6.

(*mchod gnas*) of material gifts to the *saṃgha*; and he was a religious virtuoso exercising a mastery over space, time and discourse. The crystallization of all these elements into his single person meant that his mandate to rule squarely encompassed both the worldly or temporal (*srid*) and the religious (*chos*).

As this brief survey of three possible configurations of the union of religious and temporal spheres indicates, the Tibetan conception *chösi sungdrel* as an abstract theory of government was broad enough to allow a wide range of political scenarios. From divine or religiously-sanctioned kingship to hierocratic government, the understanding of *chösi sungdrel* as an overarching principle referring to a range of phenomena in which a constellation between religious and temporal spheres is achieved closely approximates our understanding of theocracy. While the models of religiously-sanctioned kingship and *chöyön* diarchy align well with loose understandings of theocracy as a system of government whose rule is in accordance with religious prescriptions, the hierocratic governments of the seventeenth century match the widely invoked definition of theocracy as a form of hierocratic government run by a clergy, however rare such instances appeared in history. It is in this sense that one can veritably speak of a theocratic movement across much of Tibetan history.

There is something distinct that can be said about the hierocratic models of the seventeenth century however, especially with regard to the Drukpa government of Ngawang Namgyal. While the qualification of the Drukpa state as a hierocratic

government run by a clergy is accurate in some respects, it also misses the complexities and multivalence of this system. As mentioned above, the brand of *chösi sungdrel* espoused by the newly-founded Drukpa state simultaneously embodied the characteristics of divine or religiously-sanctioned kingship, *chöyön* diarchy, and hierocracy. More importantly, however, and as I will argue in this dissertation, the renewed understandings of the role and place of the religious hierarch in the Tibetan social arena made the nature of Ngawang Namgyal's rule especially akin to Jospehus' restrictive and utopian definition of theocracy as the rule of *theos*; and in this sense, the Drukpa state envisioned by Ngawang Namgyal and his apologists may stand as a rare example of the restrictive kind of theocracy described above.

It may be worthwhile to mention at this point that Ruegg has rejected the applicability of the term theocracy to describe the political systems of the seventeenth century, arguing that the Buddhist notion of the Arya Bodhisattva on a supramundane path (*lokkotara-mārga*) shares little, if any, with the Greek *theos*. He, in turn, proposes the term "Boddhisattvacracy" as a more apt and precise description of the Tibetan situation.<sup>46</sup> Here is not the avenue for theological debates over the scope of the term *theos*, and it will suffice to claim that the Greek term has a broad enough semantic range to include many of the divine attributes that the figure of the reincarnated hierarch/Bodhisattva-king had acquired in Tibet by the seventeenth century. While Ruegg's

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<sup>46</sup> Ruegg 1995: 8, 17.



"Bodhisattvacracy" may have the merit of staying within Buddhist nomenclature, I hope to demonstrate that there is an added analytic payoff in making, at the very least, a loose apposition between Ngawang Namgyal's state-building project and Josephus' utopian ideal. That is not to suggest that there exists an intrinsic correlation between the two as to require a comparative exercise, but rather simply that Josephus' restrictive understanding of theocracy as the rule of an omnipotent *theos* over a perfect commonwealth may be a useful and productive lens through which to look at the founding of the Bhutanese state.

If, at this point, we have a clearer picture of what the possible configurations of a theocratic movement in medieval Tibet may have looked like by exploring the ideal typical characteristics of three enunciations of *chösi sungdrel*, nothing has been said of how these may have historically materialized. What were the historical dynamics that produced one system over another? What were the causes and conditions for the balance between temporal and religious to tip one way or another? What historically contingent structures allowed for the relationship between religious and temporal spheres under the banner of *chösi sungdrel* to become kaleidoscopic? The answers to such questions undoubtedly lie in the 'messiness' of historical phenomena and it is only by turning to the social and material realities of the period in addition to its ideological composition that a clearer picture of the rise of a theocratic movement in Tibet and eventually Bhutan may surface. Doing so, however, necessitates a clear methodological

strategy on our part. At stake here is the application of a theoretical approach that helps us locate and make sense of the complexities and layers of the historical phenomena observed. To this end, we turn to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu with a focus on his notion of symbolic capital and theory of strategic action fields as a means of developing a theoretical framework that sheds light on the processes and mechanisms that informed the socio-political changes of interest to this dissertation.

### **Bourdieu, Symbolic Capital, Habitus and Strategic Action Fields**

Even if, as I have argued above, there is enough ideological continuity between the theocratic governments of the seventeenth century and preceding models of governance to speak of a theocratic movement across Tibetan history, the emergence of the hierocracies of the seventeenth century certainly entailed a radical rupture in the social fabric of the region. In no uncertain way, the rise of ecclesiastical power in seventeenth century Tibet and Bhutan caused a major reconfiguration of the social order and struck a severe blow to the region's indigenous power bases. As Ronald Davidson has argued in his monograph of the institutionalization of Buddhism in Tibet, following the dissolution of the Tibetan Empire in the ninth century and the political fragmentation that ensued, nascent lineages of Tibetan Buddhism turned to the "most powerful single institution in Tibet: the sense of cohesiveness of the great clans and

aristocratic lords."<sup>47</sup> It would be difficult to overestimate the role that Tibet's highly hierarchical clan-based aristocratic society played in the institutionalization of Tibet's first Buddhist sects.<sup>48</sup> I will be exploring the characteristics of this early phase of Buddhist institutionalization at length in the next chapter and it will suffice to mention here that Tibet's first Buddhist sects were established in an asymmetrical relationship of dependence upon Tibet's powerful clans and aristocratic families. The rise of a theocratic movement leading up to the hierocracies of the seventeenth century hence entailed a gradual reordering of the social arena and the terms of engagement between the aristocratic and religious establishments such that an eventual reversal of the social hierarchy was achieved with the ascendancy of religious hierarchs on the political plane. As a study of the dynamics at stake in such a reversal, my project is thus guided by the fundamental question of how social change and/or stability are effectuated and maintained.

Pierre Bourdieu's notions of symbolic capital, field analysis and *habitus* are instructive to an analysis of the processes mentioned above. Bourdieu's work has shown the extent to which conflict is fundamental to all social life. At the heart of all

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<sup>47</sup> Davidson 2005: 274.

<sup>48</sup> Here, I follow the distinction between lineage and sect established by Kapstein 1980: "By sect, I mean a religious order that is distinguished from others by virtue of its institutional independence; that is, its unique character is embodied outwardly in the form of an independent hierarchy and administration, independent properties and a recognizable membership of some sort. A lineage on the other hand is a continuous succession of spiritual teachers who have transmitted a given body of knowledge over a period of generations but who need not be affiliated with a common sect." For a further discussion of this distinction, see Miller 2005.

social arrangements, according to him, is the struggle for power. His sociology thus investigates how actors navigate the social world and strategically manipulate capital to advance their position over others in the social hierarchy. Effectuating what amounts to a criticism and extension of materialist historiography, Bourdieu has redefined the Marxist understanding of capital to include all forms of power, whether they be material, cultural, social, or symbolic. For Bourdieu, the notion of capital encompasses assets other than simply money and property. Education, social networks, artistic abilities, and cultural knowledge are all obtained at the expense of labor, and these forms of symbolic capital are all subject to the same laws of accumulation, inheritance, and exchange that govern material forms of capital. Bourdieu speaks of symbolic capital as a 'denied capital,' a means through which 'naked self-interest' and 'egoistic calculation' become misrecognized. Through the conversion of material capital into symbolic capital, the logic of self-interest underlying all practices becomes misrecognized as one of 'disinterest.' For him, this misrecognition is fundamental to the reproduction of the social order and its inequalities. Through the accumulation of symbolic capital, individuals and groups acquire symbolic power. In turn, symbolic power yields control over the means through which the social world is represented and maintained. As such, in Bourdieu's sociology, symbolic capital is as significant as material capital, since both are equal facets of a larger economy of power.

One of the benefits of Bourdieu's sociology specific to our case lies in directing

our attention to the means of production of symbolic capital. According to him, through their labor, 'symbolic producers' such as intellectuals, artists, writers, teachers etc. form a crucial basis for the production of symbolic capital and the legitimation of a particular social order. The issue at stake here is one of representation; how and by whom is the social order enunciated and reproduced? In the case of medieval Tibet, such a role largely belonged to the religious elite, making it the primary locus and recipient of symbolic power. As will become clear in the following chapters, a central tenet of my project is the thesis that a particularly potent agent of symbolic labor in medieval Tibet was the development of literary forms which recognized and reconfigured the religious hierarch to be at the head of the social order. In other words, wielding the power and authority of representation inherent to the reproduction of the social order, the religious elite of medieval Tibet was able to gradually conjure and enunciate the vision of the social order manifested in the theocracies of the seventeenth century.

Principal among those literary forms was the genre of life-writing (*rnam thar*) which, through its efflorescence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries following technological advances in xylographic printing, allowed Tibetan Buddhist authors to promulgate and widely disseminate a particular vision of the religious virtuoso that often stood in opposition to indigenous models of clan-based authority. As has been demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>49</sup> the medium of biography made the life of the religious

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Gyatso 1998, Schaeffer 2004, and Quintman 2014, amongst others.

hierarchy one of the primary loci for the exemplification of the Buddhist path. His often explicit equivalence to the Buddha and/or other divinities as well as the idealized patterns to which his life was molded charged the religious hierarchy with a charisma that placed him at the center of the Tibetan cultural imagination. Whereas under indigenous models of authority, an individual's position and mobility within the social hierarchy was determined by ancestry and clan-affiliation, this new religious model introduced forms of authority based on the capacity of an individual's life to be modeled according to a set of idealized Buddhist truths. Such novel understandings of authority in turn had important ramifications for the articulation and reproduction of the social order. As such, my work attempts to contribute to the growing secondary literature on Tibetan life-writing by further pointing to the genre's inherent social and political dimensions as opposed to its soteriological concerns alone. As I hope to convincingly demonstrate in chapter four, the celebrated biography of Ngawang Namgyal penned by Tsang Khenchen ought to be considered not simply as a work of Buddhist edification but, as John Ardussi has rightly claimed, a political statement articulating a justification for Ngawang Namgyal's state-building efforts<sup>50</sup>. Still till this date considered an enduring emblem of the Bhutanese state and providing a template for numerous Bhutanese scholars and historians to continue the work of formulating a Bhutanese national identity, Tsang Khenchen's biography of Bhutan's founding figure

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<sup>50</sup> Ardussi 2004: 35

ought to be observed as a compelling and consequential work of symbolic labor articulating a specific vision of a new social order.

If, by the seventeenth century, Tibetan Buddhist authors were largely successful in establishing a distinct regime of truth wherein the figure of the religious hierarch became synonymous with sources of both religious and temporal power, such an advent did not occur without a long process of incremental changes and negotiations at the material level. Here again, Bourdieu's sociology is helpful in making sense of the structures governing such developments. In particular, his theory of strategic action fields, understood as hierarchically structured social arenas in which actors strategically compete for money, prestige and power, is instructive to the dynamics at play in the relationship between the religious and clan-based aristocratic establishments. Through much of the period of Buddhist sectarian institutional growth, a relational model of legitimation was achieved between religious and temporal establishments wherein each faction invested in the other various forms of capital. While on the one hand, religious institutions wielded considerable symbolic capital, the aristocracy, on the other, commanded control over much of the material resources of the region. In order to maintain its place of supremacy in the social hierarchy, the clan-based aristocratic establishment invested its material resources in the monastic institutions for the return of symbolic capital. Vice versa, the religious institutions of Tibet invested their symbolic

capital in the aristocracy in order to grow and expand in their material pursuits.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately in our case, Bourdieu was primarily concerned with the relative autonomy and overall stability of fields, leaving little space for a radical transformation of the social system. Such a position is only reflective of Bourdieu's overall interest in synchronic analysis, however, and by no means amounts to a rejection of the possibility of social change, radical or otherwise. A number of social theorists have since taken up Bourdieu's field theory and applied it diachronically to great success by emphasizing the dynamism and shifting conditions of fields over time.<sup>52</sup> One such treatment, which this study will heavily rely on, is *A Theory of Fields* by sociologists Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam. In addition to their deep indebtedness to the work of Bourdieu, Fligstein and McAdam draw on more recent scholarship produced in the fields of social movement studies, organizational theory, economic sociology and historical institutionalism in the political sciences.<sup>53</sup> Central to their theory of strategic action fields is an emphasis on the emergence and transformation of fields by collective actors. In contradistinction to Bourdieu, Fligstein and McAdam are primarily concerned with

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<sup>51</sup> A similar kind of symbiotic and cooperative relationship has been observed by Bourdieu in his study France's grandes ecoles. While the grandes ecoles are overtly dependent on large corporations and government for the maintenance of their position of prestige in the social structure, corporations and government are equally dependent on the grandes ecoles for the maintenance of their own legitimacy. See Bourdieu 1989.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Savage and Silva 2013. For an application of Bourdieu's field theory in the Tibetan context, see Ducher 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 3-4.



social change and transformation, arguing that fields are always in a state of contention and flux, with even the most stable of conditions being the result of actors working very hard to maintain and reproduce their local social order.<sup>54</sup> Because field theory functions as an important theoretical backbone to this dissertation, it will prove useful to delve deeper into its central characteristics over the course of the following few pages.

First, what constitutes a strategic action field? As I mentioned above, Bourdieu understood fields as social arenas in which actors compete for money, prestige and power. More fundamentally for him, fields are social spaces in which actors and their social positions are located. The position of each particular actor in a field is dependent on the interaction between a distinct set of circumstances: the specific rules of the field, the actor's *habitus* (more on *habitus* below), and the actor's capital. Mobility within a field is thus determined by the ways in which actors are able to strategically manipulate these constraints to their advantage. Fligstein and McAdam offer a definition of fields that largely conforms with Bourdieu's, other than adding an emphasis on collective actors, not just individuals, as being constitutive of a field. They write, "A strategic action field is a constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules

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<sup>54</sup> Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 12-13.

governing legitimate action in the field.”<sup>55</sup> As the fundamental building blocks of social and organizational life, strategic action fields abound and permeate every facet of the social world. As such, any given field is embedded in a broader environment consisting of a complex matrix of countless other proximate or distal fields which may or may not carry influence over its development.

At a fundamental level, a strategic action field is an arena occupied by two or more groups whose actions are oriented to each other. Whether such actions are conflictual or cooperative, these two or more groups must arrive at a shared understanding, according to Bourdieu, of ‘what is at stake’ in the field. What is implied here is that for a field to emerge or exist, there needs to be first a consensus amongst actors as to the existence and nature of the social space that they are engaged in. For the field of religious studies in North America as a social arena to exist, for example, a shared understanding of the existence and terrain of this field - in this case the existence of such a thing as religion and its study - need to exist amongst its actors.<sup>56</sup>

Second, a strategic action field is composed of actors that are positioned asymmetrically in their influence and power over the field. Drawing from social movement theory, Fligstein and McAdams identify three broad categories of actors

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<sup>55</sup> Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 9.

<sup>56</sup> It is important to note here that a shared understanding of the nature of a field need not be consensual. In relation to the example of religious studies as a field, while there need to be a shared understanding among field actors of the existence of religious studies, they need not have consensus on what constitutes religion itself or its study.

constitutive of fields: incumbents, challengers, and governance units.<sup>57</sup> Incumbents are those actors who wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization of the field. The purposes and structure of the field are thus adapted to their interests and shared meanings within the field tend to legitimate and support their privileged position. Challengers, on the other hand, occupy less privileged positions within the field and ordinarily wield little influence over the field structure and operation. Importantly, while challengers recognize the nature of the field and the dominant logic of incumbent actors, conforming to the prevailing order, they nonetheless have the ability to articulate an alternative vision of the field and their position within it. This, of course, does not mean that every challenger is always an advocate of oppositional logics, but rather that the possibility to challenge the structure and logic of the system is available to her. Lastly, depending on the complexity and sophistication of the field, it may be composed of what Fligstein and McAdams call 'internal governance units.'

Internal governance units bring us to the third and final essential characteristic of a field, what Bourdieu calls "the rules of the game." Every strategic action field is governed by an explicit or implicit understanding among its actors about the nature of the rules that govern interaction within the field. Such rules are the cultural understanding of what forms of action and organization are viewed as legitimate and

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<sup>57</sup> See Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 13-16.

meaningful within the context of the field. Needless to say, the rules of the field will always favor the privileged position of incumbents. Internal governance units are then groups of actors within the field who are charged with overseeing compliance of the rules and facilitating the functioning and reproduction of the system. This last point is crucial to the success and stability of a field: the capacity of the field to reproduce itself over time. When a broad consensus is reached among field actors as to what is at stake within the field, what are the rules governing action in the field, and what are the actors' positions within the field, such a settlement allows the field to reproduce itself.

One of the most important characteristics of strategic action fields - even the most stable ones - is that they are in a constant state of flux. What this means is that the settlement achieved amongst actors is always shifting in some way or another. While in a very stable field the reproduction of the *raison d'être*, rules and positions within the field may shift ever so slightly over time, in other less stable fields the possibility for a reevaluation of the terms of the settlement is significantly more present. This brings us to the important question of how change or transformation is achieved within field dynamics and the associated perennial question of structure versus agency in the social sciences. Following the structuralist turn of the 50s and 60s, social scientists have largely struggled to make sense of agency in their accounts of social life, usually privileging the social forces that compel action and relegating individuals to being passive instruments of such forces. Such a view of the social world however faces the significant problem of

how to account for change. If social structures are all powerful and determinative of human action, reducing individuals to caricatural robots executing and continually reproducing the master script of the social order, how are we to make sense of and account for agency and social change? Such a concern lies at the heart of Bourdieu's theory of action and his notion of *habitus* can be seen as an attempt to find a middle-ground between the structural objectivity of society and the subjective reality of individual experience.<sup>58</sup>

Bourdieu insisted on a dialectical rather than an oppositional relationship between the structural constraints of social world and individual actors. His notion of *habitus* in effect collapses the opposition between society and individual by recognizing both as two interdependent dimensions of the same social reality. For Bourdieu, *habitus* consists of a set of deeply internalized master dispositions that condition an individual's actions as she navigates the social world. *Habitus* is generated through the process of socialization, whereupon external structures are internalized by the individual who then in turn affirms and reproduces such structures through her actions. Such a circular relational system allows Bourdieu to bring together objective social structures and subjective individual practices into one integrated theory of action.

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<sup>58</sup> As Swartz puts it, "It is primarily in reaction to Levi-Strauss' structuralism - and the Althusserian variant in French Marxism - and its view of action as a mere reflection of structure that Bourdieu formulates his theory of practice and his concept of habitus. His principal concern was to introduce the idea of agency into structuralist analysis without recourse to the kind of voluntarism he found in Sartre's existentialism." Swartz 1997: 101.

As a predominantly unconscious internalization of social structures since early childhood, *habitus* legitimizes and reproduces social inequalities by regulating the aspirations and expectations of individuals in accordance to the relative probabilities for success or failure common to their social position. According to Bourdieu, for example, if the French working-class youth did not appear to aspire to high levels of education attainment during the educational expansion of the 1960s, this was because they had internalized the limited opportunities that previously existed for their success in school.<sup>59</sup> *Habitus*, then, represents a deep structuring of the individual, largely generating self-fulfilling prophecies that are in accordance with class opportunities. But while Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* certainly points to the restrictions on individual action engendered by social structures, it also opens a door for human agency by injecting such a structuralist model with the language of strategy. For Bourdieu, individuals are not simply passive recipients reproducing the structures of the social world; they are rather active members navigating and strategizing within the constraints of their *habitus*. In other words, Bourdieu's theory of action recognizes that social actors are not mere rule followers but strategic improvisers who respond dispositionally to the opportunities or constraints offered by their *habitus*. It is important to note that by 'strategy' Bourdieu does not mean the kind of conscious and rational calculation that is normally associated to the term. Rather, for Bourdieu, strategy

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<sup>59</sup> Swartz 1997: 104.

functions within the context of *habitus*, as an intuitive and practical response to the opportunities or constraints of social life. As they navigate the social world, social actors make choices based not solely on rational calculations of a given outcome, but also from practical dispositions that incorporate ambiguities and uncertainties; what Bourdieu would describe as a "sense of practice" or "having a feel for the game."<sup>60</sup>

Bourdieu's theorization of strategy as a means to recognize individual agency in a structuralist framework is especially relevant to the project of this dissertation.

Individuals like Ngawang Namgyal were socialized within a specific *habitus* that conditioned much of the possibilities for social action available to them, yet at the same time they acted as creative agents of history who successfully strategized and manipulated the resources at their disposition to their advantage, eventually altering the social order.

Returning to field dynamics and the processes at stake in field transformation, Fligstein and McAdams attribute large-scale changes in fields to moments of crisis that

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<sup>60</sup> See Bourdieu 2020: 79. "The feel for the game is that kind of sense of the history of the game which enables the game to take place at all, because at every moment there are players who have a feel for the game. This analysis gives agents a crucial role. They are not the Trager ('bearers') of Althusser's neo-Marxism, where the agents are merely the instruments of the structure, performing the same task as the structure and don't even need to be there, since the structure by parthenogenesis engenders further structures and a new mode of production replacing the previous one. No, the agents are in fact extremely important: you have only to put a tennis or a baseball player on a hand ball court (to use relatively familiar examples) to see that Althusser's model is wrong. And it is absurd to wonder whether it is the structures or the agents (or the dispositions) that are more important, because, in a game that functions properly, they are the same thing twice over. The logic is one where the agents, armed with their dispositions, are absolutely constitutive of the game: it is they who define it, who make it function, and the rule and even the constraints of the game are only effective for players who have a feel for the game, and this is crucial."

are precipitated by exogenous and/or endogenous shocks. As I noted above, fields are always in a state of flux, with actors strategizing to improve their position within the field given their *habitus* and the rules specific to the field. Through the investment and manipulation of capital, actors are constantly working to produce or reproduce their positions within the field. While endogenous crises of the kind that propel a reevaluation of the field settlement are relatively rare, they may occur over long stretches of time through very minor incremental changes that, when aggregated, cause enough field destabilization as to force a new settlement. A far more common cause for field transformation, however, according to Fligstein and McAdams, is the combination of exogenous shocks and endogenous instability.<sup>61</sup> Fligstein and McAdams identify three broad external sources of field destabilization: the sudden influx of outsiders to the field, changes in fields upon which the strategic action field in question is dependent, and more rare macroevents such as war or depression that end up destabilizing the broader socio-political context in which the field is embedded.<sup>62</sup> Delving in the intricacies of each of these macro situations is not necessary for us here and it will suffice to mention more broadly that a field's success in weathering exogenous shocks is directly dependent on its ability to maintain internal stability through reproduction.

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<sup>61</sup> Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 84.

<sup>62</sup> Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 99.



## **The Strategic Action Field of Religio-Political Rule in Tibet**

Having drawn the general contours of Bourdieu's sociology and related theory of strategic action fields, we now turn to the specificities of the Tibetan and Bhutanese contexts and how such a theoretical approach may help us uncover some of the underlying historically contingent structures and mechanisms that allowed for the formation of theocratic governments in the seventeenth century. One of the advantages of field analysis is that it pushes the researcher to consider much broader social phenomena at stake in an instance of socio-historical change than the immediate series of events precipitating such a change. For example, while an analysis of the conflicts between Ngawang Namgyal and the king of Tsang, Karma Phuntsok Namgyal, may well provide some insights into the rationale behind Ngawang Namgyal's flight southward and eventual state-building efforts, they are squarely insufficient in explaining the larger dynamics that allowed for a religious hierarch to found a Drukpa hierocracy in the Southern region (Lho ljongs) that would become Bhutan. As I have mentioned above, the Drukpa state envisioned by Ngawang Namgyal and his apologists ought to be observed as the outcome of a long trajectory wherein religious hierarchs and their institutions gradually rose to a position of hegemony in the social and political landscape of the region.

In making sense of the trajectory of a theocratic movement in Tibet leading up to the founding of the Drukpa theocratic government of Ngawang Namgyal, I propose to observe religio-political rule in Tibet, articulated as the abstract theory of 'the union of religious and temporal domains' (*chos srid zung 'brel*), as a distinct strategic action field. As is characteristic of any field, the strategic action field of religio-political rule is deeply imbricated with numerous other proximate and distal fields, especially those that straddle functions of the state and religion. Fields such as clan-based political formations, family estate jurisdiction and bureaucracy, economic regulation, law administration and enforcement, foreign policy, religious constitutions and institutional legacies, sectarian formations and affiliations etc... all fed into and influenced the field of religio-political rule in significant ways. As an abstract theory and system of government recognized and reproduced over several centuries by multiple actors whose participation in such a system was codified and governed by a distinct set of rules, religio-political rule fits all the characteristics of a strategic action field.

As I mentioned above, the Tibetan conception of the union of religious and temporal domains was never static and the field was subject to a number of crises and transformations leading up to the establishment of the hierocracies of the seventeenth century. The project of this dissertation will thus be to examine closely the trajectory of this field by paying particular attention to its internal and external dynamics, including the ways in which field participants navigated and strategized their positions through

the production, investment and manipulation of various forms of capital. As it must be evident by now, the principal actors within the field of religio-political rule were religious hierarchs and representative leaders of Tibet's clan-based nobility, both factions supplemented by their administrators and sympathizers. As the following chapters will explore, there is at first very little to differentiate these two factions - religious hierarchs were for the most part members of the clan-based aristocracy in the early stages of Tibetan Buddhist sectarian institutionalization - yet in their function as representative tokens of the theory of the union of religious and temporal domains, they personified opposing ends of a spectrum. While Fligstein and McAdams' classification of field actors into the categories of incumbents and challengers is useful and productive in examining field dynamics as a whole, its applicability to the Tibetan situation is questionable to a certain degree. Certainly, religious hierarchs and aristocratic leaders held asymmetrical positions in the field of religio-political rule, but the kind of fluidity, instability and complexity of these positions was such that a simple split into two categories would appear too reductive. As I shall observe over the course of the following chapters, throughout much of the historical trajectory of the field of religio-political rule in Tibet, religious hierarchs and aristocratic leaders were engaged in a deeply symbiotic relationship of legitimation that involved more equal-footing in their jockeying for power than the classification of incumbent and challenger would suggest.

A historical analysis of Tibet's theocratic movement leading up to the founding of the Bhutanese state by way of a study of the field of religio-political rule over time must begin with an examination of the emergence and formation of such a field into a stable reproductive system. Who were the key actors who vied for control of the emerging field? What were the principal terms of the settlement of the field? The following chapter will explore these questions by investigating the social and political dynamics of thirteenth and fourteenth century Tibet, when an implicit notion of the union of religious and temporal domains was adopted by Tibetan institutions. As Buddhist sects institutionalized on the Tibetan plateau and became invested with representational power over the field, however, Buddhist authors, through the objects of their symbolic labor, began infusing the figure of the religious hierarch with forms of charisma and authority that directly challenged indigenous models of power and governance. With the efflorescence of the genre of Buddhist life-writing in the fifteenth century, Buddhist hierarchs gradually became the region's primary locus of authority, embodying a set of characteristics that enveloped both worldly and otherworldly domains. Such a reconfigured position of the religious hierarch through literary modes was accompanied by the introduction of alternative institutional models of succession and inheritance, causing a further restructuring of the field. By the seventeenth century, the successful transition of the majority of Tibetan Buddhist institutions from indigenous clan-based models to the *tulku* mode of succession entailed a major rupture

to the field's settlement, paving the way for religious hierarchs to seize control of the political domain and articulate a new settlement to the field. As such and as I will argue in chapter five, Tsang Khenchen's theocratic vision articulated in his *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* ought to be understood as the enunciation of a new settlement to the field of religio-political rule; one which thoroughly mobilized the ideological and material conditions set over the course of the previous centuries into the articulation of a new and reproducible social order.

This last point brings about an important area of discussion central to the concerns of this dissertation. While this study heavily relies on Bourdieu's theory of strategic action fields as a means to uncover some of the underlying structures and mechanisms conditioning the birth of the Bhutanese theocratic state, there is perhaps one area in which my work somewhat departs from Bourdieu's sociology. To a large extent, Bourdieu held a fundamentally materialist view of the social world, emphasizing the conflictual and self-interested nature of social actors. For Bourdieu, social actors are constantly driven by naked instrumental gain through the strategic manipulation of capital in order to advance their position over others in the social hierarchy. While self-interested materialist concerns certainly played a decisive role in the internal dynamics and trajectory of the field of religio-political rule in the Tibetan region, a sole insistence on this aspect alone would be missing much of the picture. The danger here is that an overemphasis on materialist concerns as the sole engine of social

life would reduce much of the acts of symbolic labor discussed above as mere instruments in the service of social mobility. I would like to argue otherwise. The work of symbolic producers such as Tsang Khenchen and others, while certainly reflecting and reproducing the social order with all its inequalities, stands for more than a misrecognized bargaining chip for self-interested advancement in the social hierarchy. Rather, such works of symbolic labor equally represent an attempt, on behalf of their authors, at conjuring and fashioning a meaningful world for themselves and others. To reject this dimension of the literary products observed in this dissertation would yield a significantly impoverished understanding of their function within the specific social and historical contexts of their composition. To a large extent, the historiography of Tibet, especially when observing political formations, is no stranger to this trend, often relegating the religious proclivities and considerations of Buddhist authors to being mere instruments of political ambition and power.<sup>63</sup> To be clear, under no circumstance does my analysis seek to negate or diminish issues of power, interests and capital inherent to the historical phenomena under observation; rather, it maintains that such issues are themselves inextricably linked to other existential concerns such as making sense of the world. In other words, the historical narrative I wish to convey through my analysis of the trajectory of the field of religio-political rule in Tibet and Bhutan is as

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<sup>63</sup> For a detailed investigation of this prevalent trope in the historiography of Tibet, see McCormack 2018: 24-28.

much a story of the construction of a meaningful social world and the possibilities it entails as it is one of conflict and legitimation in an overall economy of power. It is my hope that through such an approach, a more complex and nuanced understanding of not only Bhutan's theocratic project but theocracy as a whole may come to light.

## CHAPTER TWO. THE RISE OF ECCLESIASTICAL POWER IN TIBET: CLANS, MONASTERIES, AND COMPETING MODELS OF AUTHORITY

### **Introduction**

I have argued in the previous chapter that an investigation of the founding of hierocratic governments in Tibet and Bhutan during the seventeenth century requires an analysis of a long trajectory of incremental changes in the Tibetan social sphere whereby the role and place of the religious hierarch was reconfigured to occupy a place of hegemony in Tibetan society. I proposed to qualify such a trajectory as a theocratic movement, encapsulated in the Tibetan abstract theory of governance termed *chösi sungdrel* (*chos srid zung 'brel*), or “the union of religious and temporal spheres.” My analysis of this phrase produced three broad classificatory systems or ideal types, depending on how the union of the two spheres of religious and temporal is understood. If the union of religious and temporal spheres is understood as the coordination between two separate yet equal entities, the model that arises is a diarchic one, with typically two figureheads representing each sphere and sharing power in the enunciation of government. If, on the other hand, the union of religious and temporal



spheres is understood as the subordination of the temporal by the religious, the model that arises would be a hierocratic one, with a religious figure-head invested with both religious and temporal functions at the helm of government. Vice versa, if the union of religious and temporal spheres implies a subordination of the religious by the temporal, the model that ensues is divine or religiously-sanctioned kingship.

Relying on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, I then proposed to observe the rise of a theocratic movement in Tibet by way of recognizing religio-political rule, articulated as the union of religious and temporal spheres, as a distinct strategic action field. The analytical payoff of such a theoretical and methodological approach is to draw our attention to some of the underlying historically contingent structures and mechanisms that allowed for the formation of hierocratic governments in the seventeenth century. Tracing the trajectory of the field of religio-political rule, in other words, pushes us to consider the broader social and historical dynamics at stake in the formulation of new systems of government in Tibet, paying particular attention to the ways in which field participants navigated and strategized their positions through the production, investment and manipulation of various forms of capital.

As is characteristic of any strategic action field, the field of religio-political rule in Tibet was never static and subject to a number of crises and transformations leading up to the establishment of the hierocracies of the seventeenth century. The primary concern of this chapter will thus be to observe some of the overarching material and ideological

mechanisms through which the field and its original settlement gradually shifted and ended up experiencing the kind of rupture necessary for a radical reenvisioning of the Tibetan social arena in the seventeenth century. As will become evident over the course of this chapter, there is no single factor alone that caused such instability in the field as to put into question its original settlement. Rather, as I will contend, the eventual capitulation of Tibet's ancient clan-based aristocracy to the religious establishment was the result of a series of internal pressures and exogenous shocks that precipitated the field of religio-political in a state of crisis.

In order to observe the mechanisms that led to a rupture in the settlement of the field of religio-political rule, we must begin with an examination of the emergence and formation of such a field into a stable reproductive system in the first place. Who were the key actors who vied for control of the emerging field? What were the principal terms of the settlement of the field? I will argue here that the notion of the union of religious and temporal domains emerged as a theory of governance in the environment of Buddhist sectarian institutionalization in Tibet during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and was exemplified in the Sakya-Yüan rule of Drogön Phakpa ('Gro mgon 'Phags pa 1235-1280) and Khubilai Khan (1215-1294). Delineating what may be termed 'clan-based Buddhist institutions,' this chapter will explore the insularity of early Tibetan Buddhist institutional models by tracing their dependence on single clan aristocracies.

I will then turn to some of the strategies through which Buddhist institutions in Tibet sought competing institutional models and cultivated novel understandings of religious authority, particularly in relation to the role and place of the religious hierarchy, in an effort to free themselves from the stifling control of aristocratic families. One crucial aspect of this effort was the introduction in Tibet of the concept of *'tulku'* (*sprul sku*) and its associated mode of succession. Through the implementation of this new mode of succession, religious institutions in Tibet largely circumvented the terms of the field's settlement and garnered the kind of material and institutional autonomy from individual aristocratic establishments necessary to engage the political center on an equal footing. This, however, could not be achieved without the successful promotion and wide scale dissemination of a renewed understanding of the Buddhist virtuoso in Tibetan society, a feat that was in part achieved, as I argued in the previous chapter, through the efflorescence of the literary genre of life-writing (*rnam thar*).

Finally, this chapter will explore the above processes and their historical consequences by observing the religious institution of Druk Ralung, the seat of the Drukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism in Southwestern Tibet, and its associated temporal estate managed by the Gya (Rgya) Clan, leading up to the life of its hierarch and founding figure of the Bhutanese state, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

## Chöyon Diarchy and the Emergence of the Field of Religio-Political Rule

Early Tibetan sources describing the era of the Yarlung (*yar klung*) dynasty from the seventh to ninth centuries, during which Buddhism was first introduced to Tibet, reveal the extent to which conceptions of sacral kingship profoundly tied to the ideals of a heroic and clan-based aristocratic society were woven into the Tibetan social fabric.<sup>1</sup> Tibetan Buddhist historiography speaks of the immediate period after the fall of the dynasty as a 'dark age,' whereupon a persecution of Buddhism by various parties within the clan-based aristocracy vying for power against each other almost threatened to 'blow out the lamp of the dharma.' According to these sources, this period ended in the eleventh century with the coming of the *chidar* (*phyi dar*), or 'later diffusion' of Buddhism, when the spread of Buddhism flowered again through a renewed wave of interaction with Buddhist India. A number of scholars have begun to challenge this depiction, however, pointing to the continuities and positive achievements of Buddhism during this so-called dark period. Jacob Dalton, for example, has argued that the political fragmentation of the Tibetan empire is perhaps precisely what allowed its populace to make Buddhism their own, freed from the controls of a centralized authority.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when the historical record picks up again in the eleventh century,

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<sup>1</sup> See Kapstein 2000: 17.

<sup>2</sup> Dalton 2011: 13.

Buddhism appears to enjoy far more widespread support among Tibetans at all levels of society.

The debates over the precise nature of the so-called 'dark age' need not concern us here. What we may stress for our purposes, however, is the continuity that the clan-based structure of Tibetan society endured. The picture of Tibet that surfaces after the fragmentation of the Tibetan empire is that of a partitioned geography, whereupon the Tibetan plateau was ruled by conglomerations of clan-based nobilities headed by powerful chiefs or princelings fighting each other for political hegemony. Such clan-based nobilities unanimously turned to the glory of the Tibetan empire as a symbol of power and legitimacy. Part and parcel of this disposition was the emulation of the Tibetan Yarlung dynasty's model of governance and patronage of Buddhism. From the time of the second diffusion of Buddhism onwards, rulers within the nobility associated the patronage of Buddhism with the civilizational claims and advancements of the empire. As a result, all across the Tibetan plateau, Buddhism became one of the primary loci for sources of prestige and authority amongst the nobility.

It is at this stage of Tibetan history that the majority of the lineages and sects of Tibetan Buddhism were formed. As pious Tibetans and Indian *paṇḍītas* began crossing the Himalayas again to renew ties and continue the process of transmission initiated during the empire, numerous new lineages in need of patronage began to surface. As argued by Ronald Davidson in his monograph on this period of Tibetan history, it is in

the fabric of Tibet's clan structure that the newly established lineages were able to find support and institutionalization. He writes,

“Buddhism thereby made the great transition required to succeed: it became indigenized and began the long and sometimes tortuous process of assimilation. To accomplish this, various traditions found that they needed the strength of the most powerful single institution in Tibet: the sense of cohesiveness of the great clans and aristocratic lords. The clan structure provided the model for inheritance, for the transmission of authority, and for the development of family-based spirituality.”<sup>3</sup>

The first Tibetan Buddhist sects were thus established in relation to and modeled after Tibet's ancient clan-structure. As monastic institutions were founded, these became associated and run by aristocratic families. As a result, the majority of the early sects of Tibetan Buddhism were identified not by the particular doctrines that they emphasized but by the site of their establishment or their clan affiliation.<sup>4</sup>

Following the example laid down by the Yarlung dynasty, the Tibetan rulers who became active patrons of Buddhism and founded monasteries maintained significant control over their religious institutions. As a means to guarantee that the material wealth invested into the newly founded monasteries stayed in the hands of the noble house associated to it, many of the early Tibetan Buddhist sects followed what has been

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<sup>3</sup> Davidson 2005: 274.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Sakya (sa skya), Dakpo Kagyü (dwags po bka' rgyud), Drikung Kagyü ('bri gung bka' rgyud), Taklung Kagyü (stag lung bka' brgyud), and Tselpa Kagyü (tshal pa bka' brgyud), amongst others, are sects that were named after the region in which they were established. The Phakmodrupa Kagyü (phag mo gru pa bka' rgyud) on the other hand, was named after the aristocratic clan to which it was associated.

termed the '*khuwön*,' (*khu-dbon*) or 'uncle-nephew' mode of abbatial succession. According to this system, the succession of religious and temporal powers over a particular estate would occur within a single-family network. At each generation, a married brother would continue the family line and transmit the temporal powers of the family domain to one of his sons, while another brother would be ordained as a monk and become the hierarch of the religious institution. The religious hierarch would in turn be succeeded by one of his nephews.<sup>5</sup> The institutional model espoused was thus insular in nature, protecting the noble house from outside interference and consolidating its political and religious authority.

It is in the context of this symbiotic relationship between religious and temporal leaders that the strategic action field of religio-political rule can be said to have emerged as a stable and reproductive system. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the principal actors within the field were religious hierarchs and representative leaders of Tibet's clan-based aristocracy, with both factions supplemented by their administrators and sympathizers. From one perspective, there is very little to distinguish these two factions from one another during this early period of field formation; for the most part, religious hierarchs were themselves members of the clan-based aristocracy. Yet, from another, each faction represented distinct positions and roles with regard to the

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<sup>5</sup> As discussed by Imaeda, in reality and due to the uncertainty of offspring, the successor to the abbatial throne was not always a nephew and was sometimes passed from father to son or brother to brother. See Imaeda 2013: 4.

enunciation of the social order. While, on the one hand, temporal rulers within the clan-based nobility were understood to govern over the temporal or worldly affairs (*'jig rten pa*) of the realm, on the other, their religious counterparts were understood to govern over the supramundane or otherworldly (*'jig rten las 'das pa*) matters. Even though the union of religious and temporal spheres as a distinct theory of governance does not appear to have been explicitly invoked yet during this period, we can find in this early cooperative and relational partnership between both groups a first instance at integrating the religious and temporal into a single enunciation of power and governance. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, such a partnership was conceptualized within the Buddhist “patron/beneficiary” or *chöyön* (*mchod yon*) relationship, with temporal leaders taking on the role of patron (*yon bdag*) and religious hierarchs that of beneficiary (*mchod gnas*).

It would be difficult to overestimate the extent to which the period of Buddhist sectarian institutionalization in Tibet was governed by intense competition between various clan conglomerations in their efforts to seize greater control of the Tibetan landscape, and it is in this context that the extensive patronage and elevation of nascent lineages of Tibetan Buddhism ought to be observed. Through their expansive assimilation of Buddhist systems of knowledge and practice, Tibetan Buddhist virtuosi embodied a sense of charisma, prestige and cosmopolitanism that carried immense currency within the clan-based establishment. As Davidson has written in the context of



the later Mongol captivation with the figure of the religious hierarch, the latter's appeal rested in an expansive set of skills that included, among other things, yogic systems, magical rites, monastic decorum, intellectual acumen, administrative ability, medicine, logic, language and so forth.<sup>6</sup> Through their patronage of Buddhist institutions, clan leaders were simultaneously inscribing themselves within the institutional legacy of the Tibetan empire and the broader civilizational claims of Buddhism in Asia. In other words, the investment of material capital into the newly-founded monastic institutions of Tibet by the clan-based establishment brought with it the exchange of significant social and symbolic capital manufactured by the religious institutions of the plateau.

The *chöyön* diarchic model espoused by Tibet's religious and temporal elite invested the religious establishment with the power of representation inherent to the reproduction of the social order. Such a monopoly over sources of representation allowed the religious elite of the period to frame its symbiotic relationship with temporal powers within distinctly Buddhist understandings of the relationship between the *saṃgha* and its lay patrons. As Ruegg has pointed out, the Tibetan *chöyön* diarchic model primarily drew on Indian Buddhist formulations of the relationship between tantric guru and disciple on the one hand, and *dharma*rāja and preceptor on the other.<sup>7</sup> Such a recourse to paradigmatic representations of the relationship between guru and

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<sup>6</sup> Davidson 2005: 375.

<sup>7</sup> See Ruegg 1995: 71, 80.

disciple or king and preceptor positioned the temporal clan leaders of Tibet within a distinct set of roles and responsibilities vis à vis Buddhist institutions. In their role as *dharमारāja*, temporal rulers were charged with the patronage of Buddhist institutions and the establishment of laws in accordance with the dharma, and in their position as tantric initiates they were ritually bound to their guru's injunctions. Such an investment was in turn repaid with the 'gift of the dharma' (*chos kyi sbyin pa*) and the ritual rehearsal and representation of the ruler's power and dominion.

But while the religious elite of Tibet was invested with the power over representation of the social order and able to draw on Indian Buddhist models of governance, it was also significantly bound to Tibet's ancient systems of succession, inheritance, and authority. The 'uncle-nephew' mode of abbatial succession, as I mentioned above, was deeply grounded in Tibet's indigenous ideals of a heroic and clan-based aristocratic society, and as such, maintained the clan-based establishment's supremacy in the social hierarchy of the region. Monasteries were effectively governed by the noble house to which they were associated and their sources of support and patronage were largely limited to single aristocratic families. In the milieu of Buddhist sectarian institutionalization in Tibet, clan-affiliation and pedigree very much dominated conceptions of authority and the possibilities of social mobility within both religious and temporal spheres. The settlement of the field of religio-political rule exemplified in the *chöyön* diarchic model thus found a careful balance between the

import of Buddhist theories of governance and the maintenance of indigenous models of clan-based authority and succession. While, on the one hand, Buddhist institutions were entrusted with the representation of the social world, on the other, they operated within a hereditary system of succession which clearly favored their temporal counterparts in the exercise of power. If the emergence and formation of the field of religio-political rule in Tibet signals an elevation of the religious establishment through its participation in the enunciation of power, the field's settlement and rules nonetheless constrained the possibilities of social action within an insular and restrictive model of authority.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the most important characteristics of any strategic action field is that no matter how stable, it is in a constant state of flux and the settlement achieved among its actors is always shifting in some way or another, even if ever so slightly. The early settlement achieved in the field of religio-political rule in Tibet, while stable enough as to reproduce over time, was nonetheless relatively fragile and prone to various challenges. At its heart was a logic whereby the successes of temporal leaders and clan-based hegemonies was heavily dependent on the elevation of the position of the religious elite and its institutions. The more the religious hierarch became imbued with charismatic power, the more symbolic capital could, in turn, be earned by the temporal establishment. In the competitive milieu of this period of Buddhist institutionalization in Tibet, such a reasoning carried the inherent risk of

gradually allowing religious hierarchs and their institutions to rise to a position in the social hierarchy from which they could directly challenge the asymmetries of the field's settlement. As we shall observe in the next section, this was precisely the outcome when the religious establishment gradually began cultivating alternative models of authority and succession.

While prevalent amongst Tibet's numerous clan hegemonies spread throughout the plateau, the *chöyön* diarchic model became most clearly exemplified and memorialized in the Sakya-Yüan partnership established by the Sakyapa hierarch Drogön Phakpa and the Mongol emperor Khubilai Khan in the latter half of the thirteenth century. As Ruegg has pointed out, however, the cultivation of a patron/beneficiary relationship between Tibetan lamas and foreign princes began as early as the first half of the thirteenth century when the Karmapa hierarch Karma Pakshi (kar ma pak shi 1206-1283) was recognized by the great Möngke Khan (1209-1259) as his lama.<sup>8</sup> Such efforts to draw patronage from powerful rulers outside of Tibet reveals the extent of the competitive nature of the period and the ways in which Buddhism and Buddhist virtuosos functioned as an important currency in the advancement of the ambitions of various clan hegemonies. When the Sakyapa hierarch Drogön Phakpa became

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<sup>8</sup> Other nascent sects of Tibetan Buddhism also sought direct patronage from powerful Mongol chieftains during this period, including the Tselpa Kagyü entertaining a relationship with Khubilai Khan, the Drikung Kagyü with Möngke Khan, the Phakmodrupa Kagyü with the prince Hülegü, and the Taklung Kagyü with Ariq Böke. See Ruegg 1995: 31-32.

appointed as the preceptor of Khubilai Khan and initiated the latter into the tantric cycle of *hevajra*, he and his native Khön clan were offered in exchange governance over the whole of the thirteen myriarchies of Tibet.<sup>9</sup> Such a moment ushered the approximate century-long Sakyapa rule over Tibet whereby the region was administered by the powerful Khön clan. The involvement of foreign powers in the field of religio-political rule added some complexity to the structure of the *chöyön* diarchic model. On the broader international stage, the model was represented by the figures of the hierarch of Sakya and the Yüan emperor in their characteristic roles of preceptor / *dharmarāja* or tantric lama / disciple, and at the internal and local level, the model was representative of the partnership between the Sakyapa hierarch and his temporal counterpart within the Khön clan, known as the Pönchen (*dpon chen*) or "great civil administrator."

Whether practiced at the regional level or in the ranks of the central Sakya administration within the Khön clan, the 'uncle-nephew' mode of succession for religious hierarchs consolidated political and religious authority within Tibet's ancient clan structure. The field of religio-political rule's emphasis on hereditary transmission and succession insured that nascent Buddhist institutions remained within the insular fold of Tibet's clan-based aristocracy. As this and the following chapters will explore at length, while fragile and prone to challenges, such an original settlement within the field proved tenacious enough to perdure in some form or another all the way up to the

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<sup>9</sup> Ruegg 1995: 54.

establishment of hierocratic governments in the seventeenth century. As I shall argue in chapter five, for example, Ngawang Namgyal's state-building successes in Bhutan were in part due to his hereditary status within the Gya clan. That said, the inherent fragility of such a settlement, with its reliance on the growth of the image of the religious hierarch as an important source of symbolic capital for the clan-based establishment, opened the door for the religious elite of Tibet to directly challenge the terms of this original settlement by reconfiguring the position of the religious hierarch through the conception of alternative models of authority and succession. Part of such a challenge was the introduction in Tibet of novel theories of emanation encapsulated in the *tulku* (*sprul sku*) mode of succession and the efflorescence of the literary genre of Buddhist life-writing (*rnam thar*), to which we now turn.

### **Biography and the Reconfiguration of the Buddhist Hierarch**

It is perhaps not a surprise that the period following the collapse of the Yüan empire and its Sakyapa protectorate in the late fourteenth century up to the theocracies of the seventeenth century, often described as an environment of antagonism, quasi-constant civil war, and intense competition, was also one of the most productive in Tibetan history with regard to cultural innovations, including important developments in the arts, writing and printing. Hildegard Diemberger has likened the period to the Italian Renaissance, where political fragmentation was followed by increased

urbanization, new commercial relations, the spread of literacy, the specialization of craftsmanship, and various forms of patronage that promoted artistic and technological innovations.<sup>10</sup> Standing against the modern historiographical trend of qualifying this period in negative terms, using such language as the “Tibetan Middle Ages” with its stereotypical images of feudalism, rurality and stagnation, Diemberger instead underlines the extraordinary creativity and innovation that the era witnessed. She writes,

“highlighting political unification as the central category of assessment neglects the important socioeconomic processes of this period, including the development of urban areas, trade and commercial relations, craftsmanship, and new technologies. This large scale transformation had an extraordinary bearing on the cultural life of the time, which, (...) also benefitted from the plurality of patronage and the lack of hegemonic center.”<sup>11</sup>

It is during this fecund period that the genre of life-writing, or biography, formally crystallized and blossomed in Tibet. There is no doubt that an important factor in the proliferation of the genre was the development of new printing technologies in Tibet through the advent of xylographic methods starting in the fifteenth century. As Diemberger and others have argued, such innovations in printing technology not only facilitated access to textual resources and promoted the circulation of standard works, but most importantly reshaped the Tibetan relationship to knowledge in terms of access

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<sup>10</sup> See Diemberger 2007: 7, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Diemberger 2007: 104.

and control.<sup>12</sup> Andrew Quintman's study of the biography of Milarepa (Rje btsun Mi la ras pa c. 1052-1135) written by Tsangnyön Heruka (Gtsang smyon He ru ka 1452-1507), perhaps the most celebrated biography of the Tibetan world, is indicative of the significance of the advent of printing in Tibet. In what Quintman terms "what may have been one of Tibet's first concerted multimedia approaches to life writing,"<sup>13</sup> Tsangnyön Heruka took advantage of the recent technological advancements in xylographic printing and succeeded in having his biography printed, reprinted and widely distributed all over southern Tibet in very little time. The result of his efforts certainly paid off, with his biography soon becoming the standard, eclipsing a large corpus of earlier biographical sketches of the great eleventh century *yogi*. But the advent of printing is not the only feature that contributed to the standardization and crystallization of Tibetan biography in the fifteenth century. Here again, Quintman's study of the evolution of the Milarepa biography is illustrative of the innovations taking place within the genre.

According to Quintman, the close disciples of Milarepa composed the very first biographical snippets of the Tibetan yogi soon after his death. Then, as Milarepa's teachings and lineage began to spread in the following century, a need arose for new forms of literature that would authorize those transmissions within specific

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<sup>12</sup> Diemberger 2007: 16.

<sup>13</sup> Quintman 2014: 132.



communities and nascent institutions. This necessity led to the formulation of what Quintman terms the “*proto-Life*,” rudimentary expressions of a life with little explicit structure or plotting.<sup>14</sup> These texts functioned principally as legitimating instructions to an author’s collected works and as preliminary texts for the aural transmission of tantric instructions. One such *proto-Life*, written by Milarepa’s disciple Ngendzong Repa (Ngan rdzong ras pa Byang chub rgyal po b/d.u.), refers to an episode of the master’s life as a direct expression of meditative realization, sealed by his guru’s command, and meant only for followers endowed with “authentic experience of the practical instructions.”<sup>15</sup> In these early stages of biographical writing, the genre is thus equated with the transmission of tantric instructions, and limited to the initiated practitioners of the lineage; biography is not merely a descriptive account of an individual’s liberation, but the vehicle for liberation itself.

A century later, as Buddhist lineages began the work of institutionalizing into sects associated with particular regions and clans, a growing need arose to represent their original founders as autonomous figures and authoritative sources for their tradition. At this point, biographies began to take shape into more extended forms. Drawing from the earlier *proto-Life* snippets, these biographical accounts, which Quintman refers to as “*compendia*,” reorganized the disjointed episodes of a life into a

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<sup>14</sup> Quintman 2014: 80.

<sup>15</sup> Quintman 2014: 91.

structured whole. Now following a chronological sequence, the *compendia* detailed the life of the founder from birth to death through the judicious use of plotting, emphasizing continuities and organized around some thematic developments.<sup>16</sup>

But it was not until the advent of the fifteenth century that Tibetan biography reached its full narrative potential. In many ways, this event is ushered by Tsangnyön Heruka's influential biography of Milarepa itself, which, as Gene Smith has argued, wholly inspired a new tradition of biographical literature in Tibet.<sup>17</sup> In this new model provided by Tsangnyön, the subject of biography became fully fictionalized. What is meant here is not a fictional falsity, but rather a pronounced attention to the narrative process itself, a careful attention to structure, plot, thematic development and pacing that together give overall coherence to the whole. Tsangnyön's biography was not so much a reinvention of the previous corpus of accounts of Milarepa's life as it was a remodeling of the materials into an appealing literary form. Through the process of fictionalization, the biographical subject takes on a new life; one that is no longer constrained by a mere accumulation of facts in chronological sequence but one in which the life itself is subsumed under the overarching truths that it is meant to exemplify. As Quintnam has stated:

“This is perhaps Tsangnyön's greatest achievement: the fictionalization of

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<sup>16</sup> Quintman 2014: 84-85.

<sup>17</sup> Smith 2001: 61.

biography, creating a form of life writing that encompasses evidentiary documentation, didactic resource, and even programmatic legitimation of lineage, but is not constrained by them. Earlier traditions produced a lifelike portrait, but Tsangnyön Heruka ultimately brought it to life.”<sup>18</sup>

An important aspect of this new form of biography was the explicit correspondence made between the biographical subject and the Buddha himself. As Janet Gyatso has stated in her seminal work on Tibetan auto/biography, the repetition of idealized patterns, a ‘script for life,’ modeled on the hagiographies of the Buddha and other Indian saints, became a normative pattern in the Tibetan context.<sup>19</sup> It would appear that Tsangnyön Heruka was the architect behind this important trope. His narrative of the life of Milarepa is framed by his ‘twelve deeds,’ explicitly mirroring the famous ‘twelve marvelous deeds’ (*dvadaśa-buddha-kārya*) of the Buddha. Even though the specific details of each deed are not identical, this device nonetheless established the biographical subject’s categorical equivalence to the Buddha’s life. Biographies of the Buddha thematized around his twelve deeds had already been in circulation in Tibet since at least the twelfth century and considering the extensive references to these in both canonical and historical works, it can be deduced that their status in the Tibetan literary sphere was already significant. What’s more, Tsangnyön’s biography itself begins with the classic Buddhist formula to introduce a discourse of the Buddha, “Thus

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<sup>18</sup> Quintman 2014: 141.

<sup>19</sup> Gyatso 1998: 111.

have I heard at one time..."<sup>20</sup> Here, a direct equation with the person of the Buddha is made, wherein the biography purports to recount the events of the life of the master as he himself had narrated them in the same way that sutras are understood to recount events narrated by the Buddha. Thus, as a result of this new structuring, the life of the founding figure of the Kagyu lineage and its various sub-sects is depicted as none other than the life of a Buddha, only now set in the rugged and high-altitude landscapes of Tibet as opposed to the Gangetic plains of India.

Through the narrative 'fictionalization' of the subject, biography in Tibet achieved new heights of reception. Now no longer limited to the purview of the specific lineage or sect of its provenance, biographies emphasized the general traits of the path of a Buddhist saint from birth to liberation that could be adopted and followed by the faithful across Tibet's religious landscape. Individuals like Milarepa became literary types that functioned to illustrate a Buddhist path to be emulated by all. Through his explicit equivalence to the Buddha and/or other divinities as well as the idealized patterns to which his life was molded, the Tibetan Buddhist virtuoso became charged with a charisma that placed him or her at the center of the Tibetan cultural imagination. Needless to say, the literary reformulation of the religious virtuoso through the efflorescence of biography had important repercussions for the field of religio-political rule and the construction of Tibet's social order. Through the wide scale dissemination

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<sup>20</sup> Quintman 2014: 137.

of the genre across the Tibetan cultural sphere, the religious hierarch gradually became the region's primary locus of authority, eventually overshadowing the indigenous clan-based system's cultural hegemony.

The kind of authority embodied by the religious hierarch and represented through the medium of biography was one in which advancement in the social order was determined not by clan-affiliation or ancestry, but by the capacity for an individual's life to be modeled according to a set of idealized Buddhist truths. Such truths recognized self-cultivation and mastery as essential elements of subject formation. The narrativization of Buddhist truths in the popular idiom of biography presented a model for moral transformation that put the individual's own efforts at the center of the picture. Through the activities of scholasticism and/or virtuosity in yogic systems of practice, the religious virtuoso embodied a sense of authority that was primarily based on personal dedication, ability and charisma.<sup>21</sup>

Relying on Antonio Gramsci's theorization of hegemonic power, Carl Yamamoto has described the figure of the Buddhist virtuoso during the early period of Buddhist sectarian institutionalization in Tibet as one cultivating a mastery of the cultural sphere.<sup>22</sup> Focusing on the figure of Shang Yudrakpa Tsöndrü Drakpa (zhang g.yu brag pa brtson 'grus grags pa 1123-1193), his study illustrates how the figure of the religious

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<sup>21</sup> See Gyatso 1998: 118-120.

<sup>22</sup> Yamamoto 2012: 25.

virtuoso gradually came to encapsulate, through dedication and perseverance, a totalizing mastery over the Tibetan social world. He or she is a master of sentient beings, compassionately taming them and bringing them to a correct understanding of the dharma; a master of space, building, maintaining, protecting and binding territories through ritual expertise; a master of time and history through the possession of a spiritual lineage passed down over time; a master of religious style (*chos lugs*) conceived as a religious outlook that holds realization, doctrine, ritual and symbols together in an integrated whole; a master of narrative and rhetoric, taming beings through an extensive knowledge of the full panoply of means of expression; and a master of symbols, using the many symbols of Indian tantric Buddhism as instruments of hegemony.<sup>23</sup> As I will claim in chapter four of this dissertation, the celebrated biography of Ngawang Namgyal not only participates in this novel vision of religious authority, but very much exemplifies it.

As Gyatso has discussed in the context of biographical writing, part and parcel of the successful implantation of Buddhism to Tibet was the decimation of Tibet's indigenous power bases. One of the principal strategies involved in this process was the rhetorical assertion of the backwardness of Tibetan culture before the advent of Buddhism. Under such conditions, Tibetan Buddhists thus needed to reshape themselves and to assume an utterly new identity, one to which their ancestral, barbaric

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<sup>23</sup> See Yamamoto 2012: 274-5.

nature was anathema.<sup>24</sup> Part of such a refiguring, I will claim, was a reformulation of Tibet's past and mythology along Buddhist lines. The divine status of the early kings, for example, was now understood through an elaborate Buddhist cosmology in which Tibet was perceived as the special field of activity of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and the first Buddhist king, Songsten Gampo, was identified as the bodhisattva's emanation. As Matthew Kapstein has written in reference to the *Mani Kambum* (*maṇi bka' 'bum*), a heterogeneous collection of treasure texts (*gter ma*) discovered in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries articulating such a mythology,

“the mythical portions of the Mani Kambum develop a distinctive view of Tibet, its history, and its place in the world. Three elements that inform this view are outstanding: the belief that Avalokiteśvara was the patron deity of Tibet; the legend of King Songtsen Gampo and his court, in which the king is represented as being the very embodiment of Avalokiteśvara (...); and the cosmological vision of the Avalokiteśvara cult, whereby the king's divinity, and the divinity's regard for Tibet are seen (...) as matters grounded in the very nature of the world.”<sup>25</sup>

The implicit and explicit denigration of Tibet's indigenous power structures through biography's affirmation of self-assertion and moral transformation, paired with its recasting of Tibet's mythological past along Buddhist lines, gradually elevated the Buddhist virtuoso to the pinnacle of the social order and directly challenged the clan-

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<sup>24</sup> Gyatso 1998: 119.

<sup>25</sup> Kapstein 2000: 147.

based establishment's prior hold over conceptions of authority. As a primary receptacle of the kind of authority cultivated through the biographic genre, the figure of the religious hierarch became charged with a charisma that significantly threatened the fragile balance maintained in the settlement of the field. As I will explore below, paired with the advent of the rise of the *tulku* institution as an alternative model of succession and inheritance, the field was to finally experience the kind of major rupture that allowed for the birth of hierocratic governments in the seventeenth century.

### **The Tulku (*sprul sku*) Institution**

An important part of biography's deprecation of Tibet's indigenous power structures as the genre blossomed was its provision of alternative and competing models of kinship and succession from that of the clan-based nobility. Through its emphasis on the salience of religious lineage and transmission, the religious elite of the period advanced genealogical claims that pitted religious pedigree as over and above considerations of bloodline. Tracing complex webs of kinship ties between individuals across time and space within the religious establishment, the authors of biography, themselves the treasured "heart-sons" (*thugs sras*) of the lama, eventually began articulating all-together novel theories of emanation. As is well known, these crystallized into what has come to be known as the *tulku* institution of Tibetan Buddhism, often translated in English as the "Tibetan institution of reincarnation." The introduction in



Tibet of the *tulku* mode of abbatial succession was to have immense consequences for the field of religio-political rule and, in no small part, entirely reconfigured the social order of Tibet.

The Tibetan term '*tulku*' (*sprul sku*) translates into English as 'emanation body,' a literal translation of the Sanskrit *nirmāṇakāya*. As such, the concept of *tulku* finds some theoretical antecedents in the Mahāyāna Buddhism of India. That being said, the practice of recognizing the reincarnation of a particular religious hierarch and investing in him (*tulkus* were almost always male) his predecessor's spiritual and material heritage is a distinctly Tibetan phenomenon that cannot be traced to Indian roots.

In her monograph on the life of the fifteenth century female practitioner Chökyi Drönma, originator of one of Tibet's rare female *tulku* lines, Diemberger makes a useful distinction between the concepts of 'incarnation' and 'reincarnation' in the context of the Tibetan *tulku* phenomenon. She writes,

"There is an important difference between the incarnation of a *bodhisattva* or a tantric deity and the reincarnation of a historical figure. The former refers to the manifestation of a spiritual entity in a human being, whereas the latter implies the transmission of a principle of consciousness from one human being to another."<sup>26</sup>

While the Tibetan term *tulku* eventually comes to encapsulate both of these elements, their distinction is helpful in tracing differing origins to the *tulku* concept.

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<sup>26</sup> Diemberger 2007: 241.

The principle of the incarnation of transcendent bodhisattvas or tantric deities finds its origins in the Mahāyāna and esoteric Buddhist traditions of India. According to the Pāli canon, as early as during the lifetime of the Buddha, a distinction was made between the different modes of reality through which a Buddha engages with the world. A celebrated verse of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, for example, recounts how the monk Vakkali lamented the fact that because of his illness and old age he would no longer be able to visit the Buddha. The Buddha is said to have answered, “Enough, Vakkali. Why do you want to see this foul body? One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma.”<sup>27</sup> From verses such as this one, the early Buddhist community began making a distinction between the human physical form of the Buddha (*rūpakāya*), and the truth that he embodied (*dhammakāya*). Thus, the death of the Buddha meant only the death of his physical form, while the *dhamma* that he preached and embodied, the very principle of Buddhahood, lived on.

Through the advent of Mahāyāna sūtras, however, the various modes of reality embodied by the Buddha began to be systematized into a more detailed classificatory schema. Of particular relevance were the *Lotus* and *Laṅkāvatāra* sutras, both important scriptures for the Vijñānavāda school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In these scriptures and their commentaries, a Buddha was now understood to operate through three distinct modes, or bodies (*trikāya*): the ‘body of dharma’ (*dharmakāya*), the ‘body of

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<sup>27</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000: 939

enjoyment' (*sambhogakāya*), and the 'body of emanation' (*nirmāṇakāya*). While the original distinction between material and transcendental forms was retained, an added distinction was made between the form of the Buddha as an object of sensory perception experienced in daily life – the 'body of emanation' – and a more subtle form of the Buddha experienced through clear vision, dreams or meditation – the 'body of enjoyment.' This latter mode was able to function as a crucial hermeneutical tool to explain and authenticate the emergence of the Mahāyāna corpus of sutras. According to this schema, it is in the subtle form of the *body of enjoyment* that the Buddha preached the Mahāyāna sūtras to the retinues of bodhisattvas endowed with higher faculties, while the śrāvakās, of lesser faculty, only witnessed his *body of emanation*.

The three bodies doctrine became especially relevant to later developments in Indian Buddhism, particularly with regard to the advent of the Vajrayāna. With a gradual blurring of the distinction between highly advanced bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara or Mañjuśrī and fully enlightened Buddhas, a host of transcendent divinities residing in the highest Ākaniṣṭha heaven were now accessible to the practitioner in their *body of enjoyment* through extensive visualizations and meditative concentration. Additionally, because they were such advanced bodhisattvas and their commitment to the welfare of sentient beings was so marked, these could in turn choose to emanate on earth periodically through their *body of emanation* to preach the dharma and fulfill their altruistic mission. Thus, we find references to Indian or Tibetan *siddhas*

acting as emanations of various *bodhisattvas* or tantric deities.

The reincarnation of a historical figure, implying the transmission of a principle of consciousness from one human being to another, appears to be a phenomenon whose origins are more closely linked to indigenous Tibetan beliefs and practices than to the Buddhist tradition of India. Certainly, the pan-Asian Buddhist belief in the perpetual rebirth of individuals in *samsāra* conforms to this principle, but certain references to reincarnation in early Tibetan sources seem to point to an older and possibly pre-Buddhist substratum. One such reference appears in the *Testament of Ba* (*sBa' bzhed*), the famous account of the establishment of Buddhism during the reign of Tri Songdetsen in the second half of the eighth century. The reference in question, studied by Kapstein, involves a tale recounting the death and funerary rites of the minister Ba Selnang's two children. In the tale, a pearl smeared with a solution of vermillion is placed in the left cheek of the mouth of Ba Selnang's daughter's corpse. The corpse of the infant is then placed in an urn and buried beneath the mother's bed. Months later, a child is born into the family with a pearl in its mouth spotted red and the urn is found to be empty. When the child becomes a year old, she recognizes places and persons she has seen before, without having been instructed about them before.<sup>28</sup>

As discussed by Kapstein, Anne-Marie Blondeau's study of early Tibetan funerary rites practiced in connection to the death of neonates, shows that such rituals

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<sup>28</sup> Kapstein 2000: 39.

most probably form the background to the tale of Ba Selnang's daughter. Blondeau's study reveals that similar practices continue to be prevalent in the Tibetan cultural sphere and points to pre-Buddhist understandings of rebirth in Tibet that are often difficult to reconcile with Buddhist conceptions of karma. She writes,

“J’ai pourtant souligné; à l’occasion; la contradiction flagrante entre les concepts qui le sous-tendent et ceux du bouddhisme (...) comment ce retour d’une individualité identique; née des mêmes parents; peut-elle se concilier avec la renaissance conditionnée par les lois du *karma*, sauf à faire appel aux sophismes de la scholastique? Il est courant, lorsqu’on se trouve en présence de telles incompatibilités, de proposer d’y voir des survivances d’un hypothétique fonds pré-bouddhique de type chamanique; je l’ai moi-même suggéré à propos du phénomène des *sprul-sku* tibétains.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, for Blondeau, the early Tibetan concept of reincarnation, even though thoroughly incorporated into Buddhism at a later stage, perhaps shares more in common with broader shamanic traditions within the societies of Central Asia.

By the time the first *tulku* lines emerged in Tibet in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, both elements discussed above - the incarnation of *bodhisattvas* and the reincarnation of a historical person - had merged into a single system. Often considered to be emanations of transcendent *bodhisattvas*, religious virtuosos, through their claims

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<sup>29</sup> Blondeau 1997: 212-213. The passage can be roughly translated as, “I sometimes underlined the striking contradiction between the concepts on which [the funerary ritual] is based and those of Buddhism (...) How can this return of an identical individuality, born from the same parents, be reconciled with the rebirth conditioned by the law of *karma*; except by recourse to the sophism of scholasticism? In the face of such incompatibilities, it is common to see in them the survival of a hypothetical pre-Buddhist substratum of the shamanic type; I even suggested this myself concerning the phenomenon of the Tibetan *sprul-sku*.”

of advanced mastery and control of the continuum of consciousness in the passage from death to rebirth,<sup>30</sup> could voluntarily reincarnate indefinitely as historical figures to fulfill their altruistic mission. But the institutionalization of such a practice also eventually came to encapsulate a range of economic, legal, and political functions. As Schwieger has argued, such a process was gradual, and all of the functions with which the *tulku* institution is now known for did not fully materialize until the seventeenth century.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the practice of recognizing a child as the direct rebirth of a preceding religious hierarch by his close disciples and investing in him not only his predecessor's spiritual authority but also his material heritage would appear to have begun early on.

Tibetan historiography often credits the Karma Kagyü sect of Tibetan Buddhism with the creation of the *tulku* mode of succession in the thirteenth century. This was achieved through the recognition of Karma Pakshi as the reincarnation of the first Karmapa hierarch Düsum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa 1110-1193). As pointed out by Schwieger, however, the gap of more than ten years between these incarnations reveals that at this early stage, the idea of establishing a succession of uninterrupted reincarnations had not yet crystalized. Rather, he writes, "Karma Pakshi's reputation

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<sup>30</sup> Techniques to control the passage from death to rebirth were developed in the Buddhist Tantric milieu of India and transmitted to Tibetans especially through the nascent Kagyü and Kadam lineages in the tenth/eleventh century. Through the practice of Phowa (*pho ba*), or 'transference' of consciousness, Tibetan Buddhist practitioners claimed the ability to transfer one's consciousness in any desired new recipient.

<sup>31</sup> Schwieger 2015: 17.

was as a powerful tantric master, not as a link in a chain of famous reincarnated masters.”<sup>32</sup> It is in the person of the third Karmapa hierarch and supposed reincarnation of Karma Pakshi, Rangjung Dorjé (Rang ’byung rod rje 1284-1339), that scholars such as Turrell Wylie have identified an actual initiator of the concept of *tulku*.<sup>33</sup> While some scholars have pointed to the difficulties in identifying concrete social and economic circumstances and motives for the early development of the *tulku* position, others have been quick to argue for political and material incentives. Yoshiro Imaeda, for example, has pointed to the fact that the two earliest known *tulku* lines, the Karmapa and Shamarpa incarnations, were both founded by monks who did not belong to prominent aristocratic families. In his opinion, the motive for their adoption of the *tulku* mode of succession would appear to be primarily economic, as a means to gather the prestige necessary for generating enough material support to compete with other established sects backed by powerful clans.<sup>34</sup> In addition, by choosing the *tulku* mode of succession, the Karmapa and Shamarpa institutions could secure the material wealth amassed over the lifetime of its previous hierarch by reinvesting it onto the newly found reincarnation.

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<sup>32</sup> Schwieger 2015: 18. Samuel also mentions that the fifteenth century historian of the *Blue Annals* (*deb ther sngon po*), Gö Lotsawa Shonu Pal (1392-1481), carefully avoids describing Karma Pakshi as the rebirth of the First Karmapa Düsüm Khyenpa. He does however describe the Third Karmapa hierarch, Rangjung Dorjé, as the rebirth of Karma Pakshi. See Samuel 1993: 494.

<sup>33</sup> See Wylie 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Imaeda 2013: 6.

In his discussion of the Karmapa reincarnations, Wylie, on the other hand, argues for a purely political motive to the *tulku* mode of succession. For him, the conceptualization of the idea of reincarnation has to be localized in the particular Tibetan-Mongol political relations of the fourteenth century. He writes, “reincarnation developed in Tibetan Buddhism primarily for political reasons, and its immediate purpose was to provide the Black-hat-Karma-pa hierarchs with a metaphysical lineage devoid of patrimonial connections as a preliminary step towards the replacement of the quarrelsome ‘Khon family as regents of Tibet.”<sup>35</sup> Here, Wylie refers to the particular political scene of the fourteenth century mentioned above, when Tibet was ruled by the Khön clan, patrons of the Sakya sect, in the name of the Yüan dynasty of China. According to Wylie, Rangjung Dorjé’s self-fashioning as the reincarnation of Karma Pakshi, who had entertained some relations with the Yüan court during his own lifetime, was a political strategy to win the favor of the emperor and eventually overcome the political hegemony of the Khön clan and their Sakya sect. Ruth Gamble, in a recent monograph on the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé, directly argues against Wylie’s thesis, claiming a close investigation of the life of the Third Karmapa shows no evidence of Karma Kagyu claims to seize political control over Tibet.<sup>36</sup>

Schwieger generally accepts Wylie’s explanation as a plausible motive for the

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<sup>35</sup> Wylie 1978: 586.

<sup>36</sup> See Gamble 2018: 8.



inception of the *tulku* mode of succession, but argues for a generally more complex situation with many other factors coming into play. For example, he points to the fact that the *tulku* concept offers the promise that a disciple will meet his teacher again in his next life. This idea would have strengthened the sense of belonging to a specific monastic community beyond the death of its head, and would insure the continuity of the monastic institution without the need for an affiliation with a noble family to ensure its survival.<sup>37</sup>

While the scholarly literature on the subject of the rise of the *tulku* institution varies in the specific motives and factors that led to the inception of this mode of succession, it is nonetheless in general agreement that this movement arose in significant part as a means for religious institutions to gain greater autonomy from the control of clan-based aristocratic families, whether that be for religious, political or economic reasons. From the fourteenth century onwards, the *tulku* mode of succession gradually spread amongst most Tibetan Buddhist sects, culminating in the seventeenth century with the predominance of the *tulku* system over other modes of succession. It is at this point that the *tulku* mode of succession can be termed an institution. Although at no point was anything like a distinct or elaborate canonical theory of the *tulku* developed, and inconsistencies between various sects of Tibetan Buddhism are readily apparent, the stability that this system now possessed and the degree of recognition and

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<sup>37</sup> Schwieger 2015: 18.

power that was invested in it, largely warrants us to qualify it as such.

Interestingly, while the institution's rise was met with opposition in some cases, it appears that the aristocratic nobility at first generally sought to take advantage of the rising trend and the claims it purported by attempts to integrate the system within the clan-based model described above. The Gya clan and its monastic institution of Druk Ralung, as we shall observe below, is a case in point. Starting in the fifteenth century, the noble family began to integrate the *tulku* mode by recognizing a child within its own family as the reincarnation of a previous hierarch. But once such noble families opened their doors to the system, their claims over the process of succession weakened significantly and the scope for contestation of earlier models of succession within the monastic establishment increased. The family's responsibility of producing an heir to the abbatial throne was no longer taken for granted and the identification of the next reincarnation could now fall to the close disciples of the hierarch within the monastic institution. Such a prospect made aristocratic families extremely vulnerable to political machinations from other clans, who could exert influence on monastic institutions to recognize a child of their own family as the reincarnation of its hierarch. Again, the Gya clan's struggles with other prominent noble families over the recognition of the hierarch of the Drukpa sect, the Gyalwang Drukchen *tulku* line, is a case in point.

The gradual shift from clan-based models of succession encapsulated in the *khuwön* or 'uncle-nephew' system to the *tulku* mode of succession within Tibetan

Buddhist institutions would have catastrophic consequences for the hegemony of Tibet's ancient clan structure. This new system of succession and inheritance allowed monastic institutions to free themselves from the stifling control of single aristocratic families and garner unprecedented wealth and influence over Tibet. By capitalizing on the constant conflicts between noble families in their efforts to seize political control over the region by lending them social and symbolic capital in exchange for further patronage, monastic institutions grew at astonishing speeds across the Tibetan plateau. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, monastic institutions attained such levels of wealth and influence that they were able to directly challenge the terms of the field of religio-political rule and threaten the ancient clan-based hierarchy's grip over Tibet's social arena. So powerful had the Buddhist hierarch become that the Tibetan nobility found itself in complete dependence on Buddhist institutions for the reproduction of its position in the social order. This fact marks an important moment of rupture in Tibetan history, signaling the final and thorough success of Buddhist institutions in implanting themselves in Tibet. After a long process of accommodation to Tibet's ancient social structures, Buddhism now succeeded in supplanting the old system and rising as a hegemonic force. Through the reconfiguration of the Buddhist virtuoso as the primary locus of power and authority over the phenomenal world, and the successful propagation of alternative models of succession and inheritance, the Tibetan Buddhist hierarch now laid claims to much more than spiritual concerns; his position evoked a

whole range of economic, legal, and political functions. Once elevated to the highest echelons of the Tibetan social order, he had all the elements in hand to envision a Buddhist state over which he stood at the helm.

### **Druk Ralung, the Gya Clan, and Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal**

The history of the Drukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism is illustrative of the developments described above. The sect was founded in the thirteenth century by, as his name illustrates, the ‘cotton-clad’ *yogi* belonging to the Gya clan (*Rgya ras*), Tsangpa Gyaré Yeshé Dorjé (Gtsang pa Rgya ras Ye shes rdo rje 1161-1211). Tsangpa Gyaré was a disciple of Lingrepa Pema Dorjé (Gling ras pa Padma rdo rje 1128-1188), himself a prominent student of the acclaimed Kagyüpa master Pakmodrupa Dorjé Gyalpo (Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje rgyal po 1110-1170). The Drukpa sect takes its name from the monastic center of Namdruk (Gnam ’brug), founded by Tsangpa Gyaré towards the end of his life in 1205.<sup>38</sup> The historiography of the Drukpa sect relates how Tsangpa Gyaré witnessed in a vision nine dragons flying in the sky above the location where the monastery would be founded and hence gave it the name ‘Dragon,’ or ‘Druk.’ The seat of the sect, however, was established at the monastic center of Ralung (Rwa lung) in the Nyang (Myang) valley of Tsang (Gtsang) in western Tibet, where Tsangpa Gyaré had studied with his teacher Lingrepa and later founded the monastery in 1196. Tsangpa

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<sup>38</sup> See Kumagai 2018: 29. The Namdruk monastery is commonly referred to as Druk Sewa Changchubling (’Brug se ba byang chub gling).

Gyaré was an adept teacher and gathered many students over the course of his life, bringing great acclaim to his sect across southern Tibet.<sup>39</sup> Already by the time of his death, the sect had given rise to three broad branches, each represented by his three principal disciples.<sup>40</sup> Control of the seat of the sect, however, was maintained by Tsangpa Gyaré's ancestral clan, the Gya, following the uncle-nephew mode of succession discussed above.

As discussed by Roberto Vitali, the Gya clan traces its origins to the great proto-Tibetan tribe of the Dong (Ldong) and enters the historical record through the activities of the two brothers Lhaga (Lha dga') and Luga (Klu dga'), who, the sources claim, were responsible for bringing the statue of the Jowo Śākyamuni from China to Tibet during the reign of Tibet's famed Buddhist king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) in the seventh century.<sup>41</sup> The clan's establishment in the Upper Nyang valley of western Tibet occurred following the reigns of Tri Songdetsen (Khri Srong lde btsan) and Tri Ralpachen (Khri Ral pa can), when these the lands were offered by royal decree.<sup>42</sup> Following the dissolution of the Tibetan empire, the clan functioned as an important

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the life of Tsangpa Gyaré, see Martin 1979, Miller 2005 and 2006, and Kumagai 2018.

<sup>40</sup> The three early branches of the Drukpa represented by Tsangpa Gyaré's three principal disciples are usually represented as the Upper Drukpa (Stod 'brug) established by Gotsangpa Gönpö Dorjé (Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje 1189-1258), the Middle Drukpa (Bar 'brug) established by Sangyé Önré Darma Sengé (Sang rgyas Dbon ras Dar ma seng ge 1177-1237), and the Lower Drukpa (Smad 'brug) established by Lorepa Wangchuk Tsöndrü (Lo ras pa Dbang phyug brtson 'grus 1189-1258).

<sup>41</sup> Vitali 2003: 7.

<sup>42</sup> Vitali 2003: 8-9.

temporal power player in the region and Tsangpa Gyaré's successes brought it much prestige and authority.

Tsangpa Gyaré's successor as hierarch of the Drukpa sect was his nephew Sangye Önré Darma Sengé (Sang rgyas Dbon ras Dar ma seng ge 1177-1237), who expanded the monasteries of Ralung and Namdruk, and famously sent Phajo Drukong Shigpo (Pha jo 'Brug sgom zhig po c.1184-1251) to the southern region that would later become Bhutan to spread the Drukpa teachings there. Following Sangye Önré's tenure, the religious estate of the Gya clan and seat of the Drukpa sect was passed down from uncle to nephew, following the *khuwön* mode of succession, all the way down to the person of Ngawang Namgyal in the seventeenth century, himself the seventeenth throne-holder of Ralung and scion of the Gya clan.<sup>43</sup> But while the position of hierarch of the Drukpa sect was unambiguously maintained within the Gya clan for much of the early history of the sect, the rise of the *tulku* institution in Tibet and the clan's adoption of the system during the tenure of its fourteenth hierarch in the fifteenth century brought great complications to the clan's maintenance of control over the sect's development and leadership thereafter.

As Per K. Sorensen and Hou Haoran discuss in an article addressing the Drukpa sect's adoption of the *tulku* mode of succession, while Kunga Paljor (Kun dga' dpal 'byor 1428-1476), Ralung's fourteenth throne-holder and scion of the Gya clan,

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<sup>43</sup> On some rare occasions, the throne of Ralung was passed on to a brother, son, or grandson.

represents the first hierarch of the Drukpa sect to be officially recognized as a reincarnation of the sect's founder Tsangpa Gyaré, theories of emanation were already circulating prior to his life.<sup>44</sup> Tsangpa Gyaré himself was considered an emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara during his own lifetime, and other Ralung throne-holders were identified as emanations of Mañjuśri or Vajrapāṇi<sup>45</sup>. Additionally, already following the death Tsangpa Gyaré's successor and nephew Sangyé Önré Darma Sengé, the sect began informally recognizing some subsequent throne-holders as the second hierarch's rebirth.<sup>46</sup> Such attempts, although inconsistent and haphazard, reveal an early interest in the claims of mastery and prestige associated to the *tulku* mode of succession on behalf of the sect and the Gya clan. It is in the fifteenth century, however, that such an interest fully materialized with the official recognition of Kunga Paljor as the direct rebirth of Tsangpa Gyaré, albeit some three centuries after the founder's death.

As Sorensen and Hoaran argue, the official recognition of Kunga Paljor as the rebirth of Tsangpa Gyaré only occurred after his passing and reflects the specific historical circumstances of the sect at this point in history.<sup>47</sup> Kunga Paljor was a highly acclaimed practitioner who studied with some of the most prominent masters of the

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<sup>44</sup> Sorensen and Haoran 2018: 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ralung's eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth throne-holders, were considered incarnations of Mañjuśri, Vajrapāṇi and Avalokiteśvara respectively. See Sorensen and Houran 2018: 42.

<sup>46</sup> See Sorensen and Haoran 2018: 44-45.

<sup>47</sup> See Sorensen and Haoran 2018: 56.

era<sup>48</sup> and significantly expanded the influence of the Drukpa sect in southern Tibet. Much of his activities consisted in travels from Ralung to the various seats associated with the Drukpa lineage and the fostering of relationships with other sects and noble families. One such relationship was with the powerful temporal ruler of the Ja (Bya) clan, Tashi Dargyé (Bkra shis dar rgyas b.u-1499), who ruled over the Ja myriarchy of Southeastern Tibet. The biography of Kunga Paljor and his successor describe the relationship with Tashi Dargyé as especially consequential and relate how following his final visit to the ruler before contracting smallpox and passing away at Ralung, Kunga Paljor had promised his host to come back to him soon after the latter had built a new retreat center for him. Upon Kunga Paljor's untimely death, it would appear that the Drukpa sect at Ralung faced a propitious opportunity. By adopting the *tulku* mode of succession and recognizing Kunga Paljor's rebirth within the Ja ruler's own family, the Drukpa sect could expand in ways previously unimaginable through the patronage of one of the most powerful rulers of southern Tibet. Such a prospect would first require to officially recognize Kunga Paljor as the rebirth of Tsangpa Gyaré and then create a parallel line of hierarchs from the Ralung throne-holders which would operate through the *tulku* mode of succession.

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<sup>48</sup> Some of Kunga Paljor's teachers include Ngok Changchub Pal (Rngog Byang chub dpal 1360-1446), Gö Lotsawa Shönu Pal ('Gos lo tsa ba Gzhon nu dpal 1392-1481), Taklung Thangpa Ngawang Drakpa (Stag lung thang pa Ngag dbang grags pa 1418-1496), and Pañchen Nakyi Rinchen (Vanaratna) (Pañ chen Nags kyi rin chen 1384-1468).



While the prospect of a parallel line of hierarchs separate from the Ralung throne-holders and potentially recognized outside of the Gya clan would have most probably been perceived as a threat to the Gya clan's control over the sect, it would appear that the clan tacitly embraced the creation of the Gyalwang Drukchen (Rgyal dbang 'brug chen) incarnation line for the overall benefits it could bring to the sect. And so it was that two years after Kunga Paljor's passing, Tashi Dargyé's son Jamyang Chökyi Drakpa ('Jam dbyangs chos kyi grags pa 1478-1522) was born and later recognized as the rebirth of Kunga Paljor and Third Gyalwang Drukchen. Besides its lack of a male birth in the years following Kunga Paljor's death, part of the Gya clan's tacit acceptance of the recognition of Jamyang Chökyi Drakpa had perhaps to do with the fact that the new hierarch and his clan never laid any claim to the properties of the Gya at Ralung and maintained a cordial relationship with the subsequent throne-holders of the Drukpa at Ralung. One also wonders if the Gya did not anticipate the fact that while the immediate rebirth of Kunga Paljor had been found outside of its own progeny, the clan could potentially lay claim to future rebirths of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation, as it would do soon in the case of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

The Drukpa sect's adoption of the *tulku* mode of succession through the creation of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line thus necessitated a careful balancing act between the various adherents of the sect and the temporal estate of the Gya clan at

Ralung. Its eventual success in this endeavor, however, opened up the sect to entirely new avenues of patronage and expansion. of As Sorensen and Haoran summarize,

“From the above it is clear that a number of events suggests how the idea and how the invention of the “rGyal dbang ‘Brug chen” lineage succession came into being. It seems to have been a combination of the earnest wish of the Bar ‘Brug pa heads at Rva lung supported by large groups of ‘Brug pa followers and so-called *cag pu pa* dwellers not least from the local areas abutting the large Bya territory in southern Tibet (*lho rgyud*). The aim was to expand the ‘Brug pa school in new territories, by setting up a new local ‘Brug pa stronghold. (...) But this evidently went hand in hand with the necessity to establish this new line outside the narrow rGya clan, not least by furnishing it with an appealing new profile in the form of a reincarnation lineage that during this epoch of Tibetan medieval history increasingly was becoming the preferred way of regulating succession within most of the major seats. By linking and initiating the new incarnation succession with the rGya-scion Kun dga’ dpal ‘byor, the family’s prestige remained intact, the ‘Brug pa conveniently were able to emphasize Kun dga’ dpal ‘byor’s existing identity (i.e. incarnation) with gTsang pa rgya ras. This nexus too was to serve as a crucial interlinkage between the founder and the new rGyal dbang. For Rva lung this foray into new territories to seek an affluent or powerful new patron therefore proved to be a double victory.”<sup>49</sup>

If the creation of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line opened up new possibilities of patronage and expansion for the Drukpa sect, it also opened up the possibilities of significant conflict. Through its tacit acceptance of the *tulku* mode of succession, the Gya clan lost much of its authority and reach over broader developments within the Drukpa outside of Ralung, and upon the death of Jamyang Chökyi Drakpa, the Third Gyalwang Drukchen’s reincarnation was discovered within

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<sup>49</sup> See Sorensen and Haoran 2018: 60-61.

the household of a minor aristocrat in the Kongpo region. As is well known, this reincarnation was to become the great Kunkhyen Pema Karpo (Kun mkhyen Padma dkar po 1527-1592), a scholar and practitioner of prodigious capacities who would bolster the influence of the Drukpa sect beyond anyone's expectations. Gene Smith has described Pema Karpo as "one of those rare Renaissance men" whose breadth of scholarship and learning invites comparison with the Fifth Dalai Lama,<sup>50</sup> and in many ways, the Fourth Gyalwang Drukchen epitomizes the reconfiguration of the religious hierarch described above. Similarly to his predecessor, Pema Karpo never laid claim to any of the Gya properties at Ralung, choosing instead to found his own monastic seat of Druk Sangnak Chöling ('Brug Gsang ngags chos gling) in the Kongpo region. Smith has further qualified Pema Karpo as a shrewd politician and a monk who "held that in the administration of church affairs the claims of the rebirth and the monastic scholar took priority over those of the scion of a revered lineage."<sup>51</sup>

It is worth repeating here that the period spanning Pema Karpo's life was one of pronounced conflict and violence across the Tibetan region. The Phakmodrupa dynasty headed by the powerful Lang (Rlangs) clan, which had successfully supplanted the Sakya regime as the dominant political force in Tibet in the fourteenth century, was now in a period of decline owing to various internal struggles within and outside the clan.

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<sup>50</sup> Smith 2001: 82.

<sup>51</sup> Smith 2001: 82-83.

Already a century prior, another important family belonging to the Ger (Sger) clan and charged with administering the Rinpung (Rin spungs) district of Tsang had broken off with its overlords and effectively taken control of the Tsang region away from the Phakmodrupa.<sup>52</sup> While the period of Phakmodrupa and Rinpungpa rule was one of great productivity and innovation, it was also marred by incessant conflict, with the central Tibetan region partitioned along complex and shifting clan alliances vying for political supremacy. The Tibetan historian Tsepon Shakabpa has described this period in the following succinct way,

“During this time, the chiefs of U, Tsang, and Ngari each maintained large private armies. Each had his own lamas for worship, his own territory for each monastery, and his own source of wealth for religious purposes. Each religious school (chos lugs) felt superior. Since they were continually attacking one another with varying alliances, there were incessant internal conflicts.”<sup>53</sup>

It is in this particular historical milieu that the Tsangpa hegemony of central Tibet rose to power through the activities of its progenitor, Shingshakpa Tseten Dorjé (Zhing shag pa Tshe brtan rdo rje b.u-1599). I will explore the Tsangpa hegemony’s activities and conceptions of governance at length in the next chapter and it will suffice to

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<sup>52</sup> Olaf Czaja has argued that the Rinpungpa’s strategy was not a complete break off from the Phakmodrupa. He writes, “One has to stress that the Rin spungs pa never fully broke with their overlords the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. Instead, the Rin spungs pa followed a strategy to manipulate them and control the current sde srid. One of their political strategies was a matrimonial policy between the Rin spungs pa and the Rlangs Phag mo gru pa. This, beside their growing military power, gave the Rin spungs pa the opportunity to influence the court of Sne’u gdong rtse according to their own wishes.” See Czaja 2013: 20.

<sup>53</sup> Shakabpa 2010: 273.

mention here that Shingshakpa Tseten Dorjé's political successes were in part due to Pema Karpo's favorable mediation of his power struggles with his Rinpungpa overlords. This important fact is revelatory of the new place that the religious hierarchy was beginning to occupy in the Tibetan social arena. As the region became more and more embroiled in violent conflicts between various clan alliances, religious hierarchs like Pema Karpo became primary agents of mediation and conflict resolution. Such a case is immediately apparent in the biographical literature associated to this period, whereby religious hierarchs became more and more associated to activities of arbitration within the political realm. The long autobiography of Pema Karpo is a case in point, revealing the extent to which the hierarch's fame and influence over the region was in significant part owing to his political abilities.<sup>54</sup>

As mentioned above, Pema Karpo epitomizes the growing power and charisma that Buddhist institutions successfully carved out for the religious hierarch in Tibet. The scope of his activities on both doctrinal and political grounds paired with the reverence attributed to him across the Tibetan landscape largely foreshadows the rise of theocratic governments a generation later. By the time of Pema Karpo's death in 1592, the Drukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism had grown from a limited clan-based establishment with its seat at Ralung to an extensive network of monasteries and properties throughout

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<sup>54</sup> Tsang Khenchen's *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, drawing from Pema Karpo's autobiography, highlights the hierarch's political activities as driven by a concern for sentient beings. See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Kha fols. 10.b-11.b.

southern Tibet. As John Ardussi has argued, the rift in the structure of monastic authority within the Drukpa through the creation of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line eventually worked to the detriment of the Gya clan by shifting the center of gravity of the sect from Ralung to the south and east.<sup>55</sup> Thus, when a male child was born to Ralung's sixteenth throne-holder Tenpé Nyima (Bstan pa'i nyi ma 1567-1619) soon after Pema Karpo's death in 1594, the Gya clan immediately proceeded to recognize the boy and future founder of the Bhutanese state as the rebirth of Pema Karpo. Such a recognition would not only secure the Gya clan's properties from the potential claims of another incumbent, but would also reinscribe the clan at the center of the Drukpa sect and allow it to capitalize on the institutional charisma and wealth accumulated by Pema Karpo over the course of his lifetime. As is well known, however, the powerful aristocratic Chongyé ('Phyongs rgyas) family, a rival of the Gya and ally of the king of Tsang Karma Phuntsok Namgyal (Karma phun tshogs rnam rgyal 1587-1620), equally laid claims to the reincarnation of Pema Karpo in their progeny. Imaeda has described the stakes of the controversy as "enormous" and the arbitrage between the two candidates, Ngawang Namgyal of the Gya and Paksam Wangpo

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<sup>55</sup> Ardussi writes, "Although during the more than 100 years since 1476 the Rgya lineage had strongly resisted relinquishing any formal authority over 'Brug-pa properties to these incarnates, it is clear that much of the prestige and patronage customarily enjoyed by the Rgya had gravitated to the corporate lineage of Rgyal-dbang 'Brug-chen incarnations in its own right. In effect, a rift in the structure of monastic authority had developed to the detriment of the Rgya family, and to Rwa-lung as the spiritual centre of the sect. The new geographical centre of Bar 'Brug-pa activity had in fact shifted to the south and east." Ardussi 1977: 198.

(1593-1641) of Chongyé, extremely complex, involving almost all the principal dignitaries of Tibet at the time, both religious and temporal.<sup>56</sup>

As Ardussi has pointed out, it had been custom by then to consult the Drukpa sect's most important prophetic relic, the Rangjung Khasarpa, when a reincarnation within the lineage had to be confirmed. Pema Karpo's recognition as the Fourth Gyalwang Drukchen itself was considered provisional until a favorable confirmation by the relic.<sup>57</sup> Since the relic was in the possession of the Gya at Ralung and the clan had already made the claim that it had confirmed Ngawang Namgyal's status, Lhatsewa Ngawang Sangpo (Lha rtse ba Ngag dbang bzang po 1546-1615), a prior student of Pema Karpo and Paksam Wangpo's chief backer, forwent the custom and proceeded to enthrone the Chongyé candidate as the Fifth Gyalwang Drukchen at Pema Karpo's seat of Tashi Thongmön in 1597. Even though a number of attempts at negotiation were subsequently entertained by both factions through various proxies, a compromise was never achieved and the controversy grew only more bitter with time.

By the second decade of the seventeenth century, the whole matter was brought to the hands of the Tsangpa king Karma Phuntsok Namgyal, which, as Ardussi has stated, must have put him in a very difficult position. On the one hand, Ralung and the Gya clan were under the direct jurisdiction of the Tsangpa court and had very

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<sup>56</sup> Imaeda 2013: 9.

<sup>57</sup> See Ardussi 1977: 199.

convincing prophetic claims to their position; on the other, Paksam Wangpo was of the Chongyé noble house in U, and it would not have been in the interest of the Tsang king to disrupt a fragile balance of power achieved in the region. Additionally, Lhatsewa Ngawang Sangpo also had convincing prophetic arguments supporting his candidate. In the end, according to Ardussi, the reasons for Karma Phuntsok Namgyal's decision to veer to the side of the Chongyé candidate are not entirely obvious. Besides the fact that it would appear the king did not enjoy favorable personal relations with Ngawang Namgyal,<sup>58</sup> an unfortunate event seems to have provided him with an excuse to evade the real problem and persecute the Ralung faction for extraneous reasons.<sup>59</sup> The incident in question occurred in 1615 when Ngawang Namgyal was planning to cross the Yarlung Tsangpo river by boat and a fight broke out between his retainers and those of the Karma Kagyü Pawo incarnation Tsuklak Gyatso (Gtsug lag rgya mtsho 1568-1630). It would appear that in the course of the scuffle, one or two individuals were either injured or drowned. The Pawo incarnation immediately took up the matter to the Tsangpa court and demanded excessive retribution. Karma Phuntsok Namgyal sought to enforce the claim and cunningly added that the Gya were to relinquish their possession of the Rangjung Khasarpana relic. Ngawang Namgyal categorically refused

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<sup>58</sup> According to Ardussi, Ngawang Namgyal had supposedly breached protocol by refusing to dismount his horse when entering the Samdruptsé palace to meet with Karma Phuntsok Namgyal in 1614. See Ardussi 1977: 204.

<sup>59</sup> See Ardussi 1977: 205.



and, knowing the consequences of his disobedience, made his historic decision to flee southward in the lands that were to eventually become Bhutan following a dream in which his tutelary deities instructed him to do so. Accompanying him were his most loyal followers and the Rangjung Khasarpa relic.

Ngawang Namgyal's arrival in the southern region of Lhomön (Lho smon) marks the beginning of his state-building project there. Even though, as Ardussi has argued, his initial intention was probably to return to Ralung and resume his activities there if and once his dispute with the king of Tsang was resolved, within a decade of his arrival, he had already consolidated the major factions of the land under his single authority and began to envision a state over which he stood at the helm. Such a fact is emblematic of the new place that the religious hierarch had come to occupy in Tibetan society through the mechanisms described above. Ngawang Namgyal's refusal to relent to the demands of the Tsangpa king presented a direct challenge to the authority of the Tsangpa institution, a hereditary model of religiously-sanctioned kingship aligned with Buddhist conceptions of governance, and represents the thorough success of the religious establishment's reconfiguration of the social hierarchy of Tibet. As is well known, some three decades after Ngawang Namgyal's flight southward, another religious hierarch and prominent reincarnation also directly challenged the authority of the Tsangpa monarchy; this time, however, by overthrowing it and founding hierocratic government in Lhasa. As for the Gya clan, following Ngawang Namgyal's failure to

produce a capable heir and the eventual embrace of *tulku* succession by the Bhutanese administration following his death, it, like many other prominent clans in similar circumstances during this period, very quickly faded from the historical record having lost all sense of influence and relevance.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has traced what I have termed a theocratic movement during the period of Buddhist institutionalization in Tibet leading up to the founding of hierocratic governments in the seventeenth century by tracking the emergence of and developments within the field of religio-political rule. I have argued that the formation of such a field can be traced to the period of the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet (*phyi dar*), when, following the collapse of the Tibetan empire, nascent lineages of Tibetan Buddhism entered into a strategic and symbiotic relationship with Tibet's ancient clan structure. The settlement of the field of religio-political rule, achieved between Tibet's clan-based nobility and the religious elite of the region, found expression in the investment of various forms of capital between both parties. While it relied on the manufacture of social and symbolic capital on the part of religious institutions by granting them the power of representation inherent to the reproduction of the social order, the original settlement favored clan-based models of authority and succession. Such a settlement was however fragile, with at its heart a logic that

encouraged the expansion of the role and place of the religious hierarch in Tibet's competitive social environment. The fragility of the field's settlement, paired with the exogenous shocks of near-constant civil war in the region, provided the religious elite of Tibet the opportunity to challenge its terms by envisioning and articulating competing models of governance and authority. A crucial aspect of this challenge, which I hope to have convincingly demonstrated, was the introduction in Tibet of the *tulku* mode of succession. The gradual embrace of this system by the various sects of Tibetan Buddhism brought enough pressure on the field as to cause its eventual rupture and the possibility of envisioning hierocratic governments in the seventeenth century. As we saw in the case of the Gya clan and the Drukpa sect, the creation of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line during the fifteenth century was to have devastating consequences for the fate of the Gya clan. Such a process, however, catapulted the Drukpa sect to new heights of influence and patronage, paving the way for its hierarch and *tulku* in the seventeenth century to found a theocratic state in the sect's name.

This chapter has focused on providing a macro picture of the historical developments of the rise of ecclesiastical power in Tibet leading up to the theocracies of the seventeenth century. In the following chapters, I will concentrate on the specificities of the transitional period preceding, in conjunction with and immediately following the founding of the Bhutanese state of Ngawang Namgyal, all in an effort to further examine the remarkable characteristics of this theocratic vision of the world.

## CHAPTER THREE. THE GREAT SCHOLAR FROM TSANG: TSANG KHENCHEN JAMYANG PALDEN GYATSO (1610-84) AND THE TSANGPA HEGEMONY OF CENTRAL TIBET

### **Introduction**

This dissertation began with a set of questions associated to the founding of the Bhutanese state in the seventeenth century: What were the historical dynamics that allowed for a religious hierarch like Ngawang Namgyal to emerge and consolidate the political and religious factions of the land under his single authority? What were the mechanisms through which Ngawang Namgyal was able to enact a Buddhist theocratic vision of government? Drawing on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, I have argued above that an important mechanism through which religious hierarchs seized political control of the Tibetan region and articulated a distinct vision of Buddhist theocratic government in the seventeenth century was the manufacture of symbolic capital through the development of literary forms which recognized and reconfigured the religious hierarch to be at the head of the social order. Principal among these literary forms, I argued, was the genre of life-writing (*rnam thar*), whose efflorescence beginning in the fifteenth century was instrumental to the religious elite of Tibet's gradual

evocation and enunciation of the particular vision of the social order manifested in the theocracies of the seventeenth century. In the next chapter, I will examine closely one such work, the celebrated biography of Ngawang Namgyal entitled the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*<sup>1</sup> composed by the great polymath Tsang Khenchen Jamyang Palden Gyatso; a text whose influence over Bhutanese understandings of the nature of the state and the union of religious and temporal domains continues till this day. Before embarking on a close reading of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, however, it will prove useful to first introduce the great scholar from Tsang and the historical circumstances that brought him to the Southern lands of Lhomön. As I will argue in the following pages, a correct understanding of Tsang Khenchen's *habitus* and the circumstances that propelled him to write his biography of Bhutan's founding figure will go a long way in explaining his particular theocratic vision of the Bhutanese state.

As I shall explore in this chapter, Tsang Khenchen's remarkable life spans some of the most turbulent and consequential events of Tibetan and Himalayan history. Born in Tsang during the heyday of the Tsangpa hegemony, Tsang Khenchen experienced within his lifetime the ravages of a violent civil war that precipitated the fall of his primary patron the Tsangpa king Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, the installment of the Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso by the

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<sup>1</sup> The full title of the biography is *Song of the Great Cloud of Dharma: the Extensive Biography of the Glorious Drukpa Incarnate Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin rnam rgyal* (ngag dbang bstan 'dzin rnam rgyal gyi rnam thar rgyas pa chos kyi sprin chen po'i dbyangs).

Mongol chieftain Gūshri Khan, the sectarian purges that followed the Gelukpa sect's political ascendancy, the vulnerability and precariousness of exile to the periphery, and the birth of a new state in the southern lands that would become Bhutan. What makes his life remarkable, however, is less the fact that Tsang Khenchen witnessed first-hand the turbulent events of Tibet's seventeenth century, but rather the ways in which he navigated the constraints and opportunities afforded by the period. From the prestige and wealth of a life at the political center to the destitution and insecurity of exile, followed by the promise of refuge and sanctuary, Tsang Khenchen's life encapsulates both the extremes of the period and the resourcefulness necessary to traverse them. As both a scholar-practitioner of great acclaim and a consequential player in the field of religio-political rule, his life offers a unique insight into the social and material history of the religious elite of seventeenth century Tibet.

As I hope this chapter will make clear, much of Tsang Khenchen's outlook on Ngawang Namgyal's state-building efforts were molded by his experience at the court of the Tsangpa king Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, and, as a result, any serious investigation of his articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy has to take into account the short-lived and little-studied Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet. As the ideological milieu in which the great scholar from Tsang matured and rose to prominence, the Tsangpa hegemony's vision of governance and the union of religious and temporal domains (*chos srid zung 'brel*) exerted a powerful influence on his perspectives on state-

building. As I shall argue at length in the following pages, the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet represents an important transitional moment in Tibetan history; one which largely anticipated the theocratic movement taking hold of the region and to a great extent successfully embraced and incorporated such elements in its ideological frame.

That a remarkable degree of ideological continuity can be found between the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet and the subsequent theocracies of the seventeenth century may come as a surprise to the student of Tibetan history. Owing to a paucity of sources and a general reliance on state-sponsored narratives produced by Gelukpa authors, our understanding of the Tsangpa hegemony has tended to portray the regime and subsequent theocracies as diametrical opposites. Represented either as an evil regime bent on the destruction of the noble Gelukpa sect or even Buddhism writ-large by prominent Gelukpa authors, or more recently by Tibetan and western scholars as a largely ideologically bankrupt regime which successfully maintained political dominance over the region primarily through its economic and military might, the period of Tsangpa rule has tended to be portrayed as a dark or at best insignificant phase precluding the dawn of the Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama. This chapter will argue otherwise and, relying on a number of sources falling outside the gambit of the Ganden Phodrang's official state-sanctioned narratives, will claim that contra the image of strongmen with little influence outside of their military and economic might, the kings of Tsang largely stood at the forefront of the powerful

ideological movement associated to the birth of the theocratic regimes of the seventeenth century. As I will attempt to demonstrate in this and the following chapters, the Tsangpa hegemony's cultivation of novel understandings of religious and political governance across the region was both foundational and instrumental to Tsang Khenchen's and Ngawang Namgyal's envisioning of the Bhutanese theocracy. Before delving into the ways in which it did so, however, we first turn to the remarkable life of the great scholar from Tsang based on his own autobiography.

### **Tsang Khenchen Jamyang Palden Gyatso (1610-84)**

Surprisingly, besides a few passing references in the literature relating to the founding of the Bhutanese state, little is known today about the great scholar from Tsang. He is generally presented in Tibetan and Himalayan scholarship as a Karma Kagyü scholar who fled from persecution in Tibet following the rise of the Ganden Phodrang government and settled in the Paro valley of western Bhutan, where he penned the authoritative biography of Bhutan's founder Ngawang Namgyal. More recent scholarship has begun to hint at the contours of some other aspects of Tsang Khenchen's life, including his artistic contributions in Bhutan and his relationship to the Tenth Karmapa hierarch, Chöying Dorjé (1604-74), of whom he also produced a biography.<sup>2</sup> That said, such treatments remain terse and the overall picture of his life

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<sup>2</sup> For Tsang Khenchen's artistic contributions in Bhutan, see Ardussi 2008 and Maki 2017. For his relationship with and biography of the Karmapa, see Mengele 2012.



fragmentary. It is also unfortunate that a number of misconceptions regarding this great figure have arisen, the most glaring of which is his identification as a Karma Kagyü scholar. Despite sharing a strong affinity towards the Karma Kagyü sect and generally espousing a non-sectarian approach to Buddhist learning, Tsang Khenchen clearly and unequivocally identified with the Sakya milieu in which he was ordained and trained.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, Tsang Khenchen left behind a detailed autobiography, which, besides clarifying many aspects of his life, is a real treasure trove for the historian of the tumultuous seventeenth century.

Tsang Khenchen's autobiography, entitled *The Speech that Gradually Opens the Many Doors to the Pāramitās, Dhāraṇīs, and Samādhi: the Autobiography that Reveres and Follows in the Footsteps of the Perfect Liberation of all Dharma Holders* (Bstan pa 'dzin pa'i skyes bu thams cad kyi rnam par thar pa la gus shing rjes su 'jug pa'i rtogs brjod pha rol tu phyin pa dang gzungs dang ting nge 'dzin gyi sgo mang po rim par phye ba'i gtam) is a long and difficult undated work in manuscript form comprising of 458 folios in two volumes and written in highly ornate Tibetan.<sup>4</sup> The first volume, which recounts the first thirty years of the scholar's life in Central Tibet before his flight to Bhutan, offers rare and lucid descriptions of life under the Tsangpa hegemony leading up to the war of 1641-42

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<sup>3</sup> Tsang Khenchen's near unanimous identification as a Karma Kagyü scholar in English-language publications is puzzling to me and I have failed to trace an original Tibetan source making this claim.

<sup>4</sup> Although the autobiography is undated, its composition can be roughly attributed to the mid-1670s, since it was composed before the biography of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

which toppled the regime. The second volume focuses on Tsang Khenchen's life and activities in Bhutan, including the description of two short trips to India he undertook from there. The narrative is unfortunately unfinished and ends abruptly after Tsang Khenchen's return from his second trip to India. The remaining ten folios of the text are penned by one of his close Bhutanese disciples, presumably Drakpa Gyatso (1646-1719), who recounts the final activities and eventual death of his teacher.

As Tsang Khenchen states in the introduction to his autobiography, the primary impetus for writing about his life is didactic, and so much of the work consists of extensive reflections on Buddhist doctrine and practice. Michael Aris, who read part of the autobiography, laments Tsang Khenchen's abstruse style in both the autobiography and the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, qualifying the latter as "one of the most deeply frustrating works in the historical literature of Bhutan," largely owing the numerous and complicated categories of Buddhist thought that, in his opinion, end up obscuring the biographical subject.<sup>5</sup> Because the following chapter will examine Tsang Khenchen's style and tone in greater detail, it will suffice to mention here that Tsang Khenchen's consistent recourse to Buddhist theory and imagery when explaining various phenomena in both his own autobiography and the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* are neither unintentional nor accidental. Rather, and as I will argue in the following chapter, besides making a display of his standing at the pinnacle of scholastic erudition, they are

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<sup>5</sup> Aris 1979: 203-204.

willful representations of a world mediated by Buddhist thought. At other times, Tsang Khenchen's narrative in the autobiography is deeply personal and indulges his reader in the little details that often make for great story telling, ranging from accounts of the boredom of being locked up at home as a child because of a smallpox epidemic outside to moving descriptions of his mother's love and care for him. His poetry, punctuating much of the text, further draws his reader in the intimate space of his inner subjective world; one which often celebrates the complexity, fallibility and humanity of the Buddhist practitioner. What emerges is thus a rich and complex narrative which is at times normative and at other times deeply idiosyncratic. The vacillation between these two modes is at once representative of Tsang Khenchen's depth of erudition and character.

According to his autobiography, Tsang Khenchen was born in 1610 at his family's estate in the Upper Nyang valley of Tsang<sup>6</sup> on the auspicious fifteenth day of the fourth month at sunrise, and given the name Norbu Sangpo (Nor bu bzang po). His father, Ngakchang Genyen Sangpo, was an important administrator from the Nub clan and a tantric practitioner in the lineage of Ratna Lingpa. Besides his affiliation to various Nyingma lineages, Tsang Khenchen's father was a fervent follower of the Drukpa sect

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<sup>6</sup> Tsang Khenchen's family possessed a large estate called Tashi rabtu tenpé khangzang (Bkra shis rab tu brtan pa'i khang bzang), situated in Tsanga (Gtsang dga') in the upper Nyang (Myang) valley of Tsang. A number of important religious teachers were hosted there. For a description of the estate, see *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 91.a.

and a disciple of Kunkhyen Pema Karpo, from whom he received his name.<sup>7</sup> His mother, Tsewang Khyeu Dren, was also a practitioner with close ties to the Jonang sect and belonged to the prestigious Ché (Ice) clan.<sup>8</sup> Her brother, Tsang Khenchen's maternal uncle, Changchup Pal Rikzin Guru Rinpoché, was a well-known artist and master craftsmen.<sup>9</sup> Tsang Khenchen was born the third of three children, after his brother Tsei Wangpo and his sister Nampar Gyalma.<sup>10</sup> Because two other elder siblings had died in infancy, his parents engaged in various pious activities before his birth and during his infancy, including visits to many religious centers and receiving blessings from some of the most important lineage holders of the region, including the Sixth Shamarpa Garwang Chökyi Wangchuck (1584-1629) and Jonang Tāranātha (1575-1635).

Tsang Khenchen began his religious education under the tutelage of his parents, both of whom he refers to as bodhisattvas throughout the autobiography. While his

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<sup>7</sup> For a full description of Ngakchang Genyen Sangpo's (Sngags 'chang Dge bsnyen bzang po) religious affiliations, see *TKAB* vol. 1 fols. 103.a-104.b.

<sup>8</sup> Tsang Khenchen's mother was considered to be an incarnation of the mother of the Jonang prelate Kunga Drölchok (Kun dga' grol mchog 1507-1566) and was often referred to as a *dākinī*. See *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 15.a.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Tsang Khenchen's autobiography fails to mention at any point where and with whom he studied Tibet's artistic traditions. We are told however that his drawing and painting began at a very young age and can therefore presume that his maternal uncle had a hand in transmitting this knowledge to him.

<sup>10</sup> Tsang Khenchen mentions in the first volume of *TKAB* that a younger brother of his was killed in the war of 1641-42 (fol. 270.a). His early descriptions of his childhood however make no mention of a younger brother. It is probably fair to assume that the individual in question was rather a close relative of Tsang Khenchen.

mother was the first to introduce him to the fundamentals of Mahāyāna Buddhism, his father transmitted to him the mantra of Vajrakīlāya from the moment he was able to speak. Especially inclined to the religious life from a very young age, Tsang Khenchen was already coveted by a number of religious institutions and rumored to be the reincarnation of some important figures.<sup>11</sup> When, at the age of five, he started reading under the tutelage of the monk Lodrö Rinchen, his exposure to Buddhist avadānas confirmed his desire to dedicate his life to the Buddhist path. It is at the tender age of seven, however, that his aspirations fully transpired when he met for the first time Khenchen Lungrik Kunga Gyatso (b.u-c.1639), the celebrated Sakyapa scholar who was at the time abbot of the nearby monastery of Pökhang Chödé (Spos khang chos sde) and who would become the most important figure in his life.<sup>12</sup> Instantly struck by unwavering faith and devotion towards this teacher, Tsang Khenchen took refuge and

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<sup>11</sup> Probably owing to his affiliation to the Che (*Ice*) clan and an incident that occurred at Palkhor Chödé (Dpal 'khor chos sde), Tsang Khenchen was rumored to be the reincarnation of the 6th Abbot of Shalu (Zhwa lu) monastery, Drungné Sangpo Gyaltsen (Drung gnas Bzang po rgyal mtshan) (*TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 23.a). For a discussion of the previous incarnations that Tsang Khenchen was believed to have taken, see *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 9.a-b. Regarding the various individuals and institutions that coveted Tsang Khenchen, these included the Dewachen Dratsang (Bde ba can grwa tshang), the 6th Shamarpa Chökyi Wangchuck (Chos kyi dbang phyug 1584-1630), Jé Tāranātha, the abbot of Palkhor Chödé monastery Jamyang Döndrup ('Jam dbyangs don grub) and the manager of Riding (Ri lding) monastery, who believed Tsang Khenchen was a reincarnation of its abbot (*TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 52.a).

<sup>12</sup> Pökhang Chodé (Spos khang chos sde), also known as Pökhang Tsokpa (Spos khang tshogs pa) or Pökhang Tsokdé (Spos khang tshogs sde), was founded in 1213 by Paṇḍita Śākyaśrībhadrā's disciple Changchub Pal Sangpo (Byang chub dpal bzang po b.u.-1224). The monastery acted as the seat of one of Śākyaśrībhadrā's original four monastic communities, the Joden Tsok Dé Shi (*jo gdan tshogs sde bzhi*). For more on Śākyaśrībhadrā's four monastic communities, see Heimbel 2013.

novice vows in his presence. Although he strongly desired to join the community of monks and had the support of the majority of his relatives, Tsang Khenchen's father, a tantric house-holder practitioner, was reluctant to let his son be ordained. Finally through the intervention of Lungrik Gyatso himself, his father acquiesced and Tsang Khenchen was ordained by his root teacher on the fifteenth day of the first month of 1622, at the age of thirteen, and given the name Jamyang Palden Gyatso.

Soon after Tsang Khenchen's ordination, Lungrik Gyatso was promoted by the Tsangpa king Karma Tenkyong Wangpo to become abbot of the important Palkhor Chödé monastery in Gyantsé. Tsang Khenchen spent the next three years studying under his teacher at Palkhor Chödé and accompanying him on his travels in U and Tsang. At the age of fifteen, he spent the *yarné* retreat at his family estate where Khenpo Samten Rinchen, who succeeded Lungrik Gyatso as abbot of Pökhang, was in residence. There, Tsang Khenchen gave his first sermon to an assembly of monks on the subject of epistemology. Everyone present was impressed by his aptitude and eloquence and encouraged him to continue his studies at a monastic college. It is also during these years that Tsang Khenchen received his first teachings from the Sixth Shamarpa, while the latter was visiting the Nyang valley and was hosted at the family estate.

At the age of sixteen, Lungrik Gyatso arranged for Tsang Khenchen to be enrolled at the prestigious Serdokchen monastery, where the young monk could continue his training in sutra and tantra in the tradition of Pañchen Shākya Chokden

(1428-1507). There, Tsang Khenchen studied under the renowned Paṇḍita Shākya Tenzin, who became his second-most important teacher.<sup>13</sup> Tsang Khenchen excelled at his wide-ranging studies, quickly making a name for himself. Besides focusing extensively on the major subjects of Tibetan scholasticism, including Prajñāpāramitā literature, Pramāṇa, Abhidharma, Vinaya, Madhyamaka, and Yogācāra, his studies at Serdokchen also included Sanskrit, grammar, and poetics. By the age of twenty he began touring the major religious institutions of the Tsang region for his debate rounds and gathered much fame and recognition, including the favor of the Tsang ruler, for his mastery of epistemology. These years were also marked by many trips to Gyantsé and Shigatsé, where Tsang Khenchen would meet with his lama Lungrik Gyatso to receive various tantric empowerments and sādhanas.<sup>14</sup>

At the age of twenty-five, in 1634, through the recommendation of Lungrik Gyatso and by order of the Tsangpa king, Tsang Khenchen was enthroned as the abbot of Pökhang monastery. Now responsible for one of the major seats of Panchen Śākyaśrībhadrā's lineage, he spent the following years occupied with important administrative duties and a busy teaching schedule. Although he worked tirelessly for the welfare of his community, Tsang Khenchen tells us in the autobiography that he

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<sup>13</sup> For a full list of teachings (*gsan yig*) that Tsang Khenchen received from Shākya Tenzin over the course of his life, see *TKAB* vol. 1 fols. 231.a-251.b.

<sup>14</sup> For a full list of teachings (*gsan yig*) that Tsang Khenchen received from Lungrik Gyatso, see *TKAB* vol. 1 fols. 158.b-169.b.

longed to live a life of retreat far away from the hustle and bustle of Tibet's powerful religious institutions. Life would have it differently, however, and in 1638, after having led the community of Pökhang for four years, Tsang Khenchen was recruited by the Tsangpa ruler to become the abbot of the newly-built monastic complex of Chökhör Dechen at the capital. As I will argue below, Chökhör Dechen visibly stood as an emblem of the Tsangpa hegemony's vision of itself and Tibet as a polity, and Tsang Khenchen's acceptance to lead the complex is testimony to his active participation in such a vision.<sup>15</sup> And so it was that practically overnight, Tsang Khenchen became one of the most influential figures in the Tsang kingdom. He tell us in the autobiography, however, that he was ill-suited to a life of riches and prestige, and that he became increasingly disillusioned with his position in the capital. With political turmoil beginning to engulf the region and the sudden death of his root teacher, his longing for a life of retreat in remote locations became all the more pronounced. Tsang Khenchen's poetry punctuating this section of the autobiography is especially poignant and reflective of the tensions of the period.

When the Mongol troops of Güshri Khan ravaged the Tsang region in 1641, Tsang Khenchen was on a visit to his ancestral home in the Nyang valley. Caught in the chaos and carnage of the war, he fled southwards in the cover of night with a small

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<sup>15</sup> For Tsang Khenchen's description of the center, see *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 201.a-b, and fols. 218.b-222.a.



retinue that included his brother and sister. Taking all kinds of detours to avoid running into an army patrol, the party eventually arrived at a site on the banks of the Yarlung Tsangpo, where, coincidentally, the Tenth Karmapa Chöying Dorjé had set up camp. Thus, in the midst of the chaos of war, Tsang Khenchen was to have one of the most significant encounters of his life. Instantly struck with immense faith and devotion to the Karma Kagyü hierarch, the two spent much time discussing religious matters and both parties travelled together as far as Tsari.

In a recent monograph on the life of the Tenth Karmapa, Irmgard Mengele has advanced the hypothesis that Tsang Khenchen may have been in fact the Karmapa's ever-faithful attendant going by the name of Kuntusangpo (Kun tu bzang po). Besides the fact that both individuals share the same birth year and life spans, Mengele bases this assumption on four points related to Tsang Khenchen and the Karmapa's autobiographical writings.<sup>16</sup> A careful study of Tsang Khenchen's life however

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<sup>16</sup> The four points sustaining Mengele's hypothesis that Tsang Khenchen and Kuntuzangpo are one and the same person are the following: 1. Tsang Khenchen's autobiography cites in full a passage from the beginning of the Karmapa's autobiographical composition entitled the *Wish-Fulfilling Cow* in which the latter describes their meeting. At the end of this passage in the *Wish-Fulfilling Cow*, the Karmapa refers to Tsang Khenchen by the term 'rimdrowa' (rim gro ba), the name by which he called his personal attendant Kuntuzangpo. 2. Mengele understands a passage in Tsang Khenchen's autobiography to be referring to Tsang Khenchen receiving a secret tantric name by the Karmapa. 3. Another passage in Tsang Khenchen's autobiography recounts a meeting between Tsang Khenchen and the Sixth Shamarpa, Fifth Situpa and Fifth Gyaltsab. The three tell him that if he were to go in the presence of the Karmapa, the latter would be pleased by his knowledge. 4. Three biographical compositions of the Karmapa, which he had entrusted in the care of his attendant Kuntuzangpo, were mistakenly published in Bhutan in 1976 as part of the collected works of Tsang Khenchen. See Mengele 2012: 287-289.

overwhelmingly refutes this hypothesis.<sup>17</sup>

After parting with the Karmapa, Tsang Khenchen contemplated whether to return to his home in Tsang or to continue his journey southwards to the forests of Lhomön. Knowing that his position as one of the Tsang king's primary teachers (*dbu bla*)

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<sup>17</sup> For the sake of brevity, I shall address each of Mengele's points in the order that they appear: 1. The Karmapa does indeed refer to Tsang Khenchen as 'rimdrowa' in his *Wish-Fulfilling Cow*. This term however is not exclusive to his attendant Kuntuzangpo. In the previous page, for example, the Karmapa refers to himself as the Shamarpa's rimdrowa. This reference alone is insufficient to identify Tsang Khenchen as Rimdrowa Kuntuzangpo. 2. The passage in question details an initiation into the mandala of cakrasamvara along with the conferral of a secret tantric name to Tsang Khenchen by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal at the Punthang Dewachen Dzong in Punakha, not by the Karmapa. 3. Tsang Khenchen does indeed recount a meeting in his youth with the three Kagyü figures whereupon they encouraged him to meet with the Karmapa. Tsang Khenchen even recounts that he replied with the aspiration, "may I be fortunate enough to be in the presence of the Karmapa." This however, does not substantiate in any way the claim that Tsang Khenchen became the Karmapa's personal attendant for 35 years. 4. The fact that the Karmapa's biographical compositions were accidentally published in 1976 in the collected works of Tsang Khenchen is puzzling. Attributing this curious mistake to the possibility that Tsang Khenchen was indeed Kuntuzangpo is a far stretch however. More probable is the possibility that given Tsang Khenchen's relationship with the Karmapa, the Karmapa's writings were kept in proximity to his and the editors failed to separate them.

The only surviving biographical information that we have on Kuntuzangpo is related in Situ and Belo's *History of the Karma Kagyü Sect*. In it, we learn that Kuntuzangpo was born in the Yorpo (G.yor po) valley of Lhokha (Lho kha). He was ordained by the Sixth Shamarpa and began his studies at the age of fifteen at the Karma Kagyü monastery of Thupten Nyinché Ling (Thub bstan nyin byed gling) in Kongpo (Kong po). He met the Karmapa while the latter was visiting Lhodrak (Lho brag) and became his personal attendant serving him for the next 35 years. Kuntuzangpo was with the Karmapa when his encampment was attacked in 1645 and fled with him into exile in Lijiang (See *History of the Karma Kagyü Sect* vol. 2, fol. 174.a). In light of Tsang Khenchen's biographical sketch given above, the shared identity of these two individuals is simply not possible. It is unfortunate that this hypothesis has been uncritically adopted in subsequent scholarship, including Ariana Maki's work on the artistic legacy of Tsang Khenchen (see Maki 2017). The fact that Tsang Khenchen was not the Karmapa's beloved attendant Kuntuzangpo however does not diminish in any way the strong affinity shared between these two individuals. Tsang Khenchen did write a biography of the Karma Kagyü hierarch from his seat in Paro and felt unwavering devotion towards him. His autobiography recounts numerous dreams and visions of the Karmapa during his retreats in Bhutan and even posits that he was probably a disciple of the Seventh and Eighth Karmapas in previous lives (see *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 9b).

almost surely meant persecution for him and his followers at the hands of the new Ganden Phodrang government, he eventually chose exile and embarked on the arduous journey to the Bhutanese border. He eventually entered Bhutan through Northern Gasa, using the same route that Ngawang Namgyal had taken some twenty-five years earlier. Tsang Khenchen's description of crossing the border between Tibet and Bhutan is as uplifting as it is heartrending, painting the lush forests, wild animals and colorful flowers of Bhutan in sharp contrast to the grey, war-ravaged and desolate landscape he left behind. He writes that at upon crossing the border, he sat atop the high mountain pass for a moment to rest, in a feeling of "happiness and sadness mixed together" (*dga' skyo 'dres ma'i rnam rtog*). Tsang Khenchen memorializes this moment in the autobiography by composing the following poem:

Just then, my mind was blissful and clear.  
My faith painted the Buddha, Sixteen Arhats and attendants  
Like rainbow-hued clouds in the sky.  
I prostrated [before them] and prayed that in their assembly,  
The deeds of the Buddha's teaching may flourish and spread.

Although content with whatever means of livelihood,  
Unable to forget in my meditation the heart-ache [associated]  
[To the plight of my] students and whether they are alone without a  
teacher,  
I implored the dharma protectors and Sixteen Arhats  
To protect the teachings, and entered the forest.

While the flowers bloomed in the Malaya-like forest,

I, the [plaintive] peacock, heard the Dragon's rolling thunder,  
 The enlightened activity of a faith-inspiring bodhisattva.  
 Looking at the clouds, I went there.

Here too the light of the precious teaching,  
 Limitless and victorious in all ways,  
 Is even brighter than the essence of gold.  
 May it completely pervade everywhere with its auspiciousness.<sup>18</sup>

Soon after crossing the border, Tsang Khenchen left his party and entered a

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<sup>18</sup> *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 281 a-b. The second stanza of the poem relates to Tsang Khenchen's concern for his students which he had to leave behind in Tsang, and the 'Malaya-like forest' refers to Bhutan. The bodhisattva whose activity he hears is of course the Dragon (Drukpa) hierarch Ngawang Namgyal. The poem reads in Tibetan:

སྐབས་དེར་རང་སེམས་བདེ་གསལ་ནམ་མཁར་འཇའ་སྤྲིན་བཞིན།  
 །ཐུབ་དབང་ཆེན་པོ་གནས་བརྟན་བཅུ་དྲུག་ཞབས་འབྲིང་བཅས།  
 །དད་པའི་རི་མོར་དམིགས་ཏེ་ཕྱག་བྱས་ཐུབ་པའི་བརྟན།  
 །ཚོགས་ན་སྤོང་རྣམས་དར་ཞིང་རྒྱས་པའི་སྤོན་ལམ་བཏབ།  
 །བདག་ནི་ཇི་ལྟར་འཚོ་བ་བདེ་ཡང་དགེ་འདུན་སྡེ།  
 །མཁན་པོས་དབེན་སམ་སྤྲིང་ལ་བྱུང་དུ་ཏིང་འཛིན་དུ།  
 །མི་བཞེད་དུན་པས་ཚོས་སྤྲོང་དག་བཅོམ་བཅུ་དྲུག་ལ།  
 །བརྟན་པ་སྤྲོང་བར་གསོལ་བ་འདེབས་བཞིན་ནགས་སུ་ལྷགས།  
 །མ་ལ་ལ་འདྲའི་ནགས་ཚལ་མེ་ཏོག་རྒྱས་པའི་དུས།  
 །བྱང་རྒྱལ་སེམས་དཔའ་མོས་པ་སྤང་མཛད་འཕྲིན་ལས་ཀྱི།  
 །སྤྲོད་བྱུངས་འབྲུག་གི་རྩ་ཆེན་སྤོག་པ་དང་ལྷན་ཅིག  
 །ཐོས་པའི་མདོང་མཐའ་འཛིན་པའང་སྤྲིན་ལ་བཟོ་བཞིན་འགྲོར།  
 །འདྲིར་ཡང་ཐུབ་པའི་བརྟན་པ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།  
 །གསེར་གྱི་ཐིག་ལེ་ལས་ཀྱང་ཆེས་གསལ་བའི།  
 །འོད་ཟེར་མཐའ་ལས་རྒྱལ་བའི་ཞིང་ཀུན་དུ།  
 །ཡོངས་སུ་ཁྱབ་པའི་བྲག་ཤིས་རྒྱ་ཆེར་ཤོག།

solitary retreat not far from present-day Gasa.<sup>19</sup> Later while giving some teachings and empowerments to the general public at the Gön Tshephuk cave, he was invited to proceed southward to the Bhutanese capital of Punakha and meet with Ngawang Namgyal at the Punthang Dewachen Palace. This would be the first of many meetings that Tsang Khenchen had with the Drukpa hierarch, the two forging a special bond that would last until the latter's final retreat and death in 1651.

As I will discuss at length in the following chapters, Tsang Khenchen saw in the person of Ngawang Namgyal a true incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and revered him with the same fervor he did his teacher Lungrik Gyatso. Although his original intention was to spend only a short time in Bhutan and continue on his travels to Sikkim and India, Tsang Khenchen ended up spending the remainder of his life in Bhutan as a cherished guest of the Drukpa hierarch and his successors. For Ngawang Namgyal, Tsang Khenchen was also an important asset to his state-building project. The breadth of his erudition and his previous standing at the Tsang court made him a welcome addition to the ranks of the newly-founded theocratic state. In particular, his knowledge of logic and epistemology was especially sought after and he was quickly recruited to train the monks of the state monastic body at the Punakha Dzong.

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<sup>19</sup> Tsang Khenchen's brother and sister continued on their journey to Sikkim while the rest of the party appears to have returned to Tibet (*TKAB* vol. 2 fol. 284.a). Tsang Khenchen's brother eventually traveled to Bhutan to meet him (*TKAB* vol. 2 fol. 308.a), while his sister stayed in Sikkim and eventually died there (*TKAB* vol. 2 fol. 317.a).

Although he was instrumental in the founding of a college of dialectics (*mtshan nyid grwa tshang*) by composing commentaries of Indian treatises for its use and even teaching there for a month, Tsang Khenchen's long-held desire for a life of retreat was granted and respected. While it would appear that he spent the first ten years of his stay in Bhutan in the Punakha region, he eventually settled at the small hermitage of Menchunang in the Paro valley, where, besides three short trips to India, he remained for the rest of his life.

From his seat at Menchunang, Tsang Khenchen trained a whole generation of prominent Bhutanese scholars and artists, including the celebrated artist Drakpa Gyatso (1646-1719) and the Third Jé Khenpo Pekar Lhundrup (1640-99). His most lasting contributions however are arguably the many volumes that he penned while in Bhutan. From tantric exegeses, commentaries on Indian and Tibetan philosophical treatises, works on grammar and poetics, and numerous biographies, the breadth of Tsang Khenchen's literary activity is immediately apparent. His biography of the Buddha, comprising over one thousand pages, has been characterized by Kurtis Schaeffer as perhaps the largest life of the Buddha ever composed in Tibetan, a "veritable encyclopedia of Buddhist-lore, with citations from seemingly every conceivable scriptural source that touches upon the Buddha's story."<sup>20</sup> His most enduring work however remains his biography of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, which the latter

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<sup>20</sup> See Schaeffer's introduction to Chogyel 2015.

personally requested him to write and which served as the base text for all later biographies of the Drukpa hierarch and founder of the Bhutanese state.

On the eighth day of the sixth month of the wood mouse year (1684), at the age of seventy-five, Tsang Khenchen passed away while in retreat at MENCHUNANG. It appears that his death was precipitated by an ailment to his foot that had first developed while in Tsang and later flared up again in Bhutan. His death was accompanied by many auspicious signs.

### **The Tsangpa Hegemony of Central Tibet**

We have already observed the historical contours of the rise to power of the Tsangpa hegemony through the efforts of its progenitor Shingshakpa Karma Tseten Dorjé in chapter two, and we will focus here on an examination of the overall significance of the Tsangpa hegemony to the rise of theocratic movements in the region, paying particular attention to the ways in which the polity's conceptions of governance and the union of religious and temporal domains exerted much influence on Tsang Khenchen's thought. Until recently, such a task would have been difficult (if not impossible) to conduct, owing to what I see as a deeply skewed understanding of the nature of the Tsangpa hegemony in the scholarly literature on the period. The reason for this is two-fold: on the one hand there are very few surviving historical records that detail the history of this polity, and on the other, the majority of the sources that are

available, as is almost universally the case, are written from the point of view of the victors of history. In this case, the dominant narrative of the period is clearly representative of Gelukpa sentiments and proclivities, painting the Tsangpa hegemony in a negative light and, I will argue, missing much of the remarkable developments taking place during this period of Tibetan history.

Unfortunately, a complete survey of state-sanctioned Gelukpa sources and their influence on modern scholarly accounts of the period fall beyond the scope of this chapter, and it will suffice to mention here that central to state-sanctioned Gelukpa narratives of the period is the portrayal of the kings of Tsang as evil agents bent on the annihilation of the virtuous and righteous Geluk order through repeated claims of persecution, necessitating foreign Mongol assistance as a matter of survival.<sup>21</sup> Such a persecution is almost always understood as being motivated by sectarian prejudices, pitting the kings of Tsang as fanatical Karmapa supporters bent on replacing Geluk

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<sup>21</sup> The major state-sanctioned Gelukpa sources for the period are the Fifth Dalai Lama's seminal history of Tibet *The Song of the Queen of Spring* (*spyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs*) and his long autobiography *The Illusive Play* (*'khrul ba'i rol rtsed*), the Desi Sangyé Gyatso's (*Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho* 1653-1705) biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama and History of the Gelukpa sect, the *Vaidūrya Serpo*, and Sumpa Khenpo Yeshé Paljor's (*Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor* 1704-1788) History of the Gelukpa sect entitled *The Auspicious Wish-Fulfilling Tree* (*dpag bsam ljon bzang*). All three authors, and especially Sangyé Gyatso and Sumpa Khenpo, are unabashed in their verbal assailing of the Tsangpa regime. The following excerpt from Sumpa Khenpo's *Auspicious Wish-Fulfilling Tree*, translated by Tucci, should suffice to capture the gist of the Gelukpa stance on the Tsangpa hegemony: "In the year earth-horse (1618) the fruit of evil deeds ripened. That king (of gTsañ) and his son, their mind infatuated by Māra, through their devotion to the Kar ma pa, unable to tolerate that sun of the good law which is the school of the Yellow caps, lofty everywhere as it represents the essence of the Buddhist teaching, has no rival and is not contaminated by the least stain of sin, wished to destroy them; in the seventh month according to the Hor calendar, they sacked Se ra and a'Bras spuñs..." See Tucci 1999 vol. 2: 655.



centers with Kagyü ones. As a result of this polarizing depiction, modern scholars of Tibet have generally understood the driving force behind the rise of the Ganden Phodrang government to be deeply entrenched sectarian conflicts<sup>22</sup>, and, broadly-speaking, the approximate century of Tsangpa rule largely continues to stand in for a dark phase precluding the dawn of the Ganden Phodrang in our general understanding of Tibetan history.

Such an evaluation of the Tsangpa hegemony is unfortunate and is in need of substantial revision. As the late Elliot Sperling wrote in 2016, speaking of the inadequate state of our knowledge of this period, "If the standard account of Tibet's history - the mainstream account - is inadequate to convey a full sense of what was experienced in Tibet in the seventeenth century, one must turn to the marginalized, to the sources

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<sup>22</sup> Giuseppe Tucci's monumental *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, is arguably the most influential study of the period by a western scholar which narrates the rise of the Ganden Phodrang government as the result of increasing sectarian conflicts. Considering the state of our knowledge of Tibetan history in the 1940s and the limited sources that he had at his disposal then, Tucci's pioneering work stands out as one of the greatest achievements of the field of Tibetology. The paucity of sources at his disposal and his at times uncritical assessment of these, however, has led him to often over-simplify the historical narrative and reproduce the polarizing picture presented by Gelukpa accounts. Under titles such as the "Reds against Yellows," "gTsañ against dBus," and "The Triumph of the Yellows," Tucci reified an understanding of the period as primarily governed by sectarian tensions and religious allegiances juxtaposed onto the regions of U and Tsang. Even though his account has added complexity to the picture by introducing the many aristocratic families and clans that vied each other for political power during the period, his simplistic and uniform assessment of their religious allegiances has restricted his analysis. As I hope to demonstrate below, the religious and sectarian scene of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was much more fluid and permeable than Tucci's account would permit to believe. Be that as it may, Tucci's somewhat formulaic depiction of the period served, according to Templeman, as a "prompt for many later scholars, who, preferring to avoid the political complexities of the times, simply regarded the lead up to the Civil War as if it were an example of increasingly hostile religious positions." See Templeman 2015: 485-6.

written by those who were cast out, for a more complete picture."<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, a growing number of sources outside the purview of the Ganden Phodrang and more sympathetic to the Tsangpa polity have begun to surface, offering a far more complete and nuanced picture of the period. As I will explore below, one such source is Tsang Khenchen's own account of his life during the heyday of Tsangpa rule, demonstrating both his alignment with and participation within the Tsangpa hegemony's vision of itself and the Tibetan polity.

*The Code of Sixteen Laws of Tsang (gtsang pa'i khrims yig zhal lce bcu drug)* and the *History of Tsangpa Kings (gtsang pa'i rgyal po gdung rabs mdor bsdus)*

As the modern Tibetan historian Thubten Phuntsok (Thub btsan phun tshogs) laments in his history of Tibet published in 2006 entitled *Bod kyi lo rgyus spyi don padma rA ga'i lde mig*, "Nowadays one only finds accounts of the rule of the Tsangpa kings that rely on partisan texts and views." He proceeds to stress the responsibility of historians to strive for impartiality and study texts that represent both sides of a given conflict. In the case of the Tsangpa kings, he argues, there is but one text that clearly presents events from their perspective and is therefore of crucial importance to the history of that period, the *Code of Sixteen Laws of Tsang (gtsang pa'i khrims yig zhal lce bcu drug*,

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<sup>23</sup> Sperling 2016: 9.

henceforth *Tsang Law Code*).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, another modern Tibetan historian, Sonam Tsering (Bsod nams tshe ring), in his study of various Tibetan law codes published in 2004 entitled *Snga rabs bod kyi srid khrims*, has argued that for the researcher of the period of Tsangpa rule, the *Tsang Law Code* is the single most important and reliable source.<sup>25</sup>

Almost certainly dating directly to the period of the reign of Karma Tenkyong Wangpo when the laws were instituted, the *Tsang Law Code* is a relatively short text (generally about a dozen folia depending on the publication) purportedly authored by the governor (*rdzong dpon*) of the Dechen fortress (Bde chen brag dkar rdzong) in the Lhasa region named Pel Serwa (Spel Gser ba).<sup>26</sup> The text consists of an introductory passage about the Tsangpa kings and their polity followed by citations of each of the sixteen laws along with brief descriptions of their contents.<sup>27</sup> While an analysis of each of the sixteen laws of Karma Tenkyong Wangpo falls beyond the scope of this chapter, the introductory section of the text entitled *A Brief History of the Lineage of the Tsangpa*

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<sup>24</sup> Thub bstan phun tshogs 2006: 352.

<sup>25</sup> Bsod nams tshe ring 2004: 164.

<sup>26</sup> See Ehrhard 2015: 114 fn. 2.

<sup>27</sup> For brief discussions of the contents and relevance of the *Tsang Law Code*, see Templeman 2016b: p. 34 ft. 11, French 1995: 43-44, 2014: 312-313, and Dreyfus 1995: 135. For a discussion of the preamble to the Law code (*History of Tsangpa Kings*), see Ehrhard 2015: 105, and Templeman 2016b: 36. Schaeffer 2013: 359, has translated the portion of the *History of Tsangpa Kings* describing the Samdruptsé palace. The *Tsang Law Code* has been fully transcribed by Thub bstan phun tshogs 2006, Bsod nams tshe ring 2004, and Cuppers 2015. My translations below of parts of the law code are based on Thub bstan phun tshogs' transcription of the Tibetan text and therefore cite his pagination.

*Kings* (*gtsang pa'i rgyal po gdung rabs mdor bsdus* - henceforth *History of Tsangpa Kings*), is of particular relevance to this project since it offers a rare insight into how the Tsangpa hegemony understood and represented itself.

As its title suggests, the *History of Tsangpa Kings* is primarily concerned with establishing the genealogy of the Tsangpa rulers. According to the text, the progenitor of the Tsangpa kings is identified as Nyak (Gnyags) Jñānakumāra, one of the celebrated twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava active at the court of Tri Songdetsen (*rje 'bangs nyer lnga*). Such an ancestral blood line, traced to the period of the Yarlung dynasty, is certainly no accident and reflects the sustained authority placed in Tibet's ancient clan structure despite the general decline of the old aristocratic lines during this period of Tibetan history. Thubten Phuntsok comments that by claiming such a blood line, the ascendancy of Shingshakpa Tseten Dorjé could be directly linked to the Yarlung dynasty and the rule of the Tsangpa kings could be framed within the glories associated to Tibet's early kings.<sup>28</sup> As we saw above, however, Shingshakpa Tseten Dorjé was generally believed to be of humble origins, starting out as a mere groom for the lords of Rinpung.<sup>29</sup> This discrepancy would appear to have led at least one individual to question the legitimacy the *History of Tsangpa Kings'* genealogy. The person in question

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<sup>28</sup> Thub bstan phun tshogs 2006: 353.

<sup>29</sup> In his *bod kyi lo rgyus spyi don kun gsel nor bu'i me long*, the modern Tibetan historian Rin chen Nor bu explains the etymology behind the name Shingshakpa as referring to the fact that Tseten Dorjé originally owned only one field (*zhing*) and one dwelling (*shag*). See Rin chen Nor bu 2006: 340.

is the Third Yölmo Tulku Tenzin Norbu (1589-1644), who, in his memoir studied and translated by Benjamin Bogin, scorns at Karma Tenkyong Wangpo's perceived arrogance towards religious prelates. The passage in question from Yölmowa's memoir relates how upon hearing that the Tsangpa king is camped nearby, Yölmowa ponders whether he should meet the young ruler. He writes,

“These people have crossed into excessive arrogance regarding their family lineage. They are renowned for quarreling with the Red-hat and Black-hat emanations about [the height of their] seats. [Sde srid Bstan skyong dbang po expects all] to perform prostrations to him and raise up piles of tea [as offerings]. He even [acts] like this to our lama! He rejoices in [the lama's] great qualities such as the power of his blessings and magical abilities; yet, he was unable to humble himself in the matter of the [height of the] seat and so forth... U rgyan Rin po che did not bow to the king. Afraid to diminish the king's merit and in order to increase the teachings of the secret mantra, he did not do it... In general, I'm not pleased with people who act in this way. In particular, while being venerated as the chief lama of the Gung thang chos rgyal, I never had any problems with [the hierarchical arrangement of] seats... Then, I thought about what I should do. I said, "Although I don't want to meet him, I'll just go and see him for a moment." Then, I went.”<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin Bogin has interpreted this passage to be directly related to the genealogical claims of the Tsangpa kings, as articulated in the *History of Tsangpa Kings*. According to him, given the importance of family status in the milieu of seventeenth century Tibet, the principal criticism of Yölmowa is that Karma Tenkyong Wangpo behaved “in a manner unwarranted by his family's status in Tibet's elaborate social

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<sup>30</sup> Bogin 2005: 68.

hierarchy.” Bogin continues by arguing that despite the king’s own attempt to glorify his lineage by tracing it back to Nyak Kumāra, “many considered the Tsang kings to be unrightful usurpers of power begrudgingly accepted because of their economic and military might.”<sup>31</sup> Referencing Bogin’s interpretation, Templeman has also called into question the validity of the genealogical claims of the Tsangpa kings, seeing them rather as expedient means to bolster their legitimacy and recreate a palpable sense of having revived the values of Tibet’s imperial past, of which “they regarded themselves as being among the prime exemplars both in their dubious bloodline and in their broader aims.”<sup>32</sup> While it is certainly the case that the genealogical claims of the Tsang kings worked in the favor of creating a linkage to the authority of Tibet’s imperial past, a theme that will be further explored below, it must be pointed out that the claim made by Bogin and taken up by Templeman that there existed some form of general or even popular resistance to the Tsangpa hegemony based on its apparent lack of aristocratic origins is unsubstantiated. Until other contemporaneous sources making such a claim surface, it would appear to me to be unsound to make such a generalization based on only one account, especially one as subjective and idiosyncratic as the Yölmo Tulku’s. Be that as it may, the level of attention that the *History of Tsangpa Kings* gives to the person of Nyak Jñānakumāra and the human progeny of the Tsangpa rulers is in fact

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<sup>31</sup> Bogin 2005: 70.

<sup>32</sup> See Templeman 2015: 489.

surprisingly inconsiderable. Far more consequential is the overall religious frame in which the Tsangpa kings and their activities are painted.

The opening verses of the *History of Tsangpa Kings* are illustrative of the sustained interest of the text in framing the rulers of Tsang along Buddhist lines and are in many ways evocative of the theocratic projects that were to follow:

“Homage to the Kingdom whose *dharmarājas*  
have subdued the four extremes  
and brought glorious welfare to this world  
through the thousand-spoked golden wheel of royal law,  
and whose fame resounds like the rolling thunder of dragons.  
Ema!  
Sons of the emperors of the past,  
a basis for all good and marvelous qualities,  
who for countless eons have accumulated wisdom and merit;  
Towards laypeople they are like a treasure chest,  
Towards obstinate enemies they are like the Lord of Death,  
Towards protecting religion and state they are like Mañjuśri,  
Towards their subjects they are like a wish-fulfilling jewel.  
Thus are lauded the Kings of Upper Tsang!”<sup>33</sup>

While it is not immediately clear whether the above verses refer to the Tsangpa kings in general or Karma Tenkyong Wangpo in particular (my translation of the verses

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<sup>33</sup> “gang zhig ‘jig rten khams ‘dir phan bde’i dpal/ rgyal khirms gser gyi ‘khor lo rtsibs stong gi/ mtha’ bzhi nam gnon chos kyi rgyal po sde/ snyan pa ‘brug ltar che ba de la ‘dud/ e ma sa dbang rgyal po’i sras/ phun thsogs dge legs kun gyi gzhi/ grangs med bskal par tshogs gnyis bsrun/ mgo nag mi la sgam bu phyas/ gnya’ renga dgra la gzhi rje ‘dra/ chos srid skyong la ‘jam dpal dbyangs/ mnga’ ‘bangs rnam la yid bzhin nor/ mtshan mos gtsang stod rgyal po yin/”

See Thub bstan phun tshogs 2006: 353.

reflect the former), the multiple references to Buddhist understandings of kingship are evident. Here, the Tsangpa kings are not simply characterized as ruling in accordance with Buddhist precepts but directly put in apposition with a Buddhist pantheon. The prose of the *History of Tsangpa Kings* continues along those lines, identifying the rule of the Tsangpa kings as a projection of the love and compassion of Tibet's early Dharma kings, incarnating in this world at a time of strife for the benefit and happiness of sentient beings in Tibet.<sup>34</sup> Each of the Tsangpa rulers, in turn, are identified as the emanation of important religious figures, with their activities framed as the product of Buddhist altruism. Karma Phuntsok Namgyal is thus identified as an emanation of the Indian adept Padmasambhava and Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, the last of the Tsangpa kings, is introduced as an emanation of the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi. Heavily relying on the prophecies of important religious figures of the era, including the Jonang hierarch Tāranātha (1575-1634), the Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé (1507-1554), and the Tertön Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), the rule of the Tsangpa kings is largely presented as a preordained fact geared towards the redress of a degenerate age through the creation of a Buddhist realm to benefit to sentient beings.

Although the *History of Tsangpa Kings* conceives the whole of the Tsangpa hegemony within a Buddhist millenarian lens, the work nonetheless appears to gradually build up the religious calibre of the Tsangpa rulers so that the reign of Karma

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<sup>34</sup> Thub bstan phun tshogs 2006: 353.



Tenkyong Wangpo is presented as the culmination of their ubiquity with Buddhist patronage and even divinity. Through the use of a quotation from the *Abridged Kadam Legbam* (*Bka' gdams glegs bam chung ba*), for example, the last of the Tsangpa kings is implicitly equated to no less than a Buddha voluntarily choosing to incarnate as a king for the benefit of sentient beings.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the narrative of Karma Tenkyong Wangpo's rule, the last of the Tsangpa kings is presented as a paragon of Buddhist kingship, a Wheel-turning king ruling over the whole of the Jambhudvīpa continent whose sole purpose is the protection of the Buddhist dharma and the benefit of sentient beings. Everyone of his actions as a ruler, including his military campaigns, are thus framed within his role as *Protector of the Dharma* (*chos skyong* or *chos kyi mgon po*). The portrait that emerges is thus one of a sovereign whose sole *raison d'être* was the support and protection of Buddhist dharma. We are told that he worshipped and made offerings to all Buddhist institutions irrespective of their sectarian affiliation, regularly invited monks of all sects to the Samdruptsé palace to conduct mass ritual celebrations, built or restored monasteries and temples across Tsang, restored and safe-guarded many of the important pilgrimage routes in the region including to the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, instituted laws based on Buddhist principles making sure that they were applicable to all, instituted a ban on hunting during religious months, and annually redistributed

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<sup>35</sup> See Thub bstan phun tshogs 2006: 355, and Ehrhard 2015: 110.

taxes to those regions in need.<sup>36</sup>

Besides brief references to the *Tsang Law Code* made by a handful of scholars, Templeman and Ehrhard appear to be the only western historians to have commented on the *History of Tsangpa Kings* specifically. In writing about the religious dimension and tone of the work, Templeman has taken a rather cynical line of analysis. He writes,

“Here we will note that the theme of political expediency has become garbed in a mantle of religious justification through reference to such omens. This window-dressing process of introducing a noetic dimension into what was basically a purely political realm is in itself a common enough theme in many cultures. In it we are able to note how religious sentiments become simply another means towards the legitimation of rule. *The Ruby Key* tells us, for example, that the rulers of Tsang were said to have been mystically predicted. This ploy appears to add a certain foreordained *cachet*, a historico-spiritual inevitability, to their rule. Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, for example, is said to have been predicted as being an earthly form of the Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, as seen in a vision by the eminent Pema Lingpa (Pad ma gling pa) himself...”<sup>37</sup>

This statement is problematic for a number of reasons and echoes, albeit in 2016, the vestiges of an older scholarship at ease with the view that religious elements of the sort function as regrettable and conceited instruments of political rule. As I have argued in chapter one, such an instrumental approach, where religion is relegated to being a mere instrument of politics, serves little purpose to illuminate the complexities of Tibetan conceptions of kingship and rule. Rather, and as I will explore at length in the

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<sup>36</sup> See Thub bstan phun tshogs 2006: 355-357.

<sup>37</sup> Templeman 2016b: 36.

context of Tsang Khenchen's biography of Ngawang Namgyal, such references to prophecies and other Buddhist hermeneutical tools were essential elements lying at the very heart of the political realm. While it is certainly the case that the multiple claims of celestial origins and references to Buddhist prophecy served to bolster the legitimacy and power of the Tsangpa hegemony as a political institution, they are also equally representative of the particular intellectual and political milieu in which the Tsangpa hegemony operated. The fact that the Tsangpa rulers chose to be portrayed as semi-divine Buddhist kings on a millenarian mission reflects their sustained interaction with, participation in and commitment to the shifting conceptions of political authority and governance taking place in the Tibetan region during their rule. Relegating such a dimension of the *History of Tsangpa Kings* to the convenient realm of political machinations would be to miss out much of the remarkable social and political shifts that characterize this period of Tibetan history.

The vision of kingship advocated by the *History of Tsangpa Kings* thus represents a marked departure from the previous models explored in chapters above. First and foremost, the text's emphasis on the characterization of the kings of Tsang as semi-divine figures on an altruistic and millenarian mission within a distinctly Buddhist cosmography stands in sharp contrast to the kind of skepticism and pragmatism displayed in the *Testament* of Jangchub Gyaltzen. Second, the kings of Tsang are unambiguously presented as the natural heirs of the great emperors of the past and as

such, are placed in a genealogy of universal monarchs ruling over Tibet as a whole. In contrast to the more regional and localized focus of the Phakmodrupa model, the *History of Tsangpa Kings* rather inscribes the reigns of the kings of Tsang within the larger narrative of Tibet as a unified and single entity. Finally, it would appear that the *History of Tsangpa Kings* sees Buddhist patronage as the very *modus operandi* and arbiter of successful kingship, wherein the sole *raison d'être* and authority of rulership is based on the support and protection of Buddhism.

#### Takten Phuntsok Ling and Jonangpa Sources

Two recent publications by Andrew Quintman and Kurtis Schaeffer on the monastic institution of Takten Phuntsok Ling, the seat of the famous Jonang hierarch Tāranātha, have significantly advanced our understanding of the Tsangpa hegemony's involvement in Buddhist patronage.<sup>38</sup> Demonstrating the promise of art-historical methods paired with textual study, Quintman and Schaeffer have traced the large degree of prestige and influence that Takten Phuntsok Ling commanded over the landscape of seventeenth century Tibet as well as the networks of power and patronage that allowed it to do so. Central to Takten Phuntsok Ling's institutional identity, they

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<sup>38</sup> The two articles in question, entitled "The Life of the Buddha at Rtag brtan phun tshogs gling Monastery in Text, Image, and Institution: A Preliminary Overview," co-authored by Quintman and Schaeffer, and "Putting the Buddha to Work: Śākyamuni in the Service of Tibetan Monastic Identity" by Quintman, both make extensive reference to the earlier work of Templeman in his dissertation on Tāranātha and Champa Thubten Zongtse on the institutional history of Takten Phuntsok Ling.

argue, was what they term a “Buddha program” instituted by Tāranātha and sponsored by the Tsangpa rulers Karma Phuntsok Namgyal and his son Karma Tenkyong Wangpo. Quintman and Schaeffer explain the term “Buddha program” to refer to a distinctive vision of the role and place of Śākyamuni whereby the historical Buddha functioned as an organizing principle for a total cultural program consisting of a large body of Tāranātha’s writings and religious artwork, as well as attendant practices.

Focusing on Tāranātha’s literary works on the Buddha, the mural in Takten Phuntsok Ling of the Buddha’s life associated to that literature, and finally the significance and history of the monastery’s central Buddha statue known as “Jowo Choklé Namgyal” (“All-Victorious Lord”), Quintman and Schaeffer draw a number of conclusions with regard to the institutional identity of the Jonang monastic complex. To begin with, Tāranātha’s sustained interest and emphasis on the Buddha Śākyamuni across multiple media had the intentional effect of placing himself and his institution in the orbit of India as a source of prestige and authority. As Templeman has discussed at length in his doctoral dissertation, Tāranātha was deeply preoccupied with Indian Buddhism and to a large degree self-consciously molded his institutional persona to reflect a sense of claimed Indian-ness. Such an identity served to bolster the legitimacy and authority of his Jonang sect as the holder of the “very last of the ‘authentic’ Indian

Buddhist lineages in India.”<sup>39</sup> As Quintman writes, “For Tāranātha, India was an object of personal fascination, a subject of study, and a source of inspiration central to his identity as a Buddhist virtuoso.”<sup>40</sup>

In the competitive environment for religious patronage that characterizes much of seventeenth century Tibet, the emphasis that the Jonang center of Takten Phuntsok Ling placed on India and the Buddha Śākyamuni significantly contributed to its institutional longevity and even flourishing. Considering the abundance of material support that Tāranātha and his sect received from the Tsangpa rulers, especially Karma Phuntsok Namgyal, who provided the funds for building the monastery in 1615, and later his son Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, it is evident that the latter were conspicuous in their valorization of and participation in Tāranātha’s vision of India as a source of authenticity and prestige. Such a fact is further revelatory of the vision that the Tsangpa rulers had for themselves. Through their lavish support of Tāranātha and Takten Phunsthok Ling, they were themselves self-consciously molding their institutional persona to reflect the early patronage of Indian Buddhism by the Yarlung dynasty. The fact that Takten Phuntsok Ling became known as a destination for Indian Buddhist masters, including Tāranātha’s teacher Buddhaguptanātha, must have acted as a powerful symbol in this regard by further inscribing the Tsangpa hegemony in a lineage

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<sup>39</sup> According to Templeman, Tāranātha considered himself to be an Indian, somehow caught in the ‘wrong’ body. See Templeman 2009: 285.

<sup>40</sup> Quintman 2017: 113.

of patronage stretching all the way to Tibet's early emperors.

An especially telling example of the Tsangpa hegemony's impersonation of the activities of the Yarlung dynasty is Quintman's study of the place and history of Takten Phuntsok Ling's central object of worship, the Buddha statue known as Jowo Choklé Namgyal. Residing in the innermost sanctum of Takten Phuntsok Ling, the Jowo statue was believed to have miraculous origins and constituted the monastery's principal and most sacred relic. As its name entails, the statue belongs to a specific class of representations of Śākyamuni depicting the historical Buddha in his *saṃbhogakāya* form, adorned with elaborate robes, jewelry and other forms of ornamentation. As Quintman points out, Jowo statues implied a direct connection to Songtsen Gampo and his court during the formative period of the Tibetan empire, when the most famous of Tibet's Jowo statues, the Jowo Śākyamuni and Jowo Mikyö Dorjé, were enshrined in the sanctum sanctorum of Lhasa's Jokhang and Ramoché temples respectively. Tracing the history and significance of Lhasa's Jowo statues stretch far beyond the scope of this study and it will suffice to mention here that through its identification as a Jowo statue, the Jowo Choklé Namgyal of Takten Phuntsok Ling was directly inserted and made to participate within the exceptional space that Lhasa's Jowo statues commanded over the Tibetan religious and cultural world. Such a point is made clear in Tāranātha's own *Descriptive Guide to Phuntsok Ling* (*dga' ldan phun tshogs gling gi gnas bshad*), where the history of the statue is recounted. We are told that the statue was miraculously

fashioned in India some hundred years after the Buddha's death by divine craftsmen, eventually made its way to the Tibetan court of Songtsen Gampo where it served as the ruler's personal meditation image, was then moved to Samyé monastery by Tri Songdetsen, and after having been lost due to a flood, it later reappeared unharmed and kept at Neudong, the capital of the Phakmodrupa regime. Finally, the statue was offered to Tāranātha in 1621 by Karma Tenkyong Wangpo and installed during the same year as the central icon in Takten Phuntsok Ling's inner sanctum.<sup>41</sup> The parallels made here between the Jowo Choklé Namgyal and Lhasa's Jowo statues are evident.<sup>42</sup> Through his offering of the Jowo Choklé Namgyal to Tāranātha, an icon believed to have served as the personal meditation support of the great Songtsen Gampo, Karma Tenkyong Wangpo was very consciously emulating the activities of Tibet's early emperors and participating in their institutional legacy.

In addition to the evocation of Tibet's imperial past, the installment of the Jowo statue at Takten Phuntsok Ling also had important ramifications for the very tangible political realities of the period. The statue would have elevated the status of the Jonang monastery, situated in Tsang, in a probable attempt to diffuse the religious centrality of Lhasa, under strong Gelukpa influence and where the other Jowos resided. As Quintman writes, "at a time of increasing tensions between western and central Tibet,

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<sup>41</sup> See Quintman 2017: 129-130.

<sup>42</sup> For list of parallels between the Jowo Choklé Namgyal and Lhasa's two Jowo statues according to Tāranātha, see Quintman 2017: 136.



the Buddha of Phun tshogs gling, and thus the monastery itself, could literally stand face to face with the most important religious institutions of central Tibet.”<sup>43</sup>

The Jonangpa sources dealing with the institutional legacy of Takten Phuntsok Ling have important consequences for our understanding of the Tsangpa hegemony. First, the material extent of Takten Phuntsok Ling as a monastic complex is illustrative of the Tsangpa hegemony’s substantial patronage of Buddhist institutions, especially the Jonang sect. Second, through their sponsorship of Tāranātha and his monastic institution, the Tsangpa rulers may have consciously sought to compete with the growing patronage that Gelukpa institutions were receiving from abroad, seeking to undermine the centrality of Lhasa and the U region by further elevating Tsang as a locus of religious activity. But third and foremost, their lavish support of Tāranātha indicates their concern with and participation in his particular brand and vision of Buddhism in Tibet. Such a vision entailed the re-centering of India as the ultimate source of authenticity and prestige, as well as the rehearsal of patronage relations reminiscent of Tibet’s imperial past. This final point is important; by linking themselves to the imagined glories of the Tibetan empire, especially with regard to the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, the Tsangpa rulers effectively envisioned themselves as the natural heirs of Tibet’s early emperors and in that respect the custodians of Tibetan culture and religion.

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<sup>43</sup> Quintman 2017: 136.

## Nyingmapa sources

Another important set of sources that speak of the Tsangpa hegemony's understanding of the nature of the Tibetan polity and its place within it are the accounts of various ritual officiants at the Tsangpa court. Primarily issuing from the hands of Nyingmapa hierarchs, such accounts reveal the extensive preoccupation of the Tsangpa court with the patronage of rituals associated to the state and its well-being. Principal among them were rituals aimed at 'repelling' (*zlog pa*) evil or destructive forces. In his study of the life of one of Tibet's most well-known ritual experts active at the Tsangpa court, the Nyingmapa practitioner Sodokpa Lodrö Gyaltzen (1552-1624), James Gentry has shown how the concern for safeguarding the health and integrity of the corporate entities of human body, household, and community from the threats posed by contact with the capricious spirit world has constituted a major concern of Tibetan Buddhist ritual specialists across Tibetan history. Stemming from such a concern, Gentry informs us, ritual specialists "developed a host of ritual treatments to subjugate these threatening presences, exorcise them from the precincts of body, home, or territory, and restore internal health and cohesion."<sup>44</sup> *Dokpa* (*zlog pa*) or 'repelling' rituals quickly developed as one of the most important and popular means of achieving those ends, and Sodokpa, as his name entails ("Repeller of Mongols"), was famed for his mastery of

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<sup>44</sup> Gentry 2010: 131.

such practices. As I will explore at length in the following chapters, Ngawang Namgyal was also to become of the most well-known and notorious of such ritual specialists during the seventeenth century, often referenced in sources of the period with the title of “Great Magician/Sorcerer” (*mthu chen*).

Templeman has shown the extent to which the Tsangpa hegemony was consumed by an anti-Mongol sentiment since the very moment of its inception through the person of Shingshakpa Tseten Dorjé. He writes, “Zhing Shakpa’s ultimate objective (...) was to protect Tibet from the “foreign” intervention of the Mongols. It was this primary aim that Zhing Shakpa inculcated in his progeny, all of whom were to follow his vision of a united, Mongol-free, prosperous, and well-governed Tsang.”<sup>45</sup> Better-equipped militarily and often outnumbering Tsangpa troops, the various Mongol forays and interferences in Tibet posed a constant threat to the stability of the Tsangpa hegemony. As a supplement to more conventional means of national defense, the Tsangpa kings thus sought the help of ritual specialists whose expertise lied in the performance of Mongol-repelling rituals. Although the practice of Mongol-repelling rituals appears to have been widespread among the clergy associated to the Tsangpa kings - Tsang Khenchen, for example, was requested to perform such rituals on a number of occasions<sup>46</sup> - the two specialists that stand out are Sodokpa and the Third

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<sup>45</sup> Templeman 2016b: 33.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, *TKAB* vol.1, ff. 191.a.

Yölmo Tulku, the legacies of which were built on the performance of such rituals. Fortunately, both individuals left behind accounts of their activities, which shed much light on the nature and function of these rituals in the context of the Tsangpa hegemony. Of particular relevance here is Sodokpa's *History of How Mongols Were Turned Back* (*Sog zlog bgyis tshul gyi lo rgyus*), a detailed account of the Nyingmapa practitioner's performance of Mongol-repelling rituals, studied and translated by James Gentry.

Sodokpa's *History* is instructive to our study of the Tsangpa hegemony for a number of reasons, the first of which being the insights that it provides as to how these rituals were performed and rationalized by their officiants and patrons. According to Sodokpa and others, such as Tsang Khenchen, the Mongol-repelling rituals were primarily justified as a means of protecting the Buddhist doctrine (*btsan srung*). In more concrete terms, and as Gentry has argued, this meant preserving the geopolitical integrity of Tibet so that Buddhist institutions could thrive there unabated.<sup>47</sup> In this context, the foreign Mongol armies that would regularly encroach on Tibetan territories were largely understood by the Tsangpa hegemony as direct threats to its capacity to protect and sustain Buddhist institutions. The ubiquity of the performance of such rituals in Tsang further confirms that Mongol encroachment was interpreted by many individuals and institutions, religious or otherwise, to be a direct threat to the Buddhist doctrine in Tibet. Tsang Khenchen's autobiography is illustrative of this inclination,

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<sup>47</sup> Gentry 2010: 132.

evoking the danger that Mongol troops posed to Buddhism at large and justifying his performance of destructive rituals as a means to protect the dharma, Buddhist institutions and sentient beings more generally.<sup>48</sup> Needless to say, the Gelukpa institutions of Lhasa saw things differently, and the fervent support that they received from Mongol chieftains meant that their view of the Mongol presence in Tibet was on the opposite end of the spectrum.

Sodokpa's *History* is also illustrative of the function that these Mongol-repelling rituals played internally at the Tsangpa court. While the stated aim of the rituals was clearly the use of powerful magical manipulations of the cosmos in order to repel advancing foreign armies, the rituals themselves played other equally powerful functions with regard to the construction and rehearsal of a what Gentry calls a "corporate identity." As he puts it, "In addition to such conservative, protective functions, the ritualized expulsion of armies entailed the clear demarcation of territorial boundaries, and consequently can also be understood as a factor that contributed to the formation of a strong sense of communal corporate identity."<sup>49</sup> In his discussion of the efficacy of his ritual actions, Sodokpa not only points to his successes in actively hindering or repelling Mongol armies but also recounts instances in which his rituals provided the necessary circumstances for his patrons, the Tsangpa kings, to be

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<sup>48</sup> *TKAB* vol. 1, ff.191.a.

<sup>49</sup> Gentry 2010: 132.

successful in their campaigns. In other words, the efficacy of the state-sponsored rituals of Sodokpa and others was not always adjudicated by the physical damage it did to Mongol troops; it was also confirmed by the positive results it had on the workings of the state, whether these be social, economic or political. In his *History*, Sodokpa effectively attributes the political unification of Tsang under the Tsangpa kings and their gradual consolidation of Tibet as direct results of his rites. But more importantly, the public nature of Mongol-repelling rituals had the powerful effect of rallying disparate elements of the Tsangpa polity into a single unified vision of the state. The regular and extensive performance of repelling rituals at the Tsangpa court called into participation a wide-range of individuals who, in their numbers, confirmed and affirmed the Tsangpa hegemony's vision of a distinct Tibetan state free of Mongol or foreign interference. In that respect, as Gentry has claimed more generally, the Mongol-repelling rites regularly performed at the Tsangpa court performed a vital symbolic function in the construction and reaffirmation of the Tsangpa hegemony as a state formation.<sup>50</sup>

Tsang Khenchen's account

Finally, another important source for the period of the Tsangpa hegemony is Tsang Khenchen's autobiography itself. As one of the primary teachers of Tsang's last king Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, Tsang Khenchen's account of his activities at the

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<sup>50</sup> Gentry 2010: 132.

Tsangpa court are invaluable to our understanding of the Tsangpa hegemony's conception of itself. As I shall explore below, the picture of the Tsangpa hegemony that emerges from Tsang Khenchen's account not only confirms many of the points made above but also substantially adds to our knowledge of the activities of the last of the Tsangpa kings, especially with regard to his patronage of Buddhist institutions.

In sharp contrast to the testimony of the Third Yölmo Tulku, the portrait of Karma Tenkyong Wangpo that emerges from Tsang Khenchen's writing is one of a deeply devout and considerate individual. During his audiences with the king of Tsang, Tsang Khenchen describes in great detail the courtesy he is accorded, including the ruler lowering his throne so that he is seated at the same height as his guest and offering him many customary gifts.<sup>51</sup> On multiple occasions in the autobiography, Tsang Khenchen addresses the ruler as a Bodhisattva king (*byang chub sems dpa'i rgyal po*) and explicitly relates the latter's activities to the revival of the institutions of the Yarlung dynasty. An important example of this is the detailed account provided by Tsang Khenchen of the monastic complex of Chökhör Dechen (*chos skor bde chen*) built by the king at the Tsang capital in 1637 and destroyed by Gushri Khan's troops just five years later in 1642. As we saw above, Tsang Khenchen was recruited to become the abbot of the monastic center and led the community there until the Mongol takeover of the region. It

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, *TKAB* vol. 1 fols. 145.b-146.b, fol. 177.a., and fol. 201.b. In folio 177.a, the king escorts Tsang Khenchen to his *zimchung*, takes off his hat, speaks in honorific tone, lowers his throne and offers him gifts.

would appear that Tsang Khenchen's account, together with another by the Sakyapa hierarch Ngawang Kunga Lodrö (1729-1783) in his *Lineage History of the Sakya Sect (Sa skya'i gdung rabs dpal 'byor lhun grub - henceforth Sakya Lineage History)*,<sup>52</sup> may very well be the only extant testimonies outside the gambit of Gelukpa accounts of the remarkable scope and function of this religious center.<sup>53</sup>

Tsang Khenchen first mentions the monastic center when he was summoned to the Samdruptsé palace by Karma Tenkyong Wangpo in 1636, when he was acting as the abbot of the Pökhang Chödé monastery in the Upper Nyang valley. During his audience with the king, Tsang Khenchen was informed about the ruler's project of building a great monastic complex at the capital that would mirror the activities of the bodhisattva

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<sup>52</sup> I am thankful for an article by the modern Tibetan historian Go shul grags pa 'byung gnas published in 2000 in the journal *Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig* on the founding of Chökhör Dechen drawing from Ngawang Kunga Lodrö's *Sa skya'i gdung rabs dpal 'byor lhun grub* and its description of the activities of the Tsedong Shabdrung Kunga Sonam Lhundrup (1571-1642). According to the *Sa skya'i gdung rabs*, Kunga Sonam Lhundrup acted as one of the primary teachers (*dbu bla*) of the Tsangpa kings Karma Phuntsok Namgyal and Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, and was instrumental in the founding of the monastery of Chökhör Dechen. See Kun dga' blo gros 1991: 48-113.

<sup>53</sup> Gelukpa sources generally refer to Chökhör Dechen by the name of "Tashi Silnön" or "Suppressor of Tashi," in reference to its perceived threat to the Gelukpa center of Tashilhunpo. The Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography mentions that construction of the monastery took place in 1638, and when laborers looked for stones on the mountain behind Tashilhunpo, some rocks fell, rolled down, and damaged some of the buildings of the great Gelukpa monastery. According to him, it is upon hearing of these events and interpreting them to be a direct aggression against the Gelukpa that Güshri Khan made his decision to invade Tsang. See Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2008: 147. This narrative has been reproduced with minor variations in many subsequent Gelukpa narratives, usually pitting the monastery as a Karma Kagyüpa institution bent on the destruction of Tashilhunpo. Sumpa Khenpo's history of Buddhism, the *Auspicious Wish-fulfilling Tree (dpag bsam ljon bzang)*, for example, states that upon hearing that the Tsang kings had founded a Karmapa monastery on the slopes above Tashilhunpo and build at its back a high tower on which were written the words "Tashi Zilnon," Güshri Khan became so enraged that he made the decision then to execute Karma Tenkyong Wangpo by having "him put in a leather sack (and thrown into the river)." See Tucci 1999 vol. 2: 655.



kings of the Tibetan empire and then recruited to be its acting abbot.<sup>54</sup> It would take another year for the construction of the monastic center to be complete and Tsang Khenchen to assume his abbatial duties. Meanwhile, Ngawang Kunga Lodrö's *Sakya Lineage History* tells us that the Tsedong Shabdrung Kunga Sonam Lhundrup (1571-1642), along with other prominent religious figures, conducted the ground breaking ceremonies for the monastery that same year.<sup>55</sup>

According to both Tsang Khenchen's autobiography and the *Sakya Lineage History*, the monastic complex of Chökhör Dechen was situated somewhere between the Samdruptsé palace and Tashilhunpo. The first glaring observation that can be made about the center is its sheer scope and size. Far from the image depicted in Gelukpa sources of a somewhat modest building with a central tower on the slopes above Tashilhunpo, we are told by Tsang Khenchen and Ngawang Kunga Lodrö that the complex included nineteen different temples, five monastic colleges and numerous residential quarters housing as many as two-thousand monks, with the whole compound encircled by a fence.<sup>56</sup> In his physical description of the center, Tsang Khenchen likens it to Odantapurī, making an implicit reference to Samyé monastery,

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<sup>54</sup> See *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 201.b "sngon gyi chos rgyal byang chub sems dpa' rnam kyī mdzad pa la ched du brjod cing gus par rjes su 'jug pa'i dgongs gtad kyis chos sde gtsug lag khang chen po zhig bzheng rgyu yin pas de'i mkhan po byed dgos pa'i rgyu mtshan rgyas par gsungs te/" The *Sa skya gdung rabs* of Ngawang Kunga Lodrö confirms that the abbot of Chökhör Dechen was the *Jo gdan rin po che*, which in this case was Tsang Khenchen. See Kun dga' blo gros 1991: 97.

<sup>55</sup> Go shul grags pa 'byung gnas 2000: 52.

<sup>56</sup> For a physical description of the center, see *TKAB* vol.1 folios 218.b to 220.a.

Tibet's first monastic center built by Tri Songdetsen and modeled on the design of the Indian monastery of Odantapurī in modern-day Bihar. Although the *Sakya Lineage History* provides a long list of the major supports in all nineteen temples, it will suffice to mention here that, perhaps in a conscious effort to parallel the iconographic program of Takten Phuntsok Ling, the central object of worship of Chökhör Dechen was a statue of the Buddha Śākyamuni.<sup>57</sup>

Even more important than the scope of this institution, however, is the function that it played. The five monastic colleges of Chökhör Dechen were represented by monks belonging to the five dominant sects of Tibetan Buddhism prevalent at the time, the Sakya, Jonang, Kagyü, Nyingma and Kadam/Geluk. We are told in both accounts that the intention of the project was to provide an institutional center for all sects of Tibetan Buddhism to exchange ideas and teachings in an ecumenical manner (*grub mtha' ris med*).<sup>58</sup> Tsang Khenchen was well-suited to lead this effort, himself embodying the kind of dialogue and collaboration between the different sects of Tibetan Buddhism that the center stood for. As we have seen above, even though he was ordained and trained in the Sakya tradition, Tsang Khenchen maintained strong ties to lineages within the Kadam, Jonang, Nyingma and Kagyü sects. We are thus told in Tsang Khenchen's

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<sup>57</sup> For a list of the major supports in all nineteen temples of Chökhör Dechen, see Go shul grags pa 'byung gnas 2000: 54-57 and Kun dga' blo gros 1991: 102-104.

<sup>58</sup> Both Tsang Khenchen and Ngawang Kunga Lodrö mention that the practice of inviting monks from various sects to exchange teachings in an ecumenical manner began much earlier during Karma Tenkyong Wangpo's reign at the Samdruptsé Palace. *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 135.b describes one such event.

autobiography that during the spring and summer months leading up to the yearly *Yarné* (*dbyar gnas*) retreat, monks and *khenpos* from all the important scholastic centers of the region were invited to exchange teachings on the *tripiṭaka*, and during winter months students and teachers from regional tantric centers were invited to exchange initiations and instructions according to both old and new tantras.<sup>59</sup> During the interval periods between these two sessions, monks from various institutions regardless of sectarian affiliation would be invited to take up residence and officiate the ritual program of the center. Although this is not explicitly invoked by Tsang Khenchen, it would appear that some of the ritual events organized at the center, including a yearly recitation of the *Kangyur* (*bka' 'gyur*) by thousands of monks, were influenced by and probably in competition with the growing influence of some of the Gelukpa sect's yearly public rituals in Lhasa.

In addition to strictly Buddhist subjects, Chökhör Dechen also functioned as a center for the study of what would be understood as more secular fields today. When first introducing the center, Tsang Khenchen tells us that it functioned as a site for the study of Tibetan culture broadly speaking, including vestimentary customs (*cha byad*), language (*skad*), geography (*gnas*), clan histories (*rigs dang rus bya ba*), and economy

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<sup>59</sup> Tsang Khenchen mentions that some of the scholastic centers for the study of the *tripiṭaka* included: Serdokchen (*mnyan yod chen po gser mdog can*), Tanak Thubten Namgyal (*rta nag thub bstan rnam par rgyal ba*), Chökhör Lhunpo (*chos 'khor lhun po*), Nyenyö Jagöshong (*mnyan yod bya rgod shongs*), Dreyul Kyetsel (*'bras yul skyes mos tshal*), and Tashilhunpo (*bkra shis lhun po*). Regarding the tantric centers, in addition to inviting practitioners from numerous retreat centers across the region, Tsang Khenchen mentions the institutions of Ngor, Shalu and Takten Phuntsok Ling. *TKAB* vol.1 fol. 220.a-b.

(*longs spyod*).<sup>60</sup> The Fifth Dalai Lama's only mention of Chökhör Dechen in his autobiography adds to this list the study of medicine, Sanskrit and poetry.<sup>61</sup> Finally, Tsang Khenchen also tells us that in addition to being a center of learning, Chökhör Dechen acted as an important source of sponsorship for monks in the region. The Tsangpa king would systematically make offerings of provisions, bedding, robes, and medicine to the monks in residence, especially in preparation of the *Yarné* retreat.

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance that such a center would have played for the Tsangpa hegemony. Both Tsang Khenchen's account and the *Sakya Lineage History* stress that this was a personal project of Karma Tenkyong Wangpo and that Chökhör Dechen's abbot, Tsang Khenchen, answered directly to the king in all matters related to the running of the monastic center. The sheer amount of resources necessary for the building and running of such an institution, while at the same time dealing with a number of military incursions against Mongol encroachment in U, reveals the level of importance that the Tsangpa hegemony must have placed on it. The modern Tibetan historian Goshul Drakpa Jungné (Go shul grags pa 'byung gnas) has pointed to the political expediency of such a project for Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, allowing him to win the recognition and support of Tibet's various religious hierarchs

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<sup>60</sup> "der ri kha ba can gyi ljongs chen por cha byad dang / skad dang gnas dang / rigs dang rus bya ba dang longs spyod dang / cho ga dang grub pa'i mtha' sna tshogs pa tshul khirms can du ma'i gnas ..." *TKAB* vol.1 fol. 220.a.

<sup>61</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2008: 167.

and further stabilize his reign. In addition, the fame and prestige that Chökhör Dechen would gather, similarly to the Jowo of Takten Phuntsok Ling, would attract more pilgrims to Tsang and compete with the influence of Lhasa on the region.<sup>62</sup>

While political gain may have played a part in the impetus to build an institution of this scope, again, merely relegating it to the confines of political machination would be to miss out on much of the insights it can give us regarding how Karma Tenkyong Wangpo envisioned his rule. For one, the explicit mention in Tsang Khenchen's autobiography that the founding of Chökhör Dechen by Karma Tenkyong Wangpo was intended to mirror the activities of the Tibetan emperors further confirms our assumptions regarding the ruler's emulation and appropriation of the Yarlung dynasty's legacy. Second, as a center intent on the teaching of not just religious fields but Tibetan culture more broadly, the Tsangpa hegemony was committed to promoting and advancing a distinct understanding of Tibetan identity, of which it saw itself as the custodian. It would appear that lying at the heart of such a project was a valuation of Tibet's disparate religious sects and institutions as functioning within a single national framework. As a royal project instituted at the Tsang capital, Chökhör Dechen visibly stood as an emblem of the Tsangpa hegemony's vision of itself and the Tibetan polity. Far from the claims of the Gelukpa-influenced narratives, it would appear that the Tsangpa hegemony saw the fostering of tolerance and dialogue amongst all of Tibet's

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<sup>62</sup> Go shul grags pa 'byung gnas 2000: 59-60.

lineages and sects, including the Gelukpa, as a hallmark of their rule.

It is somewhat astonishing to think that if not for the records of two Sakyapa hierarchs, details of the remarkable scope and function of Chökhör Dechen would have virtually disappeared from the historical record without a trace. Conceivably one of the most important testament of the legacy of the late Tsangpa hegemony, it is perhaps not surprising that its memory would have been actively suppressed. As for its physical presence, the monastery was completely destroyed to the ground by the forces of Gūshri Khan in the spring of 1642 (during the second month of the water horse year). The *Sakya Lineage History* tells us that following the complete destruction of the complex (*rmang nas bshigs te*), all the wood was transported to Lhasa to renovate the Jokhang temple and the majority of relics were offered to the Fifth Dalai Lama by Gushri Khan himself, and later stored at the Potala palace.<sup>63</sup> Hearing of the destruction of the center, the Fifth Dalai Lama displays a rare level of remorse in his autobiography. He writes,

“In the great religious center (Chokhor Dechen, the monastery of the Tsang Desi), there were images, books and stupas as well as temples with groves where learning of Sutra, Tantra, medicine, Sanskrit and poetry was established. This represented a powerful example of virtuous work. To destroy the whole of it, we had committed the misdeed of demons described in the *brgyad stong pa*. Therefore it seemed to me, if inferred through his activities, that the Tsang Desi was probably a religious king.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Go shul graga pa 'byung gnas 2000: 56.

<sup>64</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2008: 167.

## A New Model of Buddhist Governance

As I hope that the above discussion of new sources relevant to the period of the Tsangpa hegemony makes clear, our understanding of the Tsangpa regime's role and place in Tibetan history is in need of some reevaluation. The new set of sources introduced in this chapter challenge in almost every respect the Gelukpa narratives of the period. Far from representing an anti-Buddhist or even anti-Gelukpa stance, the accounts of figures existing outside the orbit of Gelukpa power point to the kings of Tsang's understanding and representation of themselves as Buddhist patrons *par excellence*. In strong opposition to the claims of repeated sectarian antagonism and persecution at the hands of the Tsangpa kings, they point to the latter's surprising level of ecumenism as well as collaboration with and even support of the Gelukpa sect. At no point in all of the sources observed above are there any direct references of sectarian antagonism towards or persecution of the Gelukpa sect. While some of the religious activities of the Tsangpa kings do appear to have been aimed at bolstering the position of Tsang as a region of greater religious significance and in that respect compete with the centrality of Lhasa, they do not appear to be aimed at threatening the Gelukpa order *per se*. Rather, as each of the above sources make abundantly clear, the Tsangpa hegemony saw as its enemy Mongol encroachment in Tibet, and it was the Gelukpa sect's extensive reliance on and employment of Mongol factions that made it a target of

Tsangpa hostility, not its religious inclinations.

In this respect, Templeman is right when he identifies sectarian antagonism as noticeably lacking in the struggles of the sixteenth and seventeenth century.<sup>65</sup> But that is not to say that religion did not play a crucial role in the competing political environment of the period either. Templeman's focus on intra-familial dynamics and conflicts to explain the rise and fall of the Tsangpa hegemony has the unfortunate consequence of leaving aside much of the ideological influences on the period. While it is certainly the case that the material expenditures of established aristocratic families vying for political control of the land contributed to their gradual decline and hence created an opening for ambitious arriviste families to seize political control, such a picture is only partial. The danger here is that such a position can carry with it a number of assumptions, the first of which being the view that the Tsangpa hegemony's maintenance of political power was largely based on its economic and military might alone. With that assumption in mind, the idea that there existed some form of popular resistance to the Tsangpa hegemony along ideological lines would appear plausible. In addition, if the purported resistance to Tsangpa rule was not fueled by sectarian antagonism, then another plausible place to look for it would be in its questionable family pedigree. Bogin's study of the life of the Third Yölmo Tulku exemplifies this line of argumentation when he writes,

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<sup>65</sup> See Templeman 2015: 486.



“(…) many considered the Gtsang kings to be unrightful usurpers of power begrudgingly accepted because of their economic and military might. If we are to understand the complexities of the changes that led to the establishment of the Dga’ ldan pho brang government, it will be necessary to account for the ways in which the royal and aristocratic family lineages remained important factors in the Tibetan polity well after the bearers of the privileged titles were overwhelmed by the commercial and military might of the Gtsang kings. In fact, their eventual defeat by the Dga’ ldan pho brang / Gushri Khan alliance seems in part to have been determined by this lack of royal blood. The Fifth Dalai Lama’s political success owed a great deal to his own sensitivity to the importance of maintaining the proper respect for these traditions and incorporating them as powerful elements legitimizing his rule.”<sup>66</sup>

It is worth repeating here that besides a single instance of criticism by the Third Yölmo Tulku, Bogin does not reveal any other account that challenged the Tsangpa hegemony based on its pedigree. Bogin is right to point to the sustained importance accorded to family pedigree in the seventeenth century despite the general decline of the old aristocratic lines; however his presumption that the Tsangpa hegemony, unlike the Fifth Dalai Lama, would have failed to recognize this fact is off the mark. Quite to the contrary, the sources reviewed above tend to portray the kings of Tsang as deeply invested in orienting themselves towards institutions of the past. From their own genealogy in the *History of Tsangpa Kings* to their repeated invocations of the Yarlung dynasty and the inclusion of clan histories in the curriculum of Chökhör Dechen, the

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<sup>66</sup> Bogin 2005: 70-71.

kings of Tsang certainly had a great deal of sensitivity to the significance of royal and aristocratic family lineages. That said, in the overall trajectory of Tibetan history, the Tsangpa hegemony does represent a new turn away from the supremacy of the old aristocratic lines. The political successes of Shingshakpa Tseten Dorjé over his Rinpungpa and Phakmodrupa overlords attests to both the moribund state of the old aristocracy and the dawn of a new era in Tibetan conceptions of governance. As the *History of Tsangpa Kings*' emphasis on religious pedigree over and above indigenous models of clan-based authority would seem to indicate, aristocratic ancestry started to become increasingly irrelevant in the political milieu of sixteenth and seventeenth century Tibet, signaling the aristocratic establishment's failure to reproduce itself in the field of religio-political rule. While the heavy expenditures of incessant intra-familial conflicts certainly played a part in the aristocratic establishment's gradual failure at field reproduction, I would argue that such a crisis in the field had perhaps more to do with the developments described in chapter two, including the introduction of alternative models of authority by way of reimagining the role and place of the religious hierarch in the Tibetan social sphere, and the shifting dynamics that such changes brought onto the strategic action field of religio-political rule.

Further, the Tsangpa hegemony's wholehearted embrace of religion as the language of rule and the articulation of its mandate as almost exclusively concerned with the protection and propagation of Buddhism significantly challenge the common

portrayal of the regime as Central Tibet's last hereditary line of 'secular' kings. As such, I propose to view the Tsangpa hegemony as somewhat of a liminal space between earlier forms of Tibetan rule and later theocratic systems. On the one hand the kings of Tsang can be viewed as an extension of previous enunciations of Buddhist kingship, with its focus on the image of the *dharmarāja/cakravartin* as the paradigmatic Buddhist patron and temporal counterpart in a diarchic relationship with Buddhist hierarchs. The *History of Tsangpa Kings'* tracing of the genealogical ancestry of the kings of Tsang within Tibet's old clan structure, the lavish material support and recognition they afforded the various Buddhist sects of the region, and their focus on the economic and military prosperity of the Central Tibetan region by jockeying with and forging necessary alliances with the important aristocratic families of U and Tsang, all point to a degree of institutional continuity between the Tsangpa hegemony and previous models of governance. On the other hand, however, the Tsangpa hegemony equally represents a significant shift away from previous models of kingship by embracing many of the innovations occurring within the religious establishment and, as a result, more closely approximates the theocratic regimes superseding it. As an emanation of the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi predicted by numerous and authoritative prophecies who voluntarily took birth in a royal line to benefit sentient beings in the *Land of Snows (bod kha ba can)*, there is theoretically little to differentiate the persona of Karma Tenkyong Wangpo from, as I will explore in the next chapters, the Fifth Dalai Lama or Shabdrung Ngawang

Namgyal. While the contours of their specific *habitus* or the degree to which their divinity was ritually and publicly recognized may have differed in significant ways, all three nonetheless operated within a similar ideological framework; one in which the justification for their rule, or for that matter their very *raison d'être*, was articulated along Buddhist lines.

Another important line of continuity between the Tsangpa hegemony and later theocratic regimes, which went hand in hand with its embrace of Buddhist cosmology, was a renewed understanding of the nature of the Tibetan polity and its place in the world. Through their concerted efforts to act as the custodians of a distinct understanding of Tibetan culture and religion, the Tsangpa kings inculcated a vision of Tibet as a unified whole, whose disparate institutions functioned within a single centralized national framework. The monastic complex of Chökhör Dechen stands as a paradigmatic example of this effort; an institution built in the name of the Tsangpa hegemony striving to bring together the diverse sects and institutions of Tibet into a single national center at the Tsang capital. The numerous campaigns and rhetoric against Mongol foreign armies also played an important role in the construction of this image, serving to further demarcate national identities and boundaries. But most importantly, it is in its shared invocation and employment of an imagined glorious past that the Tsangpa hegemony was most successful in implementing its vision of the Tibetan polity. The Tsangpa kings surely were not the first to conjure up the Tibetan

empire as a source of authority or legitimacy; such a movement was long in existence as a form of contestation of political regimes by marginalized religious groups. But the extent of the Tsangpa hegemony's participation in this movement through its numerous activities brought it renewed vigor and influence. By inscribing themselves as the natural heirs of Tibet's great emperors, the kings of Tsang participated in the millenarian and utopian vision of Tibet as a privileged and chosen land for the propagation and flourishing of the Buddhist dharma. It would perhaps not be an overstatement to say that through their multiple efforts to mirror and revive the legacy of institutions of the past, the kings of Tsang sought to effectuate a form of cultural renaissance in the Tibetan region. The level of success that they experienced in this domain is attested by what would appear to be the religious elite of Tsang's wide-scale participation in this project, with Tsang Khenchen standing out as a prime example.

### **Conclusion: the *Habitus* of Tsang Khenchen**

In many ways, Tsang Khenchen's life and trajectory reveal the extent to which the political and religious environment of his upbringing during the heyday of the Tsangpa hegemony made him poised from a very young age to engage in a life of Buddhist erudition in close contact and participation with the political center. As the milieu in which he rose to prominence, there is no doubt that many of the characteristics

of the Tsangpa hegemony observed above functioned as powerful models for his later articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal. Based on his autobiographical narrative, there are a number of important observations that can be made about the particular *habitus* of the great scholar from Tsang which help explain the socio-political conditions propelling him to eventually envision an idealized Buddhist state and social order in Bhutan.

First among these is the social and economic environment which Tsang Khenchen navigated. Tsang Khenchen was born into a family representative of the pinnacle of the religious elite of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Tibet. Hailing both from prestigious clan affiliations and religious pedigree, the scholar from Tsang had access, from birth onwards, to a life of privilege at the top of the social ladder. This is evident from the material wealth and social circles that he and his family tended to during his childhood. The family estate of Tashi Rabtu Tenpa (Bkra shis rab tu brtan pa'i khang bzang), situated along the fertile upper valley of Nyang, was a large establishment comprising multiple buildings and generating substantial wealth through the employment of various forms of labor.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the estate functioned as a temporary residence for many of Tibet's most revered religious hierarchs of the period when they traveled through the region, including the Jonang prelate Tāranātha, the Sixth Shamarpa Chökyi Wangchuck, the Drukpa hierarch Pema Karpo and the various

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<sup>67</sup> For a description of the estate, see *TKAB* vol. 1 fol. 91.a.

Ralung throne-holders. As a result, and as he recounts in great detail in the autobiography, Tsang Khenchen's childhood was primarily conditioned by and immersed in the concerns and priorities of the high echelons of the religious establishment. The fact that already at the age of five he was coveted by a number of important religious institutions and individuals reveals the extent to which his career as a prestigious religious figure was largely predestined. When Tsang Khenchen expressed his desire to lead the life of a monk early on in his childhood, an entire apparatus of learning was mobilized for him by his entourage, providing him with the means and access to some of the most rigorous and prestigious institutions of learning in Tibet.

Second, Tsang Khenchen was poised from a young age to be in close contact with the political center. Owing to his family's social and economic standing described above, his childhood was spent in the midst of individuals who were regular fixtures of the Tsangpa court, including Jonang Tāranātha and his own teacher Khenchen Lungrik Gyatso. When he gained the favor of the Tsangpa king Karma Tenkyong Wangpo and was eventually appointed as the abbot of Chökhör Dechen, Tsang Khenchen was already steeped in and wholly aligned with the particular vision of the Tibetan polity nurtured by the Tsangpa hegemony, especially its promotion of an ecumenical approach to Buddhist patronage. Idealized as they are, Tsang Khenchen's descriptions of the final years of the Tsangpa hegemony, especially in comparison to the wide-scale destruction that ensued, evoke almost something of a golden age, a return to the old days of the

Yarlung dynasty ruled by devout bodhisattva kings.

There can be little doubt that Tsang Khenchen's experience at the Tsangpa court and the subsequent rise to power of the Ganden Phodrang government deeply influenced his views on Ngawang Namgyal's state-building effort. When he arrived in Bhutan as a destitute political refugee, having fled the wholesale destruction of the political structures and institutions that had molded and sustained him throughout his life, Tsang Khenchen found in the person and project of Ngawang Namgyal not only security but ideological affinity. Immediately welcomed into the ranks of the Bhutanese administration and afforded a place of great honor and influence by his patron, Tsang Khenchen would become wholly convinced by the promise of a Buddhist realm governed by a bodhisattva king in which persecuted religious individuals such as himself could find shelter. From this perspective, it should come as no surprise that Ngawang Namgyal personally requested Tsang Khenchen, and not any other qualified individual in his entourage, to compose his authoritative biography. As the product of a life spent at the pinnacle of the religious elite of Tibet, with all the erudition and scholarly accomplishments that such a station entailed, whose family had maintained close connections with the Ralung hierarchs, who had considerable experience high in the ranks of the Tsangpa hegemony, and who, above all, was wholly convinced by the promise of a new state, Tsang Khenchen was an ideal candidate for the task of not simply writing a biographical eulogy of Ngawang Namgyal but, more importantly,



articulating the very theoretical foundations of the Bhutanese theocracy. As a literary architect and founding figure of the Bhutanese state, Tsang Khenchen's legacy stretches far beyond the confines of his physical existence. With that said, we now turn to the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* itself and the theocratic vision articulated therein.

## CHAPTER FOUR. THE *SONG OF THE GREAT DHARMA CLOUD* AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LITERARY *THEOTOPIA*

### Introduction

If, as I argued in the previous chapter, the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet represents a marked shift in Tibetan conceptions of governance by embracing Buddhism as the very language and *raison d'être* of rulership, the newly-founded Drukpa government of Ngawang Namgyal represents a radical re-envisioning of the social order itself. As we will observe in this chapter and the next, the theocratic vision underlying Ngawang Namgyal's state-building efforts sought the enunciation of an idealized Buddhist state which not only further re-envisioned conceptions of governance, but called into being a distinct and novel subjectivity on the part of its members. The blueprint for this new model is most clearly articulated in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*,<sup>1</sup> and as such, Tsang Khenchen stands out as the Drukpa theocracy's primary literary architect. Still till this date considered an enduring emblem of the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to John Ardussi for allowing me to consult his unpublished translation of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* (Ardussi 1975) during the later stages of my dissertation writing. Many of my translated passages from the work draw on Ardussi's own commendable translation and, as such, will often reference Ardussi's work in addition to the Tibetan edition of the text, even if my translations, on some occasions, differ from his.

Bhutanese state and providing a template for numerous Bhutanese scholars and historians to continue the work of formulating a Bhutanese national identity, Tsang Khenchen's biography of Bhutan's founding figure ought to be observed as a compelling and consequential work of symbolic labor articulating a specific vision of a new Buddhist social order. As this chapter and the next will explore, such a vision, with its reliance on an aesthetic and hermeneutic of excess, identified the region of Bhutan as the destined earthly paradise (*zhing khams*) and dominion of the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara embodied in the person of Ngawang Namgyal. As I will argue below, such an identification of Ngawang Namgyal by Tsang Khenchen shares a singular affinity with Flavius Josephus' restrictive coinage of theocracy: a perfect commonwealth ruled by an unmediated and omnipotent *theos*.

Because Tsang Khenchen's biography of Ngawang Namgyal is so consequential to our understanding of the ideological character of the early Drukpa state, this chapter will primarily concern itself with an examination of the work as a whole by paying close attention to its content and form, before moving on to an analysis of its significance and ramifications for the Bhutanese state in chapter five. As will be explored at length in this chapter, part of the enduring legacy of Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre has to do with its overall multivalence, pushing against boundaries of genre and style. As John Ardussi has claimed in a short pioneering article on the theoretical underpinnings of the Bhutanese state, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* ought to be

considered not as unvarnished biography or history, but as a political statement articulating a justification for Ngawang Namgyal's state-building efforts in the language of intellectual debate current in the Greater Tibetan world.<sup>2</sup> In similar vein to Ardussi's claim, I will argue here that in addition to its work of Buddhist edification characteristic of the genre of Buddhist biography/hagiography (*rnam thar*), Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre primarily functioned as a work of political theology. In this characterization, however, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* does much more than political justification; it conjures and fashions a meaningful world conceived as a Buddhist *theotopia* for the benefit of its inhabitants. Before delving in an analysis of the multivalent style, tone, modes, strategies and epistemologies of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, all in an effort to characterize the nature of Tsang Khenchen's literary vision of a Bhutanese *theotopia*, it will prove useful to first introduce the biography as a whole and Tsang Khenchen's own stated intentions behind its composition.

### **Overview of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud***

The *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is a prodigious work comprising of over 400 folios spread over six thematically organized volumes. John Ardussi has dated the work to c. 1674-75, some fifty years after Bhutan's founding, based on the historical references

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<sup>2</sup> Ardussi 2004: 35.

contained therein.<sup>3</sup> The biography remains the primary historical source for the life of Ngawang Namgyal and the early stages of the consolidation of Bhutan as a state, acting as a primary resource for many of Bhutan's most important historians thereafter, including the two eighteenth century luminaries Jé Tenzin Chögyal (1701-67) and Jé Shakya Rinchen (1710-59). Based on the oral accounts of various contemporaries and a manuscript diary kept by Ngawang Namgyal himself, including copies of letter correspondences between himself and his Tibetan adversaries, the biography represents both a work of compilation and narrativization of the life of Bhutan's founder.

The biography's six volumes consist of three broad sections: the biography proper spanning volumes one through four (vols. Ka-Nga), followed by two appendixes: a summary of the larger biography in volume five (vol. Ca)<sup>4</sup> and an appended biography of Mipham Tsewang Tenzin in volume 6 (vol. Cha),<sup>5</sup> the significance of which will be discussed in the next chapter. The biography proper in the first four volumes is further divided by Tsang Khenchen into 3 broad sections spanning a total of twenty-two chapters.<sup>6</sup> The first section, consisting of volume one (Ka) and

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<sup>3</sup> See Ardussi 2004: 34.

<sup>4</sup> Volume Five (Ca) is titled *rdo rje 'dzin pa ngag dbang bstan 'dzin rnam rgyal gyi rnam par thar pa chos kyi sprin chen po'i dbyangs kyi snying po legs par bsdus pa bdud rtsi'i thigs pa zhes bya ba bzhugs so* and comprises of forty seven folios.

<sup>5</sup> Volume Six (Cha) is titled *Chos kyi sprin chen po'i dbyangs kyi yan lags rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug dpal rdo rje gdan pa'i rnam par thar pa bzhugs so* and comprises of thirty four folios.

<sup>6</sup> See Tsang Khenchen's explanation of the three sections in *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. 1 fol. 7.a.

chapters one and two, introduces the work as a whole and the figure of Avalokiteśvara and its various emanations in India and Tibet; the second section, volume two (Kha) and chapter three, consists of a condensed biography of the direct predecessor of Ngawang Namgyal, the great Drukchen incarnation Kunkhyen Pema Karpo (1527-1592), based on the latter's autobiography entitled *Thugs rje chen po'i zlos gar*; and the final section, forming the bulk of the biography spanning over two hundred and eighty folios across volumes three and four (Ga-Nga) and chapters four through twenty-two, details the life and activities of Ngawang Namgyal in Tibet in volume three and Bhutan in volume four.

Besides his stated frustrations with Tsang Khenchen's abstruse style, Michael Aris has commented that Tsang Khenchen was not personally very well acquainted with Ngawang Namgyal and seems to have spent only short periods in his company, depriving the biographical subject much of a sense of humanity. Aris writes, "The *Zhabs-drung* emerges from the work a ghostly figure wrapped in the complicated categories of Buddhist thought to which his activities are correlated throughout by the author."<sup>7</sup> Putting questions of Tsang Khenchen's style aside for the time being, while it is indeed the case that Tsang Khenchen became acquainted with and part of Ngawang Namgyal's close entourage only during the final decade of the latter's life (c. 1641-1651), the two nonetheless did spend substantial amounts of time together in Punakha, as is

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<sup>7</sup> See Aris 1979: 203.

evidenced in Tsang Khenchen's own autobiography. In addition, owing to the fact that Ngawang Namgyal personally requested Tsang Khenchen to compose the biography, Tsang Khenchen probably had at his disposition the assistance, in the form of records and testimonies, of virtually every member of the Bhutanese administration. Among them stand out the records of the fervent early patron of Ngawang Namgyal and grandson of Drukpa Kunlé ('brug pa kun legs 1455-1529) Mipham Tsewang Tenzin (Mipham tshe dbang bstan 'dzin 1574-1643), as well as the oral testimony of Ngawang Namgyal's ever-faithful attendant and first Druk Desi ('brug sde srid) Tenzin Drukgyé (Bstan 'dzin 'brug rgyas 1591-1655). In addition, when recounting the history of the Ralung hierarchs and the early life of Ngawang Namgyal before his flight southward, Tsang Khenchen appears to draw on his and his family's records of the period based on their close connection to Ralung.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, however, and much to Aris' chagrin, is Tsang Khenchen's reliance on his own Buddhist erudition as a primary resource to construct and narrativize the person and life of Ngawang Namgyal.

In his introduction to the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Tsang Khenchen states his intention behind the composition of the biography by way of invoking Vasubhandu's framework of scriptural exegesis in the *Vyākhyāyuktī*, namely stating the purpose of the work (skt: *anta-prayojana*, tib: *dgos pa'i don*), the summarized meaning of

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Tsang Khenchen's extensive description of Ngawang Namgyal's enthronement as the Ralung hierarch, which was attended by his own father. *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. 3 (Ga) fol. 59.a.

the work (skt: *piṇḍārtha*, tib: *bsdus pa'i don*) and the literal sense of the words (skt: *padārtha*, tib: *tshig gi don*). Here Tsang Khenchen articulates the purpose of the biography as the generation of faith (*dad pa*) in the Dharma. He writes,

“The chief purpose for explaining and listening to the biographies of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas and noble beings is the production of faith and the roots of the Dharma. (...) All blessings and *siddhi* derive from the faith that arises from seeing the good qualities of the teacher. Thus, the stated purpose (*dgos pa'i don*) becomes the cause for entering into the profound Dharma of Buddhahood for oneself and others, the cause for obtaining the perfect liberation, awareness, deliverance [of others], joy, and ornaments and so forth of bodhisattvas.”<sup>9</sup>

With the purpose of the work stated, Tsang Khenchen moves on to the summarized meaning of the biography (*bsdus pa'i don*), here understood as the mode through which the purpose of the work is conveyed so that, in Tsang Khenchen’s words, it is “easily understood and elegantly explained.”<sup>10</sup> In the context of the biography, Tsang Khenchen continues, this is achieved through an exposition of the Seven Realizations (skt: *abhisamaya*, tib: *mngon par rtogs pa*) and Nine Maturations (skt: *parināma*, tib: *yongs su smin pa*) of bodhisattvas, together with the Ten Wheels (skt: *daśa-cakra*, tib: *'khor lo bcu*) of the *dharmarāja*, in order to illustrate the “ways in which the Noble Avalokiteśvara coursed through immeasurable eons working for the benefit of

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<sup>9</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. 1 fol. 6.a-b.

<sup>10</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. 1 fol. 6.b.



measureless sentient beings through an unimaginable number of emanations.”<sup>11</sup> This last statement goes at the heart of Tsang Khenchen’s project in the biography. As I will discuss at length below, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*’s purpose of effectuating a moral transformation in the reader is intrinsically linked to the recognition of the indivisibility of the person of Ngawang Namgyal and the celestial bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. In other words, a close reading of the biography reveals the extent to which the person of Ngawang Namgyal, and by extension his state-building project, are entirely conceived of and mediated by an understanding of the nature and role of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the region of Bhutan. As such, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* articulates a vision of the founding of the Bhutanese state that is grounded in an idealized and mythologized recognition of Bhutan and its founder. I will call such an idealized vision a *theotopia*; the articulation of a perfect moral commonwealth that is ruled and embodied by an unmediated and omnipotent *theos*.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Ardussi has characterized the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* as a work of political justification articulated in the language of debate prevalent at the time, and in many ways Tsang Khenchen is indeed engaged in an argumentative or even polemical mode of discussion. His literary construction and edification of the figure of Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara through the course of the biography makes use of the medium of language to effectuate

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<sup>11</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. 1 fol. 7.a-b.

a persuasion and admission on the part of his reader of the kind of social world he conjures. As such, a close examination of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* has to take into consideration not only the content or arguments advanced in the work, but just as importantly, the literary form through which such content is articulated. As a perfect example of Aristotelian rhetoric, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* intentionally and self-consciously mobilizes discursive strategies of appeal and persuasion, and it is thus to this dimension of the work that we first turn.

### **Literary Style of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud***

In an article on the literary and artistic representations of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage,<sup>12</sup> Nancy Lin has drawn some observations that are especially informative to an analysis of Tsang Khenchen's literary style in *The Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. Commenting on the ornate artistic program of the assembly hall (*tshoms chen*) of the Red Palace in the Potala and associated literary productions by the Fifth Dalai Lama himself and his trusted regent Desi Sangyé Gyatso (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho 1653-1705), whose intellectual affinity to Tsang Khenchen will be explored in the next chapter, Lin traces two complimentary projects of the Ganden Phodrang court: the articulation and representation of an aesthetic of abundance characteristic of the court's ethos and a fresh paradigm of kingly rule and legitimacy based on embodied

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<sup>12</sup> See Lin 2017.

qualities expressed through the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage. Putting aside the Ganden Phodrang court's paradigm of kingly rule until we explore in greater detail the parallels between the Bhutanese and Gelukpa theocracies in the next chapter, Lin's discussion of an aesthetic of abundance encapsulated in the phrase *sishi phuntsok* (*srid zhi'i phun tshogs*), translated by her as "existence and peace replete" or "all the marvels of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*," is of particular import to our discussion of Tsang Khenchen's style.

Abundance, according to Lin, functioned as a guiding aesthetic in the artistic and literary representations of the Fifth Dalai Lama's court. Such an aesthetic, signifying the wondrous plenitude of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, embraced and celebrated material wealth, variety, and numerousness as central components of the Ganden Phodrang's image of itself. Taking the artistic and literary program of the main assembly hall of the Red Palace of the Potala as a characteristic representation of this aesthetic in three dimensional form, Lin reveals how the vivid and extravagant use of ornamentation and detail, celebrating variety and numerousness to the point of defying mental grasp translated into an intended affect in the viewer/reader with regard to the perception of the Fifth Dalai Lama's persona and spiritual state. Abundance, in other words, would appear to have functioned as an interpretative model for the court of the Fifth Dalai Lama; a hermeneutic through which the totality of the lives and activities of the Great Fifth were evoked and transmitted.

Such an aesthetic *qua* hermeneutic is immediately apparent in Tsang Khenchen's

literary style in *The Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, where abundance is celebrated on almost every page. His persistent employment of ornamentation, detail, enumeration, repetition, and even exaggeration participates in a similar kind of project outlined by Lin in the context of the Ganden Phodrang court and further underlines the affinity of these two regimes. My analysis of Tsang Khenchen's style however pushes this ascription even further, identifying not simply abundance but excess itself as a driving stylistic force behind his work. Such an ascription points to the argumentative character of Tsang Khenchen's work, whereby *The Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is not simply concerned with the edification of its biographical subject but equally engaged in a project of persuasion. In other words, Tsang Khenchen's masterful employment of language not only celebrates fullness and plenitude but also argues and persuades in ways that extol excess, here understood as the "state of exceeding or being greater in quantity or degree than is usual or necessary."<sup>13</sup> As I will attempt to demonstrate in the following pages by examining some characteristic features of Tsang Khenchen's aesthetic of excess, such a literary mode seeks to achieve a multivalent set of effects, principal upon which are to establish authority, to persuade, and to delight.

The most immediately apparent feature of Tsang Khenchen's aesthetic of excess is the exuberance and proliferation of ancillary information correlated to every detail of

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<sup>13</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Ed., s.v. "Excess (n.)," <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/65754?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=GOVvia&>

his subject's life. Through the use of protracted lists and redundant canonical references, the narrative of Ngawang Namgyal's life and activities is continuously imbedded in a complex web of extraneous material. This style is nowhere more apparent than in the chapters of *The Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* dealing with Ngawang Namgyal's scholarly training, where Tsang Khenchen spends an inordinate amount of ink listing the academic achievements of the young hierarch with extensive references to various Buddhist treatises. The ninth chapter of the biography, addressing Ngawang Namgyal's study of astrology and grammar between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, is a case in point, listing page after page the various treatises and subjects studied by the hierarch with extensive references on the significance of these to the transmission of worldly sciences in Tibet. What emerges from the chapter is thus a convoluted discussion of the grammatical sciences whose contents are privy to a select few expert scholars in the field. Besides affirming Tsang Khenchen's authority as one of those few experts, the chapter's emphasis on an overabundance of information achieves a similar effect as Lin's description of the assembly hall of the Red Palace of the Potala; the complexity, richness and detail of his descriptive enumerations defies the reader's mental grasp and creates an important distance between the latter's ordinary perception and the world that the biography conjures. Far from a clumsy or coarse narrative style, Tsang Khenchen's extensive use of long drawn-out lists throughout the biography reflects what I see as an intentional attempt to overwhelm and dizzy his reader with material,

forcing a certain intellectual surrender or even capitulation to the work's overpowering affirmations.

Another important feature of *The Song of the Great Dharma Cloud's* aesthetic of excess is Tsang Khenchen's extensive use of ornamentation and sensuous language in many of his descriptions of scenes of Ngawang Namgyal's life. Whether in verse or prose, Tsang Khenchen's mastery of poetic conventions and literary aesthetics is in full display through much of the biography. This, of course, is no accident; in as much as biography intends to impose a dizziness and surrender on its reader, such an experience is meant to be accompanied by a sense of beauty and delight. As Tsang Khenchen himself writes when closing his introductory chapter to the biography as a whole,

“Using the ornaments of Daṇḍin,  
All great poetry consists of  
Metres delightful to hear and well combined;  
In such a way shall I explain (the biography), and  
So that my listener's minds not get tired  
There are, moreover, chapters and topics,  
Arranged as a basis for delight.  
Through the various stirring emotions [brought by]  
The theatrical display of Samantabhadra,  
And Sarasvati with her lute,  
May scholars be thoroughly pleased!”<sup>14</sup>

As these verses entail, the generation of delight in his reader through ornamentation and literary embellishment lies at the heart of Tsang Khenchen's

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<sup>14</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ka fol. 8.a.

composition of *The Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. His use of sensuous and descriptive language calls into being a literary world wherein beauty and felicity gratuitously abound. Such a device sets his biographical subject apart from the reader, accentuating again the gap between a mundane perception of the world and the extraordinary reality conveyed in the work. An example of this style can be found right at the beginning of the biography, where Tsang Khenchen engages in a physical description of Ngawang Namgyal:

“Now, on that sublime occasion, the fortunate era when the glorious Drukpa teachings had spread greatly, when the Lord himself had come for the decision, being at that time marked in one sense by the number of fifty years, in the place which was the sublime Sukhāvati of Spung thang (i.e. the Punthang Dewachen Phodrang in Punakha) in Bhutan (‘brug), the grove of flowers and fruits, the great immeasurable palace of Avalokiteśvara, the hall of worship of the Perfection of Wisdom, the palace of the hall of worship of the Dharma of glorious Vajrāsana, his retinue was a sublime maṇḍala of great tantric monks, surrounded and protected by the great protectors of the Dharma, their servants and messengers; therein was the throne of the four fearless lions, various lotuses the color of the Buddhas of the four directions, the dais decorated with excellent adornments of divine substances, reflections of the moon in their pure whiteness; the teacher, the great sublime sage, his body residing in the samādhi called “Lord of Stars and Moon,” cultivating and resting in the power of the Vajradhāra bhikṣu of Aryāvalokiteśvara, radiating the light of the marks of the pure laws, and the minor marks of great merit; his eyes fixes in the self-nature of many samādhis of the most abstract and pure degree, glancing without a waver, empowering the stream of others by a mere distant look, the glory of eyebrows high, the breadth of his forehead great, his complexion clear, his [religious] hood beautiful as a parasol, so that like an image of the Buddha the very sight of which produces faith, his features so ripened by the power of mantras that it stirs one to the heart, fearful to observe from a distance, but pleasant when in his immediate presence,

striking of smile and expression when speaking, possessing no secret airs, but speaking straight-forwardly, there was no tiring at his religious discourses, so as it was said, “Never sated at listening to him, He gave the Dharma without trifling detail...” with virtue and love he applied himself to the cause of the Dharma, with the thought of purifying completely the earth.”<sup>15</sup>

As the above passage illustrates, Tsang Khenchen’s literary style revels in long and sensuous descriptions of his subject. Whether in prose or verse, his language is often heavily ornamented, frequently using simile, metaphor, metonymy, and personification to embellish his composition and further draw in his reader. What emerges is the construction of a literary world overflowing with sensory experience; one that continuously and vigorously celebrates beauty and wonder, inviting the reader to partake in these aesthetic pleasures. Wonder and delight are also achieved through Tsang Khenchen’s targeted use of repetition throughout the biography. Besides his perpetual return to the refrain of compassion to make sense of Ngawang Namgyal’s activities, his use of superlatives and adjectives of number are often repeated to create a sense of wondrous multiplicity that lies beyond the confines of the ordinary mind. Take, for example, the following passage describing the mythology associated to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara:

“In this way in an unimaginable place and *countless* eras ago, the great compassionate wisdom of the minds of all the Tathāgatas appeared in the body of the noble Avalokiteśvara as the Bhagavant the Tathāgata Dri ma med pa Nam mkha’i dpal gyi rgyal po. His body was adorned by the wonderful light rays of

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<sup>15</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ka fol. 4.a-b; Ardussi 1975: (I) 3-4.



his matchless eyesight, the light rays of the lotus vaidurya, the best of holy jewels; he was adorned by the diadem at his forehead; night and day, *without count*, he appeared, completely adorned with supplications; as a result of which *many* emanations came from the Dharma realm and the king known as Chags pa med pa'i rgyal po (and all the beings) as *numerous* as the fine grains of sand in the world were *all without exception* delivered from saṃsāra in the great kalpa, just by grasping their names. In accord with that statement, then, that is praised as the first of the *unimaginable* names of the Tathāgathas. According to the *Phyag stong spyan stong gi mdo*, it was said that the Noble Avalokiteśvara, after coursing through *innumerable* eons, as the Tathāgata 'Od zer kun nas 'phags pa dpal brtsegs kyi rgyal po became a Buddha, and that he was empowered by all the Tathāgathas. He saw all sentient creatures and, with the samādhi Which Shows the Arrangement of the Buddha Fields, he produced *countless* emanations of the body of essence as vast as the sky into as *many* places *unimaginable* and difficult to envisage even for the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, embracing the fields as *numerous* as the body hairs of that body difficult even for all the Tathāgatas to measure, and (these emanations) passed away instantly into all the realms of the six types of sentient beings, working for the benefit of *countless* sentient beings."<sup>16</sup>

Through the repeated use of superlatives and adjectives pointing to the immeasurable, *The Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* partakes in the celebration of a literary reality that contains no bounds; it is ever-expansive and all-encapsulating, presenting itself to the reader as an endless totality to be continuously embraced and absorbed. Such a feature is further accentuated by Tsang Khenchen's wide-reaching and creative use of sources, effortlessly molding and sometimes even exaggerating their import to his discussions. When writing about the relevance of the Drukpa sect as a whole, for example, Tsang Khenchen draws on every possible reference to dragons he

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<sup>16</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ka fol. 9.b; Ardussi 1975: (I) 13.

can presumably find, including Indian canonical sources and Chinese mythology, to explain how the sect's auspiciousness (*rten 'brel*) and renown had spread in all directions.<sup>17</sup> Part of this expansive style also includes a pervasive use of intertextuality in the biography, weaving, among others canonical sources, the story of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni as recounted in the *Lalitavistara sutra* with that of Ngawang Namgyal. As I will explore further in the next section, such a device situates the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* as a whole within a larger framework of Buddhist literary production, and intentionally blurs the lines of distinction between Ngawang Namgyal and the historical Buddha so that the two become at times indistinguishable from each other in the work.<sup>18</sup>

As the above few examples illustrate, Tsang Khenchen's aesthetic of excess acts as a driving literary force in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. The extensive use of detail, enumeration, ornamentation, repetition, and even exaggeration through much of the biography conjures a literary world that is in excess of the characteristics of ordinary perception. Such a multi-layered and hyper-sensuous literary world is, colloquially speaking, over the top; it gratuitously celebrates exuberance and luxuriance as a source of aesthetic delight, which, paradoxically, both alienates and draws in the reader. While the barrage of knowledge and material presented by Tsang Khenchen in the form of

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<sup>17</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga 4.a-b.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Tsang Khenchen's poetic allusions and mirroring of the Buddha's biography when recounting the birth of Ngawang Namgyal. *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fol. 12.b-13.a.

extraneous references, lists, long drawn-out descriptions and highly ornamented sensuous language produces a radical distance between the biographical subject and the reader, it also simultaneously invites the reader to partake in the aesthetic pleasures it calls into being. Such a literary style and its accompanying affects reflect what I see as a self-conscious discursive strategy on the part of Tsang Khenchen to mobilize language in the service of persuasion. Through his aesthetic of excess, Tsang Khenchen not only builds an impenetrable and unassailable position of scholarly authority; he also convinces and delights.

That said, the gap or cleavage between ordinary reality and the luxuriant world of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* that is created through its aesthetic of excess is also symptomatic, I contend, of a deeply-seated anxiety in its author. Tsang Khenchen's recourse to excess as a literary motif, for all its invocation of beauty and wonder, also discloses an important tension in the discrepancy between the historical reality of the biography's composition and the idealized reality it aims to conjure. It should not be forgotten, as I laid out in Chapter 2, that the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud's* biographical subject, and by extension his state-building efforts, was a deeply contentious figure, and, as a result, a major function of the biography was the legitimation of Ngawang Namgyal's role and mandate in the creation of the Bhutanese state. Seen from this perspective, Tsang Khenchen's employment of excess as a literary device points to both an effortless and gratuitous play with language, reflecting his

position at the pinnacle of monastic erudition, as well as a conscious and concerted, if not disquieted, attempt at persuasion and legitimation. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, such a paradoxical modality is reflected in both the biography's literary style and content, to which we now turn.

### **Strategies of Legitimation**

If my analysis of Tsang Khenchen's literary style in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* has shed light on some of the ways in which Tsang Khenchen constructs his and his biographical subject's authority through the medium of language, nothing has been said yet of the actual arguments and sources of authority to which the biography appeals in its construction of a Buddhist *theotopia*. At stake here are insights into the epistemological framework of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. As a discursive exercise in persuasion, what strategies of legitimation does the work employ? What, for Tsang Khenchen, appears to count as valid and effective instruments of reasoning and argumentation in his edification of Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara and Bhutan as the bodhisattva's earthly realm? As the following pages will attempt to demonstrate, Tsang Khenchen makes recourse to a number of important hermeneutical strategies in the articulation of his vision of the Bhutanese theocracy. Ardussi has already briefly pointed to some of these in his article on the theoretical foundations of the Bhutanese state, primarily identifying three broad sources of justification in the biography: "

prophecy, sorcery and karma,” “scriptural authority and personality,” and “a social contract and code of laws.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to drawing on and further expanding the scope of Ardussi’s classification and insights, of particular interest here are the ways in which the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*’s strategies of legitimation are constitutive of the particular vision of the social order advanced by Tsang Khenchen.

### Scriptural Authority

The primary and most evident source of legitimation employed by Tsang Khenchen in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, already alluded to above, is scriptural authority. Everywhere in the biography Tsang Khenchen draws on his erudite and intimate knowledge of canonical scriptures as the primary lens and reference point through which not only the life and activities of Ngawang Namgyal, but the very nature and function of the world, are articulated. In his discussion of scriptural authority and personality, Ardussi focuses on the biography’s use of scriptural authority to characterize the dual nature of Ngawang Namgyal as bodhisattva and wheel-turning king (*cakravartin*). He writes,

“In gTsang mKhan-chen’s interpretation, therefore, the head of state in Bhutan was himself simultaneously a Bodhisattva and a Dharmarāja, the embodiment of a militant Avalokiteśvara taking command as its chief of state, Lokeśvara (*Jig-rten mgon-po*), in a world polluted by the “five defilements” (*snyigs-ma lnga*).

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<sup>19</sup> See Ardussi 2004: 39-44.

Scriptural authority was cited from texts in the Kanjur which interpreted the mission of Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal as that of turning the ten-fold wheel of the Dharma in both a religious sense and as a Cakravartin, that is to say as a monarch inspired by religion.”<sup>20</sup>

As one of the most distinctive characteristics that is singular to the Bhutanese theocracy, this chapter and the next will pay much attention to the dual nature of Ngawang Namgyal as simultaneously the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and a wheel-turning king. Here, however, we focus specifically on Tsang Khenchen’s use of scriptural authority to make this claim. Tsang Khenchen draws on a wealth of canonical sources to frame Ngawang Namgyal’s dual nature, and as we saw above in his introduction to the biography, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* itself is structured around the Realizations and Maturations of bodhisattvas, together with the Ten Wheels of the *cakravartin*.

Although Tsang Khenchen’s quotations of and references to canonical sources on the activities of bodhisattvas in general and the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in particular are dizzying and encyclopedic, a number of key sources appear in greater frequency and in support of more contentious themes. On the imperative for bodhisattvas to incarnate in the world and guide sentient beings through worldly activities, including those of kingship, Tsang Khenchen often returns to one sutra in particular, the *ārya-bodhisattvāgocaropāyaviśayavikurvitānirdeśa sutra* (*‘phags pa byang chub*

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<sup>20</sup> Ardussi 2004: 41.

*sems dpa'i spyod yul gyi thabs kyi yul la rnam par 'phrul ba bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*). Translated by Tsunehiko Sugiki as the *Noble Exposition of Transformative Manifestation within the Domain of Means in the Bodhisattva's Field of Activity*, the middle-late period Mahāyāna sutra articulates a distinct ethics and soteriology for bodhisattvas incarnating as kings, legitimating warfare for the sake of the protection of the dharma and sentient beings at large.<sup>21</sup> On the figure of the wheel-turning king, Tsang Khenchen primarily draws on the *daśacakraṣṭigarbha sutra* (*sa'i snying po 'khor lo bcu pa zhes bya ba'i mdo*), framing the various activities of Ngawang Namgyal in accordance with the Ten Wheels of the *cakravartin*. On the theme of the more wrathful and militant bodhisattva purifying the world of the Five Defilements (*snyigs ma lnga*), Tsang Khenchen, in turn, draws from more obscure tantras, principal among which is the *vajramahākālakrodhanātharahasyasiddhibhava tantra* (*mgon po gsang ba dngos grub byung ba'i rgyud*).<sup>22</sup> Through these and other canonical sources, Tsang Khenchen not only thematically frames the biography but employs scriptural authority as a means to legitimate Ngawang Namgyal's life and state-building project. His use of scripture as a legitimating tool is immediately apparent, for example, in his discussions of Ngawang Namgyal's involvement in ritual-warfare and/or military confrontations. There, page after page of references are given from both sutras and tantras giving reason to the use

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<sup>21</sup> See Sugiki 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Tsang Khenchen also draws on the Mañjuśrīmūla tantra and the *Dpal ye shes mgon po'i rgyud*.

of warfare or ritual violence for the sake of protecting the dharma. In these instances, Tsang Khenchen employs scriptural authority as an authorizing strategy through a logic of supporting arguments: Ngawang Namgyal performs x and the need for x is stated at length in sutra a, b, c and tantra d, e, and f. Take for example the following passage describing an instance when Ngawang Namgyal performed ritual warfare against his adversaries in Tsang:

“Now at this time we have the discourse of the aged Doden Phajo (Tshewang Tenzin). He says that after the great Vajradhāra (Ngawang Namgyal) had come to the hermitage of Tango (Rta mgo), the occasion arose wherein it had become necessary to make use of the occult magical deeds of Yeshé Gonpo. And he related the unusual manner in which the omens and signs occurred. (...) The certainty of time explained in the *mgon po phyag bzhi pa'i rgyud* is clearly referring to the present time. As for the need of “maintaining, supporting and protecting the teachings, protecting is the most important” it is said, and in accord the chief thing is to protect the teaching against enemies. The need for supporting is carried out by hearing, contemplating and meditating of religious practitioners; while supporting is done by the patronage and reverent praises of patrons and attendants of monks, and all is spoken of at length in the *dpal 'phreng seng ge sgra'i mdo* and the *rin po che phung po'i mdo*, and also in the *Vinaya*. Śāntideva said, “Let the intellectual endeavors of reading and recitation be established!” and “Let there be established for a long time the obtaining of teachings and praises!” And in particular at the time when the Tathāgatā was on the verge of passing into *nirvāṇa*, the *mdo sde rin po che'i mdzod ma nyams pa* which contains his last testament says, such things as when the time of the five hundred is near, the teachings will have to be supported by royal law; that wars will have to be fought in order to support the communities of monks and individual bhikṣus. Just so did this very great Vajradhāra (Ngawang Namgyal) strive to maintain, support and protect the teachings...”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga 22.a., Ardussi 1975: (II) 30.



As the above passage illustrates, Tsang Khenchen often draws from canonical scriptures in order to validate and rationalize some of the more contentious activities of Ngawang Namgyal. In this case, Ngawang Namgyal's use of ritual warfare is rationalized with the framework of protecting the Dharma, pulling from various canonical sources stressing the importance of such an activity, including even the necessity of warfare in order to protect the Buddhist *samgha*. Such an authorizing use of scriptural authority also appears to legitimate less consequential matters in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, including the many miraculous signs and feats accomplished by Ngawang Namgyal. As in the passage above, Tsang Khenchen will often break from his narrative to quote a number of canonical sources in order to argue that such occurrence or behavior is indeed well established in both sutras and tantras.<sup>24</sup>

Scriptural authority is also employed by Tsang Khenchen in another and more pervasive way throughout the biography. In addition to the use of canonical sources to justify actions through a legitimizing process, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* extensively draws on scriptural passages to describe and illustrate events in the life of its biographical subject. The biography's sensuous and luxuriant world, discussed in the section above, is itself largely constituted by scriptural references. Through his long and rich descriptions that heavily draw on canonical sources, Tsang Khenchen effectively makes scripture a primary referent of the reality that is constructed in the *Song of the*

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<sup>24</sup> See for example, *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fold. 52.a-b, 41.a-b, and 15.a-b.

*Great Dharma Cloud*. Such a use of scripture has significant import for the social order that Tsang Khenchen envisions through the biography. By effectuating somewhat of a subtle inversion of reality, Tsang Khenchen creates a social world in which people don't just act in accordance with scriptures, but rather where the actions of people are themselves reflections of the truths and ideals contained in scripture. Tsang Khenchen's discussion of Ngawang Namgyal's conception and birth illustrate this use of scriptural authority well, whereupon references to the Buddha's own conception and birth serve as a basis for describing Ngawang Namgyal's miraculous coming into being.<sup>25</sup> Another important example is Tsang Khenchen's description of Ngawang Namgyal's enthronement ceremony at Ralung, weaving canonical references throughout his description of the event such that the ceremony effectively reads like a passage drawn from a sutra.<sup>26</sup> In these and other passages, the intertextuality between the events described and canonical sources makes scriptural authority function not only as an arbiter of the socio-moral order conjured by the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, but an arbiter of reality itself.

### Prophecy and Millenarianism

This last point connects to another major and interrelated source of authority in

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<sup>25</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fols. 2.a-b, 9.a-b, and 13.a.

<sup>26</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fols. 57.b-64.a.

Tsang Khenchen's composition. In addition to his use of descriptive canonical passages as an instrument of evocation, Tsang Khenchen also extensively draws on prophecy as a distinct hermeneutical strategy in his articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy. As Ardussi points out, "In gTsang mKhan-chen's analysis, every significant event in the life of the *Zhabs-drung Rin-po-che* had been foretold in prophecy or preordained through the workings of karma."<sup>27</sup> For Tsang Khenchen, the founding of a new Buddhist state for the welfare of its sentient inhabitants by an emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was none but a preordained fact prophesied long ago by such Buddhist saints as Padmasambhava or the Drukpa sect's founder Tsangpa Gyare (1161-1211). Through his numerous quotations of various prophecies drawn from canonical and non-canonical sources,<sup>28</sup> Tsang Khenchen naturalizes Ngawang Namgyal's divinity and state-building mission as matters grounded in the very nature of the world.

I will argue here that prophecy functions in at least two important ways in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. First, Tsang Khenchen's use of prophecy serves to establish a compelling narrative connection between the events of the present and those of the distant past, effectively placing the rule of Ngawang Namgyal within the

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<sup>27</sup> Ardussi 2004: 39.

<sup>28</sup> While Tsang Khenchen draws from such tantras as the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa tantra* or the *Vajramahākālakrodhanātharahasyasiddhibhava tantra*, his primarily source when quoting prophecies is, expectedly, the Terma tradition. Some of his recurring sources for prophetic injunctions include the the *Bka' chems ka khol ma*, the *Mañi bka' 'bum*, the *Bka' brgyad rig 'dzin yongs 'dus* of Ngari Panchen (Mnga' ris pañ chen 1487-1542), and the *gter lam mkha' ri'i zhu lan* of Guru Chowang (Gu ru chos dbang 1212-1270).

institutional legacy of key historical figures, including the early Tibetan Yarlung emperors and the Indian adept Padmasambhava. As is well known, the region that would become Bhutan had already developed a strong affinity towards the Indian adept by internalizing a number of narratives that identified him as the patron saint of the area. These narratives pitted the Southern Land of Medicinal Herbs (Lho sman ljongs) as a privileged abode of Padmasambhava, which he had consecrated as a *hidden land (sbas yul)*; an earthly paradise conducive to yogic practice. Tsang Khenchen's recurring use of prophecies claimed to issue from Padmasambhava himself urging Ngawang Namgyal to journey south, at once affirmed and naturalized Bhutan's

founder as the saint's successor in the region.<sup>29</sup>

Second, prophecy in the biography functions as a powerful hermeneutic lens through which the geopolitical realities of the period could be interpreted. The seventeenth century political upheaval in the Tibetan region, manifested in the violence associated to regime change and foreign encroachment, was understood by Tsang Khenchen through the medium of prophecy as the result of a degradation of the moral values of human beings manifested in the *Five Degenerations* (skt: *pañcakaṣāya*, tib: *snyigs*

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<sup>29</sup> Some of the most important prophecies in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* attributed to Padmasambhava include the following exhortation from the *Gsang ba nor bu'i thig le rgyud* to journey to the southern lands:

“Seek out repose in the Southern Valleys,  
On the border, through the Southern Door,  
If you do thus you will gain as much success in seven days of meditation as in seven years in the Land of Tibet.” *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 5.a.; Ardussi 1975 (II) 6.

Another important prophecy comes from the *Bka' brgyad rig 'dzin yongs 'dus*:

“The skill of the coursing of wisdom of the king of lotuses,  
Will race to Ngari and Tsang like lightning;  
In the region south of U-Tsang he will be known as Dragon;  
In Kham it will be known as in the bone lineage of Gya.  
As physical omens the vajra will appear on his forehead;  
The cross will be clear upon his working hand;  
The *dharmacakra* of his vision will adorn his hand and foot;  
The destroying letter Hum will appear on his foot;  
His navel will be adorned by the jar-shaped mole;  
His behaviors will be indefinite and he will soar unobstructed like the wind;  
His samādhi will not waver, and be firm like diamond;  
The miracles of his mantras and mūdras will be unceasing;  
Eternally he will converse with me of O-rgyan;

Together with him shall we be born into Sukhāvati!” *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga Fol. 114.b.; Ardussi 1975: (I) 204-5. Tsang Khenchen tells us that Ngawang Namgyal himself stated that upon receiving clear visions (*gsal snang*) of Padmasambhava, he was in perpetual consultation with the latter and received his blessings. See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fol. 116.a.

*ma'i lnga*).<sup>30</sup> This situation called for a new dispensation of the Buddhist dharma in the region by the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara who, Tsang Khenchen tells us repeatedly, was none other than Ngawang Namgyal in human form. Such a millenarian vision was, of course, not novel to Bhutan and can be traced back to early canonical sources describing the coming of a degenerate age and the general decline of the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>31</sup> These canonical depictions, in turn, were to effectuate a powerful hold over the Tibetan consciousness as a means to make sense of the various geopolitical conflicts taking place in the region.<sup>32</sup> Thus, drawing from both canonical scriptures describing the coming of the Kāliyuga and prophecies appearing in the *Terma (gter ma)* literature of the Nyingmapa school, Tsang Khenchen repeatedly foretells Ngawang Namgyal's mission in the following terms:

“From out of the circumstance of the spread of the Five Degeneracies, the prophecies in the *Mkha' ri'i zhu lan* which are in accord with the actions of the Noble Avalokiteśvara, who intended to produce a fortunate eon, say that in the time of degeneracy, these southern regions would become the field of conversion for an emanation of Avalokiteśvara, that that emanation would have a karmic connection with Yeshé Gonpo, and that by performing the evocation of the Gonpo the border armies would be made afraid and pacified, that the teachings

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<sup>30</sup> The *Five Degenerations*, which Tsang Khenchen observes as the vital signs of the degenerate age, comprise of: the degeneration of life-span (*tshe'i snyigs ma*), the degeneration of time (*dus kyi snyigs ma*), the degeneration of negative emotions (*nyon mongs kyi snyigs ma*), the degeneration of the view (*lta ba'i snyigs ma*), and the degeneration of experience (*nyams kyi snyigs ma*). Tsang Khenchen directly links the political turmoil in Tibet during his lifetime, including the Mongol invasions, as characteristic signs of the degenerate age. See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fols. 4.b-5.a.

<sup>31</sup> For more on early canonical references to millenarianism, see Gelle 2020 and Collins 1998.

<sup>32</sup> For more on Tibetan millenarianism, see Brauer Dolma 1985 and Childs 1999.

would spread and maintain themselves for a long time.”<sup>33</sup>

It would be difficult to overestimate the import of the above millenarian vision to Tsang Khenchen’s articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. For Tsang Khenchen, the very identity and *raison d’être* of Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara is framed within this millenarian mission. Time and time again, he reminds his reader that the totality of Ngawang Namgyal’s activities were performed as skillful means for the sake of sentient beings through the establishment of a new fortunate eon in the Southern region that would become Bhutan.

### The Natural World

In addition to the discursive modes of scripture and prophecy acting as critical hermeneutical tools to articulate his vision of the Bhutanese theocracy, Tsang Khenchen also extensively draws on the natural environment as an important source of authority and legitimation in the biography. In the social world that is created within the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, the natural environment figures as a prominent authorizing agent, responding to and confirming the sanctity or impiety of subjects through signs and omens. Tsang Khenchen’s references to the natural world are often laden with the kind of sensuous language that I described above as a distinctive feature of his aesthetic of excess. In a majority of cases, Tsang Khenchen’s descriptions of the natural world are

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<sup>33</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 3.a-b., Ardussi 1975: (II) 2-3.

of its celebration of the divinity and mission of Ngawang Namgyal. Key moments of the hierarch's life, including his birth, enthronement, travels in Central Tibet, arrival in the Southern region that would become Bhutan, meditative retreats in the Thimphu valley, establishment of the Drukpa state and the building of temples and fortresses in Western Bhutan are all accompanied by miraculous signs of approval by the natural world.

When Ngawang Namgyal traveled as a child with his father in Central Tibet, for example, "the sun would shine brightly in the sky wherever they went and over and over again, its orb bore the crown of five colors, and a white rainbow rain made it look like a road of the gods;"<sup>34</sup> or on the occasion of his enthronement,

"from the peak of the great snow mountain, abode of Gangpa Sangpo (Gangs pa bzang po), lord of all wealth, there came a white rainbow cloud, like a stretched out piece of silk, along the path of the gods, stretching throughout the region of Nyang like a canopy. From it, the bits of nectar produced white flower settled down gently while the clear and unsullied sun shined in such a way that it neither seemed too cold or too hot. Everywhere was heard the delightful sound of music, while a gentle wind arose bearing the incense of Aloe, Gugul, Sandal, Camphor and the like. (...) Thus did it become a fortunate era of thought for the spread of the doctrine of the Buddha in the field of the Noble Avalokiteśvara."<sup>35</sup>

As in the passage above, Tsang Khenchen's references to the natural environment tend to express a correlation between the vitality of the Buddhist dharma and the fecundity of the landscape. In another passage describing Ngawang Namgyal's

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<sup>34</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 45.a.

<sup>35</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fol. 61.a, Ardussi 1975: (I) 141-2.



receiving teachings and initiations of the Drukpa sect from his father while still in the womb, Tsang Khenchen writes,

“The fruit of the power of that, was that in the trees of the regions of Lhomön, India and China, happy forests where the evocatory tantras were spread, bore miraculous ripe fruits which were neither cultivated nor planted, and the animals of the dense forests acted like aged *rṣis*, living without fear and happily, like the sound of a bee in a wild pig’s ears becoming the sound of *samādhī*.”

For Tsang Khenchen, the lush and verdant landscape of Bhutan, characterized as a land of inexhaustible natural riches, was proof of its privileged place as the destined field of activity of countless Buddhist masters, of which Ngawang Namgyal, as the emanation of Avalokiteśvara, stood as the towering figure. The *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud’s* account of Ngawang Namgyal’s fateful journey southward, for example, describes the Bhutanese region as a veritable earthly paradise whose forests “beautified with a wealth of gem-like flowers and fruits,” crystal stupa-like mountains, lakes and rivers - the abodes of countless local protective deities - constitute a magically-produced maṇḍala to be offered to the successive emanations of the Noble Avalokiteśvara.<sup>36</sup> In these and other passages, the abundance and luxuriance of the Bhutanese landscape are directly tied to its status as a receptacle for the Buddhist teachings and the activities of Buddhist saints.

In many ways, the natural environment figures in Tsang Khenchen’s account

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<sup>36</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 5.b-9.b.

as an arbiter of the socio-moral order of a given space. It is largely presented as an autonomous entity whose manifestation is indicative of the human capacity to embody virtue. We already saw in the previous chapter how Tsang Khenchen, upon crossing the Bhutanese border, draws a strong contrast between the lush valleys of Bhutan and the dry and desolate war-torn landscape of Tibet in his own autobiography. Similarly in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, his references to Tibet after the Mongol takeover in 1642 are characterized by depravity, with diseases and famine being symptomatic of the degenerate age taking hold of the region.<sup>37</sup>

### Mastery of the World

A final and substantive source of authority in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is Tsang Khenchen's edification of Ngawang Namgyal as an idealized and unparalleled Buddhist scholar and adept. We have already traced the contours of the rise of the religious hierarch in Tibetan society as a receptacle for authority standing at the pinnacle of the social order in Chapter two, and this section will focus on demonstrating how Tsang Khenchen's account of the figure of Ngawang Namgyal not only participates in this novel vision of religious authority, but very much exemplifies it. In many ways, Tsang Khenchen, himself the embodiment of Buddhist erudition in seventeenth century Tibet, constructs through the figure of Ngawang Namgyal a perfect archetype of the

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<sup>37</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 115.b-116.a.

reconfigured role and place of the religious hierarch in the Tibetan social world. As I will examine below, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* epitomizes Ngawang Namgyal as both *paṇḍita* and *siddha*, whose perfect mastery of time, space, and discourse, to borrow Yamamoto's typology, at once legitimizes and makes legible his state-building project.

I have already noted above Tsang Khenchen's emphasis on Ngawang Namgyal's prodigious scholarly learning, dedicating much of the early chapters of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* to Ngawang Namgyal's prodigy as young scholar. Proceeding in linear chronological fashion, Tsang Khenchen builds a scholarly profile for his biographical subject that is reflective of Tibet's distinctive understanding of the figure of the *paṇḍita* as the pinnacle of scholarly authority and worldly knowledge. Beginning with the study of reading and writing at the age of three and grammar at the age of five, Tsang Khenchen courses through Ngawang Namgyal's impressive and somewhat inconceivable program of study in the Buddhist classificatory system of the *Five Major Sciences* (*rig gnas chen po lnga*) and *Five Minor Sciences* (*rig gnas chung ba lnga*) such that by his late teens, Ngawang Namgyal had extensively studied and mastered the fields of grammar, logic, philosophy, medicine, the visual arts, astrology, poetry, prosody, lexicography, drama, and received extensive transmissions of the tantric corpuses associated to his lineage. Throughout, Ngawang Namgyal is portrayed as having supernatural abilities of intellectual absorption, effortlessly memorizing and

assimilating a complex canon of texts and transmissions. At the age of eight, Tsang Khenchen tells us, “this charming and beautiful little child and bodhisattva of eight years” gave his first teaching on the subject of the *Hevajra Tantra* to an assembly of monks and yogis from many leading monasteries, “who all gathered in a large group and listened to him out of astonishment and reverence, saying, ‘Who is this one? Mañjughoṣa?’”<sup>38</sup> Or as Tsang Khenchen writes elsewhere quoting from the *kun tu bzang po'i zlos gar*, “The sciences of poetics, prosody, lexicography, and drama; of astrology, crafts, medicine, grammar and logic; like attachment/craving grows through intimacy, he obtained by merely looking at them.”<sup>39</sup> Ngawang Namgyal’s scholarly authority is also grounded, for Tsang Khenchen, in his impeccable discipline and diligence, based on his extensive study of and conduct in accordance with the *Vinaya*. For Tsang Khenchen, this is especially exemplified by Ngawang Namgyal’s composition in his teenage years of a new constitutional document (*bca' yig*) for the monastic community at Ralung, urging strict diligence (*brtson 'grus*) in all of its activities.<sup>40</sup>

Through much the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Tsang Khenchen’s deliberations on Ngawang Namgyal’s scholarly learning and discipline are directly linked to his worldly activities as a state-builder, pointing to a correlation between

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<sup>38</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 27.b-28.a.

<sup>39</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 80.b.

<sup>40</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fols. 109.a-110.b.

knowledge of the Buddhist sciences and effective governance. In his words, a wheel-turning king has no use benefitting sentient beings without extensive knowledge of the sciences<sup>41</sup>, and for that matter, it precisely through their acquisition of knowledge in the *Five Sciences* (*pañcavidhyāsthāna*) that bodhisattvas are able to obtain omniscience and benefit others.<sup>42</sup> As such, a central element of Ngawang Namgyal's authority as a bodhisattva king in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is his mastery of knowledge and discourse, able to centre his state-building activities within the framework of Indic classical Buddhist models of science and conduct.

This last point connects to another form of mastery and source of authority employed by Tsang Khenchen in the biography. In as much as Ngawang Namgyal is situated within an authoritative Indic framework of knowledge and prestige through his scholarly trajectory and achievements, his authority is equally built on his identity as an authentic lineage holder and *tulku*, directly linking him to some of India and Tibet's most illustrious Buddhist power bases. As the structure of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* attests, with the first two volumes of the work dedicated to an account of the various incarnations of Avalokiteśvara in India and Tibet including the lives of the various Ralung hierarchs and his direct predecessor Pema Karpo, Tsang Khenchen places much emphasis on Ngawang Namgyal's position as simultaneously the

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<sup>41</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 65.a.

<sup>42</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 69.a.

receptacle for and the embodiment of a long line of authoritative Buddhist figures. As a scion of the Gya clan and hierarch of the Drukpa seat of Ralung, he is linked to an authentic and unbroken lineage of successive masters tracing their transmissions all the way to the figure of the Buddha, and, as the emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, he is the simultaneous embodiment of an incarnation line that includes the mythical king of Shambhala Puṇḍarīka, the Yarlung emperor Songsten Gampo, Tibet's first abbot Śāntarakṣita, the Indian *mahasiddha* Nāropa, the Drukpa sect's founder Tsangpa Gyará, and the successive Drukchen incarnations of Gyalwang Jé Kunga Paljor, Jamyang Chökyi Drakpa and Kunkhyen Pema Karpo.<sup>43</sup>

As I will discuss in the next chapter, even though it would appear that Ngawang Namgyal himself preferred for his succession to follow a hereditary line, Tsang Khenchen unambiguously emphasizes and favors the founder of Bhutan's status as a *tulku* in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, spending much ink linking Ngawang Namgyal's activities to the legacies of his previous rebirths. As such, Ngawang Namgyal's identity in the biography simultaneously invokes all of his previous rebirths, collapsing the temporal distances between these figures into his own person.

Depending on the context, Tsang Khenchen tells us, Ngawang Namgyal would appear to others as the great *siddha* Nāropa, Tsangpa Gyará, Milarepa, or even

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<sup>43</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fol. 6.a. This list represents the authoritative rebirth lineage of Ngawang Namgyal according to Tsang Khenchen.

Padmasambhava.<sup>44</sup> As Yamamoto has discussed in the case of Zhang Tsöndrü Drakpa, such a process represents a mastery of time, wherein a powerful link is created, through narrative and trope, "to a rich and authoritative past of powerful adepts and buddhas; to a legitimizing and identity-supporting lineage."<sup>45</sup> In the case of Ngawang Namgyal, there is no doubt that Tsang Khenchen's narrative emphasis on his double-position as hierarch of the Ralung seat and embodiment of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara through an authoritative rebirth lineage functioned as a powerful source of legitimating authority in seventeenth century Tibet.

Finally and perhaps most significant for his state-building project, Ngawang Namgyal is equated in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* with the figure of the all-powerful tantric *siddha*, whose yogic accomplishments, enabling him to manipulate the material and immaterial worlds, signify a mastery of space itself. This is arguably the image to which Ngawang Namgyal was most famously associated to during his lifetime and thereafter, his name often preceded by the title of *Great Magician / Sorcerer* (*mthu chen*). Such an image is cultivated by Tsang Khenchen throughout the biography as a powerful hermeneutic lens to make sense of the realities of state-building, including the use of warfare and violence. As a great tantric adept and practitioner of the occult, Ngawang Namgyal shares a privileged and intimate relationship with the protective

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<sup>44</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 118.a-b.

<sup>45</sup> Yamamoto 2012: 32.

deities of the Drukpa sect and those of the local landscape of Bhutan, granting him the ability to enlist and monopolize their power at his own will and to his advantage. As I have discussed in chapter two, such a source of authority was especially prized in the milieu of sixteenth and seventeenth century Tibet, and it is by no accident that such an image forms a central component of Tsang Khenchen's depiction of Bhutan's founder. In the logic of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Ngawang Namgyal's total mastery of space made the whole world and its riches accessible to him. For the case of Bhutan, this meant the ability to seal and secure the land in such a way as to usher the possibility of an idealized social order therein.

According to Tsang Khenchen, Ngawang Namgyal's magical abilities manifested early in the hierarch's life, where in addition to the numerous miracles discussed above accompanying key moments of his early life, other signs occurred confirming that he would become possessed of great magical power. At the age of five, for example, when offering *torma* (*gtor ma*) to the protective deity Palden Lhamo (Lha mo Dud gsol ma), a blazing fire erupted from the *torma*, which was interpreted by his grandfather Mipham Chögyal as a sign that the boy would become a great magician (*mthu chen*).<sup>46</sup> As is well known, however, it is the chief protective deity of the Drukpa sect Yeshé Gonpo (Ye shes mgon po), a raven-headed manifestation of Mahākāla, with which Ngawang Namgyal was to develop a most intimate relationship. It is Yeshé Gonpo who famously appeared

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<sup>46</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 17.b.



to Ngawang Namgyal in a dream encouraging him to journey southward and who later offered him the Southern Region (lho smon) as his heavenly field (*zhing khams*).<sup>47</sup> Throughout the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Tsang Khenchen presents the relationship between Ngawang Namgyal and Yeshé Gonpo as one of intimate symbiosis, whereupon the two form an inseparable bond exerting power over both human and non-human realms.

Ngawang Namgyal's magical abilities of enlisting Yeshé Gonpo and other deities' wrathful nature often occur in the biography when the Drukpa hierarch is engaged in ritual warfare against his Tibetan adversaries. As we are told repeatedly, it is through his use of ritual magic that Ngawang Namgyal and his supporters were victorious over the various invading armies sent by the Tsang king Karma Phuntsok Namgyal and later by the Ganden Phodrang government. As I have discussed above, Ngawang Namgyal's use of ritual violence is legitimated in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* by making an appeal to scriptural authority emphasizing the need to protect the Buddhist dharma. Interestingly, Tsang Khenchen also greatly minimizes the violence that must have occurred during these military confrontations. His account of the first invasion from Tsang, for example, describes how Ngawang Namgyal's use of magic terrified the invading army, causing it to immediately disperse and flee, leaving only a

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<sup>47</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fols. 123.a-b, and vol. Nga fol. 18.b.

single casualty.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, Tsang Khenchen tells us that owing to Ngawang Namgyal being possessed of the armies of Yeshé Gonpo and his retinue, every invading army that came over the mountain passes would simply lose their power to fight and enter into a daze, easily taken hostage and/or sent back where they came from.<sup>49</sup> In the few instances when casualties do occur through Ngawang Namgyal's magical interventions, these are often rationalized by Tsang Khenchen as being the result of the victim's own negative karma, as in the case of the death of the Tsang king Karma Phuntsok Namgyal from smallpox.

In many ways, Tsang Khenchen's general ambivalence on the subject of violence and his many attempts at minimizing its implications evoke what Collins has termed "the utopian paradox of the non-violent king."<sup>50</sup> In the logic of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, it is precisely Ngawang Namgyal's complete mastery of space and manipulation of its forces that allows Tsang Khenchen to maintain and articulate such a utopian paradox. According to him, it is by first taming of all of the classes of deities inhabiting the natural world of Bhutan and bounding them by oath to protect the Buddhist teachings that Ngawang Namgyal was able to usher a new fortunate eon for sentient beings in the region; one where "travelers and children could go about

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<sup>48</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 18.a-b.

<sup>49</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 124.a-b.

<sup>50</sup> Collins 1998: 420-422.

peacefully like an old woman carrying a pot of gold and cowherds could be happy and sing songs in the empty forests, instead of thinking that harmful ghosts, men and *asuras* would come and cause them harm.”<sup>51</sup>

Again, Tsang Khenchen’s emphasis on Ngawang Namgyal’s intimacy with and mastery over the forces animating the natural world has important consequences for the social order that the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* articulates. When Ngawang Namgyal emerged from his three-year retreat in the Thimphu valley in 1625 and announced his establishment of a new state in the southern region, he famously composed an edict copied and sent by messengers to power places all over the natural world, calling on all the deities, demons and spirits of the region to obey to his rule and not falter from their oaths to him to protect the Buddhist teachings.<sup>52</sup> These and other acts in which the forces of the natural world are called upon to participate in the state-building project of Ngawang Namgyal in very tangible ways entail a social world that is characterized by a distinct understanding of the role and place of the natural environment. In the social order conjured by the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, the natural world itself, as we have seen above, and the forces inhabiting it, are all active agents and participants of the social world. Arguably, their role and responsibilities for the establishment of the enlightened society envisioned by Tsang Khenchen in the

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<sup>51</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 10.a-b; Ardussi 1975: (II) 13.

<sup>52</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 84.a-b.

biography are even greater than that of humans and certainly lie at the heart of Ngawang Namgyal's constructed authority as a tantric *siddha* and master of space.

As the above discussion entails, a key source of authority and interpretive model in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is the edification of Ngawang Namgyal as an unparalleled scholar and *siddha*, whose omniscience and yogic power entail a mastery of the world itself. Such an identification is readily apparent in Ngawang Namgyal's own representation of himself in his composition of the famous *Sixteen I* verses (*nga bcu drug ma*), composed during the early consolidation of the region under his authority and which eventually became incorporated as his official seal (see figure 1), translated below by Aris:

"I am he who turns the wheel of the dual system (*chos srid zung 'brel*).  
I am everyone's good refuge.  
I am he who upholds the teachings of the Glorious Drukpa.  
I am the subduer of all who disguise themselves as Drukpa.  
I achieve the realization of the Sarasvatī of Composition.  
I am the pure source of moral aphorisms.  
I am the possessor of an unlimited view.  
I am he who refutes those with false views.  
I am the possessor of great power in debate.  
Who is the rival that does not tremble before me?  
I am the hero who destroys the hosts of demons.  
Who is the strong man that can repulse my power?  
I am mighty in speech that expounds religion.  
I am wise in all the sciences.  
I am the incarnation prophesied by the patriarchs.

I am the executioner of false incarnations.”<sup>53</sup>



Figure 1. The Seal of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (rendered by Bhutanese graphic designer Pema Gyamtsho).

As is attested in the verses above, Ngawang Namgyal’s identity as an unparalleled

<sup>53</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 31.a-b.; Aris 1979: 214.

scholar of the *Major and Minor Sciences*, his status as lineage holder and *tulku* incarnation, and his power as tantric hero who subdues and destroys the hosts of demons and/or false incarnations lied at the heart of his vision of himself as the soon-to-be head of the Bhutanese state. Quoted in full in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Tsang Khenchen returns to the verses at various points in the biography linking Ngawang Namgyal's self-representation and his own edification of the hierarchy as an archetype of the paradigmatic scholar and *siddha* whose knowledge and power are equated to a total mastery of the world.

### **Constructing a *Theotopia***

This chapter began with a discussion of how the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* acted as a blueprint for the Drukpa theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal's enunciation of an idealized Buddhist realm which not only re-envisioned conceptions of governance but articulated a novel vision of the social order itself. I have termed such an idealized vision a *theotopia*, conceived of as the articulation of a perfect moral commonwealth that is ruled and embodied by an unmediated and omnipotent *theos*. Drawing on my above observations of the hermeneutical strategies of Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre, this chapter's final section will explore how these inform a distinctive vision of Ngawang Namgyal as a divine and unmediated source of authority and of Bhutan as his privileged and idealized earthly realm.

I have already pointed to the significance and ubiquity of the figure of Avalokiteśvara as the overarching frame through which Tsang Khenchen portrays the life and activities of Bhutan's founding figure in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. Right from the very opening verses of the biography, Ngawang Namgyal is addressed as the embodiment of the celestial bodhisattva incarnating in the world to benefit sentient beings,<sup>54</sup> and throughout, his state-building activities in the southern region are rationalized within the millenarian mission of reinstating the Buddhist dharma in an age of strife and delusion. Drawing from a range of canonical sources, Avalokiteśvara is introduced by Tsang Khenchen as the Buddhist savior divinity *par excellence*, uniquely fit and predisposed to address the suffering of sentient beings during the degenerate age. In addition, Tsang Khenchen puts an emphasis on the innumerable means through which the bodhisattva effectuates his mission, adapting to the aptitudes of sentient beings through Buddhism's characteristic notion of *skillful means* (*upāya*). Tsang Khenchen writes,

“In sum, the Noble Avalokiteśvara taught the dharma in the manner of a Tathāgata to whatever sentient beings were fit to be converted by a Tathāgata, as a bodhisattva for those fit to be converted by a bodhisattva, and as a śrāvaka for those fit to be converted by a śrāvaka. And in this way he worked for the benefit of immeasurable sentient beings, to convert all in whatever way, whether they be preceptors, fully ordained monks, upāsakas, householders, kings, ministers, generals, gods, demi-gods, asuras, piśācas, animals etc... and this is said even by

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<sup>54</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol Ka fols. 1.b-3.b.

the *saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra*.”<sup>55</sup>

It would be difficult to overstate how central the notion of *upāya* is to the overall functioning of the theocratic vision of Tsang Khenchen in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. Skillful means provides not only a rationale for a divinity like Avalokiteśvara to incarnate in human form, but, just as importantly, for such a human form to be a king. For Tsang Khenchen, a bodhisattva’s dispensation of the Buddhist dharma through worldly activities, including those of kingship, are entirely consistent with the demands of the reality of the degenerate age. He writes, “As is accounted in their biographies and *avadānas*, on account of the difficulty of calming and subduing unsuitable beings, the great bodhisattvas took the manner of kings, and brought sentient beings to peace by means of the ten laws of virtue.”<sup>56</sup> It is thus through their unwavering compassion and dedication to the welfare of sentient beings that bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara chief among them, incarnate in the world and adopt whatever means suitable to tame them.

This is certainly the rationale adopted by Tsang Khenchen in describing Ngawang Namgyal’s decision to take up the mantle of kingship. At first reluctant, Ngawang Namgyal receives visions of his Drukpa forbears and tutelary deities urging him to do so by directly linking political governance with the bodhisattvic mission of

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<sup>55</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ka fol. 10.b., Ardussi 1975: (I) 15-16.

<sup>56</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fols. 66.b-67.a.



guiding sentient beings through *saṃsāra*.<sup>57</sup> Tsang Khenchen proceeds to frame the remainder of Ngawang Namgyal's activities in the biography through the category of the *Ten Wheels* of the *cakravartin*, taming sentient beings through the characteristic instruments of political rule, including the rule of law. He is however quick to remind his reader that Ngawang Namgyal was no ordinary or worldly king, even one whose rule was deeply motivated by Buddhist concerns as would be characteristic of the *cakravartin*. Rather, kingship was simply one of the many appropriate means through which Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara could guide sentient beings along a Buddhist soteriological path. Much of the above-discussed hermeneutical strategies of legitimation, I would argue, are directly linked to this concern, acting as important interpretive models for Tsang Khenchen to emphasize Ngawang Namgyal's divinity over and above his position as the newly-founded state's monarch. His use of scripture, prophesy, environmental agency, and the images of unparalleled scholarship and mastery of the world all accentuate, in no uncertain terms, Ngawang Namgyal's otherworldliness and divinity.

The very final lines of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* drive this point further by including a discussion of Ngawang Namgyal's ontology through a recourse to the characteristic Vajrayāna language of exteriority (*phyi*), interiority (*nang*), and secrecy (*gsang*). According to this classificatory system, Ngawang Namgyal, as a magical

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<sup>57</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fols. 65.b-67.a.

manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, externally protects the Buddhist teachings in the kingdom blessed by Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the manner of a *cakravartin*, internally nurtures the monastic community's development of purified realization, and secretly subdues the armies of Māra in the manner of a *Tathāgata* who obtains victory in all directions.<sup>58</sup> Tsang Khenchen employs the contrastive language of exteriority and interiority similarly elsewhere in the biography, making a contrast between the external worldly activities of Ngawang Namgyal and his inner religious nature. In one such passage, he makes an apposition between Bhutan's founder and the fortresses (*rdzong*) that he famously erected, describing how they both externally protect the kingdom and teachings and internally perpetually perform the virtuous activities of the Mahāyāna.<sup>59</sup> In all of these cases, it is the interiority of Ngawang Namgyal that Tsang Khenchen privileges, stressing his fundamental religious and supra-mundane nature over his outward worldly activities.

Finally, Ngawang Namgyal's divinity is further characterized in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* by his being a vehicle for the manifestation of a physical and social utopia in Bhutan. I have already discussed above how the lush physical landscape of Bhutan, described by Tsang Khenchen as an earthly paradise, is directly tied to its status as a receptacle for the Buddhist teachings and the activities of Ngawang Namgyal *qua*

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<sup>58</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 159.a.

<sup>59</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 155.b.

Avalokiteśvara. In addition, Ngawang Namgyal's taming of the forces of the natural world assured the possibility of securing the land from all external and internal threats. In the final chapter of the biography, Tsang Khenchen further articulates such a utopian motif in social terms, describing an idealized society that is entirely oriented towards Ngawang Namgyal's theocratic and millenarian project. Through his activities as a *Wheel-turning king* who protects the Buddhist teachings and establishes the rule of law in accordance with the *Ten Virtues*, he brings peace and stability to the region, freeing his subjects from fear and anxiety and ushering a new fortunate era of happiness.<sup>60</sup> In more concrete terms, this translates for Tsang Khenchen into various administrative initiatives that, he claims, brought unprecedented prosperity and happiness in the region. This includes the building and renovating of fortresses, tackling water scarcity through the development of irrigation systems, building many new roads and bridges, introducing new techniques in agriculture for better productivity and quality of produce, and the intensification and profitability of trade with India, Nepal and Tibet.<sup>61</sup>

More importantly for Tsang Khenchen, these social programs are complemented with the flourishing and spread of the Buddhist teachings in the region, which, he tells us, was manifested in "paintings of the *Tathāgata*, the use of the *rañjanā* script, many learned people, wise and virtuous leaders, and the signs of the spread of fundamental

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<sup>60</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 144.a-b.

<sup>61</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 145.b-146.a.

treatises on elegant speech, poetry and the learned astrological sciences, wherein even the common people speak virtuously using religious terms...” In the newly-founded state, Tsang Khenchen continues, all of the surplus wealth was reinvested in the “maintenance of the monastic community and offerings to the triple gem, rather than being consumed in non-meritorious ways.” This, in turn, guaranteed the collective merit and fate of the Bhutanese subjects, making them destined for the promise of enlightenment (*byang chub kyi skal ba bzang po*). Herein lies the heart of Tsang Khenchen’s vision of Bhutan as an ideal Buddhist society. Through the guidance and manifest blessings of its divine ruler, such a society builds wealth and prosperity through meritorious activities governed by Buddhist understandings of ethics with the explicit soteriological goal of enlightenment. In that world, social mobility is entirely governed by the capacity to embody virtue, interpreted through the lens of Buddhist erudition and virtuosity and confirmed by favorable signs in the natural world and society itself. In many ways, the newly-founded theocratic state of Bhutan represented for Tsang Khenchen an opportunity to envisage and conjure a social order which recognized the above-discussed Buddhist hermeneutics of legitimation as self-evident. Doing so entailed recognizing Bhutan as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara’s privileged field of activity, itself an earthly manifestation of Amitābha’s *Pure Land* of Sukhāvātī, wherein all beings, through their meritorious deeds and karmic affiliation to Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara are destined for enlightenment. Tsang Khenchen writes,

“Accordingly it is established through scripture and many tantras that all karmically involved beings in this Southern Land are one with the great wheel of the mandala, and that through force of substance and evolution they shall become part of the retinue of the *Mahāvajradhāra* (Ngawang Namgyal) and be placed on the pathway to ripening and fruition.”<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

It is my hope that the above analysis of the style and content of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is illustrative of both the radical ideological transformations taking place in the Tibetan region during the seventeenth century and the way in which the literary genre of life-writing (*rnam thar*) participated in these transformations. As a work of political theology articulating a distinctive vision of the Bhutanese theocracy and its attendant social world, the biography of Bhutan’s founding figure pushes against boundaries of genre and style to reveal a multivalent and multilayered narrative of edification, justification, and persuasion. As I have argued above, lying at the heart of Tsang Khenchen’s project in his composition of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is the articulation of an idealized social order in Bhutan that is intricately and intimately linked to Ngawang Namgyal’s position as a divine being and emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. I have termed such a vision a *theotopia* in an effort to underline the interconnectedness and reciprocity between Ngawang Namgyal’s role as an omnipotent and unmediated *theos* and Bhutan as a physical and social *utopia* in

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<sup>62</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 156.b., Ardussi 1975: (II) 195-6.

Tsang Khenchen's envisioning of the newly-founded Bhutanese state.

If this chapter can purport to have provided an overview of Tsang Khenchen's literary construction of an idealized Buddhist state in Bhutan, it has said close to nothing of the historical realities surrounding the founding of the Drukpa state. It is thus to this dimension that we turn to in the next chapter, exploring the broader historical environment and implications occasioned by a theocratic vision such as Tsang Khenchen's in an effort to draw larger conclusions on the nature of the Bhutanese state and the rise of theocratic movements in the Greater Tibetan region. As we shall explore, while in some ways the theocratic vision articulated by Tsang Khenchen in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* was at the very best short-lived, in others it has left an indelible mark on Bhutanese conceptions of the state and national identity which perdures till this day.

## CHAPTER FIVE. SITUATING THE BHUTANESE THEOCRACY

### Introduction

In an effort to address this dissertation's fundamental questions related to the rise of theocratic movements in the Tibetan region during the seventeenth century, the previous two chapters have centered on the person of Tsang Khenchen and his articulation of a literary *theotopia* in the newly-founded Bhutanese state of Ngawang Namgyal. Chapter three focused on the remarkable life of the great scholar from Tsang and the milieu in which he came to prominence, arguing that the Tsangpa hegemony's novel conceptions of governance and the union of religious and temporal domains (*chos srid zung 'brel*) certainly exerted much influence on his understanding and valuation of Ngawang Namgyal's state-building efforts. Chapter four then proceeded to examine closely Tsang Khenchen's articulation of the theoretical underpinnings of the Bhutanese theocracy through his composition of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, arguing that lying at the heart of his project was the literary construction of an idealized Buddhist state which not only reconceived previous models of governance but sought the enunciation of a new social order. In this final chapter, we examine the broader historical environment and the implications of such a theocratic vision for the formation

of the Drukpa government of Ngawang Namgyal in an effort to draw broader conclusions on the nature of the Bhutanese state and the rise of theocratic movements in the Greater Tibetan region.

As I will seek to demonstrate below, the theocratic vision articulated in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* differed in some significant ways from Ngawang Namgyal's own envisioning of the Bhutanese state. As such, the picture of Bhutan's founding is substantially more complex than the historiography tends to portray, involving multiple and contending views of the theoretical nature of the state. Even though Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre was largely canonized as the state's blueprint by later Bhutanese authors and historians, I will argue below that it nonetheless represents a distinct perspective that encapsulates both the subjective idiosyncrasies of its author and the broader structural changes of the period. Exploring the implications of Tsang Khenchen's theocratic vision thus necessitates an examination of the historical context of its composition, paying particular attention to Tsang Khenchen's creative mediation of the social and political constraints and opportunities of his environment. In other words, this chapter's work largely consist in reading the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* against the grain, drawing attention to the ways in which, through its notable gaps, silences and ellipses, it is engaged in a mutually constitutive relationship with its immediate historical environment in Bhutan and broader developments in the Tibetan region.



Such an analysis will take us back to the language of Bourdieu and the field of religio-political rule, examining how the enunciation of the Bhutanese theocracy figures within the overall trajectory of the rise of a theocratic movement in the Tibetan region. As I will seek to demonstrate, a higher degree of ideological continuity than was previously envisaged can be traced between the Bhutanese state and the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet, and a striking number of parallels and affinities between the state-building projects of Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso are immediately apparent. As I will contend, however, while Bhutan's experiment with theocracy reflects its position within the incremental changes shaping the field of religio-political rule during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it also simultaneously reflects conditions and developments unique to Bhutan. As such, Bhutan's theocratic vision is broad in some respects and singular in others, and much of this chapter will be dedicated to parsing out such a multivalent nature. It is my hope that doing so will shed greater light not only on the remarkable vision and experiment conducted in Bhutan during the seventeenth century, but, just as importantly, on the project of theocracy itself.

### **Historical Context: Bhutan**

#### The Habitus of Ngawang Namgyal

I have already detailed the contours of the life of Ngawang Namgyal and his rise

to power in the Southern region that would become Bhutan in chapter two of this dissertation. Here, we focus on the historical processes through which Bhutan's founding figure was able to consolidate his authority over the region and enact his particular vision of the Bhutanese state. It may be said outright that such a task poses significant difficulties, the first of which relates to the general paucity of sources reflecting Ngawang Namgyal's own positioning vis à vis the theoretical underpinnings of the Bhutanese state. Besides his correspondences with the kings of Tsang Karma Phuntsok Namgyal and Karma Tenkyong Wangpo preserved in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* and the *Sixteen I (nga bcu drug ma)* verses incorporated into his official seal, we have none of Ngawang Namgyal's own writings to rely on. That said, these sources combined with other accounts of the period of Bhutan's founding, including the Tenth Jé Khenpo Tenzin Chögyel's (r. 1755-1762) famous *Religious History of the Southern Region (Lho'i chos 'byung)*, are enough to infer, in provisional and broad terms, Ngawang Namgyal's understanding of his position and office within the context of the nascent Bhutanese state.

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, it is important to remember that Ngawang Namgyal was a deeply contentious figure during his lifetime. His journey southward to the Bhutanese region at the age of twenty-two was not a customary teaching tour like those of his Ralung forebears but a flight from a perceived threat to his own life based on his refusal to comply with royal orders. There is reason to believe,

as Ardussi has claimed,<sup>1</sup> that Ngawang Namgyal at first envisioned his stay in the Bhutanese region to be temporary, aiming to resume his abbatial duties at Ralung once his disputed case as the rebirth of Pema Karpo was resolved with the Tsangpa king Karma Puntsok Namgyal. His unrelenting and militant character, in full display in his letters to the king of Tsang, however made such a process unlikely and further antagonized Tsangpa authorities. By the time of his final retreat and death in 1651, Ngawang Namgyal's notoriety as a master of occult practices inflicting mass destruction upon his adversaries, including the very death of Karma Puntsok Namgyal and other members of his court, was widespread throughout the Greater Tibetan region. His often cunning military tactics resulting in humiliating defeats for the newly-installed Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama, paired with his unyielding intolerance of opposition to his rule made him a deeply polarizing figure whose image as a combative and contemptuous leader stands in sharp contrast to the portrait painted by Tsang Khenchen in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, a point which further underlines the apologetic nature of the work.

If Ngawang Namgyal was indeed such a polarizing figure during his lifetime, one may legitimately question how he was able to consolidate his authority over the Bhutanese region in such a short time. When he arrived in the Bhutanese region in 1616, Ngawang Namgyal was immediately received as a cherished guest of two of Western

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<sup>1</sup> See Ardussi 2004: 37, and 1977: 206.

Bhutan's most important ruling families, the house of Obtso ('Obs mtsho) and the Dorjédenpa (Rdo rje gdan pa) collateral branch of the Gya clan tracing its descent from the famous fifteenth century yogi Drukpa Kunlé ('Brug pa kun legs 1455-1529), and just a year after his arrival, he was able to rally his supporters into a military defense against the troops of the Tsangpa king Karma Phuntsok Namgyal. By the time that he declared his establishment of the Drukpa state following his three year retreat in 1625, Ngawang Namgyal had secured the support of most of the prominent ruling families of Western Bhutan.

I will claim that Ngawang Namgyal's successes at consolidating the region under his authority can be traced to two broad and interrelated factors. First, the Drukpa sect had a long history of propagation in the region dating as early as the twelfth century through the figure of Phajo Drukong Shigpo (Pha jo 'Brug sgom zhig po c.1184-1251). The history of the Drukpa sect in Bhutan has been extensively written on elsewhere<sup>2</sup> and it will suffice to mention here that by the seventeenth century, Western Bhutan was home to a number of important Drukpa monasteries and the sect as a whole enjoyed much patronage by Western Bhutan's prominent ruling families, including the descendants of Phajo Drukong Shigpo who ruled much of the Thimphu valley. Second, Ngawang Namgyal owed much of his authority in the region to his position as a scion of the Gya clan and seventeenth throne-holder of the monastery of Ralung. This last

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Ardussi 1977, Aris 1979, Yonten Dargye 2001, and Phuntsho 2013.

point is important. Despite the general erosion of Tibet's ancient aristocratic lines in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as we have observed in chapter three, it would be difficult to overestimate the degree to which Ngawang Namgyal's pedigree played a decisive factor in his state-building efforts. When he arrived in the Southern region seeking refuge from impending peril, Ngawang Namgyal relied first and foremost on the intricate web of genealogical connections between his and Western Bhutan's prominent ruling families, and, in time, it is primarily through the support of these families that he was able to secure his place and conceive of a new state under his authority. Such an observation does not undermine the renewed understanding of the religious hierarch as a locus of power during this period, which certainly played an important role in Ngawang Namgyal's successes, but rather points to the persistence and endurance of older models of authority despite the sweeping changes of the seventeenth century. In other words, as both a scion of the Gya clan invested as Ralung's throne-holder and the claimed rebirth of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line, Ngawang Namgyal had, so to speak, a foot in both old and new models of authority. As I will argue in the following pages, such a dual position had important consequences for how Ngawang Namgyal conceived of the Bhutanese state, and there is not a more pertinent illustration of this point than his views on the issue of his succession.

As Ardussi has rightly emphasized, the principle of incarnate succession through

the *tulku* institution was strongly resisted during the early period of Bhutanese state-formation.<sup>3</sup> Even though the very birth of Bhutan stands, in large part, as a consequence of Ngawang Namgyal's persistent and unrelenting claims to be the one and only true rebirth of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line, in matters of state structure and institutionalization, he clearly favored the older model of lineal descent within Tibet's ancient clan structure. As such, Ngawang Namgyal's vision of the institutional character of the Bhutanese state shared close affinities with his home institution of Ralung, and, as Ardussi has suggested, the original structure of the Bhutanese state was in fact probably just a mirror image of Ralung, a monastic estate with a few officials and a network of patrons and properties.<sup>4</sup> It is not clear why Ngawang Namgyal was so persistent in his adoption of patrilineal succession as an institutional model for the new state, but it would not be a stretch to assume that the embroiled conflict over his own status as the rebirth of Pema Karpo played an important role in revealing to him the inherent vulnerabilities of the *tulku* mode of succession. Be that as it may, such a choice also reflects the extent to which much of his authority, as I mentioned above, derived from his hereditary position within the institutional framework of the Gya clan at Ralung. As Ardussi has pointed out, for example, the adoption of the title of Shabdrung Rinpoché (zhabs drung rin po che) to refer to Ngawang Namgyal at once connoted and

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<sup>3</sup> Ardussi 1977: 251.

<sup>4</sup> Ardussi 2004: 38.

emphasized his status as hereditary religious nobility.<sup>5</sup>

As would've been expected of him as the only male scion of the Gya clan, Ngawang Namgyal delayed his taking of full monastic vows until he could produce an heir and successor. He was already consumed with this responsibility at the period of his declaration of the Bhutanese state following his three-year retreat in the Thimphu valley in 1625, when he took Damchö Tenzin (Dam chos bstan 'dzin 1606-60), from one of Thimphu's ruling *chöjé* (*chos rje*) families descending from Phajo Drukong Shigpo, as a consort. This union however produced a daughter. Ngawang Namgyal then took another consort, Gökar Drölma (Gos dkar sgrol ma 1603-84), of which the pedigree is unknown, and was finally able to fulfill his responsibility in 1631 by producing a son and heir in the person of Jampal Dorjé ('Jam dpal rdo rje 1631-c.1675).<sup>6</sup> Immediately following the birth of his son, Ngawang Namgyal proceeded to take full *bikṣu* ordination under his aging teacher Lhawang Lodrö. Unfortunately for him, however, and of major consequence for the future of the Bhutanese state, as I shall discuss below, Jampal Dorjé was soon deemed unfit to succeed his father, most probably owing to a serious physical ailment.

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<sup>5</sup> Ardussi 1977: 280. Ardussi claims that the highly honorific title of Shabdrung Rinpoché (zhabs drung rin po che) was gradually adopted by the hierarchs of Ralung beginning in the fifteenth century as a means to enhance the prestige of the Gya clan within the Drukpa sect at large. It was a title used by many of Tibet's hereditary religious nobility and virtually the only one adopted for Ngawang Namgyal after his enthronement at Ralung.

<sup>6</sup> I follow here the dates established by Imaeda, themselves based on his reading of the biography of Tenzin Rabgyé. Imaeda argues that Jampal Dorjé died in 1675 and not in 1681, as is sometime assumed. See Imaeda 2013: 25-6.

While it would appear that the institutional framework of Ralung functioned as an important model for Ngawang Namgyal's envisioning of the Drukpa state during the early period of consolidation leading up to and concurrent with the founding of the Bhutanese theocracy, there is reason to believe that the Tsangpa hegemony, especially as the state expanded, also exerted much influence on Ngawang Namgyal. I will detail the ideological continuities between both states at length in the next section of this chapter and it will suffice to mention here that as the dominant political regime during most of Ngawang Namgyal's life, there is little doubt that Tsang functioned as an important model of successful governance for Bhutan's founder. Seen in this light, his decision for the ruler of the Bhutanese state to follow a hereditary mode of succession also shows an interest on his behalf to model more closely the institution of kingship than the *tulku* institutional model, by now accepted within the Drukpa sect at large. Although the protracted conflicts between the two polities would preclude Ngawang Namgyal from explicitly mentioning so, the model articulated in the *History of Tsangpa Kings*, discussed in chapter three, of the bodhisattva-king ruling in accordance with the dharma through the characteristic activity of law-making probably comes close to how Ngawang Namgyal would have envisioned his role within the Bhutanese theocracy. That is not to say that there weren't, of course, critical differences between the institutional identity of the kings of Tsang and Ngawang Namgyal, the most glaring of which is their being representative, on the one hand, of a line of hereditary temporal rulers, and on the other,



of a line of religious hierarchs.

Again, my emphasis on the positive role played by Ngawang Namgyal's position within clan-based models of authority does not preclude the fact that his recognition as an acclaimed Buddhist scholar, powerful tantric adept and recognized rebirth of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line played a major role in his ability to consolidate his power over the region. As I have mentioned above, Ngawang Namgyal's notoriety across Greater Tibet related not so much to his pedigree but rather to his status as a unparalleled tantric sorcerer (*mtshu chen*) backed by the Drukpa sect's most powerful deities. Ngawang Namgyal's official seal, bearing the *Sixteen I* verses, further underlines how his self-perceived authority derived in no small part from his identity within characteristically Buddhist models of authority, especially those of Buddhist scholarship and mastery over the phenomenal world. The apparent vacillation between these two modes is further testament to Ngawang Namgyal's skillful navigation of the transitional nature of his social and historical environment. In this respect, Ngawang Namgyal can be seen, above all, as a brilliant strategist in the Bourdieuan sense, creatively responding to the opportunities and constraints of the social world by investing and manipulating to his advantage the various resources at his disposition. As both a scion of the Gya clan with lineal claims to a range of privileges and a Buddhist hierarch with all the charisma that such a position entailed, Ngawang Namgyal had the tools at his disposition to achieve the remarkable feat of consolidating the region under

his single authority and conceive of a new state in his image.

The above discussion of Ngawang Namgyal's presumed envisioning of the Bhutanese theocracy, especially with regard to its insistence on a hereditary mode of succession, stands in sharp contrast to Tsang Khenchen's vision articulated in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. As I will argue below, Tsang Khenchen's notable silence on the issue of succession and his overall deemphasis of the significance of pedigree and lineal descent in comparison to his edification of theories of incarnation in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* reveal an altogether different vision of the Bhutanese theocracy. In many ways, the Buddhist *theotopia* constructed by Tsang Khenchen and discussed in the previous chapter represents a mediation of the particular historical circumstances surrounding its composition, and it thus to this aspect that we now turn.

#### The Historical Context of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, John Ardussi has dated the composition of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* to c. 1674-75, some fifty years after Bhutan's founding, based on the historical references contained therein.<sup>7</sup> The 1670s mark a period of great institutional crisis in the newly-founded state; Ngawang Namgyal had entered his final retreat and died some twenty years prior in 1651, and his administration, under the direction of a succession of Druk Desi ('brug sde srid) or civil regents and Jé Khenpo

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<sup>7</sup> See Ardussi 2004: 34.

(rje mkhan po) or head abbots, maintained a fictitious narrative that Ngawang Namgyal was alive and in strict retreat at the Punakha Dzong. The reason for the concealment of Ngawang Namgyal's death was twofold: on the one hand Tibet was still an important existential threat to Bhutan as an independent state and the administration feared that news of Ngawang Namgyal's death would embolden the Ganden Phodrang government's military campaigns against Bhutan, and on the other, as I mentioned above, Ngawang Namgyal's son and heir Jampal Dorjé was deemed unfit to rule, throwing the administration in a veritable crisis of succession. The stakes of such a crisis were significant; as Ardussi has written,

“In the ultimate analysis, all authority derived from the hierarch. His presence was thus essential, and orderly succession to the position vital to the government's legitimate right to function. It is in this context that the true proportions of the crisis resulting from Ngag-dbang-rnam-rgyal's untimely death must be appreciated. The elaborate fiction of his retreat, the unknown monks who assumed his identity to tonsure acolytes through the slot in his meditative cell, all were part of grand hoax to preserve official order until an acceptable means could be found to resolve the difficulty.”<sup>8</sup>

Little is known of the actual cause of Jampal Dorjé's affliction, but it would appear that he was stricken by disease at a young age and remained severely incapacitated for the remainder of his life, forcing the Bhutanese administration to keep him out of public sight. Whatever they may be, these circumstances occurred before Ngawang Namgyal's own death and it is fairly certain that finding a solution to the

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<sup>8</sup> Ardussi 1977: 284.

problem occupied much of his final years. The possibility of producing another heir was out of the question, since he had now taken full ordination vows. Instead, it would appear, Ngawang Namgyal considered two alternative options: the first was that, through various ritual interventions, Jampal Dorjé may recover from his impediments and assume the position of head of the state; the second, more likely, was that Ngawang Namgyal be succeeded by Tenzin Rabgyé (1638-1696), a child born to Mipham Tsewang Tenzin, Ngawang Namgyal's early benefactor of the Dorjédendpa collateral branch of the Gya clan. Even though doing so would go against the stated aims of espousing a hereditary system of succession, the choice of Tenzin Rabgyé, a distant nephew of Ngawang Namgyal through a collateral line, could be rationalized within the Gya clan's ancient *khuwon* or 'uncle-nephew' mode of abbatial succession. Seen in this light, the fiction maintained by the Bhutanese administration of Ngawang Namgyal's final retreat appears primarily aimed at simply buying time, hoping that either Jampal Dorjé would recover from his ailments or that Tenzin Rabgyé would grow up to become an effective ruler of the new state.

Tsang Khenchen's composition of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* coincided with the tenure of Bhutan's third Druk Desi or civil regent, Mingyur Tenpa (Mi 'gyur brtan pa 1613-1680), known for his successful expansionist campaigns in the East of the new state. It would appear that prior to his appointment as Desi in 1667, Mingyur Tenpa was not privy to the concealment of Ngawang Namgyal's death and upon

finding out the truth, he immediately began the process of grooming Tenzin Rabgyé to eventually ascend to the throne as the head of the Bhutanese state. It is in this context that Tsang Khenchen's composition of the final volume of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, recounting the life of Mipham Tsewang Tenzin, Tenzin Rabgyé's father, ought to be understood. Whether or not he was specifically instructed by Mingyur Tenpa to do so, Tsang Khenchen's appendix of a short biography of Mipham Tsewang Tenzin to the corpus of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* corresponded to a tacit promotion of Tenzin Rabgyé as Ngawang Namgyal's heir to the throne of the Drukpa theocracy.

Interestingly, however, such a promotion was only made implicitly; at no point in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* does Tsang Khenchen explicitly affirm Tenzin Rabgyé as the chosen successor of Ngawang Namgyal. In fact, Tsang Khenchen is notably silent on the figure of Tenzin Rabgyé altogether throughout the biography of Ngawang Namgyal proper. There are a number of possible ways to interpret Tsang Khenchen's silence on Tenzin Rabgyé and the issue of succession in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, and I will offer below two hypotheses based on my reading of the biography taking into consideration the historical context of its composition.

As I mentioned above, the death of Ngawang Namgyal in 1651 was a closely guarded secret and the first obvious reason for Tsang Khenchen's omission of any discussion of succession, hereditary or otherwise, was that at the time of the composition of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Ngawang Namgyal was supposedly

alive and well, albeit in a sequestered solitary retreat. There is reason to believe that Tsang Khenchen was aware of Ngawang Namgyal's death, given his standing within the Bhutanese administration and his addition of the biography of Mipham Tsewang Tenzin to the corpus of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. Besides the point of Tsang Khenchen's knowledge or not of Ngawang Namgyal's death, however, his composition of a biographical narrative that leaves out the final passing or *nirvana* of his biographical subject is unusual and does not reflect the typical conventions of Tibetan Buddhist life writing (*rnam thar*). The fact that Tsang Khenchen does not address the mortality of Ngawang Namgyal in his work has important implications for the character of the Bhutanese theocracy that go beyond the question of succession and which will be addressed later in this chapter. For now, it will suffice to mention that through his omission of a narrative of the death of Bhutan's founder, Tsang Khenchen achieved two interrelated results: a greater emphasis on the divinity of Ngawang Namgyal and a circumvention of the precarious issue of succession. According to this particular reading of the biography, Tsang Khenchen either chose or was compelled to avoid any discussion of Ngawang Namgyal's succession to the throne of the Bhutanese theocracy for the simple reason that succession was supposedly not a concern at the time, given that the state was still fictitiously headed by a live and operative ruler. I consider such a reading limited, however, owing to its failure to recognize that even if Tsang Khenchen was compelled or restricted from directly addressing the question of succession, he had

at his disposition other narrative avenues to express his implicit support for Tenzin Rabgyé beyond the mere addition of a biography of the father of the potential successor of Ngawang Namgyal. Tsang Khenchen's complete avoidance of any reference to Tenzin Rabgyé in the narrative of Ngawang Namgyal's life, paired with brief and somewhat disparaging remarks on the birth of Jampal Dorjé reveal, I contend, an altogether different hypothesis for Tsang Khenchen's general avoidance of a discussion of succession in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*.

A close reading of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* reveals a significant tension between Ngawang Namgyal and his administration's interest in hereditary succession on the one hand, and Tsang Khenchen's embrace of emanation and incarnation as preeminent modes of succession on the other. As I discussed at length in chapter four, the entirety of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* rests on an understanding of Ngawang Namgyal as an emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in human form taking up the mantle of kingship for the benefit of sentient beings. Going hand in hand with this image was the unmistakable affirmation and confirmation of Ngawang Namgyal as the Drukchen incarnation and authoritative rebirth of Pema Karpo. Using the various modes of legitimation discussed in chapter four, Tsang Khenchen's work is above all concerned with the construction and establishment of Ngawang Namgyal within the novel Buddhist models of authority that became dominant during this period of Tibetan history. Although he does not say so in explicit terms, Tsang Khenchen's insistence and

belaboring on Ngawang Namgyal's status as an incarnated hierarch or *tulku* throughout the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* points to his probable embrace and preference of the system for Ngawang Namgyal's succession.

Such a hypothesis is further supported by Tsang Khenchen's overall deemphasis of the significance of pedigree and lineal descent in his work. While it is certainly the case that he devotes a considerable amount of pages paying tribute to the successive hierarchs of Ralung and effectively positions Ngawang Namgyal within the institutional framework of Ralung and the Gya clan, Tsang Khenchen's emphasis throughout is rather on the ways in which Ngawang Namgyal's forebears provided him with an unbroken and authentic religious lineage. Again, the kind of authority that Tsang Khenchen builds for his biographical subject throughout the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is one grounded in Buddhist understandings of virtue and mastery as opposed to pedigree. While the kinship ties of Ngawang Namgyal to his father and grandfather are certainly highlighted, these are nonetheless framed within a distinct teacher / disciple relationship. Tsang Khenchen's announcement of the birth of Jampal Dorjé in the biography, whereupon he appears more concerned with demonstrating that Ngawang Namgyal's act of procreation was not a sin (*nyon mong*) than with celebrating a possible heir to the throne, is further telling of his position vis à vis lineal descent.<sup>9</sup>

Given that the choice of hereditary succession was favored by Ngawang

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<sup>9</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga ff. 88.a-b.



Namgyal and his administration in the early phases of the consolidation of the Bhutanese theocracy, it is somewhat puzzling that Tsang Khenchen would not have clearly delineated such a system in his work. Again, at no point in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* does Tsang Khenchen provide his reader with any clue that a hereditary system of succession would be adopted following the death of Ngawang Namgyal. In fact, without the knowledge that this was a central concern of the administration of the early Drukpa state, a cursory reading of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* would appear to suggest otherwise. Tsang Khenchen's sustained emphasis on theories of emanation and incarnation throughout the work would suggest that the Bhutanese theocracy primarily aligned itself with reincarnation as a dominant model and mark of authority. Yoshiro Imaeda's study of this fraught period of Bhutanese history reveals the extent to which the question of Ngawang Namgyal's succession was far from straightforward and represented a range of heterogenous views. Even though Tenzin Rabgyé eventually did succeed Ngawang Namgyal as the head of the Drukpa theocracy for a period of fifteen years, efforts were already underway among other circles to find a reincarnation of Ngawang Namgyal.<sup>10</sup> As Imaeda quotes from the biography of Tenzin Rabgyé, following his own failed attempts at producing an heir, he once mused, "In such a bad eon like the present one, isn't the appearance of a supreme reincarnation (of

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<sup>10</sup> See Imaeda 2013: 33.

the Zhabdrung) more appropriate for the benefit of beings?"<sup>11</sup>

By the turn of the century, Bhutan had eventually fully adopted the system of incarnate succession for the head of the Drukpa state, and in that sense more closely embodied Tsang Khenchen's articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. As Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre became canonized as the state's blueprint by later Bhutanese authors and historians, the question of hereditary succession became largely forgotten, and it is perhaps no accident that later accounts of the early period of state formation list Tenzin Rabgyé not as Ngawang Namgyal's successor, but as the state's Fourth Desi, or civil regent. Such an embrace of the *tulku* mode of succession represents an important shift in the conception of the Bhutanese state; one that Tsang Khenchen fostered in no small part through his composition of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. If, as I mentioned above, Ngawang Namgyal had a foot in both old and new models of authority and his vacillation between these two modes represented a skilled navigation of the transitional nature of his social and historical environment, Tsang Khenchen, for his part, was thoroughly grounded in the latter and his vision of the Bhutanese theocracy was one in which older models of authority had little significance.

As the above section has sought to demonstrate, the picture of Bhutan's founding is far more complex than the historiography tends to portray. An investigation of the

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<sup>11</sup> Imaeda 2013: 38.

historical context of the composition of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* and a close reading of Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre paying particular attention to the author's notable gaps and silences reveals the extent to which Tsang Khenchen's work represents a creative mediation of the social and political constraints and opportunities of the period. On the one hand, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* encapsulates Tsang Khenchen's own position vis à vis the events unfolding in the nascent Bhutanese state and on the other, it represents the broader structural changes sweeping through the Greater Tibetan region. In an effort to further characterize the nature of the early Bhutanese state we now turn to the latter of these two, exploring the period of Bhutan's founding within the context of the broad shifts taking hold of the region by situating the Bhutanese theocracy in relation to the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet and the Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

### **Situating the Bhutanese Theocracy: Tsang, Lhasa, and Padmasambhava's Hidden Land (*sbas yul*)**

I argued in chapter three of this dissertation that there can be little doubt that the short-lived Tsangpa hegemony's cultivation of novel understandings of religious and political governance was both foundational and instrumental to Tsang Khenchen and Ngawang Namgyal's envisioning of the Bhutanese theocracy. As the milieu in which both figures rose to prominence, the Tsangpa hegemony functioned as a powerful

model of successful rule to be emulated. I also argued in chapter three that the Tsangpa hegemony represents an important transitional moment in Tibetan history; one which largely anticipated the theocratic movement taking hold of the region and to a great extent successfully embraced and incorporated such elements in its ideological frame. Far from the image of strongmen with little influence outside of their military and economic might, the kings of Tsang largely stood at the forefront of the powerful ideological movement associated to the birth of the Drukpa government of Ngawang Namgyal and the Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama. In this section I will attempt to trace distinct lines of ideological continuity between the Tsangpa hegemony and the nascent Bhutanese theocracy and highlight some of the striking parallels between the Drukpa and Gelukpa theocracies of the seventeenth century. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, while Bhutan's experiment with theocracy reflects its position within the broad structural shifts shaping the region, it also simultaneously reflects conditions and developments unique to the Southern region. Much of the focus of the following pages will thus involve situating the Bhutanese theocracy in relation to Tsang and Lhasa in an effort to parse out the multivalent nature of the nascent Bhutanese state.

### Continuities with Tsang

The first and most glaring line of continuity between the Tsangpa hegemony and

the Bhutanese theocracy relates to the ways in which both political systems made use of established Buddhist ideologies to frame the legitimacy of their rule. In both cases, the mandate of rule is framed exclusively within the confines of a Buddhist soteriological project. The capacity to rule is warranted only in as much as it is concerned with the propagation and protection of the Buddhist teachings for the ultimate benefit of sentient beings. Such a standpoint is supported by canonical scriptures dealing with the characteristics of the ideal Buddhist ruler, or *cakravartin*, and those of altruistically motivated bodhisattvas. Further, these views are in turn accentuated by prophetic injunctions declaring and sustaining the Buddhist nature of these polities as a preordained fact. Both the *History of Tsangpa Kings* and Tsang Khenchen's *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* make recourse to prophecy to frame the figures of the Tsangpa kings and Ngawang Namgyal within a millenarian lens, incarnating in this world at a time of strife for the benefit and happiness of sentient beings. The very articulation of government, in both cases, is thus constituted through Buddhist hermeneutical strategies, establishing the very *raison d'être* of rulership within Buddhist theories of authority and governance. While Tsang Khenchen's enunciation of the Bhutanese theocracy arguably accentuates this characteristic even further by constructing a veritable Buddhist *theotopia* in the Southern region, both systems nonetheless wholly oriented themselves to Buddhist ideas and imagery as the language of rule. This orientation was, of course, shared with the Gelukpa theocracy of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

Both the Tsangpa hegemony and the Bhutanese theocracy's persistent use of prophecy as a hermeneutical lens also points to their shared invocation of an imagined past as a source of authority and social cohesion. Through their use of prophecy, both regimes posited a shared connection to the early propagation of Buddhism in Tibet through the figures of the Yarlung emperors and, in the case of Bhutan, the Indian *siddha* Padmasambhava. The employment of such an imagined past had important ramifications for the state both internally and outwardly. We saw in chapter three how the Tsangpa hegemony's identification of itself as the natural heir to the Yarlung dynasty went hand in hand with a particular vision of Tibet and its place in the world. Internally, such a vision inculcated the image of Tibet as a unified cultural whole and the Tsangpa hegemony as its chosen custodian, and outwardly, it fostered an understanding of Tibetan identity distinct from or even anathema to its neighbors, especially to the North. In other words, through the cultivation of an imagined glorious past, the Tsangpa hegemony sought an insular model for the Tibetan polity, whereby Tibet's disparate institutions stood behind a unified vision of a Tibet free from external interference.

In the case of Bhutan, the import of prophecies attributed to Padmasambhava went a long way in both reaffirming a distinct Bhutanese identity and situating the legacy of Ngawang Namgyal at its apex. An important aspect of Ngawang Namgyal's consolidation of the Bhutanese state was an elaborate ritual program regularly

performed in his newly-erected fortresses which heavily drew on the mythology associated to Padmasambhava and the Tibetan empire and acted as a powerful tool in the construction of a Bhutanese corporate identity. These rituals, paired with the cultivation and rehearsal of Ngawang Namgyal as Padmasambhava's prophesied emissary in the region further inscribed Bhutan's autonomous identity with respect to its neighbors. It is worth noting that although the Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama made similar recourse to the institutional legacy of the Tibetan empire, the presence of Mongol troops on the ground and the status of Güshri Khan as *de facto* king of Tibet greatly complicated this picture. Rather, here we see Bhutan sharing a singular affinity with the Tsangpa hegemony's insular vision of the region. Soon after the rise of the Ganden Phodrang government, Bhutan became the very last Tibetan cultural stronghold to resist Mongol influence and encroachment. Even though Mongol forces attempted three separate invasions of Bhutan, these were met with humiliating defeats. For apologists like Tsang Khenchen, the parallels with the Tsangpa hegemony were obvious. Albeit implicitly, in his eyes Bhutan stood as a natural extension of Tsang's insular vision of the Tibetan polity. This tendency is apparent in both the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* and his own autobiography, where Bhutan is celebrated as the destined field of activity of a distinctly Tibetan bodhisattva king, an image simultaneously reminiscent of both the Yarlung emperors and the Tsangpa kings.

Another important line of continuity between the Tsangpa hegemony and the

Bhutanese theocracy, which characteristically stood in opposition to the practices of the Ganden Phodrang government, was the inclusive model espoused by Ngawang Namgyal and his successors. Immediately upon his arrival in the Southern lands, Bhutan's founder was quick to recognize and rally the region's disparate religious sects and institutions into his unified vision of the Bhutanese state. While it is certainly the case that some conflicts occurred with other Tibetan Buddhist sects established in the Bhutanese region during the early stages of Ngawang Namgyal's consolidation of the state, these were primarily the outcome of resistance to his rule on material and political grounds. As is amply evident in the writings of Tsang Khenchen and others, Ngawang Namgyal espoused an ecumenical approach to Buddhist teachings and patronage in the same vein as Karma Tenkyong Wangpo. His general reverence towards and inclusion of the region's Kagyü, Sakya and especially Nyingma sects within the mantle of his government points to his efforts at finding a sense of shared unity amongst the religious elite of the period. There is no doubt that Tsang Khenchen was an important asset to such a project. As we saw in chapter three, himself embodying a non-sectarian approach to Buddhist learning and a refugee who fled Tibet from fear of religious persecution, Tsang Khenchen was both a paradigmatic example of this orientation and one of its primary expounders. The fact that Bhutan became the privileged destination of many Tibetan refugees fleeing the sectarian purges of the Ganden Phodrang is further testament to its embrace of religious inclusivity and ecumenism as a defining feature of



its ideological framework.

Finally, one of the most important parallels between the Tsangpa hegemony and the Bhutanese theocracy has to do with how the person of Ngawang Namgyal was conceived. Tsang Khenchen's identification of Bhutan's founder as both a *cakravartin* and the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is evocative of Karma Tenkyong Wangpo's status as a bodhisattva king. As I argued in chapter three, although the degree to which their divinity was ritually and publicly recognized may have differed in significant ways, from a theoretical perspective, Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama were all three recognized as emanations of celestial bodhisattvas incarnating in the world in an age of strife with the explicit purpose of bringing about a new fortunate eon in the region through the activities of kingship. As I shall explore below, this is an area where Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama share a unique affinity owing to their status as reincarnated religious hierarchs identified with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. But Ngawang Namgyal's preference for hereditary succession as opposed to the *tulku* mode of succession for the head of the Bhutanese state, as we have observed above, equally signals an interest on his part to mirror more closely the model of kingship provided by the Tsangpa hegemony. Such an inclination represents an important divergence between Ngawang Namgyal and Tsang Khenchen's envisioning of the Bhutanese theocracy. While it would appear that Ngawang Namgyal probably sought to emulate the model of governance provided by Tsang in the form of a

hereditary line of bodhisattva kings ruling for the benefit of sentient beings, Tsang Khenchen's articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy more closely approximates the Gelukpa theocracy of the Fifth Dalai Lama, to which we now turn.

#### Parallels with Lhasa

It would be difficult to understate the remarkable level of ideological correspondence between the Gelukpa theocracy of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Drukpa theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal. In the short span of two decades, the Greater Tibetan region saw the establishment of two new Buddhist hierocratic governments headed by reincarnated Buddhist figures who were both conceived as emanations of the Tibetan region's patron deity and whose ruling mandate was framed within a Buddhist millenarian mission. Despite the lines of continuity I have sought to draw between the Tsangpa hegemony's conceptions of governance and the theocratic governments superseding it, the founding of the Gelukpa and Drukpa theocracies represent a watershed moment in Tibetan history that entailed a major reconfiguration of the social order. The parallels between both systems are numerous: both heads of state were identified as the rebirth of the hierarch of their respective sect of Tibetan Buddhism, both were conceived as the emanation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, both articulated their rule as the creation of a Buddhist realm for the benefit of sentient beings in an age of strife, both heavily drew on the mythology of the Tibetan empire

and of Avalokiteśvara as the patron deity of the region, both built palaces which sought the material actualization of such mythologies, both wholly adopted Buddhist hermeneutical strategies of legitimation, and, more broadly, both fundamentally reconceived the possibilities of the social world. That is not to say that the two systems did not also display important and fundamental points of divergence, however. As we saw above, the Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama saw the role of foreign engagement in the region in a very different light than Bhutan and espoused characteristically different practices with regard to the sectarian diversity of Tibetan Buddhism on the plateau. It may be worth noting here that even though a full comparison between the two theocratic states in both their theoretical and practical dimensions would be a welcome addition to the historiography of the region and would bring much needed complexity to our limited picture of the period, this study is primarily concerned with the nature of the Bhutanese theocracy itself and is therefore not intended to be a comparative project. My examination of some the overarching parallels between both systems thus rather represents an intention on my part to situate Bhutan within the broader structural changes of the period, identifying those characteristics that are shared and those unique to Bhutan.

The most important parallels between the Bhutanese and Tibetan theocracies have less to do with the particular material realities of their rule than with the kind of idealized social world that they seek to conjure. As this dissertation has sought to

demonstrate, in the case of Bhutan, such an idealized world was most clearly articulated by Tsang Khenchen in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. Some two decades after the composition of Tsang Khenchen's oeuvre, a similar work of enunciation was conducted in Lhasa on behalf of the Ganden Phodrang government by the Fifth Dalai Lama's regent and prolific author Desi Sangyé Gyatso (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho 1653-1705). In their roles as the primary literary architects and major intellectual driving forces behind their respective regimes, Tsang Khenchen and Sangyé Gyatso's visions of governance and the union of religious and temporal domains share much in common. Again, the richness and complexities of their individual visions of theocratic government are far too extensive as to allow a thorough comparison here, and my analysis will limit itself to broad and somewhat superficial observations of their political theology.

Similarly to the Tsangpa hegemony, the most important area of correspondence between the theocratic projects of Tibet and Bhutan as articulated by Sangyé Gyatso and Tsang Khenchen is their use of and reliance on established Buddhist ideologies to frame the logics and legitimacy of their rule. Again, kingship here is conceived within a Buddhist soteriological project; one which is concerned with the propagation and protection of the Buddhist teachings for the ultimate benefit of sentient beings. Where the theocracies of Tibet and Bhutan depart from the Tsangpa hegemony, however, is in the degree to which they categorically embrace Buddhist epistemologies in their

articulation of authority and governance. Tsang Khenchen and Sangyé Gyatso's conceptions of their respective leaders as the Buddhist divinity Avalokiteśvara conjure a world that is constituted by an entire apparatus of Buddhist scholastic reflection and which situates Buddhist notions of virtuosity and mastery at the very center of the social world. Far from the limited and terse narrative style of the *History of Tsangpa Kings*, Tsang Khenchen's *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* and Sangyé Gyatso's numerous works articulating his vision of the Gelukpa theocracy both draw on an dizzying wealth of canonical and non-canonical sources and engage in a celebration of abundance or even excess as a defining and totalizing force in their work. As I will argue below, their strategic recourse to a totalizing Buddhist hermeneutics is not merely in the service of legitimating power, political or otherwise, but is equally invested in the production of meaning and meaning-making. In that respect, the kind of social order conceived by Tsang Khenchen and Sangyé Gyatso is very similar, and the divergences that exist in its actualization are, for the most part, reflective of the particular exigencies of the material reality surrounding both figures.

What is immediately apparent and striking about Tsang Khenchen and Sangyé Gyatso's edifications of Ngawang Namgyal and the Fifth Dalai Lama as emanations of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in human form is the almost identical pool of canonical sources from which they draw and their overall shared argument and rationale of divinity. While their individual concerns and idiosyncratic styles are evident, some of

their overarching arguments are so similar as to question whether Sangyé Gyatso had access to the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, given its publication two decades prior, and used it as an important source of inspiration for his conception of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Ian MacCormack's recent publication of an article on the divinity of the Fifth Dalai Lama drawing on the writings of Sangyé Gyatso illustrates some of these close affinities.<sup>12</sup> Referencing eight different compositions of Sangyé Gyatso between the years 1693 and 1698,<sup>13</sup> MacCormack traces a distinct discourse of divinity on the part of Sangyé Gyatso which revolves around the identity of the Fifth Dalai Lama *qua* Avalokiteśvara as simultaneously a perfectly enlightened Buddha, a bodhisattva and a mortal human being. As MacCormack states, "The Desi's narrative starts from a categorical claim that Avalokiteśvara has already attained the status of a buddha, before any of the bodhisattva activities for which he was better known; and it ends on a claim about the king's intractable humanity."<sup>14</sup> The presentation of Avalokiteśvara as an already enlightened Buddha prior to his activities as a bodhisattva is unusual and, as

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<sup>12</sup> MacCormack 2020. MacCormack's article focuses on the divinity of the Fifth Dalai Lama, referring here to ideas about Buddhahood and bodhisattvahood. He mentions that his article is intended as the first half of a two-part study, with a second future article focusing specifically on the issue of the Dalai Lama's mortality.

<sup>13</sup> The eight texts composed by Desi Sangyé Gyatso between the years 1693 and 1698 to illustrate his conception of the Fifth Dalai Lama's divinity are: 1. *The 'Marvelous Age' Prayer (Rmad byung bskal pa ma)* and its commentary the *String of Pearls (Mu tig chun po)*, 2. *The Worship Assembly Instructions (Tshogs mchod bca' sgrigs)*, 3. *The New Year's Speechmaking (Lo gsar 'bel gtam)*, 4. *The Elixir of the Ear (Rna ba'i bcu len)*, 5. *The Dūkūla* vols. 4-6 (*Du kū la'i gos bzang*), 6. *The Tomb Inventory ('Dzam gling rgyan gcig gi dkar chag)*, 7. *The Lhasa Circuit Survey (Lha sa skor tshad)*, 8. *The Yellow Vaidūrya (Bai dūr ser po)*. See MacCormack 2020: 84-85.

<sup>14</sup> MacCormack 2020: 85.

MacCormack acknowledges, exhibits significant friction with standard portrayals of the bodhisattva in canonical literature. However unusual, such an argument about the prior Buddhahood of Avalokiteśvara lies at the heart of Sangyé Gyatso’s evaluation of the Fifth Dalai Lama and provides an essential rationale for the Dalai Lama’s divinity. For Sangyé Gyatso, the bodhisattvic activities of Avalokiteśvara are only derivative of his prior Buddhahood. Sangyé Gyatso makes sense of the mutually supportive and mutually contradictory relationship between the statuses of Buddha, bodhisattva, and mortal human being by making recourse to the classical Buddhist distinction between “the way in which things appear” (*drang don snang tshul dang mthun par*) and “the way things really are” (*ngeś don gnas tshul*), what MacCormack identifies as an onto-theological dualism.<sup>15</sup> In Sangyé Gyatso’s own words, “As such, in the way things really are, he [Avalokiteśvara] has already become a buddha; but in the way things appear, he takes the form of a bodhisattva-in-training, as many of the higher and lower vehicles teach.”<sup>16</sup>

Sangyé Gyatso’s argument about Avalokiteśvara’s prior Buddhahood is supported by a number of canonical sources, the most important of which are a *dhāraṇī* text that MacCormack translates as the *Detailed Rite for Thousand-Eyed, Thousand-Armed*

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<sup>15</sup> MacCormack 2020: 86.

<sup>16</sup> See MacCormack 2020: 86.

*Avalokiteśvara*,<sup>17</sup> followed by the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and *Kāraṇḍavyūtha* sutras. In addition to these three, Sangyé Gyatso also makes recourse to two additional sutras, the *Dharmārthavibhaṅga* and *Māyopamāsamādhi*, for supportive evidence. Drawing from these five sources, Sangyé Gyatso provides a synthetic account in which, many eons ago and prior to his bodhisattva career in Sukhāvātī, Avalokiteśvara became the Buddha known as Samantaraśmyudgataśrīkūṭarāja ('od zer kun 'phags dpal brtsegs rgyal po). MacCormack is however quick to point out that Avalokiteśvara's prior Buddhahood, according to Sangyé Gyatso, in no way precludes his identity and activities as a bodhisattva. Rather, in Sangyé Gyatso's logic, Avalokiteśvara's bodhisattva activities in fact derive from his identity as a prior Buddha. As a perfectly awakened being, Avalokiteśvara adopts the form of a bodhisattva and projects various rebirths into the world for the benefit of sentient beings. Such an ability and emphasis on a multiplicity of projections or emanations is itself an extension of prior Buddhahood.<sup>18</sup>

Given the apparent originality of this conception of the divinity of the Fifth Dalai Lama *qua* Avalokiteśvara, it is somewhat remarkable that Tsang Khenchen would make not only the very same claims about Ngawang Namgyal's divinity, but use the very same canonical references to support his argument. The *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*

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<sup>17</sup> The Tibetan title of the *Detailed Rite for Thousand Eyed, Thousand Armed Avalokiteśvara* is provided by MacCormack as *Byang chuib sems dpa' 'phags pa spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug lag pa stong dang mig stong dang ldan pa'i cho ga zhib mo*. Tsang Khenchen refers to it as the *Thousand Armed Thousand Eyed sutra* (*phyag stong spyan stong gi mdo*). See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga ff. 9.b.

<sup>18</sup> See MacCormack 2020: 104-105.



relies on the very same five scriptures (and in the same order of importance) as Sangyé Gyatso to make the claim that Avalokiteśvara was simultaneously a perfectly enlightened Buddha and a bodhisattva, and his abilities as a bodhisattva, with an emphasis on the unimaginable multiplicity of his emanations, are also framed within the context of his identity as a Buddha.<sup>19</sup> While it is certainly the case that Sangyé Gyatso and Tsang Khenchen's specific styles and concerns are not always exactly the same (for example, Tsang Khenchen does not rationalize the relationship between buddha and bodhisattva within the framework of "the way things appear" / "the way things are" *snang tshul / gnas tshul*), their overall arguments about divinity share such an affinity that it would be difficult to imagine that the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* did not influence Sangyé Gyatso's compositions in some form.

While Tsang Khenchen and Sangyé Gyatso's accounts of their respective leaders are so similar in their overall articulation of the divinity of Avalokiteśvara, the two accounts nonetheless differ in at least two significant ways. The first has to do with their differing narrative of the emanational history of the bodhisattva in India and Tibet, whereupon both authors draw on separate Tibetan traditions to make sense of the specific rebirth lineage of Avalokiteśvara leading up to the Fifth Dalai Lama and

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<sup>19</sup> Tsang Khenchen's discussion of Avalokiteśvara as both Buddha and bodhisattva figures in chapter two of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Vol. Ka, fols. 8.b-14.b. His discussion of Avalokiteśvara's various projections in Tibet, which differ from Sangyé Gyatso's, can be found in chapter three, Vol. Nga ff. 14.b-22.a.

Ngawang Namgyal. Sangyé Gyatso, in that regard, draws primarily from the *Mañi Kambum* (*Ma ñi bka' 'bum*) corpus and the *Book of Kadam* (*Bka' gdams legs bam*), while Tsang Khenchen, on the other hand, draws on the Kagyü and Drukpa traditions to trace a rebirth lineage that begins in India through such figures as the mythical king of Shambhala Puṇḍarīka, the Mauryan emperor Aśoka, and the *mahāsiddha* Nāropa, and continues in Tibet through the Yarlung emperor Songsten Gampo, Tibet's first abbot Śāntarakṣita, the Drukpa sect's founder Tsangpa Gyare, and the successive Drukchen incarnations. Similarly to Sangyé Gyatso, however, such an individuated rebirth lineage does not preclude Avalokiteśvara's all-encompassing emanational powers, projecting simultaneously and in succession in unimaginable ways.<sup>20</sup>

Where Sangyé Gyatso and Tsang Khenchen's accounts of the divinity of the Dalai Lama and Ngawang Namgyal differ most significantly, however, is in the response of each author to the problem of mortality. As is well known, the period in which Sangyé Gyatso published the various compositions in question corresponds to his final divulgence of the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama, which, in another striking parallel to Bhutan had been kept secret for fourteen years, and the investiture of the Sixth Dalai Lama in 1697. As a result, a significant dimension of Sangyé Gyatso's discussion of the Dalai Lama's divinity had to delve into the question of the Tibetan ruler's mortality. As MacCormack writes, "Put succinctly, the problem was why - perfection

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<sup>20</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ka fols. 11.a-12.a, 14.a.

notwithstanding - the Dalai Lama grew old, felt pain, and died, in ways that guaranteed the workings of karma and demanded a response.” Sangyé Gyatso, McCormack continues, justified all of the state-sponsored works produced under his direction as necessary acts of purification for the Dalai Lama’s sake despite the knowledge and the fact that an already enlightened being needs no purification. Sangyé Gyatso made sense of such a contradiction by making recourse to the Buddhist doctrine of residual karma, whereby karmic effects can continue their course even after their ripening is complete.<sup>21</sup>

As I discussed in the previous section of this chapter, Tsang Khenchen, on the other hand, never discusses the mortality of Ngawang Namgyal in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. Whether his impetus not to do so had to do with the maintenance of the fiction of Ngawang Namgyal’s prolonged retreat or his disavowal of hereditary succession, the omission of a response to the problem of human mortality in the construction of Ngawang Namgyal’s divinity, as in the case of Sangyé Gyatso’s theorization of the Dalai Lama, had very real implications for the conception of Ngawang Namgyal and, consequently, the nature of the Bhutanese theocracy itself. In contradistinction to Sangyé Gyatso’s narrative, the portrait of Ngawang Namgyal cultivated by the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is one that significantly rests on a conception of divinity stripped of the attributes of humanity. In fact, if Tsang Khenchen’s theorization of Ngawang Namgyal was to figure within the opposing poles

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<sup>21</sup> See McCormack 2020: 85 fn. 9.

of Buddhahood and mortal human being, than the narrative of the biography would begin and end at Ngawang Namgyal's status as a perfectly enlightened Buddha with, in the middle, a discussion of bodhisattvahood and its manifestation in the world. The kind of utopian vision of Bhutan with which Tsang Khenchen ends the narrative of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* is one in which Ngawang Namgyal emerges as a predominantly abstract entity free of the trappings of humanity; a deity with which the inhabitants of Bhutan enter into communion and achieve the promise of enlightenment. The very last pages of Tsang Khenchen's work are preoccupied with determining, with the support of various sutras and tantras, the inseparability of the Bhutanese subjects and Ngawang Namgyal's divinity owing to the karmic links established between these two, and how such an inseparability is itself constitutive of the fortunate eon ushered by Ngawang Namgyal's presence in the region. In Tsang Khenchen's words,

"Accordingly it is established through scripture and many tantras that all karmically involved beings in this Southern Land are one with the great wheel of the mandala, and that through force of substance and evolution they shall become part of the retinue of the *Mahāvajradhāra* (Ngawang Namgyal) and be placed on the pathway to ripening and fruition."<sup>22</sup>

Tsang Khenchen's gradual edification of Ngawang Namgyal as an abstract entity whose presence, like that of a Buddha, transcends the immanence of time and remains forever accessible as a source of blessings, has important consequences for the

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<sup>22</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 156.b.

conception of the head of the Bhutanese state as an embodied lineage of rebirths.

Whether intentionally or not and despite his emphasis on theories of emanation in his articulation of the authority of Ngawang Namgyal, Tsang Khenchen's construction of a veritable and singular *theos* in the person of Ngawang Namgyal undermined the continuity of his institution through the system of rebirth. While it is certainly the case that a complex set of material factors contributed to the gradual wane of the institution of the Shabdrung, including the dispersion of his authority through the identification of multiple simultaneous rebirths over the course of the decades and centuries following his death, the seed for a conception of Ngawang Namgyal as a singular and eternal entity was already sowed in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. In Tsang Khenchen's narrative, the all-encompassing role and multiplicity through which the Buddha/bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara acts in the world was encapsulated and embodied in the singular yet eternal presence of Ngawang Namgyal. As I will discuss in the conclusion to this dissertation, such an encompassing yet individuated conception of Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara perdures till this date.

Padmasambhava and the Hidden Land (*sbas yul*)

An important dimension of Tsang Khenchen's articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy that stood outside the direct purview of continuities with the Tsangpa hegemony and/or parallels with the Ganden Phodrang government of Lhasa is its

cultivation of the recognition of Bhutan as a privileged abode and consecrated hidden land of the Indian *siddha* Padmasambhava. I mentioned already in chapter four how the region that would become Bhutan had previously developed a strong affinity towards the Indian adept by internalizing a number of narratives that identified him as a patron saint of the area and whose activities in the region made it an earthly realm conducive to yogic practice. The identification of Ngawang Namgyal as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara incarnating in the world during a degenerate age for the explicit purpose of bringing about a fortunate eon in the region is simultaneously concordant and in tension with the conception of Bhutan as a form of earthly paradise and chosen field of activity of Padmasambhava. A close reading of the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* reveals a conscientious attempt on the part of Tsang Khenchen to harmonize his millenarian vision of Ngawang Namgyal with the prevalent conception of the region and its relationship to Padmasambhava. On the one hand, the image of Bhutan as a hidden land of plenty at the periphery of the political center and a chosen site for the flourishing of the Buddhist dharma worked well with the vision of an enlightened society under the stewardship of Ngawang Namgyal; but on the other, the status of Bhutan as a form of earthly paradise was in direct tension with the notion of a degenerate age in the region.

Tsang Khenchen sought to harmonize these two images in at least two distinct ways. The first, and most apparent, was to place the figures of Padmasambhava and

Ngawang Namgyal in apposition to each other by establishing an intimate and mutually reinforcing relationship between the two. Relying on the medium of prophecy and clairvoyance, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* celebrates Ngawang Namgyal as Padmasambhava's foretold emissary in the region. The numerous prophecies attributed to the Indian *siddha* foretell the arrival in the Southern lands of Ngawang Namgyal as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara and his essential extension of Padmasambhava's activities there. In fact, according to Tsang Khenchen, it is Padmasambhava himself in a vision who exhorted Ngawang Namgyal to flee southward in 1616.<sup>23</sup> Through the repeated use of prophecy and visionary discernment, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* goes as far as creating something of a shared identity between the two figures. For example, Tsang Khenchen posits Ngawang Namgyal and Padmasambhava's inseparability by highlighting the last two verses of a prophecy drawn from the *Bka' brgyad rig 'dzin yongs 'dus*, a treasure text revealed by Ngari Panchen Pema Wangyal (Mnga' ris paṅ chen Padma dbang rgyal 1487-1542), in which Padmasambhava purportedly says, "Eternally he will converse with me of O-rgyan; Together with him

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<sup>23</sup> The *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* relates how Ngawang Namgyal primarily relied on Padmasambhava's exhortation from the *Gsang ba nor bu'i thig le rgyud* to journey southward: "Seek out repose in the Southern Valleys, On the border, through the Southern Door, If you do thus you will gain as much success in seven days of meditation as in seven years in the Land of Tibet." Vol. Nga fol. 5.a. Elsewhere in the biography, Tsang Khenchen reports that Ngawang Namgyal described how owing to having received clear visions (*gsal snang*) of Padmasambhava over and over again, he believed he had been empowered by the Indian *siddha*. *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga ff. 116.a.

shall we be born into Sukhāvati!”<sup>24</sup> Tsang Khenchen returns to these two verses at at least three other points in the biography to stress how the two figures are forever linked and in concert through their intentions and activities.<sup>25</sup> In that respect, it is no accident that Tsang Khenchen greatly cultivates the image of Ngawang Namgyal as a great sorcerer (*mthu chen*) and tantric adept able to command and monopolize the forces of the natural world, qualities for which Padmasambhava was known as the prime exemplar. In another and remarkable passage early on in the biography, Tsang Khenchen effectively merges the identities of the two figures by making the claim that based on their unitary activities and physical correspondence, Ngawang Namgyal was

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<sup>24</sup> The full prophecy from the *Bka' brgyad rig 'dzin yongs 'dus* is quoted as the following: “The skill of the coursing of wisdom of the king of lotuses,  
Will race to Ngari and Tsang like lightning;  
In the region south of U-Tsang he will be known as Dragon;  
In Kham it will be known as in the bone lineage of Gya.  
As physical omens the vajra will appear on his forehead;  
The cross will be clear upon his working hand;  
The *dharmacakra* of his vision will adorn his hand and foot;  
The destroying letter Hum will appear on his foot;  
His navel will be adorned by the jar-shaped mole;  
His behaviors will be indefinite and he will soar unobstructed like the wind;  
His *samādhi* will not waver, and be firm like diamond;  
The miracles of his mantras and *mūdras* will be unceasing;  
Eternally he will converse with me of O-rgyan;  
Together with him shall we be born into Sukhāvati!” *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fol. 114.b.; Ardussi 1975: (I) 204-5.

<sup>25</sup> See *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ga fol. 115.b and vol. Nga fol. 5.a, 126.b.



in fact an emanation (*rnam sprul*) of Padmasambhava.<sup>26</sup>

Through Tsang Khenchen's conflation of the identities of Ngawang Namgyal and Padmasambhava, including establishing an ontological correspondence between the two, Ngawang Namgyal's state-building project could be conceived as a natural extension of Padmasambhava's presence and activities in the region. From this perspective, the millenarian mission of Ngawang Namgyal was none other than that of Padmasambhava himself; a continual project of establishing the Southern region as a refuge and privileged space for the flourishing of the Buddhist dharma. This image was especially congruent with Tsang Khenchen's identification of Bhutan as a refuge from the sectarian purges of the Ganden Phodrang government. His simultaneous employment of the image of Bhutan as Padmasambhava's hidden land and Ngawang Namgyal's identity as inseparable from Padmasambhava reinforced the notion of Bhutan as a radically different space from the Greater Tibetan world and harmonized the apparent tension between this understanding of the Southern region and Ngawang Namgyal's millenarian mission there.

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<sup>26</sup> The passage reads, "In particular, on the occasion of the initiation of Guru Drakmar, he showed himself in the form of the great *mantrin* Padma Jungné and performed the empowerment of the streams of those present; and in order to subdue those who were unamenable, he would perform visibly the actions of ferocity, and on these occasions the thought would arise among those sitting at his feet that this was the brilliant and powerful *mantrin* Padma Jungné himself, the same vision appearing to all of them. For that reason it is established through inference and authoritative statement that he was the emanation of the great *mantrin* Padma Jungné." A page later, Tsang Khenchen further states: "Hence, his *dharmakāya* was Amitābha, his *saṃbhogakāya* was Mahākarunika, and his *nirṇāṇakāya* was indistinguishable (*dbyer med*) from Padma Jungné." *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Ka fol. 16.b-17.b; Ardussi 1975: (I) 25-6

A second and more implicit way in which Tsang Khenchen mediates the tension between the image of Bhutan as a form of earthly paradise and the notion of a degenerate age necessitating the activities of Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara has to do with a distinct conception of the natural world and its agency in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. A close reading of Tsang Khenchen's work reveals an important distinction made between the natural world of Bhutan, as a receptacle for the collective blessings of Buddhist figures, including Padmasambhava, and the social world, manifested in the moral failings of human beings. Such a distinction frames the millenarian mission of Ngawang Namgyal in essentially social terms, calling on a bodhisattva figure to tame not a degenerate landscape, but degenerate human beings, and guide them on a soteriological path. In Tsang Khenchen's narrative, Ngawang Namgyal is precisely able to effectuate such a mission by calling on the forces of the natural world to his aid and produce the favorable conditions necessary for his theocratic project. Here we have an important distinction between the activities of Padmasambhava and those of Ngawang Namgyal. While Padmasambhava's identity was predicated on his ability to tame a natural environment that was resistant and antagonistic toward the spread of Buddhism in the region, Ngawang Namgyal's taming was towards human beings, with the assistance of a powerful natural environment aligned with the priorities of a flourishing Buddhadharma in the region. In other words, in Tsang Khenchen's writing, the natural world, previously blessed and consecrated by

Padmasambhava, is conceived as an essential participatory agent of the enlightened society sought by Ngawang Namgyal; an indispensable vehicle for the establishment of a fortunate eon in the region. In this reading, while the confluence between the activities of Padmasambhava and Ngawang Namgyal are less pronounced in that there is a divergence in the object of their taming, the millenarian project of Ngawang Namgyal *qua* Avalokiteśvara is in perfect harmony with the conception of Bhutan as a privileged and chosen land conducive to the spread of Buddhism. The utopian vision of Bhutan as an earthly paradise is precisely what enables the utopian vision of Bhutan as an enlightened society in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*. Such a conception of the mutual and interrelated relationship between the natural and social worlds largely perdures in Bhutan today.

### **Bhutan and the Field of Religio-Political Rule**

The previous two sections of this chapter have sought to situate Tsang Khenchen's articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy in the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* within the historical environment of its composition. By examining the proximate context of Bhutan in the latter half of the seventeenth century, I have argued that the period of the Bhutanese state's consolidation was multivalent and involved contending views of the theoretical nature of the state. While Ngawang Namgyal's probable vision of the Bhutanese state reflects the transitional character of his own *habitus*, being

simultaneously a scion of the Gya clan and recognized rebirth of the Gyalwang Drukchen incarnation line, Tsang Khenchen's articulation of the Bhutanese theocracy would appear to represent a move away from older models of clan-based authority by emphasizing characteristically Buddhist understandings of authority and governance. The following section then took a step back in order to observe and situate Tsang Khenchen's work within the broader historical shifts taking hold of the Greater Tibetan region. By examining some of the important continuities and discontinuities between Tsang Khenchen's enunciation of the Bhutanese state and the Tsangpa hegemony on the one hand, followed by the Ganden Phodrang government of Lhasa on the other, it has become clear that Bhutan's experiment with theocracy simultaneously reflects a shared affinity with its temporal and spatial neighbors as well as conditions unique to the Southern region. While the Tsangpa hegemony provided Bhutan with a powerful model of Buddhist kingship that sought both an insular and inclusive vision of the state, the Ganden Phodrang government of the Fifth Dalai Lama shared the millenarian vision of Avalokiteśvara emanating in the world through the activities of kingship for the benefit of sentient beings.

In this final section, we take yet a further step back in order to observe the founding of the Bhutanese state within the broader trajectory of the field of religio-political rule in Tibet. As I have argued early on in this dissertation, the Bhutanese experiment with theocracy ought to be observed as the outcome of a long history of

incremental changes within the field of religio-political rule. The creation of a theocratic form of government which sought the union of religious and temporal domains within the figure of the religious hierarch represents the final stage of the rise of ecclesiastical power in Tibet. Returning to the language of Bourdieu, the following pages will recapitulate the field dynamics that allowed for the articulation of a new settlement within the field of religio-political rule and examine the broader implications of such a settlement for the Bhutanese social order and, finally, our understanding of theocracy in Bhutan.

We saw in chapter two how the field of religio-political rule emerged as a stable reproductive system in Tibet during the period of Buddhist sectarian institutional growth through a diarchic system of governance encapsulated in the patron-priest or *chöyön* relationship between temporal rulers and religious establishments. The diarchic model, exemplified in the Sakya-Yüan partnership and prevalent at the local level among Tibet's numerous clan-based institutions, implicated a shared notion of power and legitimation that involved the investment of various forms of capital between the temporal and religious establishments of Tibet. On the one hand, the clan-based aristocratic establishment invested its material resources in religious institutions of Tibet for the return of symbolic capital, and on the other, the religious institutions invested their symbolic capital in the aristocracy in order to grow and expand in their material pursuits. While the emergent field of religio-political rule was certainly relational and

invested in the religious establishment the power and authority of representation inherent to the reproduction of the social order, its settlement nonetheless clearly favored Tibet's clan-based aristocracy through the cultivation of clan-based models of authority and governance.

That said, the environment of political decentralization, regionalism, and fierce competition that characterizes this period of Tibetan history offered Buddhist individuals and institutions opportunities to exert significant pressures on the field's settlement by cultivating competing institutional models of authority and succession. As much of this dissertation has argued, two essential elements lying at the heart of these competing institutional models was the introduction in Tibet of the *tulku* mode of succession paired with the efflorescence of the literary genre of biography. While the *tulku* mode of succession allowed Tibetan Buddhist institutions to largely circumvent the terms of the field's settlement and garner significant material and institutional autonomy from individual aristocratic establishments, the emergence of biography allowed a reconfiguration of the role and place of the religious hierarch in Tibet by ascribing to him a totalizing power over both worldly and otherworldly domains. As I have argued at length, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* and its edification of Ngawang Namgyal stands as a paradigmatic example of such a reconfiguration.

As we saw in chapter three, by the sixteenth century, so prevalent had these novel models of authority and governance become that temporal rulers themselves

began adopting them as a rationale for the activities of kingship, as was the case with the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet. Ultimately, such internal pressures on the field paired with the exogenous shocks of an almost constant state of civil war between various clan alliances caused an inevitable rupture to the terms of its settlement. In many ways, the birth of hierocratic governments in the seventeenth century was less about some form of deliberate or cynical takeover of the political establishment by the religious elite as much as it was a creative solution to a growing problem. In the face of two centuries of protracted civil war between various prominent aristocratic lines each vying for political power, Tibet's ancient clan-based model suffered significant blowbacks. From weakened economies to crises of succession, the sense of cohesion that Tibet's ruling clans had provided for centuries became increasingly undermined. Adding to these internal struggles, the clan-based establishment's inability to restrain foreign encroachments and threats to newfound Tibetan sovereignty meant a further weakening of its ruling mandate. In this environment of crisis and uncertainty, a vacuum of legitimacy was created through the clan-based aristocratic establishment's gradual failure to reproduce itself in the social order. From this perspective, the rise of a theocratic movement in the Tibetan region represented, in large part, an attempt to make sense of Tibet's place in the world. Facing the decline of clan-based models of authority, religious hierarchs and their institutions increasingly became sources of cohesion for the Tibetan polity. Their articulation of Tibet and its rule along Buddhist

lines functioned as a powerful rallying cry for the establishment of a newfound sense of a shared corporate identity.

While the rise of ecclesiastical power in Tibet certainly involved a conflictual and in many ways self-interested relationship between two sets of social actors in an overall economy of power, the birth of theocratic governments equally represents an attempt at the construction of a meaningful social world on the part of the religious elite of the period. As I explored in the previous chapter, Tsang Khenchen's *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* sought the enunciation of an idealized social world that is entirely oriented towards Buddhism as a governing social construct. His theocratic vision represents a thorough mobilization of the ideological and material conditions set over the course of the previous centuries into the articulation of a new and reproducible social order through the enunciation of a new settlement in the field of religio-political rule. Such a new settlement recognized Buddhist hermeneutical strategies as a totalizing epistemological framework for making sense of the social world, including the activities of kingship and government. For Tsang Khenchen, the founding of a theocratic government in Bhutan meant the possibility of envisioning a utopian society whose welfare and prosperity was grounded in Buddhist understandings of ethics and subject formation and oriented towards a soteriological project. As I wrote in the previous chapter, social mobility, in Tsang Khenchen's *theotopia*, is entirely governed by the capacity to embody virtue, interpreted through the lens of Buddhist erudition and



virtuosity and confirmed by favorable signs in the natural world and society itself. For Tsang Khenchen, such an idealized Buddhist social order necessitates a veritable *theos* who not only embodies and manifests the various virtues adjoined in his vision, but who also functions as a medium for their actualization. Ngawang Namgyal, in other words, is both a didactic figure revealing the possibilities of the social world and a totalizing presence through which its fruits are forever accessible.

Importantly, Tsang Khenchen's theocratic revision of the field's settlement represents not an attempt at replacing one instantiation of the union of religious and temporal domains (*chos srid zung 'brel*) for another, but rather the articulation of an altogether new model encapsulating all of the others. In other words, his vision of the Bhutanese theocracy represents not an attempt to replace the models of diarchy or religiously-sanctioned kingship with hierocracy, as one would assume, but rather the articulation of a system of governance which incapsulates all three at once. In the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, Ngawang Namgyal is simultaneously a Buddha, a bodhisattva, a Buddhist hierarch, a *dharma*marāja, a clan leader, a patron and a priest/lama. The complex theory of divinity elaborated by Tsang Khenchen is one which thoroughly and simultaneously embraces both worldly and otherworldly domains, identifying Ngawang Namgyal as both a physical manifestation grounded in worldly immanence and an abstract figure transcending it.

Herein lies perhaps the single most important characteristic of theocracy as an

abstract theory of governance in Bhutan. While on the one hand, it is restrictive in the sense of Flavius Josephus, with its categorical emphasis on the direct unmediated rule of an omnipotent and omnipresent *theos*, on the other, such a *theos* is itself all-encompassing, embodying and embracing reality in all of its myriad manifestations. As we saw in the previous chapter, both aesthetically and theoretically, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* conjures and celebrates a multi-layered and hyper-sensuous world that is in excess of the characteristics and conventions of ordinary perception. As is evidenced in the work of Lin and MacCormack, such an impetus to embrace abundance and multiplicity as an essential feature of authority and governance is equally present in the cultural productions of the Ganden Phodrang government of Lhasa, and, as such, may very well be one of the defining characteristics of the theocratic project in the Tibetan region as a whole. The particular union of religious and temporal domains sought by such architects of political theology as Tsang Khenchen or Sangyé Gyatso in the seventeenth century Tibetan cultural sphere was one in which the union (*zung 'brel*) of these two spheres meant not a reductive process of distillation, but rather a creative and expansive process generative of new and multivalent ways of conceiving the social world. If the Tibetan and Bhutanese experiments of the seventeenth century have anything to teach us about theocracy as an abstract theory of governance, it is primarily this insight: however multivalent such a system manifests historically, at its heart lies an impulse to embrace and enact a vision of the world that is all-encompassing of its

myriad manifestations. The projection of divinity as sole sovereign means the possibility of envisioning a cohesive social world that both encompasses human activity and stretches far beyond it. In such a world, human virtuosity reflects the ability to embody and master, through erudition and transcendent abilities, the totality of phenomena.

## **Conclusion**

This final chapter has sought to situate Tsang Khenchen's enunciation of the Bhutanese theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal within its immediate historical context in Bhutan and broader developments in Tibet. Doing so has produced a number of insights with regard to the character of the nascent Drukpa state. For one, the kind of theocratic vision articulated by Tsang Khenchen was simultaneously reflective of the great scholar from Tsang's own subjective experience of Bhutan's founding as a state and his position as a paradigmatic representative of the seventeenth century religious establishment of Tibet, including its distinctive conceptions of authority and governance. As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, Tsang Khenchen's emphasis on Buddhism as the language and rationale of political rule had much in common with the Tsangpa hegemony of Central Tibet and the Ganden Phodrang government of Lhasa. The continuities and shared affinities between these three projects reveal the extent to which the Tibetan region experienced a major transformative period during the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Facing the decline of Tibet's ancient clan-based establishment, the religious institutions of Tibet gradually came to occupy a space within which novel understandings of the function of government could be envisioned.

While the founding of theocratic governments in the seventeenth century represents the culmination of the ecclesiastical establishment's long rise to power through the achievement of political hegemony over the Tibetan region, limiting our analysis to the raw exercise of power in the service of self-interested political gains would be to miss out on much of the remarkable developments taking hold of the region. As I have sought to argue in this chapter and more broadly in this dissertation, Tsang Khenchen's enunciation of the Bhutanese theocracy equally represents an attempt at making sense of the social world by conceiving of it through a Buddhist hermeneutical lens. In this sense, the *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* ought to be observed as a powerful agent of symbolic labor articulating a novel and idealized Buddhist social order in Bhutan. I have termed such a social order a *theotopia* owing to its emphasis on the Southern region of Bhutan as a physical and social utopia that is ruled and embodied by an unmediated and omnipotent *theos*. While, on the one hand, Tsang Khenchen's *theotopia* is reflective of the broader structural changes taking hold of the Tibetan region, on the other, it is built on foundations unique to Bhutan, including its conception as a consecrated earthly realm and field of activity of the Indian *siddha* Padmasambhava.

In many ways, Tsang Khenchen's utopian vision for Bhutan never materialized. As is evidenced by two centuries of indeterminate civil wars and protracted conflicts over Ngawang Namgyal's succession, leading, eventually, to the installment of the current hereditary monarchy in 1907, his dream of a new fortunate era of peace and happiness in the region where "travelers and children could go about peacefully like an old woman carrying a pot of gold and cowherds could be happy and sing songs in the empty forests"<sup>27</sup> arguably fell short. In other ways, however, and as I shall attempt to demonstrate in the conclusion to this dissertation, some of the characteristics of his theocratic vision perdure in significant ways in the Kingdom till date. Such a fact is testament to the remarkable and indelible mark that his pen left on the social fabric of Bhutan.

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<sup>27</sup> *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud* vol. Nga fol. 10.a-b.

## CONCLUSION

On November 1, 2008, the inhabitants of the small Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan braced for the momentous occasion of the coronation of their Fifth monarch, H.M the Druk Gyalpo Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck. Like all four previous coronations since the start of the Wangchuck dynasty in 1907, the event was held at the historic Punakha Dzong or fortress, built in 1640 by Ngawang Namgyal as the seat of the Drukpa theocracy. The event would be followed by further ceremonies and celebrations in Thimphu over the following weeks, including a second state coronation on November 6, held at Thimphu's Tashichödzong (Bkra shis chos rdzong) fortress. Going against tradition, the Kingdom's Fourth monarch, H.M the Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck, had abdicated the throne in favor of his son two years prior in 2006 and steered the Kingdom to transition to a constitutional monarchy, drafting a new constitution and holding its first democratic elections in 2008. Unfortunately, Bhutan's state astrologers found no immediate date auspicious enough for the coronation of their new king, postponing the event for almost two years until the morning of November 1, 2008, the 8th day of the 9th month of the Earth Rat year in the Bhutanese calendar. On that historic day, all of the major population centers and fortresses of the Kingdom were

ornately decorated in anticipation of the event, and the Punakha Dzong itself looked resplendent after weeks of preparations. The King-to-be had arrived the previous day accompanied by his royal entourage, Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley, ministers and other dignitaries, and on that morning, he was led by a grand Chipdrel (*chibs gral*) ceremonial procession into the fortress. The Chipdrel procession, originally conceived and instituted by Ngawang Namgyal in the seventeenth century for state functions, was headed by a white stallion bearing auspicious banners and symbols, and followed by numerous bearers of banners and flags, a large monastic orchestra, singers, dancers, soldiers and monks, all carrying auspicious items and substances. As it approached the great fortress, the procession was greeted by the sounds of blowing trumpets, oboes and cymbals played by monks stationed on its various rooftops.

The procession's final destination was the revered Machen (*ma chen*) temple, where the precious and prophetic Rangjung Khasarpa relic is kept, and the embalmed body of Ngawang Namgyal lies in repose since 1651. The temple is considered so sacred that only three individuals are ever allowed in it: Bhutan's King, Jé Khenpo or Head Abbott, and the temple's appointed chamberlain, the Machen Zimpön (*ma chen gzim dpon*). On that fateful morning, Bhutan's twenty-eight years old King-to-be, accompanied by his father the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and Bhutan's Seventieth Jé Khenpo, Tulku Jigme Chhoeda (Sprul sku 'Jigs med chos grags b. 1955), entered the temple and, in unprecedented humility, sat on a rug on the floor in the presence of

Bhutan's founding figure, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. An elaborate ritual followed, whereby the King-to-be was conferred a specific blessing and empowerment by the embalmed body of Ngawang Namgyal via the mediation of the Jé Khenpo. Such an empowerment, manifested in his reception of the Dar Na Nga (*dar sna lnga*) of Ngawang Namgyal, five colored silk scarves representing the five elements and the basis for physical existence, marked the officiating moment of his coronation, whereby he, like his predecessors, was conferred by Ngawang Namgyal the power and authority to rule over the land with the support of Bhutan's guardian deities. The prince then emerged from the inner sanctum as king and proceeded to the congregation hall of the fortress where he was greeted by an elaborate ceremony marking the auspicious moment.





Figure 2. The Chipdrel (*chibs gral*) procession gathering in the third courtyard of Punakha's Punthang Dewachen Phodrang (Spung thang bde ba chen pho brang) fortress before H.M. the Fifth Druk Gyalpo enters the Machen temple on November 1, 2008. © 2008 Gelay Jamtsho, Royal Office for Media, His Majesty's Secretariat.

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As the above vignette of the coronation of Bhutan's present monarch illustrates, despite Bhutan's adoption of modern and western-centric paradigms of political governance, including becoming a parliamentary democracy that same year, fundamental elements of premodern conceptions of the state and its institutions endure in the modern era. Towering among them is the conception of Ngawang

Namgyal, articulated by Tsang Khenchen in his *Song of the Great Dharma Cloud*, as a Buddhist divinity governing over the whole region and acting as its ultimate referent of political and religious authority. Such an observation addresses important questions with regard to the ways in which the ideological character of the Bhutanese theocracy of Ngawang Namgyal enunciated in Tsang Khenchen's vision of a Buddhist *theotopia* has extended beyond the period of Bhutan's founding in the seventeenth century.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, one could well argue that Tsang Khenchen's theocratic vision never fully materialized. The protracted conflicts over Ngawang Namgyal's succession, including the recognition of multiple simultaneous rebirths over the course of the decades and centuries following his death, the eventual rise of the institution of the Druk Desi over and above that of the Shabdrung in matters of state, further separating religious and temporal branches of government, and the long and indeterminate civil wars between the temporal governors (*dpon slob*) of Bhutan's various administrative regions leading up to the introduction of the current hereditary monarchy in 1907, all point to the fragility and ultimate failure of hierocratic rule as a characteristic feature of the Bhutanese state. Such a fact is perhaps not surprising, given the extreme rarity of sacerdotal forms of government ruled exclusively by a priestly class across world history. Political scientists such as Brendan O'Leary, as I mentioned in chapter one, have argued that fundamental pressures internal to theocracy in the form of sacerdotal government necessitate and engender a separation

of powers, making a priestly monopoly of power nearly impossible.<sup>1</sup> This was certainly the case in Bhutan, whereupon the routinization of Ngawang Namgyal's charisma following his death, among other factors, significantly diffused power across religious and temporal power brokers in the region.

As the work of Steven Collins has demonstrated in the case of Pali Buddhism, the antagonistic symbiosis between kings and clerics was an essential element in the enunciation and maintenance of what he terms a "Pali imaginaire." According to him, "the discursive formation of social order (politics) over which the king has the enunciatory function, and the conceptual ordering of the universe, time and death (religion), in which the cleric has the iconic voice, are complementary elements of an overall civilizational work of articulation."<sup>2</sup> The collapse of that antagonistic and symbiotic partnership in the hierocracies of Tibet and Bhutan, in many respects, meant the creation of an environment which fundamentally undermined the continued possibility of affirmation or contestation of the social order. Without the checks and balances that both institutions could provide each other, the theocratic system, although at first a creative solution, had the potential to become stagnant and highly unstable. Michael Aris made that point when, in an article published at the end of his life, he

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<sup>1</sup> See O'Leary 2009: 24. O'Leary identifies the combination of anti-relativism, hermeneutical difficulties with sacred law, and the routinization of charisma after the exit of a religion's founder, as major factors that jointly destabilize the prospects of a sustainable theocracy in the form of sacerdotal government.

<sup>2</sup> Collins 1998: 27.

attributed the downfall of Tibet in the mid-twentieth century to a religious system of government that was inherently unstable and unable to organize effectively in the face of “the onslaught of modern ideologies imposed by foreign armies.”<sup>3</sup> The reason for Bhutan’s survival as a state, Aris further argues, was primarily due to its ability to achieve a transition between the theocratic system of Ngawang Namgyal and the present Bhutanese monarchy.

And yet, as the above vignette illustrates, Tsang Khenchen’s idealized and utopian vision of a harmonious state united and embodied by a sovereign *theos*, in line with Flavius Josephus’ articulation of theocracy as the rule of an unmediated and omnipotent *theos*, in many ways continues to stand as a powerful paradigm for modern Bhutanese conceptions of authority and governance. As such, while the centuries following Ngawang Namgyal and Tsang Khenchen’s deaths certainly represent a gradual transition away from hierocratic government, they also equally represent a crystallization and thorough assimilation of Tsang Khenchen’s theocratic vision into Bhutanese conceptions of the social world. Such a paradoxical modality, I contend, is reflective of the complexity of theocracy as a governing principle of government and social life.

As I have sought to demonstrate and emphasize in this dissertation, the birth of theocratic governments in the Tibetan region represents, first and foremost, an attempt

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<sup>3</sup> Aris 1987: 141.

at the construction of a meaningful social world on the part of the religious elite of the region. For Tsang Khenchen, the founding of a theocratic government in Bhutan meant the possibility of envisioning a utopian society whose welfare and prosperity was grounded in Buddhist understandings of ethics and subject formation and oriented towards an essentially soteriological project. Theocracy, in other words, meant less the creation of hierocratic forms of government through the raw exercise of ecclesiastical power than the construction of a meaningful Buddhist world embodied by and manifested in an all-encompassing *theos*. As I have sought to underline in chapters four and five, such a Buddhist world was celebrated as multi-layered, hyper-sensuous and in excess of the characteristics and conventions of ordinary perception; embracing abundance and multiplicity as characteristic features of authority and governance. Lying at the heart of such a vision was the projection of divinity as simultaneously encapsulating all of worldly human activity and stretching far beyond it, beckoning subjects to cultivate a human virtuosity that mastered, through erudition and transcendent abilities, all of phenomena in its myriad manifestations. Such a vision, in turn, recognized the region of Bhutan as a destined and privileged space for the actualization of such a world; a utopian earthly paradise manifesting divinity through the establishment of a new fortunate eon of prosperity and happiness for its inhabitants.

Thus, while on the one hand, the field of religio-political rule may have gradually evolved away from hierocracy through the interventions of new actors and other distal

fields in the aftermath of the establishment of theocratic governments in the region leading into the modern period, on the other, essential elements of its seventeenth century settlement nonetheless remained foundational to subsequent enunciations of the social order. From the conception of Ngawang Namgyal as a singular and eternal *theos* to Bhutan's status as a refuge and privileged space for the flourishing of the Buddhist dharma, with its distinct understandings of virtuosity and the interrelated relationship between the natural and social worlds, many elements of Tsang Khenchen's articulation of the Bhutanese state continue to inform modern subjectivities in the region today. As a result, and as I have argued in the introduction to this dissertation, a singular focus on modern Bhutan's institutional character from Western-centric perspectives and discourses on modernity, as tends to be the case, would be to miss out much of the complex trajectories and processes through which it has emerged as a distinct modern nation in the twentieth century. As I have sought to implicitly articulate in this dissertation, we have much to gain from an analysis of Bhutan's experiment with theocracy at the period of its founding in the seventeenth century for the insights it can provide us on modern conceptions of the state and its subjects. Enumerating the multivalent continuities between premodern and modern Bhutanese subjectivities unfortunately falls far beyond the scope of my work here, but as I hope that the above vignette of the coronation of Bhutan's Fifth Druk Gyalpo demonstrates, such a prospect promises fruitful avenues for deeper engagements with Bhutanese and Buddhist

conceptions of modernity.

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