

## Bhutaneity in the Tibetan cultural context

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Study Bhutan for herself and independently from Tibet is rather recent phenomena.

It has long been an undeniable fact that Bhutanese studies have been conducted as an integral part of Tibetan culture especially in religious, philological and linguistic areas. Nevertheless with the increase of direct contacts and knowledges of Bhutan since the establishment of the 'Brug pa theocracy in the mid-seventeenth century, then that of the Wangchuck monarchy in 1907, and especially the recent opening of Bhutan for tourists in 1970s during the reign of the IIIrd King Jigme Wangchuck, we came to know that Bhutan has developed and established her own identity quite distinct from other parts of Tibetan culture, including Tibet itself. It is particularly evident in the field of the political system and spoken language. In the case of Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, although it derives from Chos skad, it is a quite different language which can not be understood by the sole knowledge of Tibetan. It therefore is proper to consider Dzongkha not as a dialect of Tibetan but as an independent language within the Tibetan language group. This is only an example and there are many more distinctly Bhutanese cultural identities.

As a result it nowadays is known that Bhutan is an independent country with its own distinct culture and identity. This is mainly due to a rather recent accessibility of Bhutan for foreign researchers and because researchs *in situ* by both Bhutanese and foreign researchers became possible in certain fields. Recent years have thus witnessed an incredible increase of studies on Bhutan and the creation of the International Society for Bhutan Studies (ISBS) is a natural, timely, welcome and justified one.

While in the majority of fields of the written language (*chos skad*) which is common to both Tibetan and Bhutanese, a certain number of differences exist between them although the majority of the people and even scholars are not aware of. As Tibetan and Bhutanese *chos skad* are abundant and are increasing, they have to be noticed carefully in order to avoid serious misunderstandings. It is particularly so in the case of calendars. In fact two calendars are concurrently used in Bhutan. The first one is the Tibetan Khu nu calendar, called *lo tho* (annual almanac) which is most authoritative and widely followed in the whole Tibetan cultural area including Bhutan itself. The second one is the properly Bhutanese one, called *zla tho* (monthly almanac), in order to distinguish it from the Tibetan *lo tho*. It is equally edited and distributed by the Bhutanese Central Monastic Body (Gzhung grva thang) and used mainly for national official functions and followed by a part of Bhutanese.

In the Tibetan calendar, a year starts normally with the first month (*zla ba dang po*) and ends with the twelfth month (*zla ba bcu gnyis pa*). Each year has a different *lo khams* which is one of the sexagenarian year names determined by the combination of three sets of different elements: the first one is the five elements namely: wood, fire, earth, iron and water, the second one is two elements: male and female, and the last one is the twelve animals namely: sheep, monkey, hen, dog, boar, rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, serpent and horse. As an example a year is named “earth-male-sheep (*sap-pho-lug*)” and remains the same throughout the year from the first month through the twelfth month.

As for the for Bhutanese calendar, the system of the sexagenary animals remains the same. However, the situation is rather complicated because there are in practice two ways to start the new year and there is no official written notification or consensus about this. The official one is identical with the Tibetan one and starts with the first month and ends with the twelfth month. However the popular tradition which prevails seems to start a new year not with the first month of the calendar, but with the eleventh month. What complicates more is the fact that the *lo khams* changes at the new year, that is to say with the eleventh month. As a result, the first two Bhutanese months of the year: the eleventh and the twelfth do not belong to the *lo khams* of the preceding ten months of the year but belong to the following new *lo khams*: To give an example, an “fire-female-sheep” (of *lo khams* year) ends with the tenth month and the following eleventh month is no more of “fire-female-sheep” *lo-khams*, but of “earth-male-monkey” *lo-khams* which follows in the sexagenarian system. Therefore after the tenth month of the “fire-female-sheep” year, the eleventh month which follows immediately afterwards is of “earth-male-monkey” *lo khams*.

As a result when the eleventh and twelfth months are mentioned in Bhutanese *Chos skad* calendar or in Bhutanese authors’ writings, it is imperative to know which system to start the year is followed in order to determine the corresponding Gregorian year. Unluckily it is extremely rare that this information is given and it indeed is a most serious philologico-historical problem.

In order to illustrate this, I am going to give an example. Everyone knows that December 17 is the National Day of Bhutan commemorating the election of Sir Ugyen Wangchuck as the first elected hereditary monarch in 1907. The date is precisely recorded so by the British envoy Claude White who attended at the ceremony. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of this date. Thus since its publication in English which is the world’s most widely used and understood language, the year 1907 became unanimously accepted without no hesitation.

However the Chos-skad sealed oath of allegiance which is the genuine Bhutanese original document of the event is equally published widely, but it is only seen visually but hardly read. Or, this official record clearly states that the event took place on the 13th day, 11th month, earth-male-monkey (*sa-pho-sprel*) year of the 15th *rabjung* cycle. According to the Tibetan and Gregorian calendar conversion table which is established by Dr. D. Schuh, the earth-male-monkey year in question started on 3rd March 1908 and ended on 20 February 1909. If the Chos skad calendar used was the Tibetan Khu nu one, it is impossible that the date corresponds to 17 December 1907. It can only be a year later in 1908.

We therefore are in front of a discrepancy of one year between the two official documents: British document written in English and Bhutanese record written in Chos skad. As it is hardly impossible to imagine that there was a mistake in neither of the official documents, we therefore have a difficult problem of reconciling the two years 1907 or 1908. In my knowledge, the problem has never been noticed, studied and elucidated notwithstanding the importance of the issue.

For a research fellow like myself of purely Tibetological formation, this has been a great enigma for a long time during the first years of my Bhutanese stay which started in 1981. However with gradual acquaintance with Bhutanese popular and official customs, I came to notice that a popular, but not official, Bhutanese new year starts with the eleventh month (*zla ba 11 pa*) and not with the first month (*zla ba dang po*) of the Tibetan official calendar. Furthermore, for the Bhutanese popular calendar, the *lo khams* changes at the same time with the eleventh month. All these elements mean that the tenth month ends with a *lo-khams* and the eleventh month starts with the following *lo-khams*.

As we have seen earlier, if the Chos skad official document was written according to the Tibetan Khu nu calendar, the 13th day, 11th month, the “earth-male-monkey” year (*sa-pho-sprel*) of the 15th *rabjung* cycle can not be 17 December, 1907, but only 17 December 1908.

However if we accept that the official *Chos skad* calendar followed Bhutanese popular way, the situation is completely different. According to the Bhutanese calendar, the year “hire-female-sheep” (*me-mo-lug*) ended with the tenth month, and the following eleventh month was already “earth-male-monkey” (*sa-pho-sprel*) year. Although we can not establish the day by day conversion between Gregorian and Bhutanese calendars, the 13th day, 11th month, the “earth-male-monkey” year should correspond certainly to 17 December 1907 which is recorded in English official document.

In this way, the difference of one year between the Bhutanese and English documents above mentioned is explained.

In general, it has to be noted that the eleventh and twelfth months written in Chos skad always poses a perpetual problem for chronology. The problem is further more complicated because one can almost never know for sure if the author of the calendar or the particular document follows the official Tibetan way or the Bhutanese official/popular way.

I am now going to give another recent case in order to illustrate this problem. It is the birth day of HRH Dasho Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck which took place on 6 February 2016. The English version of *Kuensel* dated the same day announces that the birth took place in the “wood-male-sheep” (*shing-pho-lug*) year, in the Bhutanese calendar 27 day, 12th month which is considered as an extremely holy year as Guru Rinpoche chose to be born in this particular year, only eight years after Buddha Shakyamuni entered into Mahaparinirvana.

However if we read the Dzongkha version of *Kuensel* dated on the following 7 February 2016, while both the date of birth of HRH in Gregorian calendar and that of the Bhutanese calendar remain the same, HRH’s *lo-khams* (year of birth) is not “monkey but sheep, which precedes monkey.

Let us have a closer look. According to the Tibetan Khu nu calendar, the wood female sheep year of the 16th rabjung cycle started on 19 February 2015 (zla ba dang po tshe gcig) and ended on 8 February (zla ba bcu gnyis pa nam gang) 2016. Therefore according to this calendar, HRH’ birth day which is zla 12 pa’i tshe 27 of *shing mo lug* (wood-female-sheep) year corresponds to 6 February 2016 and his *lo khans* therefore is sheep. I remember that immediately after the birth of HRH a popular saying in this respect spread to a certain circle during certain time.

However, according to the English *Kuensel* which is the *de fact* official media of the country, the date of birth of HRH in Gregorian calendar is the same 6 February 2016, but his birth animal element is not “wood-female-sheep” (*shing mo lug*) but “fire-male monkey”(fire-male-monkey). This difference can be understood, as has been explained earlier, due to a popular Bhutanese way which starts the beginning of the year not with the first month but the eleventh month. As the Tibetan “wood-female-sheep” *lo-khams* ended with the tenth, the eleventh and twelfth months were already “fire-male-monkey” *lo-khams* and no more “wood-female-sheep.”

This is naturally understood because of the difference of the Tibetan and Bhutanese popular way to start the year. In addition, the popularity of monkey year particularly auspicious in relation with Guru Rinpoche must have played a certain role to make HRH Gyalsay of “monkey year” rather than of “sheep” year.

As the difference of the Tibetan and Bhutanese Calendars is now illustrated by two recent cases, the historian’s quite natural question is when this difference of Tibetan and Bhutanese beginnings of the year started. Although I have no solution to this problem, here is the oldest case I know for the moment.

Let us see the year of death of Mi pham tshe dbang bstan ‘dzin (born in 1574), father of Bstan ‘dzin rab rgyas (1638-1696). There are two biographies: one written by Gtsang mkhan chen ’Jam dbyangs dpal ldan rgya mtsho (1610-1684), great Tibetan scholar who fled to Bhutan following Zhabdrung Ngag dbang rnam rgyal, and the other by Ngag dbang lhun grub (1673-1730), disciple of Bstan ‘dzin rab rgyas, born and grown up in Bhutan.

According to the former, Mi pham tshe dbang bstan ‘dzin passed away in the eleventh month of the “water-sheep” (*chu lug*) year which according to the conversion between the Gregorian and Tibetan calendars corresponds to 1643 AD. However according to the latter, the same subject passed away in the same eleventh month, but of the “wood-monkey” (*shing spre ’u*) year which follows the “water-sheep” (*chu lug*) year. At a first glance it appears that there is a gap of one year between the two sources both written in *chos skad*. However in reality notwithstanding the difference of the a year, in reality the same year is meant by both sources and there is no discrepancy between them. The eleventh month in question is that of the “water-sheep” (*chu lug*) year according to the Tibetan way. However as the year ends with the tenth month according to the Bhutanese way, the same eleventh month changes *lo khmas* at the same time and the *lo khams* becomes that of the following “wood-monkey” (*shing spre ’u*) year.

This is a typical example of the Bhutaneseities which are not yet well known and recognized. Future Bhutanese studies are expected to find and elucidate more cases of such peculiar features and characteristics of Bhutan in order to academically establish the Bhutanese identity and chronology.