

ALLIANCES AND POWER IN CENTRAL BHUTAN:  
A NARRATIVE OF RELIGION, PRESTIGE AND WEALTH  
(MID 19<sup>TH</sup>-MID 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES)<sup>1</sup>

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*Introduction*

The socio-economic reforms initiated by the Third King 'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug (1928-1972) in 1953, namely emancipating the serfs and giving them lands and putting a ceiling of 25 acres of land per household, were unprecedented bold moves for a monarch at that time. It allowed a peaceful socio-agrarian revolution and rendered possible the evolution from a 'feudal' state<sup>2</sup> to a modern state. Although these reforms were implemented without any major opposition from the noble families which had most of the large estates, it did cause a complete reframing of the socio-economic layout in Central Bhutan. This was a move which, in effect, deprived the noble families of Bumthang (to whom, interestingly, the king was related) of their traditional socio-economic powers and privileges.<sup>3</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Before starting this paper, I would like to acknowledge and thank all my friends from Bumthang and the family of O rgyan chos gling (long. 90.89, lat. 27.61, alt. 3,000m) which has supported and encouraged my research on their own estate for many years now. Without their insight and assistance this article could not have been written. This paper is based on fieldwork, interviews and historical Bhutanese sources such as the *sMyos rabs* of Lama Sangngag and the short unpublished *gTer chen rdo rje gling pa dung brgyud O rgyan chos gling chos rje rim brgyud* written in 1972.
- <sup>2</sup> We will not enter in the debate regarding the concept of 'feudal' which has been much discussed by Tibetologists and sociologists. On this question, Saul Mullard's introduction in his book on the Sikkimese state (2011) is most illuminating. The use of 'feudal' is based here on Bhutanese historians' use and on the fact that parts of Bhutan were characterised by a lord-serf relationship. The nature of this relationship will be outlined in this article.
- <sup>3</sup> An excellent analysis of these reforms can be found in Kinga (2009: 221-224) where he quotes a resolution of the first National Assembly in 1953: "It was resolved that henceforth all the serfs under any landlords should be allowed to cultivate the land on contract basis as per the following arrangement. If the total produce from the land is 20 pathis [*pathi* is a Nepali word; the Dzongkha word would be *bre*. FP], the serf should pay 12 pathis and retain 8 pathis. However the landlord should not provide the yearly livery as done earlier. If the serfs do not desire to undertake cultivation on contract basis but still desire to stay with their landlords, the landlords must keep them

This article is an attempt to present the socio-religious and economic patterns of the upper class families in Central Bhutan at the height of their power from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century until the reforms of the 1950s. It is very much a work in progress and a preliminary exploration of the relationship between religion, power and wealth in Central Bhutan from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It investigates how a handful of families of prestigious religious descent concentrated power and economic wealth and consolidated their socio-economic and politico-religious importance through a pattern of marital alliances and religious reincarnations. The material wealth brought by specific marital alliances, including generally lands which complimented the other landholdings, was necessary to cater to the religious needs which in turn conferred prestige, and legitimated political power. By analysing the socio-religious and economic capitals as well as the social network of three ruling families known as *Chos brgyud gdung brgyud* of Bumthang in Central Bhutan from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, I will try to provide a template or a master narrative for the socio-economic and politico-religious set up of Central Bhutan until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I will argue that this is, in Central Bhutan, a case of reproduction of an elite class and the individual players seemed to have developed a ‘habitus’ to quote the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This theory seeks to show that “social agents develop strategies which are adapted to the needs of the social worlds that they inhabit. These strategies are *unconscious* [my emphasis] and act on the level of a bodily logic.” Bourdieu thus sees habitus as an important factor contributing to social reproduction because it is central to generating and regulating the practices that make up social life (Bourdieu 1990: 54). Bourdieu sees symbolic capital (e.g., prestige, honour, attention) as a crucial source of power. Symbolic capital is any species of capital that is perceived through socially inculcated classificatory schemes.

Bumthang was not an isolated place as we would tend to see it today. It was part of the religiously vibrant regions of Central Bhutan (Bumthang and Krong gzar) and lHun rtse (also referred to as sKur stod) which had a long association with Tibet and especially with the province of lHo brag, the ‘Southern Rock’ which was endowed with important monasteries and a strong *gter ston* presence. Located in Tibet, its border to the south is today common with part of the northern

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as servants and not as serfs. Serfs who are neither willing to undertake cultivation on contract basis nor to stay with their landlords should be taken over by the government.”

border of Bhutan. When considering these regions, the geographical set-up should be kept in mind and that the ‘southern valleys,’ including Bumthang and lHun rtse, were much closer to Central Tibet than the eastern Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo.

The present-day lHun rtse district and Krong gsar district were economically, historically and linguistically closely tied to Bumthang. Many Tibetans seem to have regarded Bumthang as a safe place of exile and a ‘hidden country’ (*sbas yul*), a characteristic common to other borderlands of Southern Tibet. The story of the exile of the Tibetan royal scion Khyi kha Rva thod in the valleys of sTang and Chos 'khor, Bumthang is still alive in the oral as well as written traditions. Similarly, the story of the origin of the lords from U rva valley in Bumthang seems to point to Central Tibet, following the route to Bhutan via lHo brag, and the very important pre-Buddhist Tibetan deity 'Od lde Gung rgyal still worshipped in U rva seems to suggest that this was the case.

Lamas and aristocrats were joined by traders, ordinary pilgrims or even runaway miscreants who travelled the ancient path. Bhutanese had summer pastures on the Tibetan plateau and traded easily with the northern region: rice, madder, stick lac, paper, bamboo wares, and medicinal herbs were exchanged for silk, dried apricots, dried mutton, sheep-skins, wool, borax, and salt. The main market place in Tibet for central Bhutanese was lHo Stag lung near the Yamdrok (Yar 'brog) lake but Bhutanese also travelled as far as Lhasa for trade and pilgrimage. For example, 'Jigs med rnam rgyal, the father of the First King, travelled this way when he was a ‘master-trader’ (*tshong dpon*) of the Krong gsar rdzong and posted in mTshams pa near the Monla Karchung (*Mon la dkar chung*) pass which forms the border between Bhutan and Tibet.

The importance of Bumthang in the geo-cultural context of Central Bhutan and Southern Tibet, regions linked by a perilous but well trodden route through the high Himalayas, results from a combination of religious and historical occurrences, enhanced by an intricate pattern of lineages and a physically mobile society.

#### *The socio-religious and political capital*

In central Bhutan the collective term of *Chos brgyud gdung brgyud* is applied to define the upper social strata of families who have both religious and noble lineages and the term perfectly reflects the reality as

we will see in this paper. The head of the family is called a *chos rje* and this term is by extension also applied to his family.<sup>4</sup>

Testimonies of the feudal and religious set-up typical of central Bhutan come to light during the annual festival of the *bKang gso*, which takes place in O rgyan chos gling in the sTang valley of Bumthang in the autumn from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month. As it has been stated earlier:

This festival is the occasion when the ancient allegiance of the villagers to the *chos rje* family and to [mGon] po Ma ning; their protective deity as well as his entourage of local deities, is symbolically renewed. It is through the religious commitment and economic well-being of the *chos rje* family that the ceremony, which will bring to all the protection of the deities, can be performed. For the *chos rje* family, while it is a time when they renew their personal allegiance to [mGon] po Ma ning and the local deities, the ceremony confers prestige upon them: it reiterates their religious importance and their socio-economic status to the villagers; it proves their sense of duty towards the inhabitants of the territory by pleasing the deities for the benefit of all; it also allows them to redistribute wealth for the well-being of the territory through the offerings, the food, the alcohol and the cash money distributed to the lay-practitioners and to the villagers during the ritual (Pommaret 2007: 135-158).

If rituals partly served to legitimise the lords' rule over a valley, it was just a reminder, as the real legitimacy came from the religious ancestry of the families. The Bumthang region was divided into four valleys: Chu smad, Chos 'khor, sTang and U rva. U rva presented a slightly different socio-religious set-up and will not be included in this article. However, Chu smad, Chos 'khor, and sTang shared the same characteristics, at least from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were in the hands of large estate owners whose legitimacy originally rested on a prestigious religious ancestry and who intermarried within the same social class, thus reinforcing their socio-religious capital as well as their economic capital; an idea which will be examined in more detail below.

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<sup>4</sup> In Bhutan the title *chos rje* is given to descendants of a prestigious cleric and it also implies generally the possession of a temple and of an estate (*gzhis ka*). It therefore may also carry an economic connotation, depending on the size of the estate, and before the advent of the monarchy, local political power. In today's Bhutan, the title *chos rje* is still prestigious and is the term by which the upper social strata families' heads are referred to in Bumthang. Also in Bhutan, traditionally, villagers had no family names as such, but families are referred in some regions by the names of their houses.

It is now necessary to follow the simplified genealogical chart enclosed here.

Bhutanese historiography in this case traces the origins of the most important families of Central Bhutan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to great religious figures or to the *gdung* generally associated with the Tibetan royal family.<sup>5</sup> For example the family of Chos 'khor Bya dkar, is said to descend from sPre'u rdo rje, a brother of Lha lung dpal kyi rdo rje who found refuge in Bumthang in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and Padma gling pa (1450-1521), the treasure-discoverer; whereas the family of sTang O rgyan chos gling is said to descend from both Padma gling pa and another important treasure-discoverer rDo rje gling pa (1346-1405); the family of Chu smad sPra mkhar descends from a lady from the *gdung* family said to be a descendent of the Tibetan royal scion 'Od srungs through Lha dbang grags pa whose distant descendent married *Thugs sras* Zla ba rgyal mtshan (1499-1586) one of Padma gling pa's son (Aris 1986: 50-51, translating the *rgyal rigs*).

Their ramifications extend to lHun rtse where important families belonged to Padma gling pa lineage via his son Kun dga' dbang po in Dung dkar as well to the treasure-discoverer Ratna gling pa's (1403-1478) lineage in Chu sa; these lineages went as far as Dgra med rtse in Eastern Bhutan, an important monastery founded by *A ni* Mchod rten bzang mo, also a descendent from Padma gling pa. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, marital alliances were formed between these estates producing either estate lords, reincarnated lamas, wives (*mna' ma*) or husbands (*mag pa*) for other estates.

Thus O rgyan Phun tshogs who was the *chos rje* (religious lord) of the monastery of gTam zhing in Chos 'khor founded by Padma gling pa in 1505, married Rin chen dpal mo from the Bya dkar *gdung* family in Chos 'khor. O rgyan Phun tshogs was also the Krong gsar *dpon slob* in the 1850s commanding the fortress of Krong gsar in central Bhutan which had jurisdiction over the whole of Central and Eastern Bhutan. His brother 'Phrin las went as *mag pa* to marry Ye shes of sTang O ryan chos gling whose brother brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan became the Bya dkar *rdzong dpon* before being killed during the 1865 Anglo-Bhutanese war. Ye shes and brTson 'grus rgyal mtshan's father was *sKu gzhog* mTsho skyes rdo rje, a descendent of the treasure-discoverer Rdo rje

<sup>5</sup> However Ardussi (2004: 69) refutes this interpretation and proposes that “the *Gdung* people of Bhutan, including the *Ngang Gdung* ancestors of the Bemji Chöje and those of *Gdung Glang dmar* would have left Lhobrak and Chumbi and settled in Bhutan not during some vague era of the 8th – 11th centuries, but during the climactic events of 1335-58. Their dispersal between east and west would have occurred not in Bhutan but earlier in Tibet where they were known as *Shar Dung* and *Lho Dung*.”

gling pa (1346-1405). *sKu gzhog* Mtsho skyes rdo rje became Krong gsar *dpon slob* after O rgyan phun tshogs and left the post to 'Jigs med rnam rgyal in 1853. mTsho skyes rdo rje's wife, sGrol ma, seemed to have come from bKra shis g.yang rtse in Eastern Bhutan. Her exact village can so far not be traced but it might have been Ngang mkhar where the mKho'u chung (pronounced 'kochey') family, descendent of Kun dga' dbang po, Padma gling pa's son, was settled.

One of Ye shes' and 'Phrin las' son was O rgyan rdo rje who became Bya dkar *rdzong dpon* at the turn of the century and married Bsod nams chos sgron and Tshe ldan, two sisters from Chu sa in lHun rtse. O rgyan rdo rje and his wives had three children: 'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug who inherited the estate of O rgyan chos gling and married Skyid ba a lady from ra med rtse in Eastern Bhutan; 'Phrin las who married a lady from Chu sa in lHun rtse; and Thub bstan rgyal mtshan *alias* dpal 'bar who was the 9<sup>th</sup> Pad gling *Thugs sras*, the reincarnation of Pama gling pa's son, Zla ba rgyal mtshan.

'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug and Skyid ba had three sons: Kun bzang rdo rje (1925-1962) who inherited O rgyan chos gling, O rgyan dbang bdus (1927-1989), and *Sprul sku* Nu ldan rdo rje (1930-1985) who became a monk, first in Min sgrol gling monastery in Tibet, and later in life the abbot of the monastery of Nyi ma lung in Chu smad. This monastery had been built in 1937 by Mgon po rdo rje, the Chu smad *gdung* of sPra mkhar,

In the mid 20th century, the relation between O rgyan chos gling and sPra mkhar was reinforced when the elder brother Kun bzang rdo rje married Rdo rje sgrol ma from sPra mkhar, herself daughter of mGon po rdo rje the Chu smad *gdung*, and therefore a niece of the two queens of the Second king. Incidentally the second brother O rgyan dbang bdus married, in a second marriage, Chos skyid dbang mo, the elder daughter of the Second King 'Jigs med dbang phyug (1905-1952) and of his junior Queen Padma bde chen, whose father 'Jam dbyang was the lord of sPra mkhar.<sup>6</sup> In a way sPra mkhar estate in Chu smad appears at this generation as a 'wife giver' as one lady went to O rgyan chos gling while two others, Phun tshogs chos sgron (1911-2003) and Padma bde chen (1918-1991) were married to the Second King. We will come back to their lineage later.

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<sup>6</sup> The alliances between U rva, the other valleys of Bumthang and Tshakaling in Eastern Bhutan will be examined in another article.

### The Chos 'khor and Chu smad valleys of Bumthang

The dBang dus chos gling estate was established in 1857 by 'Jigs med rnam rgyal (1825-1881), Krong gсар *dpon slob* (from 1853 to 1866, taking over from mTsho skyes rdo rje from O rgyan chos gling), 49<sup>th</sup> temporal ruler (*sDe srid*) of Bhutan (1870-1873) and father of the First King. Himself from Dung dkar in lHun rtse whose lineage was established by a son of Padma gling pa, 'Jigs med rnam rgyal married Pema chos skyid, the daughter of O rgyan Phun tshogs, the gTam shing *chos rje* and the Krong gсар *dpon slob* who contributed to his political career, and of Rin chen dpal mo, from the Bya dkar *gdung* family as mentioned earlier. Pema chos skyid's brothers were the 8<sup>th</sup> Pad gling *gsung sprul* Kun bzang bstan pa'i nyi ma (1843-1891) and Padma bstan 'dzin (d.1882) who also became Krong gсар *dpon slob*.

Padma bstan 'dzin's wife's identity is not documented in historical texts. Oral tradition has it that she may have been from the temple of U rug in Chu smad valley associated with Rdo rje gling pa; while another tradition says that she was Ngos grub padma from the Padma gling pa's lineage of gTam zhing. It is of course possible that he had two wives. Padma bstan 'dzin had a son 'Chi med rdo rje and a daughter Rin chen dpal mo. Both married their paternal cross-cousins, Ye shes chos sgron and O rgyan dbang phyug, the children of 'Jigs med rnam rgyal and their paternal aunt Pema chos skyid. Rinchen dpal mo died in 1899 without giving male offspring to O rgyan dbang phyug, who after being Krong sa *dpon slob*, became the First king of Bhutan in 1907.

The son of O rgyan dbang phyug's sister, Ye shes chos sgron, and of 'Chi med rdo rje was recognised as the 9<sup>th</sup> Pag gling *gsung sprul* Bstan 'dzin chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1894-1925) and went to his monastery, lHa lung in lHo brag. Phun tshog chos sgron and Padma bde chen, the two queens of the Second King were the 9<sup>th</sup> Pag gling *gsung spru*'s nieces as their mother bDe mchog was the 9<sup>th</sup> Pad gling *gsung sprul*'s sister and had married 'Jam dbyang, the head of the noble family (*gdung* or *shal ngo*) of sPra mkhar in Chu smad valley as we saw earlier. The queens' half-brother was mGon po rdo rje (1906-1950?) who would inherit sPra mkhar and built the mansion as it is today as well as the Nyi ma lung monastery in the 1930s.

Their mother bDe mchog also had a son, 'Phrin las rnam rgyal, out of wedlock from a lama from Kham, Khyung sprul Rinpoche.<sup>7</sup> 'Phrin

<sup>7</sup> Khyung sprul Rinpoche usually refers to Khyung sprul Rinpoche 'Jigs-med nam mkha'i rdo rje (1897-1955). He was probably the most renowned Bonpo pilgrim of his time after travelling across Tibet, India, Nepal and Bhutan for more than 50 years. See (Kværne 1998: 71-84). According to Kværne, Khyung sprul Rinpoche was a

las nram rgyal (1906-1979) was closely associated with the Second King and one of his children is the present 10<sup>th</sup> Pad gling *sgung sprul* Kun bzang pad ma rin chen nram rgyal born in 1968, and abbot of dGra med rtse monastery in Eastern Bhutan.

As for 'Jigs med nram rgyal's brother, Dung dkar rgyal mtshan, who succeeded him as Krong gсар *dpon slob* in 1866, he married Sangs rgyas lha mo, also from gTam zhing and one of their children was Kun bzang 'phrin las who became successively the lHun rtse, the Thimphu, as well as the dBang 'dus pho brang *rdzong dpon*. He was therefore the cousin of the First king O rgyan dbang phyug and one of his most trusted allies.

Kun bzang 'phrin las married Sangs rgyas sgrol ma whose brother was the 7th sGang steng *sprul sku*, bsTan pa'i nying byed (1875-1905). The sGang steng *sprul sku* were and are the reincarnation of Padma gling pa's grandson, Padma 'phrin las (1564-1642) who established Sgang steng gsang sngags chos gling monastery in the Phobjikha valley in the Black mountains and who was the son of *Thugs sras* Zla ba rgyal mtshan. Interestingly, the elder brothers of Sangs rgyas sgrol ma and the 7th Sgang steng *sprul sku* were recognised as the *Zhabs drung* 'Jigs med chos rgyal (1862-1904) and Kun dga' grags pa, the *sprul sku* of rTa mgo monastery in Western Bhutan. The parents of Sangs rgyas sgrol ma and of the reincarnated lamas were Seng ge sgrol ma from dGra med rtse and Kon mchog dbang 'dus (1845-1894) from gTam zhing, both of them being from Pad gling lineages.<sup>8</sup>

The son of Kun bzang 'phrin las and Sangs rgyas sgrol ma was recognized as the 8th Sgang steng *sprul sku*, O rgyan 'phrin las rdo rje (1906-1949). However when he was the chief of lHun rtse rdzong, Kun bzang 'phrin las is said to have had from Tshe dbang lha mo, a noble

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staunch celibate and travelled to Bhutan in 1920. He meditated in sPa gro, and then was called by the king to his palace (most likely in Bumthang) but his biography does not mention an encounter with bDe mchog, the king's niece, much less the birth of a son. Another article (Alay 2011: 204-230) does not give any information on that topic.

Present day sources in Bhutan cannot confirm this attribution either and 1906, the date of birth of 'Phrin las nram rgyal does not tally either. The search for the Khyung sprul rinpoche who came to Bhutan continues.

<sup>8</sup> dKon mchog dbang 'dus was called as *mag pa* to dGra med rtse and besides Seng ge sgrol ma also married her sister sKal bzang chos sgron from whom he had five children. Among them, the best known are the Nyi zer *sprul sku* Kun bzang rig 'dzin, the rTa mgo *sprul sku* Kun dga' dbang phyug and the historian *Dge slong gnyer chen gregsp* Tshe ring rdo rje (1896-1983). This eminent progeny is famous in Bhutan (see Lama Sangngag 1983: 356-364). Their genealogy will be explained in a forthcoming article.



lady from sKur stod Khol ma (Lham Dorji 2008: 19, Padma Tshedwang 1994: 532), a daughter brTson 'grus lha mo *alias* Gle mo (d.1922), also known as *Khol ma phyug mo* 'the rich lady from Khol ma.' However her father's identity is not well established.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the reality might have been, in 1903 Gle mo became the wife of the First King O rgyan dbang phyug, and in 1905 the mother of the Second King.

To summarise this protracted description,<sup>10</sup> we observe that during one century, five reincarnations of Pad ma gling pa's lineages appear in these noble families and that at each generation cross-cousins or second cousins alliances were made. Moreover at least one man in each family at each generation became holder of a powerful official position in the state officialdom: *rdzong dpon* (district chief) or *dpon slob* (district governor).

#### *The economic capital*

Chu smad, Chos 'khor, and sTang estates were heavily dependent on lower altitude valleys to complement their economic resources: Chos 'khor and Chu smad on Krong gsar and Zhal sgang, while sTang depended on lHun rtse. These lower altitudes regions provided vital ecological resources: forests for the cattle to graze in winter and paddy fields for rice. The economic links were reinforced by marital alliances in these regions.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the estate of O rgyan chos gling was largely self-reliant, owing to its large land holdings and herds of cattle, sheep, goats and yaks in upper Tang valley and in lHun rtse.<sup>11</sup> Like all the other estates in Bumthang, agricultural and animal husbandry activities as well as the menial labour, including carrying loads and fetching water, depended on a bonded labour force which was divided in several categories. These categories "consisted of serfs [*zab* – uncertain etymology, may be *Za pa*, those who eat with the masters] who owned neither land, nor property and depended completely upon the generosity of their masters who fed, clothed and

<sup>9</sup> Lama Sangngag (vol.II, 2005: 181) writes that brTson grus lha mo's father was Phun tshogs nam rgyal, the chief of Lhun rtse rdzong. Unless Phun tshogs nam rgyal is another name for Kun bzang 'phrin las, the identity of the father of brTson 'grus lha mo is so far not well established. As for *Slob dpon* gNag mdog (1986: 200), he does not say who her father is while he mentions her mother.

<sup>10</sup> For clarity purposes, we had to concentrate here only on certain branches and descendents of these families.

<sup>11</sup> An article on the economy of O rgyan chos gling is forthcoming.

sheltered them; and *drap* (uncertain etymology) who owned some land and livestock of their own. Below the aristocracy were the tax-paying households (*khelpa*, Tib. *khral pa*) who paid heavy taxes to the government and enjoyed a higher social status than the serfs” (Choden 2008: 5).

The *zab* are well described by Kinga. The *zab* were “owned by aristocratic families. These serfs owned neither lands nor wealth. Their livelihood totally depended on the generosity of their masters. They were fed and clothed by them. They lived in huts built around the main house of the master” (Kinga 2003: 13). About their origin Kinga writes that they were “of Bhutanese, Tibetan and Indian origin. Unlike taxpaying households, [the position of a] serf was hereditary in nature” (Kinga 2003: 13).

Another kind of labour was provided by the *drap* families who had some land of their own and lived in their own house but had labour obligations to their masters. Some noble families in Bumthang also benefited from households called *suma* or *zurpa*, who chose to seek protection and pay taxes in form of labour and other goods to these families rather than to the central government. Kinga (2003: 49) writes about the consequences of the 1950s reforms on the local noble families:

Aristocratic families lost ownership and control over the serfs. Their position was further weakened as the number of hands required for farming their fields or looking after their cattle almost disappeared. They could not sustain their erstwhile economic position, as shortage of hands on farms and cattle never yielded produces [sic] comparable to the quantity and variety they enjoyed earlier. Therefore, family members of the local nobilities found themselves taking over the work done by the serfs. Today they are on equal footing with farmers.

Like all the other noble estates of central Bhutan, O rgyan chos gling enjoyed the labour and services of all three categories discussed above.

However, as prosperous as O rgyan chos gling was in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it still needed to trade and barter with Tibet and India as well as rely on the low altitude north-east valley of IHun rtse where it owned paddy fields and winter pastures (Choden and Roder 2006: 18-19). There was always movement of people and mule trains along the mountain paths, carrying foodstuff and commodities, and O rgyan chos gling had to maintain horses and mules in its stables. Moreover, one or two trade caravans went to Tibet and to India every year. The Assamese towns of Kokrasar, Bongaigaon in India and Hatisar (today Gelephu) in

Bhutan were winter trade destinations whereas trade with Tibet occurred in late spring or early autumn and O rgyan chos gling was used as a storage place in between trips to India and Tibet.

Until the 1950s and the closure of the northern border, this triangular barter trade was carried out, like in many regions of the Himalayas. From O rgyan chos gling it took roughly twelve days to go to India while it took a week to Tibet. Commodities imported from India included cotton, broadcloth, tobacco, areca nuts, metal tools, guns, sandalwood, leather as well as silver and English porcelain and in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, record players and records as well as photographic equipment.

Some of the goods from India were kept for the family needs while some were sent to Tibet to be bartered along with Bhutanese products: textiles, medicinal herbs, paper, madder, indigo, and rice. From Tibet came salt, silk, borax, tea, gold, Chinese porcelain, carpets, and dried mutton. Salt was the most important item and mTshams pa on the Bhutanese side of the border was the main salt trading station. A bigger market was in Long do, on the other side of the Monlakarchung pass, and still further in lHo Stag lung in central Tibet near the Yamdrok lake.

Kunzang Choden vividly describes the trade patterns and goods in preparation of the Losar festival (Choden 2008: 30-31):

As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the Bhutanese calendar, our family's merchants would go to the seven days annual trade fair at Taklung Tshondu, close to the lake Yamdrok in Tibet. Fine brick tea, rock salt, borax, and sheep pelts were imported and set aside for Losar. The sheep pelts were an important food item in the old days. The wool was pulled off from the pelts and processed into thread. The hides could be made into different recipes and eaten as delicacies. Whole legs of mutton, wind dried and preserved in the frigid Tibetan temperatures, had been traded against rice, chili, brown sugar, madder, hand woven fabrics and handmade Bhutanese paper. These goods were fastidiously carried over the high ice and snow bound passes, a journey of several days into the Tibetan trading centers. Although some rice was taken as far as Lhasa to be exchanged for special items most of the rice was actually exchanged at Tsampa (mTshams pa), a small settlement at the northernmost part of the Choekhor (Chos 'khor) valley of Bumthang. The merchandise from Tibet was carried back to O rgyan chos gling by porters, mules and yaks. Candies and biscuits from India—the nearest border towns were Khorasar in West Bengal and Godama in Assam—added variety to the displays. Weeks before Losar the family's yaks and pack mules

had carried many measures of rice, pulses and cereals from our estates in sub-tropical lHun rtse (sKur stod), east of Bumthang in today's lHun rtse district. Depending upon the harvest, from year to year, as many twenty or as few as five to six porters would be required to carry the more fragile and perishable goods like fruits and vegetables on their backs and trek through treacherous terrain for two to three days to reach O rgyan chos gling.

The region of lHun rtse was more than a trade destination. The Rodongla pass (4,100m) on the eastern mountain range of sTang valley led into lHun rtse and the descent was precipitous. In Pemai (alt. 3,000m) and Ungar (1,800m) lands served as pastures for O rgyan chos gling cattle in winter; Ungar people used the same land for growing maize during the summer when the cattle migrated back to Bumthang.<sup>12</sup> Further east in Gorgan, lands also belonged to O rgyan chos gling, and because of its altitude (1,400m) and good water supply, Gorgan was the estate rice basket. Sugarcane, chillies, tropical fruit, rattan products, betel leaves and rattan ropes were also provided by the lands in lHun rtse.

From lHun rtse one could then go to lHo brag or bKra shis g.yang rtse in Eastern Bhutan, and then on to mTsho nag and Tsa ri for pilgrimage in Tibet. Therefore the trail via Rodongla was a major historical route right until the 1970s.

The noble families also provided 'food security' for the villagers who, in case of poor harvest or at the lean season from March to July, could borrow grains from their stores. The borrowing period was for one year and the interest was 3 *bre* (1 *bre* = around 1,5 kg) on every 20 *bre* borrowed (Choden and Roder 2006, Choden 2009: 66).

Moreover as we have seen earlier, the high official positions that the men of these families held indirectly contributed to the economy of their own families in way of labour or corvées and in-kind resources which were taken from the taxes that the tax-payer population paid to the district.<sup>13</sup> These resources could be, amongst others, stones, timber, paper, ink, cheese, butter, textiles and vegetable dyes.

A kind of redistribution of the wealth took place through rituals or other functions as we can understand from the *bkang gso* ritual at O rgyan chos gling<sup>14</sup> where there is a display of wealth and the prosperity of the *chos rje* household is a guarantee of the prosperity of the villagers.

<sup>12</sup> Oral information Kunzang Choden, July 2010.

<sup>13</sup> On the complex tax system, see (Ura 1995).

<sup>14</sup> (Pommaret 2007).

*The symbolic capital*

At this stage of the article, it appears obvious that families who accumulated such a social, religious, political, and economic capital had a high level of symbolic prestige. Known by the honorific term of *Drag shos* and *A shi (A lce)*, men and women of these families were respected and had what one could call a 'social bonus' which can still be seen today to some extent from the deferent behaviour and gestures of people not belonging to their class of *chos brgyud gdung brgyud*. Taking off caps or head scarves, body slightly bent while in their presence, low tone of voice, waiting to be talked to, sitting or standing close to the entrance, this etiquette is still observed today in central Bhutan. However, in the past, this prestige and reverence had to be continuously worked for by the noble families who had to take care of their villagers and keep their standing. Otherwise they would run the risk of having villagers leave their estates and seek protection with another noble family. This would be considered for the noble family as a complete loss of prestige and a humiliation.

Being patrons to high lamas was one of the most prestigious and visible action and the benefit of having such important religious figures staying in the mansion also reverberated on the villagers who could take this opportunity to receive blessings, empowerments and names, as well as boast to others that such or such lama was staying on the estate.

Etiquette was extended to the guests as, in the mind of the people, the guests could only be from the same social strata. This attitude was compounded by the fact that noble families had access to rare objects, brought or purchased for them with great difficulties by guests and relations: porcelain, British guns, jade, Chinese silver coins, brocade, and binoculars. These rare items only reinforced their prestige and their position as 'elevated beings.' However, they were expected in turn to behave in a manner befitting their status, and show compassion and kindness.

Although it was a non-egalitarian feudal relationship with all its injustices, there was a sense of pride among the villagers if their lord was more powerful than the others. This could be explained by accrued material prosperity deriving from power, but also taken as a sign that the family was protected and blessed by its guardian-deity, a feeling which cannot be underestimated in Bhutan. This feeling relates to the concept of *gong g.yog* ('master-servant') where *tha/mtha dam tshig*, the loyalty to one's place, lamas and lords is central (Phuntsho 2004).

In a country where houses were scattered, and clustered villages hardly existed the palaces and manors in which the noble families lived, represented the power and their symbolic importance was paramount. The English terms ‘palace,’ ‘mansion’ or ‘manor,’ are widely accepted when describing the royal and noble residences in Bhutan. The term *pho brang* which exists in Tibetan, was used in some occurrences but there seems to be no blanket generic term for palace, mansion or manor in Dzongkha.

The seat of state power has always been associated in Bhutan with the term *rdzong*, the semantic range of the word going much beyond the architectural definition. For the families of noble religious descent (*chos rje*), their residences were traditionally called either *rdzong* or *sngags tshang* (also written *snag tshang*).<sup>15</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This position in a traditional feudal society implied a certain number of rights and duties and some still survive today in spite of major social and economic changes in the country. Since the 1960s, without any formal or spoken agreement, the villagers and the *chos rje* family, conscious of their respective leverage powers, have manoeuvred within their socio-religious and economic spaces. They constantly negotiated compromises between the traditional and the modern socio-political structures, progressing generally by consensus rather than frequent confrontation.

Moreover although the political concept of *Chos srid gnyis ldan* applies generally to a state, it was, as seen in this paper, also internalised and operational at regional levels in many parts of the Himalayas including central Bhutan.

Alice Travers wrote in her conclusions on the aristocracy of central Tibet that it appears that the biological factor was relegated in second place compared to the noble status and where adoption and taking in a son-in-law (*mag pa*) were a common practice (Travers 2006: 214).<sup>16</sup> In

<sup>15</sup> The term *ngagtshang* (*sngags tshang/snag tshang*) seems to be used only in the Bhutanese context and applied to large houses which were residences of religious lineages. We very tentatively propose that because the householders were married, they were considered *sngags pa*, hence the term but this does not tally with the second spelling.

<sup>16</sup> “Ainsi bien que le discours privilégié comme dans d’autres noblesses les liens de sang comme idéal pour la transmission lignagère, la fréquence et le contexte des pratiques d’adoption et de mariage en gendre dans la société tibétaine confirment que le biologique est relégué au second plan face à des relations plus fortes : d’une part,

the upper strata families of central Bhutan, however, it seems that the biological lineage was more important, and although the *mag pa* practice was common, adoption was not. The biological descent reinforced the links between the different families and was used in selecting important incarnations of the same religious lineages. This could partly be explained in central Bhutan by the emphasis on the ancestors, be they religious figures or from the Tibetan kings' ancestry.

It seems that the noble families of central Bhutan provide a clear template for Bourdieu's theory that is "the social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing *a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships* of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119) They provide on the span time of a century a fascinating network in central Bhutan of marital alliances and reincarnations within the same lineages, capitalising the political, religious, economic and therefore symbolic power while resting their legitimacy on prestigious ancestry.

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celle qui unit les lignages, avec les obligations d'échange qui en découlent ; et d'autre part, l'appartenance au groupe noble tout entier. Les modalités de recrutement des héritiers montrent que, plus que l'appartenance au même sang, c'est le statut noble qui fait d'un individu l'héritier potentiel de tous les lignages nobles" (Travers 2006: 214).

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MAP from SURVEY of BHUTAN with added names

