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A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa (zhabs drung phun sum tshogs pa) Thangka from the National Museum of Bhutan Collection

Ariana Maki

Introduction

Visions, and the ability to articulate them in an accessible fashion, play a crucial role in disseminating religious tradition, lineage and claims to legitimacy. Further, visions can and do stand as testimony to significant persons, entities and events. The visions of religious masters and treasure revealers give rise to new doctrines and practices, while a leader's vision frequently provides the impetus for the development and implementation of institutions and ideals. And the visions of artists offer tangible forms to religious and philosophical concepts.

The third king of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug, 1928-1972, r. 1952-1972), was a key visionary who redefined the path of his kingdom in many

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A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka

ways, by bringing Bhutan into the UN, abolishing labour taxes, and significantly overhauling the structure of the government. It was also his foresight that established the National Museum of Bhutan ('brug rgyal yongs 'grems ston khang; Figure 1). When the National Museum opened in 1968, only a few personal guests of the royal family and some government officials visited. Today, the number of museum guests surpasses 20,000 annually. Seven floors of galleries showcase Bhutanese visual culture from its earliest phases, and span archaeological finds, paintings, postage stamps, weaponry, bronze ware, traditional crafts, natural history specimens and religious treasures. The article intends to illustrate how iconography can frequently illuminate what lies behind a particular work of art, and as a result can increase our understanding of the time, place and context that gave rise to it. This painting, like so much of Bhutanese art functions in the religious and philosophical realms, and, due to the circumstances of its creation, carries with it strong political overtones as well. Beyond attesting to a lineage, some works illustrate how particular individuals saw themselves, or, how they wanted to be perceived.

This paper presents recent research on one thangka from the museum collection depicting the theme of Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa (zhabs drung phun sum tshogs pa), or 'submitting [oneself] to the one with perfect qualities'. The composition converges around the 17th century religious and political master, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (zhabs drung ngag dbang rnam rgyal, 1594-1651).

Shortly after his birth in Tibet, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was recognized as the incarnation of the great scholar Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po, 1527-1592; Figure 2), who was the fourth Drukchen ('brug chen), or head, of the Drukpa Kagyu ('brug pa bka' bgyud) Buddhist tradition. However, this recognition was contested, and as his situation became increasingly perilous, the Zhabdrung left Tibet in 1616 and headed south. At the time, 'Bhutan' was a series of small

valley-based kingdoms that lacked clearly defined boundaries and had little if any national identity. During the Zhabdrung's subsequent thirty-five year reign, he revolutionized the political history of the nascent nation by systematically establishing administrative fortresses known as dzongs, consolidating constituent valleys into a nation state, introducing the dual system of religious and political rule, and codifying laws. With great effort and foresight, the Zhabdrung was able to succeed in bringing unification to a large portion of the country under a centralized Drukpa Kagyu Buddhist rule.

Given his deep impact on Bhutanese religion, history and governance, the comparative importance of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in Bhutanese history cannot be overstated, and is testified to in part by an abundance of images of the master, crafted in metal, moulded from clay and immortalized in thangkhas. While Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa compositions have been the subject of an initial study, far more remains to be done, as it is one of the most ubiquitous themes in Bhutanese art.¹ It is the intent of this article to reveal the ways in which the National Museum thangka both adheres to and markedly diverges from other published examples of the Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa theme, and to offer analysis of these differences and the possible motivations behind its creation.

¹ Jackson, David. "Brug pa bKa bgyud and Bhutanese Painting: Preliminary Findings in History and Iconography" in *Written Treasures of Bhutan*, 205-231. See also Jackson, "Portraits of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Zhabs drung Ngag dbang nam rgyal) in Bhutanese Painting: Iconography and Common Groupings of the Great Unifier of Bhutan" in *The Dragon's Gift*, 78-87.

The National Museum Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka

Paintings with the Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa theme center on the figure of the Zhabdrung, surrounded by a series of his previous incarnations as well as other Buddhist masters, early Tibetan kings, and divine beings (Figure 3). Works with this theme are made and displayed to generate an auspicious ritual environment in temples or home shrines, a goal that is accomplished through the combined power and charisma of its figures.

In *Written Treasures of Bhutan* and *The Dragon's Gift*, Dr. David Jackson presented initial thoughts on a variety of compositions that emphasize the Zhabdrung, including those of the Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa type, which he translates as “The Perfectly Endowed Abbatial Candidate” and presents the following list of individuals as an enumeration of those figures that constitute a Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa composition:²

1. Lokeshvara (Tib. *ʼjig rten dbang phyug*)

² Jackson, David. “Brug pa bKa brgyud”, 227 and “Portraits”, 81. Jackson states that the list was provided to him by John Ardussi, and “based in part on lists originally compiled by E. Gene Smith.” The list seems to be drawn directly from the biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal authored by the 69th Je Khenpo Gendun Rinchen (*'brug rje mkhan po dge 'dun rin chen*, 1926-1997) entitled *dpal 'brug pa rin po che mthu chen chos kyi rgyal po ngag dbang rnam rgyal gyi rnam thar rgya mtso'i snying po*, which refers to this lineage as “The Incarnations of Avalokiteshvara” (*thugs rje chen po'i sprul pa'i sku 'phreng*), f. 4b. Jackson refers to the lineage as “The Avalokitesvara Incarnations of the ‘Brug pa Tradition” in “Brug pa bKa brgyud”, 226 and “Portraits”, 80.

2. Pundarika (Kulika king of Shambhala) (Tib. pad+ma dkar po)
3. Srongtsan Gampo (srong btsan sgam po; 605/617-649)
4. Shantarakshita (Tib. zhi ba 'tsho; ca. 8th century)
5. Naropa (nA ro pa, 1012/16-1100)
6. Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen, 1079-1153)
7. First Drukchen Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gtsang pa rgya ras ye shes rdo rje, 1161-1211)
8. Second Drukchen Kunga Paljor (kun dga' dpal 'byor, 1428-1476)
9. Third Drukchen Jamyang Chokyi Dragpa ('jam dbyangs chos kyi grags pa, 1478-1523)
10. Fourth Drukchen Kunkhyen Pema Karpo (kun mkhyen pad+ma dkar po, 1527-1592)
11. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (zhabs drung ngag dbang rnam rgyal, 1594-1651)

In his brief treatments of the subject, Jackson highlights that further documentation and comparative study of Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa compositions is necessary, and as such it is the intention of this article to contribute the National Museum example to the body of known works as it diverges from the proffered list in significant and meaningful ways.

The National Museum thankga composition consists of thirteen main figures, identified by number in Figure 4:

A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka

1. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal³
2. Srongtsan Gampo (srong btsan sgam po)
3. Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug)
4. Tsepagme (mgon po tshe dpag me[d])
5. Trisong Detsen (chos rgyal khri srong lde btsan)
6. Shantarakshita (shAn+ti rak+Shi ta)
7. Naropa (dpal ldan nA ro pa)
8. Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (sgam po pa)
9. Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gtsang pa rgya ras)
10. Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po)
11. Jampel Dorje (rje bstun 'jam dpal rdo rje)
12. Jamgon Tsuglag Gyatso (gtsug lag rgya mtsho)
13. Mipham Tsewang Tenzin (mkhas grub tshe dbang bstan 'dzin)

³ These parenthetical transliterations are in accord with the inscriptions found on the painting; if there is no transliteration, there is no inscription present on the work for that particular figure.

Points of iconographic correlation

As this article seeks to emphasize the unique elements of the National Museum thangka composition, there will be only cursory discussion of those figures that appear in both the painting and the published list.

The early Tibetan king Songtsan Gampo (srong btsan sgam po, 605/617-649; Figure 5) is pictured in the far upper left corner of the composition. Songtsen Gampo unified the Tibetan kingdom by forming alliances with neighboring powers Nepal and China by marrying princesses from each region. With the wives came important Buddhist images, which were housed in two temples in Lhasa. King Songtsen Gampo further established Buddhism in Tibet by building a large number of temples throughout the region. The figure opposite Songtsan Gampo, in the far upper right is the great scholar and pandit Santarakshita (zhi ba 'tsho, ca. 8th century; Figure 6). He was abbot of the famous Buddhist university of Nalanda in India, and he also played a key role in establishing Buddhism in Tibet. It was the later Tibetan king Trisong Detsen (khri srong lde btsan, 742-796), who invited Santarakshita to Tibet to establish a monastic community at Samye. As Trisong Detsen is not always encountered in Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa compositions, further discussion of him will take place in the following section.

Under the image of Songtsan Gampo is the Indian master Naropa (na ro pa, 1012/16-1100; Figure 7), whose teachings went on to serve as a source for the Kagyu (bka' brgyud pa) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism when he gave extensive teachings to Marpa Chokyi Lodroe (mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1012-1097; not pictured). When Marpa brought those teachings back to Tibet, he eventually accepted Milarepa (mi la ras pa, 1052-1135; not pictured) as a student and entrusted the transmission to him and other select students. And it was a student of Milarepa by the name of Gampopa

A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka

Sonam Rinchen (sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen, 1079-1153; Figure 8), shown below Santarakshita. Gampopa initially resisted taking on disciples, yet when he finally did in his later years, some of these students would go on to found four distinct traditions of Kagyu practice. For the Drukpa Kagyu, the most important of these four traditions was the Phagmodru (phag mo gru pa), which itself branched off into eight sub-traditions within two generations. Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gtsang pa rgya ras ye shes rdo rje, 1161-1211; Figure 9) was the founder of the Drukpa sub-tradition, and appears below the figure of Naropa. It was through Tsangpa Gyare's effort and initiative that a Drukpa Kagyu presence was introduced in western Bhutan in the 12th century, and ties continued to be cultivated between Drukpa sites in Bhutan and Tibet for centuries thereafter.

Thus in this composition, the individuals included reach back to the earliest strata of Tibetan Buddhist history and illustrate key personalities that were formative in the stepwise development of what eventually became the Drukpa Kagyu tradition. The painting is, however, notable in its omissions of major figures such as Marpa and Milarepa. Yet once we correlate the pre-incarnations of the Zhabdrung as enumerated in his biography (rnam thar) and published in Jackson's list, it is clear to see that these "Avalokiteshvara incarnations" are a discernable presence. Yet this lineage accounts for only five of the twelve subsidiary figures in this thangka, and so it is to the remaining seven that we now turn.

Points of iconographic divergence

The remaining figures in the National Museum composition do not appear in the list, and, in the cases of Ngagi Wangchuk and Pema Karpo, seem to be present in a conflated form:

1. Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug)
2. Trisong Detsen (khri srong lde btsan, 742-796)
3. Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po)
4. Jampel Dorje ('jam dpal rdo rje, b. 1631)
5. Third Pawo Jamgon Tsuglag Gyatso ('jam [m]gon gtsug lag rgya mtsho, 1567/8-1633)
6. Khedrup Tsewang Tenzin (mkhas grub tshe dbang bstan 'dzin, 1574-1643)

Thus, this composition diverges from the list by not including the Shambhala king Pundarika, Second Drukchen Kunga Paljor (kun dga' dpal 'byor, 1428-1476), and Third Drukchen Jamyang Chokyi Dragpa ('jam dbyangs chos kyi grags pa, 1478-1523). Given that Zhabdrung was considered the immediate incarnation of the Fourth Drukchen Pema Karpo, it is noteworthy that the Second and Third Drukchens are so obviously missing.

As will be explored in detail in subsequent sections, there are a number of reasons why such seemingly notable figures are excluded, while others are imported or present in conflated forms. It is my suggestion that if the Fourth Drukchen Pema Karpo is present at all, it is only in a form where he is conflated with a bodhisattva, a phenomena that happens elsewhere in the composition in the figure of Ngagi Wangchuk. Further, I will offer possibilities as to why the configuration and identities of the individuals in this composition intentionally draw upon authorities outside the Drukchen lineage, specifically, members of the ancient Tibetan Gya (rgya) family. Additional figures proclaim and reinforce the multiple sources of authority employed and promulgated by the Zhabdrung during the often-tumultuous

years of the mid-17th century. These next sections will illustrate how the National Museum Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa thangka reveals this markedly different iconographic scheme—one that emphasizes the prominent roles played by certain individuals during the course of the Zhabdrung’s life, and does so by drawing on multiple sources in a comparatively unique and innovative way.

Conflated figures

At first glance, one could identify two figures as candidates as the bodhisattva Lokeshvara, or Chenrezig (spyan ras gzigs) in Choekey, present as either the figure in the top row to the left of Tsepagme, or alternately below Gampopa at center right. Yet additional examination reveals a more complex situation. The figure to the left of Tsepagme is inscribed Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug; Figure 10), a form of the bodhisattva of wisdom Jampelyang (Skt. Manjushri). This particular form of the Jampelyang could be confused with Chenrezig; however, the two armed, lotus-bearing form of Chenrezig (Skt. Padmapani Lokeshvara) would invariably have a small animal skin over his left shoulder, an attribute which is clearly absent in this figure. Close examination of Ngagi Wangchuk reveals his chest muscles are painted as fully round circles, which could lead to his being mistaken for a female deity, most likely Drolkar (sgrol dkar, Skt. Saptalocana Tara). However, in Himalayan art history this convention for the depiction of the male chest is not unknown and does not necessarily indicate that the figure is a female. Further, were this a form of Drolkar, she would most likely have seven eyes present, three on her head, one on each palm and one on each sole of her foot. Her right hand would be in the gesture of giving (Skt. varada mudra), unlike the earth-touching gesture (Skt. bhumisparsha mudra) displayed here. In fact, Ngagi Wangchuk is exactly who the inscription attests him to be—a form of Jampelyang, the bodhisattva of wisdom. And, according to the Zhabdrung’s biography, it was this

specific form that played a significant role in the confirmation of the Zhabdrung as the true incarnation of Pema Karpo.

According to his biography, in 1620 the Zhabdrung was in the process of building the memorial chorten (sku rten) of his father, Yab Tenpai Nyima (yab bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1567-1619; Figure 11).⁴ Zhabdrung was unsure of the exact measurements and dimensions as had been prescribed by Pema Karpo, and thus he summoned a teacher from Tibet to come and confirm. The teacher's name was Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe (yongs 'dzin lha dbang lho gros, b.16th century) and he had been a student of both Pema Karpo and the Zhabdrung's father Yab Tenpai Nyima.⁵ The Yongdzin complied with the Zhabdrung's request, but arrived expressing some doubt over Zhabdrung's claims of being Pema Karpo reincarnate.⁶ In fact, the early in his stay, Yongdzin proposed that in order to end the dispute, Zhabdrung be acknowledged as the body emanation of Pema Karpo, while the Tibetan contender, Pasam Wangpo (dpag bsam dbang po, 1593-1641) would be declared the speech emanation. Zhabdrung refused, saying that he alone was the body, speech and mind incarnation of Pema Karpo. Zhabdrung then went on to request that the Yongdzin remain and assist in constructing Yab Tenpai Nyima's memorial chorten.

⁴ Dzongkha version related in Dorje, 166-175; English translation Kinga, 99-102

⁵ Lhawang Lodroe (*lha dbang blo gros*) is mentioned as a "very old lama" being in frequent company of the Zhabdrung in the Jesuit priest Father Estevão Cacella's report on their travels through the region on their way to Tibet. See translation in Aris, *Sources of Bhutan*, 173.

⁶ See Dorji, 99-105 for a detailed account of Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe's time with the Zhabdrung.

Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe agreed to stay and help erect the chorten of his former teacher. Later in his stay, the Yongdzin was performing a weeklong ritual dedicated to Jamkar, the form of white Jampelyang illustrated in the National Museum thangka. This manifestation is distinctive due to the display of bhumisparsha mudra with his right hand, rather than the more expected varada mudra gesture of giving generally seen in forms of white Jampelyang, and is further notable in that it lacks Jampelyang's common (but not universal) attributes of a sword and book.

In the midst of his meditation on Jampelyang, the Yongdzin suddenly experienced a vision of his other main teacher Pema Karpo, who offered Yongdzin a book on astrology based on the Dukyi Khorlo (dus kyi 'khor lo; Skt. Kalachakra) system. This offering left the Yongdzin a bit perplexed until the next morning, when the Zhabdrung appeared with an unexpected request: for Yongdzin to compose a text based on the Dukyi Khorlo. At that moment, the Yongdzin ceased to doubt the Zhabdrung was the true incarnation of Pema Karpo, and publically confirmed him as such. Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe went on to formulate the Kalachakra-based system that forms the core of the Bhutanese calendar, and he also conferred upon Zhabdrung the few remaining Pema Karpo-related initiations and teachings he had not yet received.

Thus, as it was while the Yongdzin was practicing this particular form of Jampelyang when Pema Karpo appeared to him and offered forth the Dukyi Khorlo text, I suggest that the inclusion of this distinctive and less-common form of Jampelyang is a deliberate reference to that specific moment in the Zhabdrung's life—the moment that enabled Yongdzin, a qualified Tibetan master, to recognize the Zhabdrung for who he claimed himself to be, namely the rebirth of Pema Karpo. The name employed in the inscription, Ngagi Wangchuk, acquires another layer of significance when we note the moniker was shared with a highly important human master. And the human Ngagi Wangchuk (ngag gi dbang phyug grags

pa rgyal mtshan, 1517-1554) was yet another main teacher of Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe as well as of Pema Karpo.

Keeping these connections between master and student in mind, our examination of the composition can now turn to the other bodhisattva style figure located at middle right. Shown with a similar crown, color, countenance, and attributes as Ngagi Wangchuk above, this figure is inscribed Pema Karpo (pad+ma dkar po; Figure 12) or White Lotus, a common epithet of Lokeshvara. Yet, as noted above, if this was the form of Padmapani Lokeshvara outright, there would almost invariably be an antelope skin over his left shoulder. It is my suggestion that this figure in fact references the *historical* Pema Karpo, the fourth Drukchen and pre-incarnation of the Zhabdrung, shown in the guise of a bodhisattva much as his master is conflated with Jampelyang above.

Further evidence in support of these connotations is seen in the placement of the figures themselves. Full bodhisattvas would never be placed below human masters as in this case, Pema Karpo appearing underneath Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (Figure 13). When a composition focuses on a human master, bodhisattvas and other deities are shown at the top of the composition, as are Ngagi Wangchuk and Tsepagme (Skt. Amitayus), the Buddha of Long Life. In general, these highly realized beings are placed along the top of the composition, a hierarchal position befitting their comparatively advanced levels of attainment. In other types of compositions, bodhisattvas are found outside the top registers and surround the main figure as a set of bodhisattvas. In that arrangement, those bodhisattvas would be shown in groups of four, eight, ten or sixteen of them gathered around the main figure—clearly not the case here. Alternately, a pair of bodhisattvas could flank the main figure as attendants, yet that is the only case when the main figure is a Buddha; bodhisattvas would not appear as attendant figures to a human master. And, whenever they are shown as primary

attendants to a central Buddha, the bodhisattvas are most frequently in a standing, not seated.

Given that “Ngagi Wangchuk” can refer to both the specific form of Jampelyang directly related to the Yongdzin’s recognition of the Zhabdrung’s legitimacy and to the human Ngagi Wangchuk, teacher of the Yongdzin, and that the lower inscription Pema Karpo (deliberately chosen over the far more frequently-encountered moniker Chenrezig) references the previous life of the Zhabdrung, I postulate that these epithets were selected with the intention of conflating these human masters with particular bodhisattvas. Buddhist texts are rife with the use of epithets, where masters are frequently given epithets of deities as expressions of their divine qualities. In texts, such confluations are not at all a new idea. I suggest this thangka is operating in a similar way, following the pattern of conflating the qualities of deities with incarnate or accomplished masters that is so frequently encountered in Buddhist texts. In the National Museum composition, this convention of conflation is instead presented primarily in an artistic, visual form, and is supported by precise inscriptional choices. Thus, when we observe a thangka and encounter ‘common’ bodhisattvas and other deities, they should not be so quickly dismissed as ‘just another Chenrezig’, and special attention should be paid to the specific epithet being employed lest we overlook the full significance and meaning of their presence in the composition.

Connections to the Gya (rgya) lineage

As mentioned above, in the National Museum thangka the notable absence of the Second and Third Drukchens is supplanted by the remarkable presence of members of the

ancestral Gya (rgya) lineage.⁷ From the Drukpa Kagyu perspective, the Gya extend back to Lhaga (lha dga') and Luga (klu dga'), two individuals responsible for accompanying the Lhasa Jowo statue to Tibet in the 7th century. Members of the Gya have played significant roles throughout early Tibetan history, with periods of waxing and waning power.⁸ Branches of the Gya also provided a multitude of incumbent throne holders to Nening (gnas rnying) and Ralung, further embedding itself in the religio-political history of Tibet.

The Drukpa Kagyu founder Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje was a holder of the Gya lineage, and would endure as the key figure to which all subsequent Drukpas traced their own Gya histories. Though he died in 1211, Tsangpa Gyare did not reincarnate until 1428, when Kunga Peljor (kun dga' dpal 'byor, 1428-1476) deemed to be his incarnation and assumed the title of Second Drukchen. Only two years elapsed between the demise of Kunga Peljor and the arrival of the Third Drukchen, Jamyang Chodrak (jam dbyangs chos grags, 1478-1523), and only four years between his death and the birth of the Fourth Drukchen, Pema Karpo (1527-1592). Each Drukchen was essentially part of the Gya lineage by dint of being direct incarnations of Tsangpa Gyare, yet none of them appears in human form in the National Museum thangka. By keeping in mind that the Zhabdrung was not universally accepted as the incarnation of Pema Karpo and thus as the Fifth Drukchen, this composition can be easily reconciled through a brief study of the interrelatedness of Gya physical and incarnation lineages.

⁷ See Ardussi, "Rgya [Gya] Family and Reincarnation Lineages of Ralung Monastery (Tibet) and Bhutan" in *Dragon's Gift*, 373-375, for an extensive ancestral chart which compiles information from a wide range of historical sources.

⁸ See Vitali, "Glimpses of the History of the rGya Clan with Reference to Nyang Stod, lHo Mon and Nearby Lands (7th-13th Centuries)" for a fuller treatment of the activities and legacy of the rgya.

The alternate candidate for the Fifth Drukchen was Pasam Wangpo (dpag bsam dbang po, 1592-1641), born to the Chonje Depa (‘phyong rgyas sde pa) Ngawang Sonam Dragpa (ngag dbang bsod nams grags pa) from an affair he had had with a maid.⁹ The Chonje Depa petitioned for his son to be recognized by the Tsang Desi (gtsang sde srid) at the same time that the Zhabdrung was residing at Ralung, having secured numerous acknowledgements of his recognition as Pema Karpo reincarnate. Mipham Chogyal (mi pham chos rgyal, 1543-1604) was at that time the seventeenth hierarch of Ralung, yet despite his best efforts the two contesting parties would neither reconcile nor acquiesce. At this point in history, central Tibet was embroiled in an enormous amount of political turmoil.¹⁰ In short, tensions and struggles for power between the Gelugpa (dge lugs pa) and Karma Kagyu (kar+ma bka’ bryud), coupled with the arrival of the Mongols had resulted in an incredibly unstable and opportunistic climate in central Tibet and its environs. Despite significant efforts both above board and otherwise, once the Tsang Desi supported Pasam Wangpo as the incarnation of Pema Karpo, in order to safeguard his life, the Zhabdrung had to heed a vision of Mahakala, which had been urging him southward to Bhutan, where a long-standing network of patrons awaited.

⁹ Dorji, 60.

¹⁰ A full treatment of this period of Tibetan history lies outside the scope of this paper. For further reading, see articles by Samten G. Karmay “The Fifth Dalai Lama and His Reunification of Tibet” (p. 65-80), and Elliot Sperling “Tibet’s Foreign Relations during the Epoch of the Fifth Dalai Lama” (p.119-132) in *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century: The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*, ed. Françoise Pommaret. Brill Tibetan Studies Library, Vol. 3. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003; *The History of Tibet*, ed. Alex McKay, Vol. 2, ed. London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. A thorough Bhutanese historical account of this period is offered in Pema Tsewang (pad+ ma tshe dbang), *brug gi rgyal rabs*, Thimphu: KMT Press, 2008 (reprint), p. 202-316. See also Aris, *Bhutan*, 212-232.

Thus, in this composition, it can be noted that essentially the interceding Drukchens between the Zhabdrung and Tsangpa Gyare have been cut out. Pema Karpo, arguably one of the most important scholars of his era in any tradition is not even shown in human form, as we discussed above. Instead, his representation as bodhisattva is echoed by—and subservient to, due to his lower placement in the composition—that of his teacher Ngagi Wangchuk. Also Ngagi Wangchuk, himself the sixteenth Ralung heirarch, was Gya, born to the fifteenth Ralung heirarch Ngawang Chogyal (ngag dbang chos rgyal, 1465-1540), the son of Lhayi Wangpo (lha'i dbang po, b. 15th century) and brother of Second Drukchen Kunga Paljor. In short, Ngagi Wangchuk was the Second Drukchen's great uncle. Ngagi Wangchuk fathered the above-mentioned seventeenth hierarch of Ralung, Mipham Chogyal, who in turn fathered Mipham Tenpai Nyima (mi pham bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1567-1619), previously mentioned as Yab Tenpai Nyima, father of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

So whereas Pema Karpo could only claim incarnation as his link to Tsangpa Gyare, the Zhabdrung also held a traceable physical lineage, extending back to Nangtsan (nang btsan), who was related by blood to Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje. I believe that this is why Pema Karpo is not fully shown as a human being, because when shown as a bodhisattva, his humanity is essentially stripped from the figure, and it was that human birth (and death) which caused such disruption for the Zhabdrung. Despite his monumental achievements as a scholar and Buddhist master, Pema Karpo is shown here without human attributes, represented as a bodhisattva subservient to his teacher-as-bodhisattva Ngagi Wangchuk, who was the great-grandfather of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Rival contender Pagsam Wangpo, on the other hand, could only draw on Drukchen lineage for authority, whereas Zhabdrung's blood link to Tsangpa Gyare left him free to emphasize this physical lineage and thus emphasize his status as the true incarnation of Pema Karpo. In this way, the thangka retains the authority of Pema Karpo while

downplaying the significance of the preceding Drukchens, and concurrently placing Pema Karpo in a subordinate position to one of his masters, Ngagi Wangchuk.

Further, when looking closely at the composition, we note that the figure of Pema Karpo mirrors that of Tsangpa Gyare, with the Zhabdrung directly between them (Figure 14). It could be reasonable to read this portion as deliberately juxtaposing these masters on either side of the Zhabdrung, who at that time was the embodiment of the Gya physical lineage and the religious legacy that they represented.

Divergent historical figures

Additional insight as to the motivations behind the National Museum painting and the messages it sought to communicate can be discerned in the remaining figures.

In addition to establishing Samye and with it the first organized monastic presence in his kingdom, the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen also convened a historic religious council (Figure 15). At the meeting, a debate contest was held between Chinese and Indian Buddhists, who were competing for favor and patronage in the region. Indian Buddhism ultimately prevailed and became the preferred doctrine in the kingdom, and thus strongly aligned the Tibetan empire with Indian Buddhist methodology and practice. And more importantly to the Zhabdrung, Trisong Detsen had a relationship with the Gya family. According to Vitali, it was Trisong Detsen who awarded significant lands to the Gya clan through an imperial decree.¹¹ Before the second diffusion of Buddhism (*bstan pa phyi dar*), the Gya effectively controlled by the area encompassing modern western Bhutan, and in fact it was a member of the Gya family Gya Tsonseng (*rgya*

¹¹ Vitali, 9.

brtson seng) that led the delegation to India that invited Atisha to Tibet.¹² Thus, it could be argued that were it not for the Gya family, the re-establishment of Buddhism in Tibet could have followed a drastically different path.

Perhaps there is an additional rationale behind Trisong Detsen's inclusion in this thangka, for during the Zhabdrung's reign in Bhutan, he was able to accomplish somewhat analogous feats, all thanks to the long ago acts of Trisong Detsen. When Zhabdrung arrived in Bhutan in 1616, there were a number of Buddhist traditions already present in the region, however, as the Zhabdrung consolidated power, he was able to selectively establish one, the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, as predominant, especially in the western and central parts of the country. By building dzongs throughout his domain, he visually proclaimed his control of that particular area under the Drukpa banner, and further implemented a system of laws and governance to create structure from disorder. The dzongs were eventually filled with government officials as well as a monastic presence whose job it was to oversee the ritual needs of the nation and of the populace. Perhaps the Zhabdrung considered his accomplishments in creating an organized and consolidated empire as comparative to and a logical outgrowth of similar developments Trisong Detsen overseen in Tibet centuries before.

The three figures at the bottom of the thangka offer much information as to the time and place this work was created, and the intentions behind it. At bottom left is Jetsun Jampel Dorje (rje btsun 'jam dpal rdo rje, b.1631-1680/1; Figure 16), the biological son of Zhabdrung. Jampel Dorje was recognized as the reincarnation of Yab Tenpai Nyima—his own grandfather. His inclusion here represents the continuation of the physical lineage of the Zhabdrung, and the combined

¹² Vitali, 10.

hopes for this family line, and by extension the newly established status quo, to continue.

After conducting an informal and brief survey, Jampel Dorje does not seem to be frequently encountered in art or murals in Bhutan, aside from a brief period in the late 17th-early 18th centuries, at which point artistic evidence reveals a shift towards an emphasis on the Sungtrul (gsung sprul; speech incarnation) and Thugtrul (thugs sprul; mind incarnation) lineages of the Zhabdrung. This shift seems to coincide with the realization that Jampel Dorje was deemed incapable of assuming power. It seems that he lacked sufficient health and capacity to do so, and went on to live a fairly unremarkable life until the age of fifty, when he passed away without having produced a viable heir.¹³ It seems possible that Jampel Dorje's inclusion here indicate that the work may have been created during his lifetime; specifically, after he had reached a sufficient majority age yet before he was deemed unfit to rule. In other words, the piece may have been painted sometime near Zhabdrung's death in 1651 when his son was about twenty years old, and when the continuation of the Zhabdrung's physical lineage—the preferred lineage—was still likely.

At bottom center is Jamgon Tsuglag Gyatso (‘jam gon byams mgon gtsug lag rgya mtsho, 1567/8-1633; Figure 17), the Third Pawo. His inclusion here would at first seem to be

¹³ Jampel Dorje was born in Simtokha to the Zhabdrung's second consort, Goekar Drolma (gos dkar sgröl ma, 1606-1684), and it was Yongdzin Lhawang Lodroe who recognized the boy as the incarnation of Yab Tenpai Nyima (Dargye, 137). Well after the death of the Zhabdrung, Jampel Dorje did marry a daughter of ngor zhabs drung klu sdings pa, and their union produced a daughter named Tshokyi Dorje (mtsho skyes rdo rje) in 1680; however, there were no subsequent male descendants to continue the physical lineage. See Dargye, 174; Aris, *Bhutan*, 245, 252-253.

remarkable, as the Third Pawo Tsuglag Gyatso plays a strongly adversarial role in a contentious scene from the Zhabdrung's biography, which we will turn to shortly. First, it is worth exploring the multiple connections between the Third Pawo's previous incarnation—the Second Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa (gtsug lag 'phreng ba, 1504-1564/6).

After the passing of the Eighth Karmapa Mikyo Dorje (mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507-1554), the Second Pawo was the de facto leader of the Karma Kagyu tradition while his student the Fifth Zhamar (dkon mchog yan lag, 1525-1583) was seeking the Ninth Karmapa. The Second Pawo stayed in this role until the Ninth Karmapa was enthroned circa 1562 at the age of six. Textual accounts state that the Second Pawo felt a spiritual connection with the aforementioned Ngawang Chogyal (ngag dbang chos rgyal, 1465-1550), the fifteenth throne holder of Ralung, teacher of Pema Karpo and great-grandfather of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

For his own part, the Third Pawo Tsuglag Gyatso spent his youth and early career under the tutelage of the Ninth Karmapa, and grew up to teach the Tenth Karmapa Choying Dorje (chos dbyings rdo rje, 1604-1674), as well as the Peling Sungtrul (pad gling gsung sprul) Tsultrim Dorje (tshul khirms rdo rje, 1598-1669) and Thinley Lhundrup ('phrin las lhun grub, 1611-1662), the father of famed treasure revealer and founder of Mindroling monastery Terdak Lingpa (gter bdag gling pa 'gyur med rdo rje, 1646-1714). Having students of such a high caliber cemented the Pawo as a person of importance for the Karma Kagyu and Nyingma terma traditions. However, his prestige did not mean that he or his lineage was immune to the political tumult that was engulfing Tibet at the time, yet it was one episode between the Third Pawo and the Zhabdrung at a river crossing that forever

transformed the Zhabdrung's future, paraphrased here from Sonam Kinga's translation of Dasho Sangye Dorji.¹⁴

Once the Zhabdrung was leaving Tsangrong after receiving offerings of millet, headed for the Tsangpo River ferry at Tagdru. On arrival, the Zhabdrung approached the ferry and began to board. Suddenly, some attendants of the Third Pawo Tsuglag Gyatso appeared, and reached out to restrain the Zhabdrung so that the Third Pawo and his entourage could board the ferry instead. Zhabdrung was furious, but was forced from the boat nonetheless. His own followers drew their swords and began fighting the Pawo's followers, killing two of them outright. The ferryboat capsized and caused further loss of life. At that point, the Zhabdrung sent his own followers into the water to rescue the floundering would-be passengers. As the Zhabdrung sought crossing elsewhere, he encountered guards of the Tsang Desi who were attacking a woman in the village of Rong Tsathang. The Zhabdrung's followers beat up the guards and rescued the woman, but the Tsang Desi, who was a staunch supporter of the Karma Kagyu and thus favored the Third Pawo, saw all the Zhabdrung's actions from that day as egregious offenses.

It was the riverside altercation with the Third Pawo that instigated the Tsang Desi to take action, as he had already felt slighted that his candidate for Fifth Drukchen, Pasam Wangpo, had not been recognized. The Tsang Desi wrote increasingly threatening letters to the Zhabdrung, who replied with his own provocative language. Before matters could come to a head, the Zhabdrung experienced a prophetic vision from the deity Gonpo (mgon po; Skt. Mahakala) to leave Tibet, which after some consideration, the Zhabdrung heeded.

¹⁴ Kinga, 34-35

On the surface it may seem incongruous that one of the Zhabdrung's main foes is given such a place of prominence in the National Museum thangka. Yet I suggest the Third Pawo's inclusion is in fact commemorating his role in the events that led the Zhabdrung to leave Tibet and establish an empire in Bhutan. Were it not for the effects precipitated by their disastrous (and murderous) riverside encounter, the Zhabdrung may have felt the same compulsion to heed the requests of Gonpo to head south. Further, the placement of the Third Pawo is in itself telling, he is directly below the Zhabdrung, literally at his feet; perhaps we could say the Third Pawo is himself clearly demonstrating the definition of the title Zhabdrung, 'submitting oneself at the feet of [the master]'.¹⁵

In the lower right corner is a figure inscribed Khedrup Tsewang Tenzin (mkhas grub tshe dbang bstan 'dzin, 1574-1643; Figure 18). This is Mipham Tsewang Tenzin, who was the grandson of the beloved Buddhist saint Drukpa Kunley ('brug pa kun legs, 1455-1529), who was famed for frequently employing bawdy language and subversive actions to lead other beings toward realization and enlightenment.¹⁵ Mipham, as well as his father Ngawang Tenzin (ngag dbang bstan 'dzin, b. 1590) and grandfather Drukpa Kunley were also all members of a collateral branch of the Gya family. Whereas the Zhabdrung and his family descended from Sherab Sengge (shes rab seng+ge, 1371-1391/2), Drukpa Kunley and his line originated from Sherab Sengge's brother Yeshe Rinchen (ye shes rin chen, 1364-1413).

Mipham Tshewang Tenzin had received his monastic vows at Ralung at age seventeen from Mipham Chogyal—the grandfather of the Zhabdrung. When Zhabdrung arrived in

¹⁵ Tradition maintains that during the eighth rabjung, Drukpa Kunley came to Tango and prayed that his lineage would come to control the site in the future. See Kuenleg, 6.

Bhutan in 1616 without a place to stay long-term, Mipham Tshewang Tenzin offered the Zhabdrung the Tango (rta mgo) temple near Thimphu.¹⁶ Tango was one of the first sites of Drukpa Kagyu Buddhism in Bhutan, founded when the 12th century master Phajo Drugom Zhigpo (pha jo 'brug sgom zhig po, 1184-1251; Figure 19) experienced a vision of his tutelary deity Tamdrin (rta mgrin, Skt. Hayagriva), in the nearby cliff face.¹⁷ Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje had dispatched Phajo as one of many Drukpa 'ambassadors' sent southward in the hopes of establishing a network of patrons for the nascent doctrine in new territory, an endeavor in which Phajo was more than successful.

Mipham Tsewang Tenzin is in fact considered a reincarnation of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo. Further, Mipham was the revealer, or tertön (gter ston) of Phajo's biography.¹⁸ Mipham's revelation of this document proved timely for the Zhabdrung, offering him a way of accounting for the long-standing patterns of patronage that had linked Drukpa Kagyu communities in Tibet and Bhutan since the 12th century. In the intervening centuries between the arrivals of Phajo, and later the Zhabdrung, an extensive network of Drukpa Kagyu patronage had been cultivated and maintained throughout

¹⁶ Dargye, 129. See also Kuenleg, "A Brief History of Tango Monastery".

¹⁷ Dargye, 129. The Zhabdrung undertook retreat there in 1618 in order to perform black magic rites against the Tsang Desi (gtsang sde srid) for the throne at Ralung (rwa lung). This ritual activity and its intended target could indicate that at this time, the Zhabdrung may have hoped to eventually return to Tibet and reassume control of Ralung.

¹⁸ In one source, the discovery was attributed to his father, ngag dbang bstan 'dzin (1520-1590). (See pad+ma tshe dbang, *'Brug gi rgyal rabs*, 619.) Yet as pointed out by Dargye and Sorensen (xii, note 20), Michael Aris presents a strong argument that mi pham tshe dbang bstan 'dzin was the revealer of said biography. (*Bhutan*, 170, 319). See also Ardussi, "House of 'Ob-mtsho", 23 fn. 28.

western Bhutan through a near-continuous exchange of Drukpa teachers, students, and patrons. This network and the patrons who sustained it offered the Zhabdrung necessary support upon his arrival, and Mipham's through the discovery and (re) introduction of the terma assisted in attesting to the centuries of Drukpa links in the region, thereby substantiating the necessity and propriety of a modern Drukpa's presence in the region while simultaneously connecting Zhabdrung to Phajo. For such a document to be discovered and disseminated to the populace would help provide additional legitimacy for the Zhabdrung, connecting him to the earliest Drukpa Kagyu master to create a lasting legacy in Bhutan, and also to Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje.

Further, according to Bhutanese tradition, Mipham Tsewang Tenzin shared a consort with Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.¹⁹ Her name was Damcho Tenzin (dam chos bstan 'dzin), who a descendant of Phajo via the Changangkha lineage established by his son Nyima. Zhabdrung had been unable to produce and heir with Damcho Tenzin, and so he gifted her to Mipam and himself went on to start a relationship with Goekar Drolma, the mother of Jampel Dorje. The relationship between Mipham and Damcho Tenzin further strengthened his affiliation with Phajo.²⁰ The significance of their relationship took on a greater meaning when Mipham Tsewang Tenzin fathered Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1798) with Damcho Tenzin.²¹ From the moment of his birth, Tenzin Rabgye was expected to take over for the Zhabdrung. Jampel

¹⁹ See Stein *Vie et Chants*. Also see Namgyal, 94.

²⁰ See Stein *Vie et Chants* and Namgyal, 94 and Aris, *Bhutan*, 170. The Changangkha lineage originated with Phajo's son Nyima, who founded a temple of the same name in Thimphu.

²¹ For brief studies on the wide-ranging impact of Tenzin Rabgye in Bhutanese history and culture, see Ardussi, "Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1696), Artist Ruler of 17th Century Bhutan" and "Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye and the Founding of Taktsang Lhakhang".

Dorje had already been discovered to be incompetent to succeed his father, and thus Tenzin Rabgye, who would eventually become the Fourth Druk Desi, was the next best option.

Thus Mipham Tsewang Tenzin played a number of roles: first, he was the grandson of Drukpa Kunley, an important Buddhist master who had cultivated ties in Bhutan; second, he was the revealer of Phajo's namthar, which served to authenticate the pre-Zhabdrung Drukpa Kagyu presence in the region; third, Mipham received his monastic vows from Zhabdrung's grandfather; fourth, the connection between him and the Zhabdrung was compounded by the sharing of a consort from the Phajo lineage; fifth, it was Mipham who offered Tango as a home base for Zhabdrung upon his arrival in the area, and sixth, Mipham and his family were blood descendants of the Gya lineage.²²

Conclusions

While the Zhabdrung was arguably first and foremost a Buddhist master, given circumstances at the time, he had to concurrently establish national governance and security, and become adept in the political concerns of cultivating a nascent nation. In his article "Formation of the Bhutanese State", John Ardussi points out that the Tsang Khenchen-authored biography of the Zhabdrung was intended "to justify his subject's state-building mission and political position with respect to Tibet. The archetypes of legitimate governance from which [Tsang Khenchen] drew were those that were accepted more or less implicitly by the Tibetan intelligentsia, namely Buddhist canonical and *gter-ma* precedents embedded within

received scripture [and] the hallowed kings of the Tibetan monarchy...”²³

As Ardussi points out, Tsang Khenchen’s biography of the Zhabdrung—a text which was likely written at roughly the same time this thangka was painted—offers a model of the personalities and histories invoked in order to present the legitimacy of an individual and his rule. And, I feel, why would such mechanisms be limited to texts alone? During this crucial period of nation-building, this particular Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa thangka composition seems to echo the model offered in Tsang Khenchen’s biography of Zhabdrung—drawing upon early Tibetan kings, Indian religious masters and the key founders of Drukpa-related traditions, yet in this painting those individuals are presented in juxtaposition with a number of personalities who were active and necessary during Zhabdrung’s life, and who offered him legitimacy and support, and further, hopes of the continuation of his branch of the Gya lineage.

I suggest that this thangka is working through the same mechanisms used in Tsang Khenchen’s biography and other texts—as using a series of important figures throughout history to solidify himself as the rightful ruler of Bhutan, and further, recalling textual precedents through the use of inscriptional epithets that trigger recollection of other masters, conflating them with bodhisattvas, and thus equating their worldly actions to the actions of enlightened beings, just as texts do when invoking the various titles and names assigned to significant individuals. I also feel that there is clear evidence for heavy reliance on Gya lineage holders in the composition, deliberately stepping away from sole dependence on the Drukchen incarnation lineage, and that these choices are meant as visual evidence for the supremacy of the Zhabdrung’s combined physical and

²³ Ardussi, “Formation”, 16

A Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa Thangka

spiritual links to Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje, the founder of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition. These choices would also present the Zhabdrung as the only right and logical choice to lead, given these complex lineal and spiritual relationships, an aim congruent with the early years of the Zhabdrung's empire in Bhutan. I believe that this thangka could date to the period between the maturity of Jampel Dorje yet before he was deemed incompetent, made in those late 17th century years when it was still the hope that the physical heir of the Zhabdrung would be able to assume power, and perhaps even when the Zhabdrung's death was being kept secret while a legitimate heir was being sought.

When this thangka is considered against the list proffered by David Jackson, it seems there can be some elaboration upon the nascent definition of those individuals that can constitute a Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa composition. The divergent figures who appear serve to illustrate the physical lineage of Zhabdrung, what his family and spiritual pedigree proclaims about him, the righteousness of his rule and the circumstances that gave rise to it. Thus, in this single work we see multiple strands weaving together—Indian Buddhist masters, early Tibetan kings, and key founders of the Kagyu and Drukpa Kagyu traditions, yet these are compounded by and juxtaposed with comparatively unexpected individuals, interlacing physical and spiritual lineages, yet all of whom in their own way culminate in the central, dominant form of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Enlightened beings conflated with masters, enlightened kings that changed the course of their nations, and enlightened artists who have presented these complex relationships in an elegant and effective way.

This single piece from the National Museum was shared in the hopes of illustrating how the careful examination of art and iconography can bring a painting to life, illuminating the ways in which identities can be constructed or exposed, and reveal how history can be communicated—and sometimes, how history can be made. It is only through informed and

careful examination that we can begin to help uncover the rationale behind these important and meaningful works.

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Photographs



Figure 1: National Museum of Bhutan, Paro. Photo: Ariana Maki



Figure 2: Padma Karpo (1527-1592), 19th century, Ground mineral pigment on cotton, H: 160 x W: 91.5 cm., Collection of Rubin Museum of Art, C2006.2.6 (HAR 65622).
Reproduced with permission of the Rubin Museum of Art.



Figure 3: Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa, late 17th century,
Ground mineral pigment on cotton, H: 123 x W: 69 cm.,
Collection of the National Museum of Bhutan, Paro.



Figure 4: Greyscale image of Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa with numbered figures.



Figure 5: Detail, Songtsen Gampo, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 6: Detail, Santarakshita and Trisong Detsen, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 7: Detail, Naropa, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 8: Detail, Gampopa, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 9: Detail, Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 10: Detail, Ngagi Wangchuk, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 11: Yab Tenpai Nyima, ca. 18th century, Metal alloy with pigment, H: 18 cm W: 12 cm., Collection of the National Museum of Bhutan, Paro.



Figure 12: Detail, Pema Karpo, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 13: Detail, Pema Karpo and Gampopa, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 14: Detail, central section, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 15: Detail, Trisong Detsen, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 16: Detail, Jampel Dorje, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 17: Detail, Third Pawa Tsuglag Gyatso, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 18: Detail, Mipham Tshewang Tenzin, Zhabdrung Phunsum Tshogpa.



Figure 19: Phajo Drugom Zhigpo. Photo: Ariana Maki.