

Demise of Tongphu Gyalpo*

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Introduction

Tongphu was one of many valley kingdoms that existed in eastern Bhutan during ancient times. There are many folktales and oral accounts associated with these valley kingdoms. One such popular account narrated and remembered to this day is about a crazy command of Tongphu Gyalpo to level a mountain blocking the view of his queen's house. This surely is a myth but the events associated with this myth are interesting in that they highlight some historical and anthropological research issues. In the following essay, I will piece together some information documented last summer from some elderly citizens in Thridangbi village in Mongar.

A Command: More precious and heavier than a mountain

The palace of Tongphu Gyalpo existed on the slope of Zarkula mountain, about one and half kilometers above Yongkala in Thridangbi village. The queen was from Masangang in Chali, another village on the other side of Kurichu river. Tongphu Gyalpo loved his queen so dearly that he could not spend a single moment without her presence. Even a glance at her house in Chali meant so much of happiness to him that he must have a look at it everyday. It appears totally crazy but he is believed to have done it daily: he would walk to the top of the mountain every day from his palace located below the slope just to cast a glance. This daily ritual of gazing at the queen's house turned out to be very cumbersome after a while. He commanded his ministers that Zarkula mountain be leveled or destroyed so that he could see the house of the queen straight from his bedroom's window

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One would perhaps expect that ministers would have appealed to the king that his command was beyond execution. People do not know if such appeals were made. One can only surmise that the ministers were so obedient or perhaps, they understood the king's intense love, and realized that there was no way of reversing the command. They mobilized hundreds of workers and began the Herculean task of leveling the mountain. Several months had passed and yet no significant progress was made. The sufferings that people had to undergo were getting beyond their tolerance. Even the ministers, who had to do physically less straining jobs of supervising workers were tired and frustrated.

One evening, as the ministers and workers were winding up for the day, an old woman carrying a little baby appeared and sung the following verses repeatedly:

*Aow, Aow.
Phuchen Dhelpha Wata,
Michen Dhelpha Drag.
Aow, Aow*

*Instead of leveling the towering mountain,
Better it is to bring down a towering personality.*

Ministers instantly understood the old woman's message and met secretly to execute the plan. They came out with this plan: to propose a *chogdha* (archery match) with the neighbouring petty kingdom of Drakar and kill their king during the match. Next day, the senior ministers informed the king about the plan; the king happily accepted it, and commanded that one of the ministers should be sent in person to discuss the plan with the king of Drakar.

As commanded, one minister and some other senior members of the palace went to Drakar, and informed about the plan. The date for the match was fixed (it is not clear if the minister also discussed the plot to kill their king with the Drakar

king). The Minister returned to Tongphu and informed the Gyalpo and his colleagues about the date for the archery match.

The Archery Match

After the rituals were conducted and local deities propitiated for their blessings, Tongphu Gyalpo and his entourage proceeded to Drakar. After traveling a few kilometers, the Gyalpo commanded his entourage that he wanted to conduct a divination about their performance in the match. He did this by trying to balance his walking stick on a flat surface of a big boulder. If the stick balanced and stood upright for a while, it was to foretell a victory; if it tilted and fell down, it was to foretell a defeat. But the divination predicted a defeat. Once again, prayers and offerings of food and drinks were made to the deities to prevent misfortune and bring victory.

In Drakar, a splendid arrangement had been made for the match. Women of varying ages performed dances; food and drinks of varying kinds were served in abundance. Two kings played as *Ma* (anchor or a person who shoots last from the team). The match went on for three days. Both teams performed equally well and none could claim victory. Also, nothing had been done to execute the plan of killing the Gyalpo. Ministers and the archers of Tongphu began to get nervous.

Amidst these worries and confusions, an idea struck in the mind of one of the ministers. He suggested that the Tongphu Gyalpo needed to forgo his *Ma* position to bring luck to the team. The king agreed, and a minister assumed the role of *Ma*. Even today, it is believed that a change in the order of shooters could bring luck to the team. The Gyalpo went to other side of the archery range to encourage or direct his teammates after he had shot his arrows.

It was Drakar Gyalpo's turn to shoot. This was an opportune moment for the minister of Tongphu to kill his king. The

minister who substituted the Gyalpo as Ma and other archers of Tongphu provoked Drakar Gyalpo: they commented he was a bad shooter. They told him that his chance of hitting a small target was non-existent; and that he could not hit the target even if it were the size of Tongphu Gyalpo's giant physique. This challenge provoked and irritated Drakar Gyalpo and he wanted to prove that he was not a bad shooter. So, he proposed that instead of aiming at the target, he would aim at their king. They further provoked and challenged his ego. As Drakar Gyalpo took aim, Tongphu Gyalpo, standing a few meters away from the target on the other side, was distracted by one of his chamberlains who offered him an alcohol. In the flicker of that moment, Drakar Gyalpo released his arrow. Tongphu Gyalpo could not escape the swift and forceful arrow of his opponent. He was shot on the chest.

Tongphu Gyalpo fell flat on the ground. This place where he fell flat came to be known as *Tingarbi*. *Ting* in the local dialect of the region means stretch or fall flat. Associated with this word, people called the place *Tingarbi*, which means a place where Gyalpo fell flat. Many places between these two kingdoms were named after a series of events that followed the injury and subsequent death of Tongphu Gyalpo.

Return to Tongphu

The injured Gyalpo and his entourage returned to Tongphu. A few kilometers down from the archery range, the wounded Gyalpo shook his body in great pain and anguish. The spot where the Gyalpo shook in pain and anguish came to be known as *Parbi*, a place where the Gyalpo moved.

The next place is known as *Changchangla*. When the injured Gyalpo and his entourage reached this spot, the Gyalpo's wound bled like a cascade. *Changchang* in the local dialect means cascade or flow in abundance. The place came to be known as *Changchangla* after this event.

Demise of Tongphu Gyalpo

When the entourage reached a ridge, the king's face shrunk and turned pale. This ridge came to be known as *Nyamsergang*. *Nyam* means deterioration, *ser* yellow or pale, and *gang* a ridge.

The injured king's health was dwindling with every passing minute. When they reached a place where there was a pond of water, somewhere near Zhongar Dzong, the Gyalpo realized that he had no chance of surviving. He asked his ministers and other subjects to rest there. He then narrated his *zhelchem* (oral will). A few minutes later, he passed away. The ministers tied the body of the Gyalpo there. This place came to be known as *Dhamchu*, meaning a pond where body of the Gyalpo was tied. (*Dham* means tying and *chu* means water; here it means the pond).

With their torturous Gyalpo dead, ministers proceeded on to Tongphu. They stopped for a while when they reached a place about a kilometer after Zhongar Dzong. Here they discussed about the future of Tongphu. They were happy that their tyrant leader was dead. This place where they discussed plans and felt happy came to be known as *Galikhar*, a place where happiness (*ga*) was experienced.

Triumphant ministers and the subjects who accompanied them proceeded on. Their jubilant mood, however, was not able to suppress the guilt of killing their king. When they reached a place across the stream, they regretted the crime. They felt remorseful and bad. This place came to be known as *Thridangbi*. *Thri* means sorrow or remorse. *Thridangbi*, therefore, means a place where sorrow was experienced. It is evident from this that *Thridangbi* was initially name of a single spot but today the whole village is known by this name.

When they reached a small gorge further up, all ministers began to experience empty feelings. This gorge came to be known as *Tongpa Lungpa*. *Tongpa* means empty and *Lungpa* a gorge. About a kilometer up from this place, the entourage

rested for a while and some of them urinated at that place. This place came to be known as *Zengmagang*. *Zengma* refers to urine in *Bumtap*. Apparently, it appears that some of the ministers were from Bumthang. My interviewees said that they could possibly have been from Ura. They said that there used to be frequent contacts between the people of Thridangbi and Ura. This is further supported by Michael Aris, in “Bhutan: The Early History of Himalayan Kingdom” (p. 130) where frequent contacts between people of Ura and Zhongar area are mentioned to have existed for many years.

Ministers and rest of the people in the group walked uphill for a few kilometers and as they were approaching Tongphu, they came across many deer. This place came to be known as *Khasha Tong*. *Khasha* means deer and *tong* a thousand. Local people believe that it is ominous to come across many deer. A large number of deer, indeed, foretold ominous future for the kingdom of Tongphu.

When the ministers and the archers were approaching the palace, people from different parts of the kingdom had gathered in the vicinity of the palace. The news of death of their Gyalpo had put them in a state of confusion. This place came to be known as *Yomkala*, meaning a hill of confusion (*yom*). This place is now known by its corrupted name, *Yongkala*.

The tip of *Zarkula* that was leveled came to be known as *Wobkola*. *Wob* means depression or depressed, *ko* dig and *la* a mountain. *Wobkola* therefore, means a dented piece of land that has emerged out of digging. *La* here must have been added as it is still close to the apex of the mountain. It is also appropriate here to explain the meaning of the name of the kingdom - *Tongphu*. *Tong* in local dialect [also] refers to wild pear and *phu* to a hill or mountain. People say that there existed a wild pear tree next to the palace and since the palace was located on the slope of a mountain, name of the

kingdom was derived from the combination of these two words.

Tongphu without the Gyalpo

For the next few years, kingdom of Tongphu fell into a state of complete anarchy. When the Gyalpo passed away at Dhamchu, he left the following *zhelchem*: he would be reborn in Lhasa and if people of Tongphu ever needed him in future, they should come and fetch him; people coming to fetch him should carry some pears (*tong*) from the pear tree next to his palace; he would be amongst a group of children; to show pears to the children; and the child that recognizes the pear will be his reincarnate.

State of anarchy increased with every passing day. The need for a king was felt desperately. As instructed in his *zhelchem*, a group of people went to look for him in Lhasa, carrying some pears. Upon arriving Lhasa, they ran into a group of children. They threw about a dozen or so pears amongst those children. One of the children picked up a *tong* and looked at it very curiously. He finally commented that those pears were from the tree next to his palace in Tongphu. This confirmed the reincarnation of Tongphu Gyalpo.

The group of people who went to look for the reincarnate mugged the child; put him in the sack and kidnapped him out of Lhasa before people had any knowledge of the child's disappearance. The child, who was then about three or four years old is supposed to have defied the kidnappers. Upon reaching Zhangmala pass in Bumthang, they relaxed and took the boy out of the sack. They saw a bunch of grass in both his hands; the grass got uprooted as the boy tried to defy the kidnappers by clinging onto them. The spot at Zhangmala, where the boy threw the grass later turned into two patches of grass distinct from the local species. People called it Tibetan grass and the two distinctly unique patches of grassland are there even today.

From Zhangmala, he was brought to Pangkhar village in Ura. When he reached the village, he told the kidnappers that he did not want to return to Tongphu; he said he was afraid that he might meet with similar fate/treatment as the former Tongphu Gyalpo and pleaded that he be allowed to settle in Pangkhar. The kidnappers from Tongphu agreed, the boy settled in Pangkhar and later became very famous. He started the Dung family of Ura and came to be known as Dung Nagpo.

Conclusion

The myth of the command of Tongphu Gyalpo to his subjects to level a mountain is not interesting or unique by itself. Such myths are told and narrated elsewhere too. Besides, the same myth is credited to different hero by different accounts. For instance, in *Gyal-rigs in Aris' Sources for History of Bhutan* (1986), the same myth is credited to Relpa Tobchen, a boy who was born out of a fish and later became the *Gyalpo* of *Zhongar*. Some believe that it was *Zhongar Dzongpoen Namedla*. It is not clear who the real person associated with the myth was. Purpose here is not to refute sources. The historical and anthropological issues that this myth unfurls are interesting. This narration provides explanation to why places are named in a particular manner though they may not be fully correct and authentic. Apart from understanding the meaning of names, such accounts also help us understand and record rich history of our villages. Similar studies could be replicated to understand the names of places in other parts of Bhutan.