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Francoise Pommaret

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TRACING YARLUNG IN SOUTH-CENTRAL BHUTAN?

MYTHS, MIGRATIONS, AND SOCIETY:
THE COMMUNITY OF NGANGLA TRONG IN LOWER KHENGFRANÇOISE POMMARET
CRCAO, CNRS (Paris) & CLCS (Royal University of Bhutan)

INTRODUCTION

The region of Lower Kheng (Zhemgang district)¹ is considered one of Bhutan's most remote areas. Until 2016, it was only accessible from Zhemgang by several days of strenuous walking through steep Himalayan jungles or from India via the Manas National Park, encompassing parts of south-central Bhutan and the politically troubled region of North Assam. Situated at the low altitude of 1,190m, the area of Ngangla Trong is the last Bhutanese mountain outpost in Lower Kheng before the plains of Assam. These steep slopes and ridges are home to a cluster of villages sharing a common identity, myths, and social structure that have not been studied until now. These specificities may have remained unique and survived till date because of this region's lack of regular communications with the outside world. In early March 2012 a ten-day ethnographic field trip was made possible by a grant from the Helvetas/EU's project 'Preserving and Leveraging Bhutan's Cultural Diversity' to the Institute of Language and Culture Studies (ILCS), Royal University of Bhutan. A motorable road, much awaited by the people of the area, was under construction and consequently the need was felt to document the cultural specificities of the area before immense changes occurred. A fieldwork paper was published in 2015 by Helvetas in Bhutan.²

This article intends – through the analysis of language, history, and myths – to place the community of Ngangla Trong within a broader research agenda that seeks to trace patterns of migrations in Bhutan.

¹ Because of the different languages (Tibetan, Dzongkha, Khyengkha) involved in this study, I will spell the names and terms as they are spelt in Latin alphabet in contemporary Bhutan. Whenever possible, I will use or add the classical Tibetan term in Wylie.

² Pommaret (2015).

Situated in south-central Bhutan, Ngangla Trong has a unique location, being at the nexus between Central and Eastern Bhutan. Using the case study of Ngangla Trong, a first exploration of the links to the region of Bumthang to the north and to Eastern Bhutan is proposed. The investigations hint that the ancestry of the people of Ngangla Trong could be traced to a common root, which would be the region of Yarlung in Central Tibet, at least if we rely on Bhutanese historiography and the myths of the region.

THE DATA AND CONTEXT

As this region is still unknown in the field of Himalayan Studies, I will first summarise the ethnographic data collected with my ILCS colleagues during the field trip of March 2012 in order to underline the broader discussion on patterns of migrations in Bhutan.³

People and languages

The community of Ngangla Trong proper, in the south of Zhemgang district, has seventy mostly scattered households and is composed of Khengpas and a few Sharchopas from the neighbouring sub-district (*rgad 'og*) of Bjoka (written *Byog kang* in classical text) who married into Ngangla Trong.

The language spoken in Ngangla Trong is Khengkha but most people also speak a dialect of Tshangla (Sharchopkha), spoken in Bjoka. Khengkha belongs to the large Bumthangkha family (East Bodish); Bumthangkha and Khengkha are mutually intelligible. Khengkha therefore belongs to the East Bodish branch of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, while Tshangla belongs to the Bodish branch of the Tibeto-Burman family, albeit its exact classification is still debated among linguists. Khengkha and Tshangla are mutually unintelligible. Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, is taught in the schools, along with English.

³ The full field report is available in the book edited by Karma Phuntsho and published by Helvetas in 2015 under the LCD/EU project. My colleagues from ILCS were Kinzang Dorji, Yannick Jooris, and Sonam Nyenda. A film and over 500 documentation photos are available. I am most grateful to Sonam Nyenda for his translations from Khengkha.



Ngangla Trong ridge

Geography, landscape, and environment

Ngangla Trong is located at 26°56' latitude, 91°0' longitude, and an altitude of 1,190m.

It is perched on a ridge that dominates the whole landscape to the north and to the south, towards the Indian plains. It is a spectacular location with an aerial view. Except for the ridge where the main settlement is located, the whole landscape is made up of very steep slopes covered by thick tropical forest.

The settlement consists of scattered bamboo houses surrounded by fields. It is spread out along the ridge with clusters of two to three houses on the slopes near the ridge. Except for the top of the ridge, there is no flat area; a few slopes near the top of the ridge are used for farming. The temple is built on the highest point of the ridge, surrounded by five houses, including the stone house of the *koche* (lord).



A traditional house in the vicinity of Ngangla Trong

The climate of Ngangla Trong is pleasant and dry in the winter, from October to March, but the area is subject to very strong winds from north and south. In the rainy season, which starts as early as April and lasts till September, the weather is terribly wet and life is difficult, with rodents, snakes, and leeches everywhere. The swollen rivers are then impossible to cross.

Forest products, including bamboo and rattan, are truly still part of the way of life and ‘food bank’. The forest gives the people of Lower Kheng a unique material culture and knowledge. This part of Bhutan is an important point of comparison for the biodiversity of Asia. Keiji Nishioka recognised this specific biodiversity as early as the 1970s and wrote of the ‘shiny leaved forest culture complex’.⁴

As in many other places in Lower Kheng, the people of Ngangla Trong depend on subsistence farming – mostly done using slash and burn (*Dz. tshe ri*) – and forest products, with oranges (*citrus*) as a cash crop, for their livelihood. Maize, buckwheat, foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*), and fingermillet (*Eleusine coracana*) are the main crops. Wheat and potatoes are grown in very small quantity. Formerly, millet and maize were used as staple food but nowadays people prefer rice, which they bring from India. Today maize and millet are used mostly

⁴ Nakao & Nishioka (1984), p. 108.

for brewing local beer *bangchang*, while buckwheat is kept for making the distilled alcohol *ara* (Dz.; Kh. *a rag*), a common drink.

People rely heavily on forest products such as 'wild potatoes', yams (*Dioscorea* spp), and taro (*Colocasis escaleta*). Khatkala Metog (*Adhatoda vasica*), a white flower from a bush blooming in March and April, is used to a great extent as a vegetable, as are orchids (*Cymbidium hookerianum*), banana shoots, cabbage of wild pandanus, and rattan buds (*Calamus* spp.) as well as different kinds of bamboo shoots, stinging nettles, mushrooms, and ferns. By comparison, vegetables from the garden are few: chilli, cabbage, radish, and pumpkin. All of the vegetables are eaten fresh or dried and stored. Amaranth (*Amaranthus hypochondriacus*) is cultivated between the maize and millet and the grains from the red spikes are used, especially with chilli paste. Ginger is widely available and used. The leaves of the *Perilla frutescens*, a kind of mint or basil, are eaten as a vegetable while its matured grains are widely used in salads, mixed with garlic, cheese, and chillis or pounded to give an oily texture and added to tea.

Oil was produced from different kinds of nut trees, especially from *Lindera* (spp. *Lauraceae*) and *Madhuca* (spp. *Sapotaceae*) but today it has been replaced by refined oil from India. Similarly, now tea is imported from India. Tea made from tree leaves or bark (*shing ja*) was available traditionally, mostly from *sorbus cuspidate* (Himalayan whitebeam). Tea is drunk with butter or with milk. However, people prefer *banchang* to tea.

Pigs are raised for personal consumption and not for commercial use. Many people keep hens for eggs. Only a few of them have cattle and one family has a mithun (Kh. *bamen*; *bos indicum*) which is crossed with local cows. It is prized for the qualities of its offsprings. Dairy products are difficult to get and cattle are never slaughtered for meat. Due to religious prohibition people are reluctant to talk about their past as hunters, but they did hunt with bows and arrows and set pointed-bamboo traps in the forest. Hunting supplemented their diet and protected their crops against wild boar, deer, bear, and squirrels. There is not much threat to the livestock; only old isolated tigers attack the cattle.

Traditional trade was carried out on a small scale and was based on barter. Ngangla Trong traded with Assam (India), but the thick jungles of the Manas region in the south and the lack of surplus commodities may have hampered this marginal trade. The items traded were bamboo and forest products against salt, rice, and spices. Today, oranges (*citrus*) are the main source of cash income in most of Ngangla Trong

and are traded in Assam, rice being the largest import item. As for trade within Bhutan, it appeared to have been limited. Their main bartering partner seems to have been the village of Bjoka, a two-hour walk to the east.

A handful of women weave simple cotton cloth for dresses and belts on backstrap looms. Additionally, the relatively rare ‘card weaving’ for belts is still practised. Weaving of simple utilitarian baskets of bamboo and cane is done but rarely for commercial purposes.

The lifestyle of the area of south-central Bhutan shown in this short survey with its low altitude, steep slopes, dense tropical jungle, and bamboo culture could not be farther from Central Tibet, and yet the field and historical research presented below allows us now to echo what Ardussi so rightly concluded from his textual research about the scions of the Tibetan prince gTsang ma (b.800) in Eastern Bhutan: “So remote were they [branches of nobility found on dramatic ridge-top settlements] from the main centres of Tibetan culture that these princes go almost entirely unnoticed in Tibetan studies of the lineage fragments from the former Yarlung dynasty.”⁵

History and myths

As is often the case in Bhutan, written texts do not document the history of remote areas. We have to rely on oral history and myths as well as data from other regions to try and understand the history of a particular place while being mindful of the danger of reconstruction.⁶

The Kheng region in Central Bhutan stretches from the south of Bumthang to the Assamese border and forms the Zhemgang district (*dzong khag*). It was divided into three main regions – Upper Kheng (sPyi 'khor), Middle Kheng (Nang 'khor), and Lower Kheng (Tama chog or Matpala) – which were ruled by petty lords with different titles: *dung* (*gDung*), *koche* (*sKu mched*), and *ponpo* (*dPon po*). Due to its remoteness from the district headquarters in Zhemgang, Lower Kheng is now a specific administrative entity (*dung khag*) with its headquarters in Pangbang and comprises Bjoka, Ngangla, Goshing, and Pangkhar sub-districts.

The daunting topography with steep slopes and deep gorges covered with jungle has certainly contributed to the isolation and fragmentation of Kheng, leading to the rise of petty lords ruling over

⁵ Ardussi (2007 b), p. 15.

⁶ This is magistrally demonstrated by Mullard (2011) with regard to the oral history on state formation in Sikkim.

small territories. Kheng did not come under any kind of centralisation until the mid-seventeenth century, at the time of the conquest of Central and Eastern Bhutan by the *'Brug pa* forces led by the 3rd *sde srid* Mi 'gyur brtan pa (1613-1681). However, even after the unification of Bhutan and the later establishment of the monarchy, Kheng retained a lot of autonomy, although Upper Kheng was more under the control of the kings due to its close socio-economic links with Bumthang.

In Lower Kheng the most important traditional rulers were the Bjoka *koche* and the Ngangla *koche*, as well as the Pangkhar, Tama, Gomphu, and Goshing local leaders (*gDung*); of these the Bjoka *koche* seems to have had the most power.⁷ *Koche* is a title given to a hereditary ruler in parts of Lower Kheng and also in the Dungsam (*gDung bsam*) area of Eastern Bhutan. I will come back to this title and its possible etymology later.

We cannot study the history of Ngangla Trong without mentioning the Tshangla-speaking village of Bjoka which is only two-hour walk away as their histories appear to be intertwined. However, due to lack of time, the study does not extend to fully include Bjoka, but only explores its relations with Ngangla Trong.

The origin of the Ngangla Trong people and the koche according to local myths

Although Ngangla Trong is mentioned, to our knowledge, only once⁸ in available written historical records, there is an oral tradition on the myths and origin of the people inhabiting the region. According to this, the people are divided into several classes: the Brela, the Lhamenpa, the Bjarpa, and the Koche.

Myth of origin of the Brela and the Lhamenpa

One of our respondents recounted the myth as follows: Brela were the first humans to reside at Ngangla Trong. But the king of demons, called Rangwang Gyelpo, hunted the place and never allowed the humans to stay in peace. Sometimes he turned into a vulture and ate people. Other times he turned into an enormous snake and swallowed people. So people had a hard time living there. Descendants of the gods, Khewa Dorji and Chagi Tempa, came with their sister Chingi Thagpa, from a

⁷ Lham Dorji (2005), pp. 31-59.

⁸ Aris (1986), p. 39.

place called Urbayling in Bumthang to save them. The Brela handed out grain to them, hence their name, Bre, meaning 'measure'.

These two brothers fought with the demon Rangwang Gyelpo, while the sister Chingi Thagpa prepared three meals per day and wove two dresses each day. As the two brother's clothes were torn off each day fighting with Rangwang Gyelpo, Chingi Thagpa would wake up early in the morning to weave and finish stitching in the evening. When Chagi Tempa subdued the vulture in the sky and returned, he did not see Khewa Dorji anywhere. When he called for his brother, Khewa Dorji replied from the snake's belly. Chagi Tempa told him to use his animal fangs. Suddenly, Khewa Dorji remembered the fangs he had and he tore the snake's belly and got out. It had been nine days and nine nights of fighting by this time. Chingi Thagpa said to her two brothers, "It's done now, we got the land and food. I am so tired of this game. Tomorrow as the sun goes behind the hills, your sister won't be there for you." The next day when the two brothers arrived home, they saw the meal prepared by their sister, but the fire she had made was dying down. This frightened the two brothers and they went to look for her. When they reached the lake Lachen Ama Ringlamed, they saw their sister Chingi Thagpa disappearing into the lake, half of her body changed into a snake and the other half still human.

The two brothers left Ngangla Trong and went to a place southwards known today as Panbang. Chagi Tempa died while fighting a tiger. When the tiger jumped at him, part of his flesh was ripped off and each time Chagi Tempa got on the tiger he broke one of the tiger's ribs. At the end of the fight, Chagi Tempa died lying on one side and the tiger on the other side.⁹ Khewa Dorji disappeared into a rock while building a stone bridge over one of the rivers.

The Lhamenpa are believed to be the descendants of these divine figures who disappeared, hence the etymology Lha literally means god and Menpa means without.

This myth might suggest that the people who came to settle in Ngangla from the north, mainly from Bumthang, were the Lhamenpa. Because Chagi Tempa, Khewa Dorji, and Chingi Thagpa came from Bumthang and 'disappeared' in the end, the original people, the Brela, who lived in Ngangla Trong believed these siblings were their gods which they had lost. Who were the Brela? It is impossible for us to

⁹ Lham Dorji notes the importance of toponyms derived from the word *stag* (tiger) around the locality of Tagma. This relates to a female tigress who was killing people and animals until it was tamed, (2005), p. 39.

know as till date no historical account or even an oral origin myth could be recorded.

Myth of origin of the Bjarpa and the Koche

It had been a long time since the people did not have any leaders to look up to and to maintain decorum in the community. So people decided amongst themselves to find a leader who was of a higher clan. A group of people went to search for a leader in the east, towards Mongar. The group decided to steal a boy because they knew that nobody in the villages would be willing to give a son to them. When they reached the east, they found one young boy playing on the branch of a tree and another sitting under the same tree. So the search party abducted the boy under the tree, covering his head and bringing him back to their village. When the boy grew up, the people made him their leader as a Koche. After a few years the boy's relatives learned that he had been made the *koche* in that community and they followed him to become *koche*, as well. When his relatives arrived there, people did not accept them as *koche*, but let them stay there if they wished. So the descendants of these people are called Bjarpa. These Bjarpa people came to rely on the Koche as the literal meaning of Bjarpa is 'relying' or 'attached'.

To summarise: The Brela are described as the first "humans of the soil" (Dz. *Sa gzhi rten pa*). The Lhamenpa are thought to descend from the two brothers from Bumthang. The third class, the Bjarpa, is related by blood and ancestry to the *koche*. The Brela were the first humans to reside at Ngangla Trong. They were threatened by a demon and two brothers, descendants of gods, came with their sister from a place called Urbayling in Bumthang to save them. Their descendants are the Lhamenpa. However, the brothers disappeared, leaving them without a ruler; hence we have the probable origin of their name Lhamenpa 'people without gods/rulers'. So the Brela went east to steal a child whom they made their ruler. His descendants are the *koche* ruling family. Then members of the stolen child's family in the east wanted to become *koche* too but as this was not possible, they were allowed to settle with high status and became the Bjarpa, which means 'attached/dependent' (to the *koche*).

This is, in a nutshell, the origin of the three classes (*rigs gsum*),¹⁰ plus the rulers, that make up the people of Ngangla Trong: the *koche*, the Bjarpa, the Lhamenpa, and the Brela. People say that only Ngangla Trong has this *rigs gsum* system in Kheng. Nearby Bjoka appears to have a similar system but with different names. Unfortunately, I had no time to investigate in Bjoka.

As usual, myths are fragmented and not always logical, but we can deduce from these stories that the population of Ngangla Trong had at least two origins – one from the north, in Bumthang, perhaps Ura (Urbayling), and one from the east. Nowadays the villagers believe that the *koche* lineage stems from the Thinangbi *koche* in Dungsam (gDung bsam). This part of Dungsam is in today's Mongar district.

The *koche* family confirms its Eastern Bhutan origin and attributes its ancestry to Prince (*Lha sras*) gTsang ma, the brother of the Tibetan King Ral pa can, who is said to have come to Bhutan in the ninth century and to be at the origin of most of the nobilities of Eastern Bhutan, including the Dungsam region.

Social structure and alliances pattern

At a high point towards the top of Ngangla Trong ridge, the temple dominates the village – one big stone house, three large bamboo houses on stilts with banana leaf roofs, and a new white cement house. There is a smaller house just below the temple, where the temple caretaker lives. The stone house belongs to the *koche* of the village.

The three large houses are closely linked to the social set-up and history of Ngangla Trong. As already explained, Ngangla Trong has three social classes (*rigs gsum*): the Brela, the Bjarpa, and the Lhamenpa. Each has a minimum of forty-five households, which are spread all over the ridges and jungles of the sub-district, up to Goshing to the north-west (which was made a separate sub-district in 1997). Beyond these three classes, which already constitute a distinct feature of Ngangla Trong, the system of property ownership and community also appears to be unique. The three houses and adjoining fields near the Ngangla Trong temple do not belong to a private owner but are 'class houses', one for each class, which has ownership over them. However, the word 'class' (*rigs*) may have to be moderated by further research.

¹⁰ We use the term 'class', not being comfortable yet in this context with the term 'clan' although they have clan features such as a common ancestry. However, we feel our research is too preliminary to ascertain these are clans.



The stone house of the Khoche

Every three years a household from each class is nominated to stay in the respective ‘class house’ near the temple. That household takes care of the respective house and fields for three years. After the term the tenant goes back to his/her own house and land, and another ‘class tenant’ of the same class takes over. These community houses have two kitchens so that two families can stay in the house and cook separately. This relates to the fact that the rotation system is extended beyond the three-year term and a fixed transition period exists. The class house is not only inhabited by the family serving the three-year term but also, for one and a half years, by the family who served the term before; this family helps the new tenant with the transition of responsibilities. In other words, a newly chosen tenant family first shares the house with the ‘old’ tenant for one and a half years, then the old tenant leaves and the ‘new’ tenant family lives in the house on its own for three years and then for another one and a half years it shares the house with the next newly chosen tenant family. This means that each family nominated to be the class house tenant actually lives in the house for a total of six years. A three-year tenure ends on the 30th day of the 12th Bhutanese

month. The new tenants' arrival is celebrated with a feast and a pig killed by the people of their class. All the class tenants are responsible for initiating activities taking place in the temple. They must also take care of renovating and replacing the roof of the house and contribute financially or in kind to the yearly festival of *mchod pa la*. The people of their own class construct and renovate the three class houses.¹¹



Lhamenpa and Brela houses around the temple

This is a unique and sophisticated social system. It allows every family of a class a chance to occupy this house and land, even if temporarily, and it must have been a prestige marker to live near the *koche*. This custom of staying three years in the community class house and shouldering the attendant responsibilities binds the society together and reinforces the existing class system. It thereby buttresses the social stability of the region. However, it is a rigid system which entails huge problems and responsibilities. When the class tenant family returns to its own area they can find their house destroyed and the fields taken

¹¹ Recently, the MP (Member of Parliament), who was the Minister of Labour until 2013, newly constructed the Bjarpa house through CDG (Constitutional Development Grant), with modern facilities, so that it won't have to be renovated so often. There is a similar plan for the other two houses, too.

over by the jungle. Often an elderly person is left in the house to take care of it but then the food rations have to be provided.



Ngangla Trong community waiting for the Gantey Trulku near the temple

The system of class houses in proximity of the *koche* is certainly legitimised by the myths and history relating the different origins of the people of Ngangla Trong. The class system, at least in Ngangla Trong, is very much alive, and people are routinely referred to by their class name. Although a socio-historical class consciousness in general terms was strong all over Bhutan, Ngangla Trong appears to have refined it and kept it in a unique way, which is, to this day, translated into the settlement and socio-economic landscape of the community.

The rest of the villagers of the three classes who are not serving at the class houses are called *pampa* (Khyenkha; it could be *Phan pa* ‘those who benefit/are of help’?) and have to work and assist the ‘class households’ and the *koche*. They are paid in meals and *banchang*. Again, these people are referred to according to their class. So they are the Bjarpa *pampa*, the Lhamenpa *pampa*, and the Brela *pampa* as well as the Koche *pampa*.

Information from the genealogical chart of the Ngangla Trong *koche* that we drew, based on four generations, shows that the preferred mode of alliances of the *koche*, just as most of Central and Eastern

Bhutanese nobility,¹² was with a cross-cousin from the Bjoka *koche* lineage. Bjoka appears to have been the ‘wife givers’ to Ngangla Trong, but further research in the genealogy is needed to confirm this. In Ngangla Trong, as in Bjoka, the mode of residence is patrilocal and the sons inherit property. It might have been a way for the Bjoka *koche* to give away non-essential members of the lineage while keeping the Ngangla *koche* pleased by this alliance with a powerful neighbour of the same origin. The two *koche* families are intimately linked through this practice. The Ngangla *koche* built their house at the beginning of the twentieth century on the model of Bjoka and according to the genealogical chart, the two Koche families have been intermarrying at least since the early twentieth century. We can assume that this practice goes back much beyond that date. In the same way, the alliances also extended to the Kuthir/Kuthar *gDung* – in the Bardo area, north of Bjoka and Ngangla Trong – who are considered as having the same rank as the Bjoka *koche*.

Across the classes, residence is also patrilocal and inheritance is patrilineal. This is a strong contrast to Upper and Middle Kheng where marriage was matrilineal and inheritance through the female line.¹³

The classes had a pattern of alliances amongst themselves but this is fast disappearing due to migrations outside the area. The Koche did not marry Bjarpa, because they were considered to be relatives and the Bjarpa did not marry the Lhamenpa for the same reason. However the Brela could marry the Bjarpa and the Lhamenpa. Therefore, besides the *koche* families, the alliance system as described to us in Ngangla Trong reflects strongly the mythical and historical origin of the classes, and perhaps an old clan system. The Brela, who are said to have been the first inhabitants and whose origin is unknown, were not considered of the same blood and therefore could marry both Bjarpa and Lhamenpa. This is consistent with a clan pattern as clans are usually exogamic but there are still questions that need further field research. In particular, one may wonder why the Lhamenpa and the Bjarpa could not intermarry as they seem to have come from two different migrations, and why the *koche* practised the endogamic cross-cousin marriage

¹² In Bhutan there is a distinction between *spun cha* (translated as brothers and sisters but which include in fact the ‘parallel cousins’) whom it is forbidden to marry, and the ‘cross cousins’ which are often the preferred mode of alliance. In the west of Bhutan, the term relatives (*nyewa*) refers to any type of cousins and marriage of cousins is prohibited.

¹³ See Dorji Penjore (2009) for detailed description of marriage practice in Wamling, Upper Kheng.

common in Eastern Bhutan and amongst the religious lords (*chos rje*) of Bumthang.¹⁴ Nowadays the young generation that is studying and living outside the village, do not want to continue the practice of cross-cousin marriage, which they consider obsolete. However, the patrilocal residence and inheritance pattern may subsist longer.

Polygyny is practised but generally the wives are sisters or cousins as is the custom in Central and Eastern Bhutan. Polyandry does not seem to have been practised and this is again in line with Central and Eastern Bhutan.

The groom's parents bear the cost of the matrimonial arrangement which is done in five stages, can last for several years, and sometimes start when a child is born. Dorji, Rigden, and Pelgen have already described this custom in details.¹⁵ The groom's parents have to fatten pigs, stock grain for alcohol preparation, and send their son to the house of the prospective bride's family to work for up to three years before the actual ceremony.¹⁶ We can infer that this gives time to the bride's family and the girl to evaluate the working ability and the character of the prospective husband, as well as 'pay themselves' for the loss of their daughter in terms of the work force.

After this trial period the ceremony takes place and the bride leaves for the groom's house. One year later, the bride's family hosts a feast and gives the girl her share of the family wealth in the form of jewellery, pots, or a cow. Each stage involves feasting, drinking, and codified and metaphorical songs in the form of praises and riddles, but also involves strict responsibilities and commitments from both parties. As well, it involves the exchange of gifts which are closely evaluated. Marriage is a socio-economic alliance. Although the groom's family requires and appoints a matchmaker, it can be assumed that, given the small pool of potential candidates, the unions are more or less predictable and help to cement this agrarian society. Separations seem to be relatively rare in that area of Lower Kheng, no doubt due to the strong socio-family links, the economic consequences that a separation could have for both families, as well as the three-year ordeal the groom has to go through. A song illustrates this concern:

¹⁴ Pommaret (2016).

¹⁵ Lham Dorji (2003), pp. 1-23, and Tenzin Rigden, & Ugyen Pelgen (1999), pp. 70-72.

¹⁶ Balikci (2008), pp.267-68, gives a description of marriage customs among the Lhop/Bhutia/Denjongpa of Tingchim (Sikkim) and points out the similarities with the Kheng customs in her footnote p.268 n.27.

We engaged you for three years,
Now take the hands of our daughter (*bomey* (Kh.)),
Be loving and kind to her,
Do not change your preferences,
Do not look for other flowers;
Let us not hear about quarrels,
Let us not hear about divorce.¹⁷



Temple and houses

Religious, spiritual, and cultural life

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to give a full report on the religious set-up of Ngangla Trong.¹⁸ I will simply concentrate on elements that are important in relation to the present topic.

People in Ngangla Trong, as in the rest of Lower Kheng, follow the *Pad gling* (Padma gling pa 1450-1515) tradition of the *rNying ma pa* religious school, which has its roots in Bumthang. Ngangla Trong had a strong religious affiliation with the gSum 'phrang religious lords (*chos*

¹⁷ Lham Dorji (2003), p. 18.

¹⁸ The full field report will be available in the book published by Helvetas under the LCD/EU project.

rje) of Ura in Bumthang. The gSum 'phrang lama, himself a descendent of Padma gling pa, until recently came every other winter from Ura to Lower Kheng via the villages along the Chamkhar river. He would perform rituals and give teachings. Villagers would host him and offer him forest products and bamboo weaving. Khengkha and Bumthangkha languages being close, there was no communication problem. This religious link reinforces the historical/mythical connection of the Ngangla Trong community to Bumthang.

As in most communities of Central and Eastern Bhutan, there are no monks in Ngangla Trong and ordinary rituals are performed by married lay practitioners (*sgom chen*) and, at the time of death, by the specialist called the *Mi shi* lama. The *sgom chen* are married lay villagers who till the land but also conduct rituals in the villagers' houses. This adds to their income - in kind or in cash - while providing spiritual and emotional support to the community households. There are about ten *sgom chen* in Ngangla Trong and one of them is the astrologer (*rtsis pa*) who decides the auspicious date to start any new endeavour. The *Mi shi* lama is the head of the lay practitioners and the highest religious authority in the village. This is a socio-religious title common in Central and Eastern Bhutan which is given to a lay practitioner who has mastered the common Buddhist rituals. He is requested by the villagers to take this role and conduct the Buddhist rituals for the village in absence of a member of the clergy. He fills the role of funerary priest, hence his title, and is usually from the Bjarpa class.

Since 2008, the 9th Gantey Tulku (*sGang steng sprul sku* b.1955) who is one of the holders of the Padma gling pa lineage and the reincarnation of Padma gling pa's grandson, has been active in Pangbang, Ngangla Trong, and Bjoka. He has visited the area several times and contributed to the restoration of the temple in Bjoka which he consecrated and took over in March 2012.

The Ngangla Trong temple, the construction date of which is unknown, is a one storey stone structure with an assembly hall and an inner shrine. A lay practitioner (*sgom chen*) from one of the three classes on a rotational basis looks after it. This caretaker (*dkor gnyer*) is married and when he goes away to perform rituals, his wife replaces him at the temple. They live just below the temple.

Besides all the local deities that live in the landscape such as the *gzhi bdag*, *gnas bdag*, (*klu*), *gnyan*, and *yul lha*, each class has its own protective deity, which, like in other parts of Bhutan, is a *btsan*. These deities are: Talatsen (*sTag* (?) *la btsan*) for the *koche* and Bjarpa, which reinforces the belief that the *koche* were originally from the same class

as the Bjarpa, Donglatsen (Dong la btsan) for the Lhamenpa, and Rinlatsen (Rin la btsan) for the Brela.

Two local practitioners are particularly important in the daily life of the villagers – the *bon po* and the *dpa' bo*. They are specialists of local deities and rituals that belong to the non-Buddhist complex but they themselves are Buddhist in the typical Central and Eastern Bhutanese custom of practising *Bon* and *Chos* (Buddhism) together, which is also found in many Himalayan areas. *Bon* is seen as dealing with immediate problems of daily life such as harvest, cattle, weather, health and prosperity, while *chos* deals with karmic retribution and after life.¹⁹

The *bon po* is appointed by the community, which looks at the capacity of a person and his willingness to take on this function. However, the *bon po* is usually from the Lhamenpa class. The *bon po* plays an important role during the *mchod pa la* festival and has a dedicated place of worship - the *bla brang*, a bamboo and leaves altar in the open air on the Ngangla Trong ridge. He performs rituals to bring fortune (*g.yang*) and keep the people, the land, and the cattle healthy and prosperous. He learns the rituals by rote, has no text, and calls his practice *Bon chos*. When he performs, he wears a white headband like a turban and a white scarf. He has no musical instrument.

The present *dpa' bo*, who is a spirit medium, is in his mid-eighties and can barely walk.²⁰ For the *mchod pa la* festival, people have to carry him from his house to the temple, a twenty-minute walk up the hill. He belongs to the Brela class. He became possessed for the first time when he was twenty-two when he ran to the forest, climbed trees, and acted like a madman. After he had spent a few days in the forest, the villagers brought him back and presented, for his recognition, objects of the previous *dpa' bo*, as well as other things. He chose the right ones and was declared *dpa' bo*. He says there has been no other *dpa' bo* in his family. He gets possessed by three deities, the most frequent being the local deity Saling Norbu, then Ama Jomo, and lastly Gesar. For each of these deities, when he is possessed, he speaks a different language and has a different costume.

His role is the same as the *dpa' bo* in the other areas of Bhutan and Sikkim.²¹ Several deities can possess him, a characteristic also found in the *gter bdag* of the Lhuntse region.²²

¹⁹ Pommaret (2009).

²⁰ He died in 2013.

²¹ Balikci (2008).

²² Pommaret (1998).



dpa' bo

The major festivals of the year are: *Ser gtam*, *Dus mchod*, *brGyad pa tshes bcu*, and *mChod pa la*. All the festivals, except the *brGyad pa tshes bcu* in honour of Guru Rinpoche, appear to be a syncretism of Bon and Buddhism.

As a caution, I would like to quote the words of the anthropologist Robert Weller here:

In looking for exegesis of rituals, it is easy to gravitate toward a few especially articulate informants. Often... this is the only way to get coherent explanations of religion. However, this procedure can lead us to ignore the great mass of people who have no ready explanations. It is unsafe to assume that the few people who have given more thought to their rituals are expressing ideas common to everyone. The very fact that many people have no easily verbalized explanations is in itself significant. (1987: 64)²³

The people as well as the *koche* sponsor all the festivals. The latter is involved in all the rituals and sponsors the *dbu mdzad* (ritual master). Each of the three classes sponsors a ritual specialist and it might also be an indication of their different origins: the Bjarpa sponsors the *mi shi* lama, the Brela sponsors the *dpa' bo* and the Lhamenpa the *bon po*. Additionally, they all share the sponsorship of the local *sgom chen* (lay

²³ Weller (1987).

practitioners). When the lama, the *bon po*, and the *dpa' bo* sit together, the *bon po* is placed next to the lama and then the *dpa' bo*. Thus again the order of rank also reflects the social structure of the society.

Lay practitioners perform all the rituals in the temple. Outside the temple *bon po* and *dpa' bo* make offerings according to their own traditions for all these rituals. For religious activities the class households serving the three-year tenure along with the *koche* must provide all the necessary items and food for the offerings. They must also take care of the people from their own class who come for the rituals.

Here, the example of the *mChod pa la* (*mchod pa lha/ bla/ zla ?*)²⁴ is given. The ritual is celebrated from the evening of the 14th day of the 10th Bhutanese month to the morning of the 17th day.²⁵ It is the most important festival of the year when all the people of Ngangla Trong and their relatives from other villages assemble at the end of the orange season. The three ‘class tenants’ and the *koche* play an important role, which reinforces the social structure, promotes harmony, and gives them prestige. However, the burden of their economic contribution is heavy, as they have to provide for everything over the four-day period. Below I provide a summary of the events.

On the evening of the 14th day, the three ‘class tenants’ and the *koche* gather in the temple to make a pledge (*bka' dam*) enounced by the *mi shi* lama. They pledge to have the festival run smoothly and that no fighting should take place. They appoint two *gar pa* (dancers/helpers) for each class who dance during the festival. After a ritual of *bgegs gtor*, meant to dispel evil influences, these *gar pa* perform three dances in the temple.

For the whole festival the *mi shi* lama is hosted by the Bjarpa ‘class house’, the *bon po* by the Lhamenpa and the *dpa' bo* by the Brela; i.e., each practitioner is hosted by the class to which he belongs.

The festival is characterised by a complex ‘visiting process’ which starts that evening. The *dpa' bo* from the Brela class goes to meet the *bon po* in the Lhamenpa ‘class house’, and together they go to the Bjarpa and *koche* houses before retiring in their respective ‘class houses’ for the night, after much drinking in each house.

²⁴ We know that in the Bumthang group of languages, the *zla* is often pronounced ‘la’ and not ‘da’.

²⁵ This festival is video-documented by Dr. Kunzang Dorji and Kinley Penjor but the final product is not yet available. Our shortcomings or mistakes can be corrected by their documentary.

On the 15th day, around 3 a.m., in the temple the *mi shi* lama and the *sgom chen* start the ritual based on the Norjam (*Nor bu rgya mtsho*) text of Padma gling pa. Then at 7.30 a.m. the *koche* perform the offering of the *mar chang*.²⁶ At least one representative of each household of the region falling under the classes of Ngangla should be present. Two men, playing the role of the ‘old man’ *rgad po* and ‘old woman’ *rgad mo*, arrive and start telling a story. The *rgad po* carries a phallus in his hand while the *rgad mo* waves her ceremonial scarf (*ras chu*). These two characters are found in many festivals of Central Bhutan. They depict the origin of human beings and their journey from heaven to earth. They represent the ‘ancestors’. It is believed that they use crude and foul language so that people who listen are embarrassed in front of their relatives and neighbours and this action gets them cleansed from all defilement.²⁷

The *mChod pa la* won nation-wide recognition in December 2011 when Dasho Karma Ura included the Ngangla Trong *rgad po* and *rgad mo* in the newly established Dochula Festival and wrote that “they bring prosperity, longevity and happiness to the audience”.²⁸

Then everybody comes out of the temple; a *gser skyems* is offered and a dance of wrathful deities is performed. With a cymbal player preceding them, the *rgad po* and *rgad mo*, the *dpa' bo*, the *bon po*, and the *mi shi* lama, accompanied by the lay practitioners, go to the *koche*'s house and then to the ‘class houses’ of the Bjarpa, the Lhamenpa, and the Brella in succession before returning to the temple. In each house they receive money offerings (called here *snyan dar*) and ample drinks. The ‘official role’ of the *rgad po* and *rgad mo* is now over.

The *bon po* goes to his altar, the *bla brang*, a five-minute walk to the east along the ridge. He is joined by the *dpa' bo* and his helpers, the

²⁶ *Mar chang* ‘butter and alcohol’ is a ceremonial offering which precedes any important function in Bhutan. It is a libation and prayer to propitiate the deities and, in particular, Mahakala.

²⁷ Lham Dorji (2005), p. 36, writes an interesting account of the Gadpo: “Gadpo families were equally influential but were believed to have no noble ancestry. They were ennobled based on their intelligence (*saila*), strength (*khego*) and wealth (*junor*). Gadpos were known for their courage and skills during warfare. Because of such qualities, people unanimously recognized them as their leader [...]. Gadpopa is referred to as a performer during a local festival called Chodpa in Goshing. He performs dances and prays for the longevity, wisdom and prosperity though exhaustive use of mockery and obscene language. He traces his origin to the abode of Lha Jajin (Lord Indra). As revealed by his ritual recitation, he makes his psychic journey from the heaven through Ura to the present place. This is clear from the verses about his encounter with Ura Nad mo (female host of Ura).”

²⁸ *Tashi Delek* magazine Jan-Feb. 2012, pp. 12-13.

lha'i bu mo – ‘divine girls’, in fact young boys who wear girls’ dresses. The *dpa' bo* exhorts them to remain united and performs a dance called ‘the good dance of prophecy’ *Lung bstan phab bzang*.

The *bon po* is the host at the *bla brang* and receives the *rgad po* and *rgad mo*, as well as the *mi shi* lama and the *sgom chen*, who arrive from the temple. He offers them drinks and then performs divination (*shala*, perhaps from *Phyva* ‘divination’?) for each of them using a banana leaf folded with a stick. The way the banana leaf falls on the ground indicates the individual’s outlook for the year.

In the meantime, the *gar pa* representing the three classes go to the *koche*’s house where they perform a *mar chang* and three dances; then they join the others at the *bla brang*.

In the evening, the *sgom chen* return to the temple singing and get blessed with holy water by the *mi shi* lama, then they make the round of the houses, visiting the ‘class houses’ of the Lhamenpa, the Brela, the Bjarpa, and finally the *koche*’s house where the auspicious song and dance *bkra shis* is performed.

The *dpa' bo*, his helpers – the *lha'i bu mo* and the *bon po* – go to the temple where a dance is performed according to a song sung by the *bon po*. This is the end of the role of the *bon po* in the festival.

On the morning of the 16th day the *sgom chen* perform a dance which enacts the journey of Padma gling pa to Kheng and then visit the three houses as well as the *koche*’s house where they are given offerings that represent the products of Kheng: maize, cotton textiles, *spas dkar* (resin of the Sal tree (*Shorea robusta*)), as well as agar wood (dark resinous heartwood that forms in *Aquilaria* and *Gyrinops* trees, also called aloewood). This part of the festival is a symbol and remembrance of the conversion of Kheng to Buddhism by Padma gling pa and its acceptance by the society.

When the visit to the houses is finished, they go back to the temple and the *dpa' bo* and his *lha'i bum* perform a dance depicting the animals of the forest.

Donations from civil servants and people working in the private sector outside the village are collected and divided amongst the performers.

At the end of the day everybody assembles in the temple. The *rgad po* and *rgad mo* come back to the temple in the late evening and their return marks the formal end of the festival. They congratulate the participants for the smooth arrangements and good atmosphere of the festival.

The formal send off of the *dpa' bo*, *bon po*, *mi shi lama*, and *sgom chen* takes place on the morning of the 17th day.

Besides the ritualised importance of the visits to the 'class houses' and the repartition of the practitioners according to their classes, it seems that one of the features of this festival is the fact that the mythic and historical figures of the community get a 'slot', starting with the ancestors, the *rgad po* and *rgad mo*, followed by the *bon po* and the *dpa' bo* and lastly Padma gling pa. The scenario of the festival crescendoes to the appearance of the Buddhist figure who presumably introduced Buddhism in this part of Bhutan.

The composite religious nature of the *mchod pa la* is quite clear from the sequences of events as well as the emphasis on unity and harmony at the community level. The festival, once more, demonstrates the interaction between myths and rituals, ritual's cohesive social function, and its role as a community memory.

If we look beyond Ngangla, this research could be tentatively linked to the religious pattern that has been defined as *Srid pa'i lha Bon* in a recent article²⁹ by Toni Huber. Huber attempts to demonstrate, based on his studies in Eastern Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, that there was a common Eastern Himalayan space centred around speakers of East Bodish languages and what he calls the *Srid pa'i lha Bon* religious phenomena. "They fully participate in Trans-Himalayan cultural patterns of narrative, symbolism and social practice as well as systematically reflecting ecological realities of the same region".³⁰

In search of history

The whole social set-up, legitimised by the myths, comes out clearly in the annual religious festival of Ngangla Trong, the *mchod pa la*,³¹ as well as in the system of 'class houses'. Each class – the *koche*, the *Bjarpa*, the *Lhamenpa*, and the *Brela* – has specific responsibilities during the festival and is associated with a religious performer. Each class also occupies the common 'class house' according to a pattern that has not yet been documented in other parts of Bhutan.

To this day, the social set-up in *rigs gsum* (three classes) seems to be specific to Ngangla and Bjoka. It might be the remains of the clan

²⁹ Huber (2013), pp. 263-94.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 288. Furthermore, he calls for a reassessment of 'Bon' in the light of the new material from the southern Himalayas. In this, Huber concurs with my own work 'Bon in Bhutan. What's in the name?' (Pommaret 2014)

³¹ A 20 minutes documentary film on the *mchod pa la* was made in 2015 by Kunzang Dorji and Kinley Tshering within the framework of the Helvetas/EU LCD project.

(*rus/gdung*) system which was prevalent in Central and Eastern Bhutan before the 'Brug pa conquest of the mid-seventeenth century as related in the *rGyal rigs*. The *rGyal rigs* was authored by the monk Ngag dbang³² and translated by Michael Aris who dated the text of 1728 while John Ardussi argued in favour of 1668.³³ This text states that

the Ura *gdung* having also gained power over Khen rigs nam gsum [present-day Zhemgang district] and gZhong sgar Mol ba lung [today the west of Mongar district], gDung Grags pa dbang phyug came annually to collect taxes and in private he lived with *dpon mo* ('chieftainness') bKra shis dbang mo of whom the son Nyi ma rnam rgyal came forth. His descendants gradually spread and all the *gdung* families who are in Khen rigs nam gsum [i.e. those of] sTung la sbi, Go zhing, Pang mkhar, Ka lam ti and Nya mkhar and also the so called *rJe* [families] of Yong lam who are in gZhong sgar Mol ba lung are of his lineage.³⁴

This text seems to support the oral tradition and the myth that the Lhamenpa, one of the upper classes of Ngangla which came under the same territorial administration as Goshing (Go zhing) until 1997, migrated from Ura in Bumthang.

They would therefore also be the descendants of the Tibetan child that the people of Ura went to kidnap from Yarlung in Central Tibet after their chief gDung Grags pa dbang phyug died without son, having ordered them to go to Central Tibet to get a leader. *gDung* Grags pa dbang phyug himself, according to the myth presented in the *rGyal rigs*,³⁵ was the grandson of Lha mgon dpal chen, the first Ura *gdung*, who was the divine son of a lady from Ura and of the great central Tibetan pre-Buddhist deity 'O lde gung rgyal, who is believed to have said "The divine son Gu se lang ling having grasped the divine *rmu* cord, will descend to U ra". Gu se lang ling stayed in the womb of the Ura lady till his birth as Lha mgon dpal chen.

³² Ardussi (1977), unpubl. PhD: "However, in the form we now have it, the Bhutanese story of Tsangma was not written down until 1668, eight hundred years after the events in question and a mere decade or so after these chiefs were conquered by the 'Brug pa ecclesiastic authorities from western Bhutan. In their reduced political circumstances, the defeated eastern chieftains were saddened that their former subjects had lost interest in distinctions of nobility and class and in memorizing the oral history of their clans and families. So they pooled their knowledge into a private genealogical memoir called the *Rgyal rigs*, written by a monk known only as Ngawang of the Byar clan."

³³ Aris (2009) pp. 5 and Ardussi (2007 a), pp. 1-11.

³⁴ Aris (2009) pp.50-51.

³⁵ Aris (2009), pp. 47-50.

Dorji recalls the importance of a non-Buddhist religion in Kheng and the invocation to the *Bon* figure Tenpa Shenrab in many local rituals. Dorji cautions that linking one's ancestry with the gods of the sky such as 'Ode-Gongyal, Tonpa Shenrab and Ama Gung khai gyalmo' was necessary to claim any legitimacy as a ruler because of the importance of a non-Buddhist religion in Kheng and the invocation of the aforementioned gods from the sky in many rituals.³⁶ While keeping this potential incentive for constructing divine ancestry in mind, the linguistic evidence that Khengkha, a branch of Bumthangkha, is spoken in the area also strengthens our hypothesis that part of the people of Ngangla came from Bumthang along the Chamkhar river at a date yet to be determined.³⁷

We could then propose that people of Ngangla Trong, which is right at the edge of the Himalayas where they adjoin the Indian plains, have kept a myth that links them first to Bumthang Ura and further to Central Tibet.³⁸ The river valleys offer an easy connection all the way to Yarlung. As an example, in a sketch Huber³⁹ shows how the dissimination of specific *srid pa'i lha bon* rituals and priests as well as the link with the IHo brag region⁴⁰ follow the rivers from Yarlung in the north going south all the way to Kheng, adding evidence to our work. Furthermore, the distance between the region of Yarlung in Central Tibet and Bumthang is barely 300 kms, with only two high

³⁶ Lham Dorji (2005), p. 37.

³⁷ This route was still taken until the 1990s by petty-traders and the religious lords (*chos rje*) of gSum 'phrang in Ura when they came down to Ngangla every other winter to perform rituals and collect alms in kind as Ngangla Trong fell under their religious purview.³⁷

We also know that people of upper Kheng travelled to Lower Kheng-that is around Ngang a-Bumthang and Tibet: "In olden days, people travelled to the Lower Kheng (*mad*) to buy cotton, three or four months before *kharpu*. Until the middle of nineteenth century, the Lower Kheng cultivated cotton, and the people of the Outer Kheng contributed cotton tax to reciprocate gifts of rock-salt from the court in Wangdichholing, Bumthang. The people also travelled as far as Tibet to buy and barter rock salt for farm produce. They bought cotton with *baytam* or *sertam* coins or bartered with Tibetan rock salt, which was in turn exchanged for rice or chillies in Bumthang". Dorji Penjore (2000), p. 52.

³⁸ Another trace of this migration can be found in the deity 'O lde gung rgyal, propitiated in the Wamling village of Upper Kheng. See Dorji Penjore (2008) p. 271.

We will address the issue of migrations in a forthcoming book with the tentative title 'Deities, lamas, migrations and power in Bhutan'.

³⁹ Huber (2013), p. 271.

⁴⁰ We already explored the later links of Central Bhutan and Lhodrak in Pommaret (2000).



The Lower Khen district of Zhemgang, Bhutan

passes to cross, one between Yarlung and Lho brag and one on the Bhutan border (see map).⁴¹ Between Bumthang and Ngangla, in the village of Wamling in Upper Kheng, the *Bon po* priest who presides over the festival of Khar phu (*dkar phud*) makes a mental journey from Wamling to Tibet via Bumthang to invite the deity 'O lde gung rgyal.⁴²

However, as we have seen earlier, there are different myths of origin for the people of Ngangla Trong and one of them narrates that the lords and the upper class – the *koche* and the Bjarpa – arrived from the East. The story of a child stolen in the East to become the lord echoes the Ura myth where the Uraps went to Central Tibet to get a ruler. The *rGyal rigs* text once more provides a concurring clue: “The descendants of Bjar Ong ma are all the Byarpa families who are at U dza rong, Byog kang, Ngang la, Khom shar, Ne-to-la and Kheng rigs rnam gsum”.⁴³

The author of the *rGyal rigs* underlines the *koche* family’s oral history. He traces the origin of the Bjar lineage through a complex genealogy to the Tibetan Prince (*Lha sras*) gTsang ma, the eldest son of the Tibetan King Khri lde srong btsan Sad na legs,⁴⁴ who is said to have taken refuge in Eastern Bhutan in the ninth century and whose

⁴¹ However, we cannot for the time being subscribe completely to Huber’s hypothesis that “some form of *Srid pa'i lha bon* was very likely the ancestral religion of the Shar Dung populations in southern lHo brag prior to their mid-14th century southward dispersal into the same Himalayan valley systems where the religion exists today” (Huber 2013, p. 264). He bases his assumption on Ardussi (2004), pp. 60-72. Ardussi’s article on the *Dung/gDung* uses Tibetan sources and Ardussi argues in favour of a mid-14th century migration to Bhutan by the Shar and lHo *Dung* following a *Sa skya pa* military campaign against them. He also reviews the myths and argues for a construction of the myths at that time. For the time being, we cannot completely follow Ardussi although his historical presentation is convincing. The migrations into Bhutan cannot be linked to this sole 14th century event, especially if he considers the term *gDung/Dung* “as an epithet rather than a formal lineage name”. The historian Karma Phuntsho (2013), pp 128-133, takes a similar cautious approach to the *gDung/Dung* issue in Bhutan.

⁴² The song goes as such:

'Lha 'O de gong jan
It is not early for last year's time (neither early)
It is not late for this year's time (nor late)
To the three score households (60) of Wamling
Come to eat food of all men
Come to drink the *kemchana* (*churma*) (alcohol) of all women'.

⁴³ Aris (2009), p. 39.

⁴⁴ Aris (2009), p. 29 sqq.

descendants became the lords of dominions in Eastern Bhutan.⁴⁵ One lineage of descendants of gTsang ma was called the Bjar and is at the origin of the ruling family of, among others, Ngangla Trong and Bjoka.⁴⁶

The present acknowledged proximity between the *koche* family and the Bjar is thus confirmed by another historical source and it is likely that the person who became the *koche* of Ngangla was from the Bjar lineage, which settled in many places of Eastern Bhutan. Moreover, two elements of these myths – the stolen child and the ‘attached people’ – are also found in myths of origin of Ura in Central Bhutan and Eastern Bhutan respectively. To put the history of Ngangla Trong in a broader perspective, while the ruler of Ngangla Trong attributes his ancestry to Prince gTsang ma, as does the one of Bjoka, the nearby rulers (*gDung*) of Goshing and Pangkhar are said to be the descendants of Ura *gDung* Grags pa dbang phyug, himself a descendant of the Tibetan stolen child from Yarlung who became the ruler of Ura in Bumthang.⁴⁷

Koche is a nobility title specific to south-central Bhutan, to areas close to the Indian plains. According to Dorji,

the Khoches were the noble families of Lower Kheng who were dominant in areas close to Assam and Bengal [...]. There was a

⁴⁵ I will not comment here on gTsang ma as it has already been debated by both Aris and Ardussi (2007 b), pp. 5-25 & unpublished Ph.D. Canberra, ANU (1977): “The last and most famous of Tibet’s royal exiles in Bhutan was Lhase Tsangma, eldest of three sons of Emperor Thri Desongtsen Senaleg (reign c. 800-817). Unlike other Tibetan princes whom we have discussed, the historicity of Tsangma is not in question. His account comes from the standard histories and not from treasure literature. According to Tibetan tradition he was a committed Buddhist, in contrast to his younger brother prince Udumtsen Darma whom later historians held responsible for the anti-Buddhist purge at the end of the Yarlung dynasty. The sons’ interconnected stories revolve around fraternal conflict over succession to the throne, and controversy about the extent to which Buddhism should serve as the state religion. This theme became grist for the mill of later Tibetan historians who padded the account of Tsangma’s exile to the south in order to build their case against anti-Buddhist elements within the ruling circle. Even his name Tsangma may have been adjusted to serve this purpose.

A very different picture of prince Tsangma emerges from the traditions of Eastern Bhutan and Tibetan Mön Yul where he was viewed as a purely secular figure, the royal ancestor of many noble families that once ruled hereditarily from ridge-top ‘kingdoms’ and isolated valleys.”

⁴⁶ Lham Dorji (2005), pp. 31-59. Lham Dorji attempted to give a narrative of their history, based mostly on oral accounts, but the absence of reliable written sources has prevented him from reaching any firm conclusion

⁴⁷ Aris (1986), pp. 47 - 51.

significant trade relationship between Khengpas and Indians. During winter seasons the people of hill had to migrate to the plains with their goats and sheep. Khengpas were known for their excellence in warfare and statecraft. ...Local tradition holds that Khoches were the direct descendants of Lhasey Tsangma, a grandson of Tibetan king Thrisong Deutsen. Lhasey Tsangma came to Bhutan in the 9th century. This can be substantiated by the fact that the descendants of this prince established Byarpa families in Kheng Joka (Bjo ka) and Ngangla where Koche were based. I would hypothesize that Byarpa families in Joka and Ngangla once ruled the Khen and Koch tribes of the plains. Through this association Byarpa families came to be known as Joka (Bjoka) and Ngangla Khoches.⁴⁸

In Kheng the term *koche* appears to be associated only with Bjoka and Ngang la, while it is also found, at least in Chimung (Phyi mung) and Thinangbi, in Dungsam (gDung bsam).

The erudite former Supreme Court Justice *Lyonpo* Sonam Tobgay, who is from Dungsam (gDung bsam) in present-day Pemagatshel district, said in an interview with *Bhutan Observer* on 19th September 2012 that “the earliest recorded history of the *dzongkhag* (district) dated back to 869 AD as Dungsam in the biography of Lhasey Tsangma, a Tibetan prince in exile, whose youngest son, Pel Thongley, visited the region and started the social class called Khhochey.” This remark shows that knowledge of local history and texts such as the *rGyal rigs* is still alive within erudite circles in Bhutan. The *rGyal rigs* indeed talks about Pel Thongley (dPal mthong legs) who came to Dungsam (gDung bsam)⁴⁹ and is an ancestor of the Byarpa families of Tsha se, Yu rung, Khang pa Phyi mung, and Zla gor, villages which are today in Dungsam (gDung bsam): “He gained power over the officers and the subjects and also the Indians and his strength and dominions became great”.⁵⁰

The title *koche* brings out different issues about which I will only propose tentative readings. The first issue there is the issue of the origin of the title *koche*. If spelt *mKoche*, it means ‘one who is needed’ in classical Tibetan. However, this term cannot be found anywhere in the *rGyal rigs* which refers to *gDung*, *rGyal po*, *Zhal ngo* and *dPon po*, the other titles associated with the ancient nobility. To our quandary, the Bhutanese historian Karma Phuntsho offered “My best guess is that it is a corrupted version of a familiar title used in other parts of the

⁴⁸ Lham Dorji 2005, pp. 34-5.

⁴⁹ *rGyal rigs*, p. 29 and p. 35.

⁵⁰ *rGyal rigs*, pp. 38-9.

Himalayan world, Kuchen – important personage. This also goes well with Ponchen, a term often juxtaposed with Koche. I am not convinced by the hypothesis that it is Koche - a useful one.”⁵¹

This remark led us to look into the word associated with *sKu* and we found that *sKu mched* in classical Tibetan refer to siblings in an honorific sense but also to “those who are born the sons of kings”.⁵² As this nobility is considered the descendent of Prince gTsang ma of Tibet, this would make sense and the local pronunciation *koche* is very close to the original Tibetan. The term *koche* could thus tentatively be linked to the origin myth.

Although the lack of textual evidence at this stage prevents us from commenting further on the historical role of the Bhutanese *koche* in Assam, I would be inclined to follow Lham Dorji’s hypothesis about the extent of power of the Bjoka and Ngangla *koche* over what the British called the Duars, these very fertile stretches of land at the foot of the Himalayas. The oral tradition reports it and the raids from the Bhutanese in the Assam plains are documented by the British authors.

A Bhutan-British war was fought over them in 1865 after centuries of skirmishes. From the *rGyal rigs* and local oral traditions, at least some Assamese Duars appear to have already been under some kind of control by ‘Bhutanese’ chieftains from Kheng and Dungsam to the north much before the seventeenth century. These Duars were populated by a well-known Mongoloid group called the Bodos, with whom ‘Bhutanese’ had trade links but whom they also kidnapped to make them their serfs. Although we do not know much about the Ngangla *koche*, we know that his neighbour and ally the Bjoka *koche* was powerful and seemed to have had some authority over parts of the Assamese plains, such as the areas of Kokabari Rangapani and Gohali, as well as part of Dungsam (gDung bsam) in Eastern Bhutan. The Chimung (Phyi mung) *koche* of Dungsam consider themselves relatives of the Bjoka *koche*. It is said that the Bjoka *koche*’s stone house/castle, which is huge by region standards, was built partially by workers from Assam and Cooch Bihar but no date is given. For the Ngangla *koche*’s house we would venture the early twentieth century, as local tradition in Ngangla says that Choeje Zangmo (Chos rje bzang mo) from Bjoka built the *koche*’s stone house on the Bjoka model. She married the Ngangla *koche* Druk Wangyal (’Brug dbang rgyal). They were the grandparents of the present Ngangla *koche* who is in his seventies.

⁵¹ Personal communication 19 June 2013.

⁵² S.C. Das *Dictionary* (1983), p. 89.

Given that the Bhutanese made raids into the Assam Duars⁵³ in order to get cattle and serfs, it is plausible that the Bjoka *koche* had serfs and loot from India. The history of Assam, called the kingdom of Kamrup in medieval times, speaks of Bhutanese raids as early as the fourteenth century but further research is needed to confirm this.

The last issue concerns the ancestry of the upper classes of Ngangla. Either from Ura in Bumthang or from Eastern Bhutan, these upper classes claim an ancestry which would have originated from scions of the Tibetan royal family and the Yarlung dynasty called the sPu rgyal dynasty. Interestingly, the name of the sacred mountain of Ura, Pur shel la, 'the crystal place of tholy mortal remains', could be a different pronunciation of sPu rgyal la. The myth of the descent to earth of the first ruler of Ura in Bumthang and the subsequent search for another leader, also echoes the origin myth of the descent to earth of the first King of Tibet and his discovery by people looking for a leader. The story was first mentioned in the Dunhuang manuscript PT 1038 and underwent several variations over the centuries. Nyatri Tsenpo (gNya' khri btsan po), the first Tibetan king, was the fourth son of the *phyva* god Ya lha bdal drug, who was the brother of 'O lde gung rgyal, the father of all the mountain deities. Nyatri Tsenpo came down from the sky on a *dmu* rope to rule the people on earth. This story presents a striking similarity with the myth of the first ruler of Ura, also a descendant of Ode Gungyal ('O lde gung rgyal).⁵⁴

The parallel between the myths of origin is interesting. The people of Ura went to steal a child from Yarlung after their lord, whose ancestors came from heaven, died without offspring. The people of Ngangla went to kidnap a child of royal descent from Eastern Bhutan after their first lords, the divine siblings who came from Ura in Bumthang, disappeared. This would explain the pre-eminence of the *koche* and Bjarpa over the Lhamenpa and the social set-up: Brela, Lhamenpa and Koche/Bjarpa.

⁵³ The name Duars, 'Doors', is derived from the several passes that lead from the region into the Indian plains.

⁵⁴ Sorensen (1994), pp. 138-40, (2000) p. 59 and p. 61 and Karmay (1998), pp. 296-97.

Tentative reading of the community of Ngangla Trong

‘Classes’	Religious practitioners	Order of the rank	Origin/myth
Koche Bjarpa	Mi shi lama	Mi shi lama	Eastern Bhutan. Prince gTsang ma’s descendents
Lhamenpa	Bon po	Bon po	Ura, Bumthang. Yar lung/'O lde gung rgyal ?
Brela	dPa' bo	dPa'bo	first settlers

Conclusion

This work is based on three sources which are usually viewed with some suspicion, if not considered ‘apocryphal’ by textual historians: oral tradition, myths, and historiography. It does not dismiss the possibility of overlapping between the three sources and it also must take into account the legitimacy agenda of prestigious ancestry which is a common template in the Himalayas. However in this case, the three sources allow us to get a glimpse into the history of this remote region of Bhutan.⁵⁵

Here I cannot provide a linear vision of history but rather pick up surviving fragments and try to make sense of them, as well as raise more questions, including the possibility of a meme. Bhutan did not go through the political and cultural turmoil Tibet did and the memory of the past is not totally erased. To quote a proverb taken from the *Sa skya*

⁵⁵ Balikci (2008), p. 96, also notes the Yarlung connection concerning a Pawo from Chongpung village in West Sikkim: “Late Chongpung Ajo Pawo used to chant ‘our *pho lha* came from Yarlung’, which is an indication that their ancestors might have been pushed towards or established on the fringes of Tibet since ancient times, where they escaped the full impact of Tibetan Buddhist thought in later centuries.” Further on, she concludes (p. 374): “The presence of the great *mo lha* from Yarlung, Yum Machen Düsüm Sangay, as the central deity of the *pawo*’s most important ritual is an indication that Tingchim villagers may trace their origin to the Yarlung valley of the kings of central Tibet, an ancient origin which could indicate that their establishment in these southern valleys long predates the migration of western Sikkimese clans from Kham Minyak in the thirteenth century.”

legs bshad and well-known in Bhutan: “If a man does not know his own family lineage, he is like a monkey playing in a boundless jungle”.

The monk Ngag dbang already replied to possible criticisms at the end of the *rGyal rigs*:

Thus although they represent all the numerous clans names (*rus kyi ming*) which accord with the various local dialects prevailing throughout the area of the Eastern Province of IHo Mon, since they cannot be substantiated here, no more than just this has been put into writing. As for the version which most stories make universally renowned, according to which some people, in recounting the various oral traditions, say that the origins [of their ancestors lay in a] descent to the land of humans after grasping the divine *dmu* ladders and the gold and silver *phyva* cords, is this a legend based on the treasure-texts of the *Bon* tradition? Or is it said of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas whose manifested forms, emanated for the sake of beings, were born among the scions of these families and clans (*rigs rus*)?⁵⁶

Perhaps what we today call, for want of a better term, ‘social classes’ (*rigs*) in Ngangla Trong are surviving vestiges of the clans (*rus*) that we know from textual evidence were prevalent in Eastern Bhutan but disappeared after the *’Brug pa* conquest in the seventeenth century. The strong identification of the people to each class, the alliance patterns, the sense of shared responsibility, the houses and lands at the class level, as well as the religious festival scenario – all of which continue to the present day – would favour this hypothesis, which shall nevertheless remain speculative for the time being.

The downfall of the Kheng nobility was, it seems, caused at the end of the seventeenth century by the ambition of the Nyakhar gDung in Upper Kheng, which angered some of the lords. They called the *’Brug pa* armies of the new state for help. The Nyakhar gDung was defeated leading to Kheng becoming part of the new Bhutanese state and the nobility accepting an overall power. However, as mentioned earlier, most of the lords continue to enjoy a great autonomy, due, no doubt, to the difficult terrain. At the same time, they collected taxes for the Bhutanese central government and acted as intermediaries between the central government and the people. This was confirmed by the people of Ngangla Trong, who said they always paid in-kind taxes and contributed labour to the central government and not to the Koche.

⁵⁶ *rGyal rigs*, pp. 60-1.

However, by being ‘middlemen’, the Koche still enjoyed prestige and probably found the arrangement to be to their own benefit.⁵⁷

This paper, due to the preliminary stage of this study raises as many questions as it tries to solve, and many points need further clarification and research. However, it is intended to bring notice to a very specific and fascinating society on the threshold of tremendous changes that come with development.

Ngangla Trong is at the nexus of the histories of Eastern and Central Bhutan and the myths only confirm this. It may also be a surviving testimony and at the receiving end of the turbulent events that took place in Yarlung, Central Tibet, in the ninth century with the assassination of the last Tibetan King and the flight of personalities linked to this event into Bhutan. In a material culture centred on bamboo and jungle, in the deep south of Bhutan where the Himalayas meet the Indian plains, myths and local history may conjure up events of the ninth century in Central Tibet.

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⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that since the 1960s and the socio-political reforms of the Third King until 2014, the local leader gup (*rgadp*) of Ngangla has always been from the Koche family and the minor officials of the village, such as the chipon (*spyi dpon*) and the tshogpa (*tshog pa*), from the other classes.

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