

# THE HOUSE OF 'OBS-MTSHO - THE HISTORY OF A BHUTANESE GENTRY FAMILY FROM THE 13<sup>th</sup> TO THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

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## Background<sup>i</sup>

One of the most important threads of ongoing research in Bhutanese history is the documentation of the origin and historical interrelationships among its regional elite families. For most of its history, Bhutan has been characterized by relatively decentralized government, a geographically complex land of fragmented ecosystems in which such families shared habitat and competed for local dominance (the term “ruled” is probably too strong a generalization). The 'Brug-pa theocracy which began during the 17<sup>th</sup> century was the first successful attempt to impose national unity upon a constellation of local self-governing units of great variety, which in some cases trace their ancestry back as far as the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Even under the *Zhabs-drung Rin-po-che* and his successors, local elite families strongly influenced the direction of state policies. Remnants of the earlier era of decentralized local government are found in the persistence of old socio-geographic names<sup>ii</sup> including, perhaps, an archaic name for Bhutan itself: *Lho (Mon) Kha-bzhi* (The Southern [Mon] Country of Four Approaches).<sup>iii</sup>

From its inception in 1625,<sup>iv</sup> the *Zhabs-drung's* transplanted ecclesiastic establishment, sought to defend its Bhutanese properties against external enemies and to establish a framework for local law and order based upon Buddhist

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principles. The support cadre that administered this enterprise consisted initially of monks who came with him from Tibet and local leaders from prominent families. However, relations among these families were not always harmonious. Mediation of local family disputes had been a common activity of missionary lamas from Tibet, whose advent over the centuries resulted in persistent ties between a particular Tibetan monastery and its Bhutanese outposts. But the geographic and cultural distance from Tibet was significant, and ties were often loose. Many Tibetan lamas took local wives and settled permanently in Bhutan. The headship of their local family hermitage was passed down among descendants. As Aris has shown, this process often resulted in the supplanting of older layers of ruling families with new ones of a quasi-ecclesiastic character headed by men with such titles as *zhal-ngo* and *chos-rje*.<sup>v</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to describe one such case, that of 'Obs-mtsho, a family with a monastic establishment in the vast district known today as Goen (*dGon-yul*), in the mountains northwest of Punakha in western Bhutan. The history of the rise to prominence and vicissitudes of the house of dGon 'Obs-mtsho during the 13<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> centuries offers important insight into the sociology of Bhutan. It also exemplifies changing patterns of competition among landed Bhutanese gentry families for positions of power within the emerging Bhutanese state.

### **The Early History of dGon 'Obs-mtsho<sup>vi</sup>**

In common with many other elite family lines of Bhutan, the 'Obs-mtsho people trace their ancestry to a renowned lineage of ancient Tibet, in this case to the lDan-ma clan (*rus*) of eastern Tibet.<sup>vii</sup> The legendary ancestral progenitor was a soldier named lDe-ma lDe-ma, who is said to have guarded the Jo-bo image of the Buddha as it was to Tibet brought from China in the train of princess Wen-cheng, Chinese bride of king Srong-btsan-sgam-po. The next cultural hero in this lineage was the legendary scholar *Lo-tsa-ba* lDan-ma rTse-

mang associated in the *Padma-thang-yig* and the *bKa'-thang-sde-lnga* with Padma Sambhava and canonical translation activity of 8<sup>th</sup> century Tibet.<sup>viii</sup> Traditions handed down in Tibetan and Bhutanese *gter-ma* texts connect him with various works of early scholarship, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century he had become enshrined as an early figure in an important Bhutanese incarnation lineage (*'khrungs rabs*) of the Padma Gling-pa tradition.<sup>ix</sup> Reputed for his skill in calligraphy, the alleged inventor of Bhutanese cursive script,<sup>x</sup> manuscripts in his original hand were reportedly still to be seen in Tibet during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>xi</sup> and in Bhutan during the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>xii</sup>

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, various strands of lDan-ma people had migrated to gTsang, such as those who became ministers of Sa-skya and the “kings” of Gyantse.<sup>xiii</sup> But more than one hundred years before the beginning of Sa-skya hegemony another branch of the lDan-ma had established itself in the Myang sTod district of gTsang, at a place called rTa-thang (“Plain of Horses”). There, a teacher by the name dPal-lDan Shes-rab became known for his religious practice and acquired the epithet *dGe-bshes* rTa-thang-pa. It was from him that gTsang-pa rGya-ras (1161-1211), founder of the 'Brug-pa sect, took his preliminary monastic vows. *dGe-bshes* rTa-thang-pa's own son Nor-bu dPal-lDan later became a student of gTsang-pa rGya-ras. In his early youth, Nor-bu dPal-lDan meditated at a place called sGo-mo gter-khung, noted for its thermal springs and sulfurous geysers, and which was also the habitation of a local deity named dGe-bsnyen chen-po.<sup>xiv</sup> Through his great yogic powers he subdued this deity, who thereupon promised to become a protector of Buddhism and of Nor-bu dPal-lDan's successors.<sup>xv</sup> From these accomplishments this yogin became known as *Grub-thob* gTer-khung-pa (~ gTer-khung-pa).

After some years had passed, *Grub-thob* gTer-khung-pa went before his guru and an assemblage of monks at Rwa-lung, where gTsang-pa rGya-ras is recorded to have foretold,

My son, your field for converting disciples is in the South. Hence go there, and though groups of the faithful will come to you, you must take charge, for great benefit will accrue to sentient beings.<sup>xvi</sup>

In this way, gTsang-pa rGya-ras dispatched him to seek his spiritual fortune in the southern wilderness of what would become the state of Bhutan.<sup>xvii</sup> On his way he founded a hermitage in Tibet called dPal-sdings, returned briefly to Rwa-lung for the funeral ceremony of gTsang-pa rGya-ras, and then left on his mission to the south. Along the way, he was invited to visit places known as 'Brog Tsha-yul and bDe-chen-chos-sdings, then entered the vast mountainous districts of La-yag and dGon-yul in what is now northern Bhutan. In about AD 1212-13, he established a *bla-brang* at 'Obs-mtsho chos-sdings, not far from what is now Gasa (*mGar-sa*) rDzong in the administrative district of Goenkhatoe (dGon-khastod).<sup>xviii</sup> He then returned to Tibet where his uncle dPal-ldan-rgyal-po still resided. There he installed the latter's younger grandson dPal-ldan-rdo-rje as head of the local *gDan-sa* (presumably dPal-sdings).<sup>xix</sup> He also petitioned gTsang-pa rGya-ras's successor at Rwa-lung, Dar-ma Seng-ge (1177/8-1237), for permission to withdraw the elder grandson Bla-ma dBon from the monk body at Rwa-lung and install him as head of the 'Obs-mtsho *gDan-sa*.<sup>xx</sup> The connection between 'Obs-mtsho and Dar-ma Seng-ge is confirmed by a note in the latter's brief but contemporary *rnam-thar* in the biographical collection entitled *Rwa-lung dkar-brgyud gser-'phreng*, which mentions a certain *dGe-bshes* 'Obs-mtsho-pa as one of his students.<sup>xxi</sup>

From this point until events of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the details in our sources become somewhat sketchy. For several generations we know only the names of the monastic heads and a few bare facts about their deeds. The initial intent seems to have been to maintain a unified administration of the two religious centers of dPal-sdings in gTsang and 'Obs-mtsho in Bhutan. But these ties gradually loosened and within one or two generations the two monasteries became

virtually independent. It appears that succession at 'Obs-mtsho initially followed the familiar 'uncle - nephew' pattern. During these centuries, the founder's descendants and relatives intermarried locally, increased the lands under their possession and systematically assumed the title of *chos-rje*. Then, during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the ninth incumbent Seng-ge-rgyal-mtshan took a wife in order to preserve the family line, after which the rule of celibacy seems to have been preserved only intermittently.

'Obs-mtsho itself was expanded over time, and affiliated hermitages were built in nearby districts. A noted *lha-khang* at 'Obs-mtsho was constructed by the 4<sup>th</sup> abbot bSam-gtan Byang-chub. A later split in the *gDan-sa* resulted in the founding of a monastery named Yon-tan rDzong with its own *chos-rje*. The most important expansion, however, was a branch hermitage built near the summit of rTsig-ri, a mountain peak two days to the southeast and six hour's trekking distance north of Punakha. During the 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century, this site was given to the 7<sup>th</sup> abbot of 'Obs-mtsho, *Chos-rje* 'Jam-dbyangs bSod-nams-rgyal-po, by a prominent lord of the Punakha region named *sLob-dpon* rGyal-mtshan rDo-rje whom he had cured of sickness. Serving initially as a winter residence, this dramatic mountain-top site was named rNam-rgyal-rtse. A *lha-khang* of that name was created at the very summit as a residence for *dam-can* sGo-mo, protective deity of dGon-yul and the northern Punakha valley (and of the followers of gTer-khung-pa).<sup>xxii</sup> In the course of time, the monastery on the ridge just below rNam-rgyal-rtse *lha-khang* was expanded into the important monastic complex of Se'u-la (also spelled bSe'u-la), which today contains some of Bhutan's finest art treasures of the 17<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xxiii</sup> During the same era (although we have no direct testimony for the precise date), a branch residence for lay relatives of the 'Obs-mtsho *chos-rje* was established in the hamlet of Amorimu, located below the crest of a ridge several miles northwest of Se'u-la.

Coupled with this lineage's successful establishment in Bhutan were its religious ties maintained with the parent Rwa-lung monastery in Tibet. Over the centuries, generations of youths from throughout the Bhutanese southlands were sent to this monastery to receive formal tuition and exposure to the larger universe of Buddhist scholarship and practice. The 'Obs-mtsho families dutifully participated in this tradition. When the future Rwa-lung hierarch Ye-shes Rin-chen (1364-1413) was born to a Bhutanese mother at Wang-ri-kha, near 'Obs-mtsho, it was 'Obs-mtsho *Chos-rje* 'Jam-dbyangs bSod-nam rGyal-po who accepted him as a student for several years, before conducting him to Rwa-lung for ordination.<sup>xxiv</sup> Several generations later, we know that the 'Obs-mtsho *chos-rje* Nam-mkha' dPal-bzang married a sister (*lcam*) of the 'Brug-pa hierarch *rGyal-dbang* Kun-dga' dPal-'byor (1428-1476), and that their son *rJe-btsun* Grags-pa Rin-po-che was sent to study at Rwa-lung monastery, before his installation as head of 'Obs-mtsho.<sup>xxv</sup>

### **Parallels with Pha-jo 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po**

In order to see the history of the 'Obs-mtsho establishment in better perspective, and before following the story into the modern era, it is useful to compare its history with that of another lineage of remarkably similar origin. A few years after *grub-thob* gTer-khung-pa, a second Tibetan devotee of gTsang-pa rGya-ras destined for fame in Bhutan came to Rwa-lung, only to discover that his guru-to-be had just died. Pha-jo 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po (1179?-1245?)<sup>xxvi</sup> was accepted as a student by the new Rwa-lung hierarch Dar-ma Seng-ge. But before his death, gTsang-pa rGya-ras had foretold his coming:

There will come from Khams a small child, but I will not meet him. You should accept him and send him to the Valleys of the South where the feet of U-rgyan mKhan-po Padma-'byung-gnas have trod. There he will bring great benefit to the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>xxvii</sup>

There are strong mythic elements to the life stories of these two 'Brug-pa pioneers, as one might expect given that the descriptions we have of them date from more recent centuries.<sup>xxviii</sup> Even so, it is useful to compare their careers and overlapping Bhutanese legacies, which had little in common beyond a similar inception. From the time when he must have first entered Bhutan in about AD 1225 Pha-jo was active mainly in the valley settlements of the far west, at Paro and Thimphu. But in contrast with the quiet life at 'Obs-*mtsho*, Pha-jo's career was tempestuous. *gTer-khung-pa* emerges from our sources as a reclusive yogi by temperament, fond of mountain retreats, whereas Pha-jo was a combative sorcerer with a sizable family. His reputed proficiency in magic and illusion won students and many patrons, as did his encouragement for their rebellion against the carrying tax (*'u-la*) and other excessive tithes imposed coercively by the local chief lama of the Lha-pa or Lha-nang-pa sect, then well established in the area.<sup>xxix</sup> Possessed of a galvanic personality not unlike the *Zhabs-drung Rin-po-che* who battled the Lha-pa four hundred years later, his actions in support of the 'Brug-pa faith polarized the valley settlements, which led to his poisoning and death. So it is Pha-jo, and not Grub-thob *gTer-khung-pa* of 'Obs-*mtsho*, whom the Bhutanese regard today as having first introduced the 'Brug-pa teachings to Bhutan.<sup>xxx</sup>

Late in life Pha-jo parceled out his acquired territories among four sons, to whom numerous prominent Bhutanese *chos-rije* families of later centuries trace their ancestry. One of these sons, dBang-phyug, was given control of land in the Thed (Punakha) district and to the north in dGon-yul, which must have soon brought him and his descendants into contact with the family of the 'Obs-*mtsho chos-rije*.<sup>xxxi</sup> But being fellow 'Brug-pa sectarians, the relationship which developed between 'Obs-*mtsho* and Pha-jo's successors in the area seems to have been at least outwardly amicable. A key factor must have been their mutual, enduring tie to Rwa-lung monastery.

One result, if not the principal cause, of the persistent relationship between Rwa-lung and the 'Brug-pa lineages of dGon-yul in Bhutan was a series of marital links. It is a remarkable fact that during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, every single hierarch of Rwa-lung monastery was married to and/or born in Bhutan to a local woman descended from Pha-jo 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po, at least three of them from Wang-ri-kha near 'Obs-mtsho.<sup>xxxii</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> Rwa-lung hierarch 'Jam-dbyangs Blo-gros Seng-ge (1345-1390) was born at Wang-ri-kha to a Bhutanese holy woman of prominent family named *sLob-dpon-ma Sras-mo* bKra-shis-ldan, who founded this hermitage.<sup>xxxiii</sup> He later married a woman of the same Bhutanese lineage, and their son became the 10<sup>th</sup> Rwa-lung hierarch *chos-rje* Shes-rab Seng-ge (1371-1392).<sup>xxxiv</sup> The latter's brother and successor on the throne of Rwa-lung, 'Jam-dbyangs Ye-shes Rin-chen (1364-1413), was also born at Wang-ri-kha to a Bhutanese woman.<sup>xxxv</sup> Until he reached eight years of age, Ye-shes Rin-chen resided in Bhutan under the tutelage of the 'Obs-mtsho hierarch *chos-rje* 'Jam-dbyangs bSod-nams rGyal-po, who accompanied him in that year to Rwa-lung.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Ye-shes Rin-chen's two sons Nam-mkha' dPal-bzang (1398-1425) and *rJe* Shes-rab Bzang-po (1400-1438), who became the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Rwa-lung hierarchs, were born to a Bhutanese woman who was a descendant of Pha-jo from the village of rNal-'byor gzhung, near Paro.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

But when the ruling principle of the Tibetan 'Brug-pa sect shifted during the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to succession by reincarnation, the tradition of marital ties between its hierarchs and Bhutanese families from dGon-yul ceased. For many decades, the focal point of 'Brug-pa activity in Bhutan moved further to the west. Although the prominence of Rwa-lung became somewhat eclipsed by the advent of the *rGyal-dbang* 'Brug-chen incarnations, its patriarchs of the rGya clan continued their long-standing relationship with the communities of Bhutan.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The great era of 'Brug-pa monastic foundations serving the agricultural valleys of western Bhutan stretched from the late 14<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of these began as family hermitages



belonging to descendants of Pha-jo 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po and were later enlarged by visiting hierarchs of Rwa-lung, including the 1<sup>st</sup> rGyal-dbang 'Brug-chen Kun-dga' dPal-'byor. In contrast, no major monasteries affiliated with Rwa-lung were constructed in the mountainous regions near 'Obs-mtsho, although smaller hermitages were established there from time to time.<sup>xxxix</sup> The 'Brug-pa hierarch Padma-dkar-po (1527-1592) had students from 'Obs-mtsho,<sup>xl</sup> but until the era of the *Zhabs-drung*, 'Obs-mtsho and its *chos-rje* families seem to have persisted quietly in the background of regional affairs, with little hint of the fame that still lay in their future.

### **Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal (1594-1651) and His 'Obs-mtsho Followers**

The rise of the 'Obs-mtsho lineage and its Amorimu successors to political prominence was tied directly to their support for the founder of the Bhutanese state, *Zhabs-drung* Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal (1594-1651). Exactly how this came about is not described in the oldest source, the biography of the *Zhabs-drung* by gTsang mkhan-chen. Surprisingly, the *rnam-thar* of Se'u-la Byams-mgon based on family records is also silent. But by the time the first "standard" history of Bhutan was published in 1759, the *Lho'i chos 'byung* of bsTan-'dzin Chos-rgyal (1700-1767), the details had been laid out in the form followed by subsequent writers.<sup>xli</sup> According to this author, when the *Zhabs-drung* fled from Rwa-lung in 1616, an invitation reached him from an unnamed lama of 'Obs-mtsho. The *Zhabs-drung* accepted his offer and the 'Obs-mtsho lama provided an escort into the country, offering him donatory estates (*mchod gzhis*) if he would remain as ruler (*dpon-po*), which the country at that time was said to lack.<sup>xlii</sup>

The main 'Obs-mtsho figure of this period was a famous individual in Bhutanese history, a contemporary of the *Zhabs-drung* named bsTan-'dzin 'Brug-rgyas (1591-1656) who entered Rwa-lung monastery in 1601 where, in 1610, he was conferred the joint positions of *dbu-mdzad* (chant master) and *phyag-mdzod* (treasurer). Later, in Bhutan, these two

functions evolved into the office of civil head of state known as *sDe-srid Phyag-mdzod* (“Druk Desi” or Deb Raja of British colonial sources), of which he was the first incumbent.<sup>xliii</sup> Whether it was he or a relative who was the unspecified ‘Obsmtsho lama, it is clearly a result of bsTan-’dzin ‘Brug-rgyas’s personal relationship with the *Zhabs-drung* that this family’s political fortunes suddenly began to flourish. From 1616 until his death forty years later, bsTan-’dzin ‘Brug-rgyas held responsibility for public administration within Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal’s ecclesiastic establishment.<sup>xliiv</sup> When the *Zhabs-drung* reached his decision in 1625 to expand this into a “state” (*gzhung*) on the model of Sa-skya, his role expanded accordingly. Construction of the great monastic fortresses of Punakha, Tashichhodzong and Wangdi Phodrang was carried out under his direction. He is further credited with planning the successful military defense against invasions from Tibet, against the coalition of long-entrenched lamas from opposing sects, and against independent district chieftains in central and eastern Bhutan. But he was also an educated monk, and his skill in sorcery based on intense study of the *Kalacakra* system with the *Zhabs-drung’s* own teacher Lha-dbang Blo-gros was reputedly responsible for much of Bhutan’s success in the wars against Tibet before 1651.<sup>xlv</sup> At the time of his entry into final retreat (and death), the *Zhabs-drung* assigned to him the role of administering the state in his absence. As master of “external affairs” during this period he promulgated a famous code of conduct for the clergy and the lay administrative elite that became the model for future Bhutanese law codes.<sup>xlvi</sup> In perhaps his most delicate political role, as one of the *Zhabs-drung’s* two closest attendants he was responsible for concealing Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal’s death until a suitable successor could be found.<sup>xlvii</sup>

The sensitivity and complexity of the task to expand the authority of the *’Brug gzhung* in Bhutan no doubt demanded a cadre of close supporters of unquestioned loyalty. It is interesting that most of those assigned key positions during the early decades were either relatives, or other Tibetans and Bhutanese who had served with the *Zhabs-drung* in the monk

body at Rwa-lung. The long, personal relationship between him and *sDe-srid* bsTan-'dzin 'Brug-rgyas was a case in point, boosting his family's opportunities for other assignments. For example the brother of the first *sDe-srid*, 'Brug rNam-rgyal was appointed in 1623 to remain in Tibet as caretaker of the *Zhabs-drung's* interests at Rwa-lung.<sup>xlviii</sup> When the Fifth Dalai Lama's commanders expelled him from Tibet in 1647 he returned to Bhutan where he was appointed to the post of government steward (*gzhung mgron-gnyer*). Then in 1650 'Brug rNam-rgyal was chosen to coordinate the military offensive against Dagana in the south of Bhutan, which led to its incorporation into the emerging state.<sup>xlix</sup> During this era other members of the family also gained powerful positions in service to the new government. Notable examples include dPal-ldan 'Brug-rgyas, the first *phyag-mdzod* at the newly-constructed capital fortress of Punakha, and the first *sDe-srid's* nephew Ngag-dbang-rab-brtan (1630-1680?). The latter became an officer and minister of state under the third *sDe-srid* Mi-'gyur brTan-pa (1613-1681, r.1667-1680), famous in Bhutanese history for his deeds to expand the reach of the 'Brug-pa state.<sup>1</sup>

### **Rivals of the 'Obs-mtsho**

The favored position of men from 'Obs-mtsho in the emerging state hierarchy became a source of jealousy and opposition from other landed gentry families. The most powerful rival was a family from the dKar-sbis district along the west bank of the Mo-chu river north of Punakha. Dkar-sbis was one of the "eight communities of the Wang people" (*wang tsho chen brgyad*), a population stratum highly respected in western Bhutan for its antiquity and their early support for the *Zhabs-drung*. Nevertheless, no men from dKar-sbis are recorded to have served in the monk body at Rwa-lung in the decades before 1616. And in spite of their initial support for his cause, no dKar-sbis monks or headmen became as close to the *Zhabs-drung* as bsTan-'dzin 'Brug-rgyas and his relatives from 'Obs-mtsho.

The rivalry between the two families came to its first significant crisis during the war with Tibet of 1676, during which 'Obs-mtsho-pa Ngag-dbang Rab-brtan's superior generalship is said to have reversed a near defeat caused by the incompetence of dKar-sbis dGe-'dun Chos-'phel, the Punakha *rDzong-dpon* at that time.<sup>li</sup> Dge-'dun Chos-'phel's resentment soon led him to assassinate one of Ngag-dbang Rab-brtan's brothers, an attendant upon the son of the deceased *Zhabs-drung*.<sup>lii</sup> Meanwhile, their military successes in this war earned for the 'Obs-mtsho additional rewards from the third *sDe-srid*, whereas he severely scolded the Punakha Dzongpon dGe-'dun Chos-'phel for his jealous behavior. Consequently, in 1680 dGe-'dun Chos-'phel organized a *coup d'état* against the *sDe-srid* at Punakha.<sup>liii</sup> The rabble crowd accused him and his other Tibetan expatriates of bringing nothing but hardships and warfare to Bhutan. The Bhutanese had been forced against their will to quarry stones to build the great fortress rDzongs, countless stupas and *mani* walls. The *sDe-srid* defended himself and the *Zhabs-drung* as having brought prosperity and religion to the country, but in disgust at what he saw as ignorance and ingratitude he resigned from office, warning his assailants of the bad *karma* which their actions would surely bring.

With the *sDe-srid* out of the way, the rebels next turned with vengeance against his allies from 'Obs-mtso. The state minister Ngag-dbang Rab-brtan was imprisoned at Wangdue Phodrang, publicly humiliated and shortly thereafter assassinated. His wife and two of their sons were driven into exile. It was only the intercession of the pious fourth *sDe-srid* bsTan-'dzin Rab-rgyas (r. 1680-1694) that stemmed the worst abuses, and temporarily restored the widow and her sons to their homes and property.<sup>liv</sup>

Then, in 1688, dGe-'dun Chos-'phel requested permission to retire from his post as *rDzong-dpon* of Punakha. bsTan-'dzin Rab-rgyas assented only when dGe-'dun Chos-'phel agreed to retire to the fortress-monastery of Wangdue Phodrang, several miles south of Punakha, instead of to his ancestral estate

near his enemies at Amorimu.<sup>lv</sup> Although supposedly now settled into a life of meditation, dGe-'dun Chos-'phel in fact continued to involve himself in politics. In 1694 he emerged from retirement and led a faction demanding that bsTan-'dzin Rab-rgyas resign as *sDe-srid* and remain only in a spiritual capacity. But bsTan-'dzin Rab-rgyas, suffering from failing eyesight and other illnesses, decided to retire altogether, whereupon dGe-'dun Chos-'phel got himself appointed as *sDe-srid*. Soon the feud resumed with vigor. On New Year's day of 1700, a dispute over a broken marriage commitment resulted in *sDe-srid* dGe-'dun Chos-'phel imprisoning the 'Obs-mtsho *chos-rje* Phun-tshogs on trumped up charges. This was followed by an aborted act of revenge to dethrone the *sDe-srid*. When that coup attempt failed another purge of the 'Obs-mtsho people took place, the family estate was burned, and the aged widow and her sons were again driven into exile near India while other family members were imprisoned or assassinated.<sup>lvi</sup> The dispute finally went into remission only when dGe-'dun Chos-'phel died, in 1701.

### **From 'Obs-mtsho to Amorimu**

In the course of these events (or perhaps because of them) the family abandoned once and for all the monastery and estates at 'Obs-mtsho and re-established themselves at Amorimu, where they continue to this day.<sup>lvii</sup> The new government again restored the widow and remaining sons from exile, and even rebuilt their home by way of apology and in honor of the family's relationship to the respected first *sDe-srid* of Bhutan.<sup>lviii</sup> But the 'Obs-mtsho *chos-rje* (hereafter of Amorimu) went on to regenerate themselves in subsequent decades, in a way that illustrates an important aspect of the adaptive interplay between religion and politics characteristic of Bhutanese society. Over the next three hundred years, the family refocused its energies on achieving prominence primarily within the religious sphere, where one may speculate that it felt less exposed to the direct heat of political competition. The seminal figures in this transformation were offspring of the assassinated chief minister Ngag-dbang Rab-

brtan, namely his eldest son *Byams-mgon* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan (1647-1732) and his grandson *chos-rje* Ngag-dbang 'Phrin-las (1712-1770). Both led active religious lives, and contributed immensely to the status and scale of Se'u-la monastery. Each gave rise to a lineage of hitherto unrecognized reincarnations who, by tradition, have taken birth as scions of the former 'Obs-mtsho *chos-rje*, now of Amorimu. Although in the modern era Se'u-la has become a property within the state monastic system, by convention it remains the seat of these two incarnation lineages and thus closely linked to its founding family. In effect, what seems to have happened is that this ancient family of hereditary *chos-rje* transformed that role and title into one passed down through reincarnation and spiritual authority at Se'u-la.<sup>lix</sup>

### **The Career of Se'u-la *Byams-mgon* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan (1647-1732)**

*Byams-mgon* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan was born at Amorimu. As a boy he witnessed at Cheri the funeral of his great-uncle, the illustrious first *sDe-srid*. He entered the state of 'Brug-pa establishment through the workings of the monk tax, and in 1662 was among the last recorded novices to receive initiation at the hand of whomever was posing behind the screen as the now deceased *Zhabs-drung Rin-po-che* (whose death was still being concealed).<sup>lix</sup> A natural talent for learning and for the arts quickly brought him to the attention of *rJe mKhan-po* bSod-nams 'Od-zer and of the 4<sup>th</sup> *sDe-srid* bsTan-'dzin Rab-rgyas, whom he served as an attendant. As a monk in the state monastery he helplessly witnessed his family's sufferings at the hands of political enemies, commanding no means to prevent them. But whereas lay members of his family served as generals and ministers, Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan pioneered a unique diplomatic role in service to the Bhutanese state, namely that of 'monk ambassador.' Appointed by bsTan-'dzin Rab-rgyas, his mission to king Sangs-rgyas brTan-pa of Derge in eastern Tibet took place over the years 1688-1695, in response to repeated requests from that king who had heard of the

mystery of the *Zhabs-drung's* long 'retreat' and wished to meet his personal representative.<sup>lxi</sup> The equally fascinating account of his subsequent mission to the court of king Nyi-ma rNam-rgyal of Ladakh, his pilgrimage to Lahore in search of Buddhist artifacts, and of his imprisonment on return through Tibet provides important insight into the challenges attending Bhutan's attempt to formulate intimate religio-political ties with the states of western Tibet.<sup>lxii</sup>

In between these missions Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan served as tutor to three of the young incarnations being groomed as spiritual successors of *Zhabs-drung* Ngag-dbang-rnam-rgyal as well as his own future biographer, the historian Shakya Rin-chen. Late in life he was also appointed to serve as Paro Penlop, though he resigned after only one year out of strong distaste for politics. In 1715 he founded the monastic residence of Chos-khor rDo-rje-gdan at Se'u-la, where he retired and began the religious instruction of his nephew *Chos-rje* Ngag-dbang 'Phrin-las (1712-1770), who later succeeded him as monastic head. In his last years he completed the paintings and sculptures for his new monastery and constructed the magnificent memorial *mchod-rten* for the remains of his deceased teacher bSod-nams 'Od-zer which still stands near the entryway of Se'u-la.<sup>lxiii</sup>

### **Successors of the 'Obs-mtsho *Byams-mgon* and Amorimu *Chos-rje***

The line of incarnations of *Byams-mgon* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan remains to this day one of the most respected in Bhutan. They and the rebirths of his nephew *chos-rje* Ngag-dbang 'Phrin-las have periodically filled elite roles in the service of the Bhutan government, including one *sDe-srid* and no fewer than five abbots of the state monk body. Except for the 5<sup>th</sup> incarnation who died in his youth, each of the Amorimu *chos-rje* incarnations had risen from their monastic seat at Se'u-la to be elected to the high religious office of rJe mKhan-po. Similar honor has been extended to the rebirths

of *Byams-mgon Rin-po-che*, whose last reincarnation died in 1991/2.

Given the destruction and family vicissitudes of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we may never have a detailed early genealogy such as that which Lam gSang-sngags has prepared for the gNyos lineage.<sup>lxiv</sup> For now, we are dependent on the unpublished booklet about Se'u-la by the present Khenpo Karma Tshering, and on Lopon dGe'dun Rin-chen's outline of the two incarnation lines in his supplement to the 17<sup>th</sup> century history of Bhutan called *Lho'i chos 'byung*. In the balance of this paper I shall briefly summarize these two lineages.

## **1. The *Byams-mgon Rin-po-che* of Se'u-la Chos-'khor rDo-rje-gdan<sup>lxv</sup>**

### **1.1 Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan (1647-1732)**

Discussed above.

### **1.2 Ye-shes rDo-rje (1757-1805)**

He was born at Ba-lang-nang in the district of Goenshari. It was not until he was 25 years old that *chos-rje* Ngag dbang 'phrin las (1712-1770), nephew of Ngag dbang rgyal mtshan, recognized him as his uncle's rebirth.<sup>lxvi</sup> He served as the 17<sup>th</sup> *rJe mKhan-po* for 6 years (1791-1797). After retirement, he continued to teach until his death.

### **1.3 'Jam-dbyangs bsTan-'dzin, *alias* bDud-'joms rGyal-mtshan (1831-1855)**

He was born into the family lineage of Amorimu. The monastic faction installed him at age 24 (1854) as the 42<sup>nd</sup> '*Brug sDe-srid*, following the strife-filled years of the previous *sDe-srid* Dam-chos Lhun-grub. However, the Dzongpon of Thimphu, Umadeva, forced the reinstatement of the previous *sDe-srid*, Dam-chos



Lhun-grub, and so for a time there were two men in this position. During his shared reign a dispute arose with the British over alleged Bhutanese depredations along the southern Duars, committed by the servants of the Dewangiri Dzungpon. It seems that he attempted to play an honest role in settling these disputes, but the emerging power at this time was the Tongsa Penlop 'Jigs-med rNam-rgyal (1825-1881), father of the first king Ugyen Wangchuk. This *Byams-mgon sprul-sku* died in office in 1855.<sup>lxvii</sup>

#### **1.4 rGyal-mtshan**

Died young, before he could be installed at the monastic seat.

#### **1.5 rGya-mtsho (d. 1991/92)<sup>lxviii</sup>**

Dge-'dun Rin-chen writes, “this man has not proven of any value for the religion, since his disciples, out of bad *karma*, have turned away from him.”<sup>lxix</sup>

### **2. The Incarnation Lineage of the A-mo-ri-mu *Chos-rje*<sup>lxx</sup>**

#### **2.1 *Chos-rje* Ngag-dbang 'Phrin-las (1712-1770)**

He was born at Amorimu and took religious vows from his uncle Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan and from his own father. He became an accomplished yogin. He served as a teacher in Nepal for a time, then returned to Bhutan and assumed the abbatial see at his uncle's monastery as *byams-mgon bla ma'i gdan tshab*. Upon the death of Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan, he enlarged the monastery and built a new temple building at Se'u-la known as the Byams-pa'i lha-khang. Following a stint as *rDo-rje-slob-dpon* in the state monk body, he was appointed as the 11<sup>th</sup> *rJe mKhan-po* in 1762. He retired in 1769 and died the following year. He

sponsored the writing of *Byams-mgon* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan's biography by Shakya-rin-chen.

## **2.2 Chos-rje Shakya rGyal-mtshan (1790-1836)**

He was born into the Amorimu family line, and studied with *Byams-mgon* Ye-shes rDo-rje, mKhan-chen 'Jam-dbyangs rGyal-mtshan and others. He was nominated as the 24<sup>th</sup> *rJe mKhan-po* in 1831 and served for 5 years. He died in office at the age of 47 (1836).

## **2.3 Chos-rje 'Phrin-las rGyal-mtshan (1839-1898)**

He was born into the Amorimu family line. He studied with Tshul-khrims rGyal mtshan and others. He was appointed as the 42<sup>nd</sup> *rJe mKhan-po* in 1886, serving for two years, and served a second term as the 44<sup>th</sup> *rJe mKhan-po* from 1889 to 1891. He constructed and performed the artwork for the third major temple building at Se'u-la, known as the sKu-'bag Lha-khang. He died there in 1898.

## **2.4 Chos-rje Ngag-dbang 'Phrin-las *phyi-ma* (1916-1950)**

He was also born into the Amorimu family line, and was a student of *sLob-dpon* dPal 'byor and *Yongs-'dzin mTshan-slob* dNgos-grub, and also of *rigs-bdag* Srid-zhi rNam-rgyal. He became a fully ordained monk at the age of 25, and was appointed as the 60<sup>th</sup> *rJe mKhan-po* in 1940. He served for 6 years, then retired in 1946. He died at the early age of 35. He was a teacher of the author of *LCB2*.

## **2.5 Ye-shes dNgos-grub (1951-1983)<sup>lxxi</sup>**

He was the son of Tshering Zangmo of Amorimu and Sangay of Kabjisa. He studied with *sLob-dpon* mKha'-

'gro of sTod-pa'i-sa (Punakha valley), *rJe mKhan* 'Phrin-las Lhun-grub, *rJe mKhan* dGe-'dun Rin-chen, *rJe mKhan* bsTan-'dzin Don-grub, and *Grub-dbang* bSod-nams bZang-po. He took full ordination and is said to have achieved complete meditative accomplishment.

## **2.6 Mi-pham Chos-kyi-nyin-byed (b. 1983)**

He was born at Amorimu to Namgay Zangpo and Wangmo, younger sister of Gup Bangay. His teachers have included his cousin Karma Tshering, Khenpo of Se'u-la, and *slob-dpon* Jagith (ex *dBu-mdzad* of the central monk body of Bhutan). He received special teachings (*gdams-sngags*) from *rJe mKhan* dGe-'dun Rin-chen and from *sprul-sku* 'Jigs-med Chos-grags. He presently resides at Se'u-la monastery where his training continues.

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> The present paper is reprinted, with permission of the editor, from the forthcoming *Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, Bloomington, Indiana (USA) 25-31 July, 1998*. This study benefited greatly from a brief visit to Punakha valley (Bhutan) in September, 1999, during which I was able to follow up several lines of inquiry with representatives of the lineage of 'Obs-mtsho presently residing at Punakha, at Se'u-la monastery and at the ancestral estate in the village of Amorimu. In particular I would like to acknowledge the hospitality and informed cooperation of Gup Bangay of Punakha, his father Jagar of Amorimu, his son Lopon Karma Tshering (Khenpo of the Se'u-la Shedra), and his nephew Lopon Kinlay Dorji, present head of the ancestral home at Amorimu. The family members express great pride in their ancestors and their historic contributions to Bhutan. I would also like to thank Dasho Tsewang Rixin of Thimphu and Karma Ura, Director of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, for facilitating this visit. Lopon Karma Tshering kindly made available for my use his unpublished booklet on the history and teaching curriculum of Se'u-la monastery. Appreciation is also due to my field assistants in Bhutan Tashi Lhendup and Karma Dorji.

<sup>1</sup> I refer here to such cluster toponyms as *Wang tsho chen brgyad* "The eight communities of the Wang," *Bum thang sde bzhi* "The four districts of Bumthang," *sPa ro bar skor tsho drug* "The six Bar-skor settlements of Paro" and many others (a recent partial listing of these is provided by Lopon Pemala in *BSGM*: 188). On the *Wang tsho chen brgyad* see M. Aris, "'The admonition of the thunderbolt cannon-ball' and its place in the Bhutanese New Year festival," *BSOAS* vol. 39/3, 1976: 625).

<sup>1</sup> Aris (1979): xxv, has expressed some surprise at the apparent sense of unity implied by this term for the Bhutan region, first encountered in a Tibetan text of 1431. But one must at least question whether a name emphasizing four nodes necessarily implies any particular degree of centralization, especially in the absence of clear identification of those nodes from an authentic, early source.

<sup>1</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> month of the wood-ox year (1625/26), and not 1616 when he fled from Tibet, is the date given in his biography when *Zhabs-drung Rin-po-che* emerged from a three-year retreat at Cheri (*lCags-ri*) monastery and reached the definite decision to found a new state based on the familiar Tibetan principle of *chos srid gnyis ldan*. (Ardussi [1977]: 212; *LNDRR*, *Nga*: 52.b, 65.b).

<sup>1</sup> Aris (1988): 15-16. An important issue not addressed in Aris's analysis is the distinction between *chos-rje* as a hereditary title of the head of a *chos rdzong* (which in Bhutanese usage can mean the ancestral home of a religious lineage) and its more restricted use for only the reincarnate descendants within a family line. The history of 'Obs-mtsho illustrates a case where the usage seems to have changed from the former to the latter, in the course of time.

<sup>1</sup> Our knowledge of the history of the 'Obs-mtsho family depends heavily on the *rnam-thar* of Se'u-la *Byams-mgon Rin-po-che* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan (1647-1732) composed during 1733-35 by the 9<sup>th</sup> *rJe mkhan-po* of Bhutan, Shakya-rin-chen (1710-1767). This unique text (hereafter *LNDRM*) is one of the most important historical sources for political events in Bhutan during the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Another biography of Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan written in 1731 by the 1<sup>st</sup> *Phyogs-las sprul-sku* *Phyogs-las-rnam-rgyal (mkhas btsun bzang po'i bdag nyid mtshungs med chos kyi rjes [sic] ngag dbang rgyal mtshan kyi rnam par thar pa'i rgya mtsho ngo mtshar gyi rba rlabs mngon par g.yo ba)* omits discussion of his clan and family background. (I wish to thank Françoise Pommaret for providing me a copy of this text).

<sup>1</sup> On the lDan-ma clan (*rus*), see E. Gene Smith (1969): 16; R.A. Stein (1961): 57, 75-77.

<sup>1</sup> PKTY: 177.a, 188.b. lDan-ma rTse-mang (~bTsan-mang) was the redactor of the *Thang-yig-chen-mo*, one of the sources of part two of the *bKa'-thang-sde-linga* (*rGyal-po'i-bka'i-thang-yig*: 2.a, 92.a). In the Tibetan history *mKhas-pa'i-dga'ston* (*Ja*, f. 125.a), he is mentioned as one of three senior translators (*lo-tsa-ba rgan gsum*) at bSam-yas under the tutelage of Padma Sambhava. He was also the scholar to whom Padma Sambhava dictated the famous legend of king Sindhara-dza (Sindhu Raja), for later rediscovery by one of lDan-ma rTse-mang's incarnations (translations in Aris [1979]: 43-48, and Olschak [1979]: 59-88; the MS is reproduced on pp.181-193).

<sup>1</sup> This line effectively began with *rGyal-sras* Padma 'Phrin-las (1564-1642?), grandson of Padma Gling-pa and founder of the Bhutanese Nyingmapa seat at Gantey monastery (*sGang-steng gSang-sngags-chos-gling*) near Wangdue Phodrang.

<sup>1</sup> The distinctive cursive script of Bhutan called *mg-yogs-yig* ("joyi") bears a close resemblance to the script of Tibetan documents from Tun Huang (examples are reproduced in van Driem [1998]: 51, and Olschak [1979]: 198-215).

<sup>1</sup> Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bkra'i chos-'byung*: 173.

<sup>1</sup> Bikrama Jit Hasrat, *History of Bhutan. Land of the Peaceful Dragon*. Thimphu, Education Dept. of Bhutan, 1980: 30.

<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, vol. 2: 662ff; Franco Ricca & Erberto Lo Bue, *The Great Stupa of Gyantse*. London: Serindia Publications, 1993: 14ff.

<sup>1</sup> dGe-bsnyen (chen-po) was the generic name of several local deities in the greater Himalayan region (see René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956, p. 222). dGe-bsnyen chen-po Jag-pa Me-len was one of the chief local protectors in western Bhutan. His principal residence is the *dgon-khang* at bDe-chen-phug near Paro (see F. Pommaret, "On local and mountain deities in Bhutan," Anne-Marie Blondeau & Ernst Steinkellner, ed., *Reflections of the Mountain*, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996, pp. 44-45).

<sup>1</sup> LNDRM: 15.a-16.a: *dge bsnyen chen pos spyir sangs rgyas bstan pa dang sgos sgrub brgyud snying po / khyad par chos rje'i slob brgyud bsrung bar khas blangs so //*.

<sup>1</sup> LNDRM: 15.b: *bu khyod kyi gdul bya'i zhing nyi ma lho phyogs su yod pas der song la dad ldan gyi tshogs pa re byung na 'ang skyongs shig khyod kyis 'gro ba la phan thogs par yod do zhes lung bstan /*.

<sup>1</sup> LNDRM: 14.a-b; Roerich, *Blue Annals*: 664f. On the life of Pha-jo, cf. Aris (1979): 168-170 and Ardussi (1977): 119-124.

<sup>1</sup> The name 'Obs-mtsho is of unknown origin. Its ruins are situated on a ridge several miles below mGar-sa rDzong near the track to Punakha, which lies two days' trekking distance to the south. The

date suggested for this foundation is based on the passage in *LNDRM*: 15.a-b, which places it shortly after the death of gTsang-pa rGya-ras.

<sup>1</sup> Dpal-sdings appears to have been located in the Khu-le valley of gTsang Myang-stod, which was also the birthplace of gTsang-pa rGya-ras (*LNDRM*: 17.a-b).

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 16.b-17.a.

<sup>1</sup> *Sangs rgyas dbon ras dar ma seng ge'i rnam thar*: 6.a, 14.a (reprinted in the *RKSP*, vol. 2). For a discussion of the various editions of this collection, see the preface by E. Gene Smith in Lokesh Chandra (1969), *The Life of the Saint of Gtsan*, New Delhi, I.A.I.C.: 32ff.

<sup>1</sup> This *lha-khang* (actually a *mgon-khang*) is said to be one of the most sacred such locations in western Bhutan. There would appear to be a connection between the cult of sGo-mo and that of dGe-bsnyen, whom *grub-thob* gTer-khung-pa subjugated in Tibet. Images of gTer-khung-pa are found at rNam-rgyal-rtse *mgon-khang*, the three temple buildings at Se'u-la proper, and in the private chapel at Amorimu.

<sup>1</sup> Among these are included a beautiful set of statues of the sixteen arhants (*gnas-brtan bcu-drug*) attributed to the renowned expatriate Tibetan artist *sprul-sku* rDzing (d. ca.1673), and a magnificent set of appliqué thangkas of *Byams-mgon* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan and other religious masters, probably dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The three main temples also contain fine mural paintings that are 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 18.b; 'Jam dbyangs ye shes rin chen gyi rnam thar: 5.a-b (in *RKSP*, vol. 3).

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 19.a.

<sup>1</sup> Pha-jo 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po's dates have yet to be worked out completely satisfactorily. Those given here are ones proposed recently by the Bhutanese historian Lupon Pemala (*BSGM*: 80-87), who also gives 1218 as the date of his entry to Bhutan. Other sources support birth dates as early as 1162 (Aris [1976]: 603), 1184 (*LCB2*: 92.a), or as late as 1208 (*Pha-jo*: 2.a).

<sup>1</sup> *Pha jo*: 9.a-b: *Khams nas khams phrug cig yong ba yod de nga dang mi 'phrad pa 'dug khyed kyis rjes su bzung nas u rgyan gyi mkhan po padma 'byung gnas kyi zhabs kyis bcags (9.b) pa'i yul phyogs nyi ma lho rong du btang zhig / sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa la phan thogs par yong ngo gsungs yod de /*. There was apparently even a third Bhutanese *chos-rje* lineage going back to a disciple of gTsang-pa rGya-ras named Pa-ri-ba, namely the Sha-la-brag Chos-rje descended from 'Jam-dbyangs Chos-kyi-don-grub who was Pa-ri-ba's *dbon-sras* (Aris [1988]: 15 fn).

<sup>1</sup> The *rnam-thar* of Pha-jo 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po is a *gter-ma* text uncovered in about 1623 (Aris [1979]: 170 suggests a different date).

<sup>1</sup> *Pha-jo*: 24.a-27.a; *LCB2*: 92.b-98.b; Aris (1979): 169f; Ardussi (1977): 121-122.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRR, Nga*: 4.a-b; *LCB2*: 98.b; *BSGM*: 80-85. Ngag-dbang-rnam-rgyal's biographer justifies his subject's use of black magic against enemies based on the model set by Pha-jo 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po (*LNDRR, Nga*: 21.a-29.b).

<sup>1</sup> *LCB2*: 97.b.

<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to identify Wang-ri-kha with the hamlet of Wang-kha, located several miles up the Pho-chu valley northeast of Punakha. However, my informants seemed uncomfortable making this connection, and it seems more likely that Wang-ri-kha will turn out to be located closer to 'Obs-mtsho.

<sup>1</sup> *'Jam pa'i dbyangs blo gros seng ge'i rnam thar*: 2.b-4.a.

<sup>1</sup> *Chos rje shes rab seng ge'i rnam thar*: 2.b (in *RKSP*, vol. 3). The mother was one *Sras-mo* bSod-nams-'dren, descendent of Pha-jo's son Nyi-ma.

<sup>1</sup> *'Jam dbyangs ye shes rin chen gyi rnam thar*: 4.b (in *RKSP*, vol. 3).

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 18.b.

<sup>1</sup> *rJe rin po che shes rab bzang po'i rnam thar*: 2.b (in *RKSP*, vol. 3). Her name was Ma-gcig Nam-mkha'-dpal-'dren.

<sup>1</sup> After gTsang-pa rGya-ras, the second incarnate of this lineage was *rGyal-dbang Kun-dga' dPal-'byor* (1428-1476), who belonged to the ruling house of Rwa-lung and was active in western Bhutan. His next two reincarnations, however, were born into Tibetan families that had no ties to Bhutan. Recognition of the fourth incarnation was disputed between supporters of *Zhabs-drung* Ngag-dbang-rnam-rgyal and a rival candidate, which led directly to his flight to Bhutan in 1616. (E. Gene Smith (1969), Introduction to Lokesh Chandra, ed., *Tibetan Chronicle of Padma-dkar-po*. New Delhi, IAIC, 1968: 2-3.

<sup>1</sup> The nearest monastery founded by a Rwa-lung hierarch seems to have been 'Brug 'Phrin-las-sgang, founded south of Punakha by Ngag-dbang Chos-rgyal, cousin of 'Brug-pa Kun-legs. A small monastery named Zab-gsal dgon-pa was also founded in dGon-yul by the hierarch 'Jam-dbyangs Kun-dga' Seng-ge near his wife's village.

<sup>1</sup> *Sems dpa' chen po padma dkar po'i rnam thar thugs rje chen po'i zlos gar*: 34.b-35.a (in *RKSP*, vol. 4)

<sup>1</sup> The original biography of the *Zhabs-drung* (dated 1675) by the exiled Tibetan author gTsang *mKhan-chen* merely notes his travelling to Bhutan under escort through the upper valleys of Punakha, then southward as far as 'Brug 'Phrin-las-sgang below Punakha (*LNDRR, Nga*: 11.b-12.a). The earliest notice of the role of the 'Obs-mtsho

lama appears to be in the brief biography of the *Zhabs-drung* written (no later than 1759) by rJe Sakya-rin-chen for inclusion in an edition of the *dKar-brgyud gser-'phreng* (*Dkar rgyud kyi nram thar gser gyi 'phreng ba lta bu las dpal ldan bla ma mthu chen chos kyi rgyal po ngag dbang mam par rgyal ba'i skabs*: 17.b-18.a, from vol. 1 of his *Collected Works*).

<sup>1</sup> *LCB*: 23.b

<sup>1</sup> *LCB*: 92.a-93.b; *SDE-SRID* 4: 58.b - 59.a.

<sup>1</sup> *LCB*: 92.a-b. At the time of the *Zhabs-drung's* arrival in Bhutan, we are told that the *sDe-srid* was already put in charge of the treasury and civil affairs “ *nang phyag mdzod kyi gnyer dang phyi 'jig rten gyi sgrigs nram gzahag byed mkhan thams (92.b) cad dbu mdzad chen mor bcol bas /....* ”

<sup>1</sup> *SDE-SRID* 4: 58.b - 59.a.

<sup>1</sup> *LCB*: 50.a-b, 92.a-b.

<sup>1</sup> Aris (1979): 246; Ardussi (1977): 247-48, 285-56.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRR*, *Nga*: 80.b; *LCB*: 42.a-b; *SDE-SRID* 4: 32.a; Ardussi (1977): 234.

<sup>1</sup> *LCB*: 48.b; *SDE-SRID* 4: 201.a.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 33.a.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 45.b - 48.a.

<sup>1</sup> This individual was *Drung* Ngag-dbang 'Brug-grags, whose death we place ca. 1677. Sorrow at this event led Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan to seek spiritual retreat at Cheri monastery in the year *me mo bya* (*LNDRM*: 48.a-b; however, this must be an error for *me sbrul*: 1677).

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 60.a-61.b.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 66.a-67.b, 73.b.

<sup>1</sup> *SDE-SRID* 4: 201.a.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 110.b-111.b.

<sup>1</sup> There is nothing in the written literature that discusses the specific timing or circumstances of the migration from 'Obs-mtsho, and the Amorimu family apparently preserves no oral traditions. Moreover, they are not the only family that abandoned 'Obs-mtsho at this time. Damcho Dorji of mGar-sa, a lawyer with the High Court of Bhutan, related to me an oral tradition attributing his family's departure to more supernatural causes. According to this account, during the performance of certain rituals at 'Obs-mtsho the ceremonial *gtor-ma* were several times seen to be carried off by ravens flying in the direction of mGar-sa *rdzong*, motivating his ancestors to move there. He further states that mGar-sa families with historic ties to 'Obs-mtsho still make an annual trek to the ruins where certain rites are performed (interview in Paro 25 Sept., 1999). The connection, if any,



between the families of mGar-sa and Amorimu remains to be explored.

<sup>1</sup> The ancestral home now located at Amorimu is said to be the one constructed at this time. It is a large, traditional Bhutanese farmhouse having substantial rooms on three levels, with an attached kitchen building. A family altar room with a shrine to *grub-thob* gTer-khung-pa is found on the upper level. This private home is said to be the only one in Bhutan except that of the Dungkar *chos-rje* (the ancestral home of the present royal family, in Kurtoe) entitled to install a circular iron roof ornament (*ral-gri*) to mark its historic status (statement of Gup Bangay), although we did not observe it on the day of our visit. (Most private homes in Bhutan are surmounted by a single wooden sword, the conventional *ral-gri* roof ornament).

<sup>1</sup> Aris (*Ibid*: 20) calls this type of development one where the principle of the recognized rebirth was “used to strengthen and reinforce a lineage from within.” Worth further inquiry is the extent to which this development may also have affected patterns of patriliney versus matriliney in the area of inheritance. Information that I collected during brief interviews with the family in September, 1999, suggests that the estates at Amorimu are now passed down through daughters, who marry men from outside the family. The Amorimu *Chos-rje* incarnations are always born to one of these women. The one instance during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the other incarnation, the *Byams-mgon Rin-po-che*, was recognized outside the core family, as the son of a Ladakhi king, created a significant problem whose resolution will be described below.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 31.b. On the *Zhabs-drung*'s concealed death see Aris (1979): 233ff.

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 80.b-96.b

<sup>1</sup> dKon-mchog-bsod-nams (1994), vol. 1: 101; *LNDRM*: 127.a - 167.b. This mission took Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan to Ladakh, Zangskar, and Lahore, and provides a fascinating window into life in those territories. It is said that images of Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan are still to be found at sTag-sna monastery. (Tashi Rabgias [1984]: 282-287).

<sup>1</sup> *LNDRM*: 185.a-b. Chos-'khor rDo-rje-gdan is a beautiful hermitage overlooking the Punakha valley, and remains the residence of the presiding lama of Se'u-la. Several of *Byams-mgon* Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan's original murals still adorn its walls.

<sup>1</sup> Bla-ma gSang-sngags, *'Brug gi smyos rabs gsal ba'i me long*, 1983. This work has been thoroughly reviewed in Michael Aris (1988).

<sup>1</sup> *LCB2*: 133.a - 135.b.

<sup>1</sup> An interesting story is told that the rebirth of Ngag-dbang rGyal-mtshan was first recognized as a prince of Ladakh. Hearing of this,

Ngag-dbang 'Phrin-las is said to have slapped the face of the protective deity sGo-mo, for having permitted this intrusion on what the Amorimu family treated as its prerogative. sGo-mo then transformed himself into a bee and flew to Ladakh, where he stung the prince and removed his conscious principle (*rnam-shes*). The prince died, and the bee flew back to Bhutan and injected the *rnam-shes* into the womb of a local woman, who gave birth to Ye-shes rDorje. A *gter* image of sGo-mo with crooked nose is still kept in the *mgon-khang* (oral account of Karma Tshering; see also the account in *LCB2*: 136.a).

<sup>1</sup> *BSGM*: 460-463; Aris (1994): 55-56.

<sup>1</sup> Date given in *Karma Tshering*.

<sup>1</sup> *LCB2*: 135.b.

<sup>1</sup> *LCB2*: 135.b - 137.b.

<sup>1</sup> *Karma Tshering*; interview with Karma Tshering on 20 Sept., 1999 at Se'u-la monastery and with Gup Bangay of Amorimu in Punakha, Bhutan, on 17 Sept., 1999.

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