

# **The Monarch's Gift: Critical notes on the constitutional process in Bhutan**

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In 2001 the Bhutanese state took an important step in its process of state formation, as the country embarked on a journey that would turn it into a constitutional monarchy in 2008. This process is typically described by academics and the international media as one in which the King gave the constitution as a 'gift' to the people. However, there are some puzzling issues connected to this representation. It is widely argued that the new constitution was a gift which the people of Bhutan did not want. Moreover, the King himself did not view it as a gift as such. The idea of the constitution as a 'gift' therefore needs to be deconstructed. In so doing, this article analyses how the idea of the constitution being a gift relates to its birth process, and which strategic purposes this discourse serves. It shows how this idea serves to reproduce former discourses on authority, whilst relegating the citizens to the role of subjects. The article is a novel contribution to the debate on Bhutan's transition. It views this historic moment in the process of Bhutanese state formation as a highly symbolic event and examines it against the background of detailed ethnographic material.

## **The idea of the constitution as a gift**

The Bhutanese discourse on the constitution generally presents it as a 'gift' from the King, as is indicated here by a member of the Constitutional Committee, interviewed prior to the distribution of the first draft:

Unlike other countries we did not request for the constitution. We even requested not to approve the constitution, but the King gifted this to the people (Chair of DYT, central Bhutan, June 2005).

This perspective is mirrored in the academic discourse on Bhutan, as is somewhat ironically noted by Whitecross:

...to date 'peoples power' in Bhutan has been highly absent. Rather, democratization is, in fact, the King's Gift (Whitecross, forthcoming).

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Such views reflect the general argument in which the constitution is seen as not being claimed, taken or even wanted by the 'people', but being 'gifted' to them by their benevolent and visionary King. Normally, a gift is something that the 'giver' intends to give as a gift, and something the 'giftee' equally wants to receive. In a Bhutanese context, however, the general view is that the 'people' did not want this gift. This is exemplified by the view of the Speaker in the National Assembly ('The Constitution: a grave responsibility', *Kuensel*, 22 June 2005): 'In Bhutan the sacred command came even as the people pleaded with His Majesty not to devolve his power'. More curiously, even the King himself did not perceive the constitution as a gift:

The Constitution is not a gift from the King to the people but it is the responsibility of all sections of the Bhutanese people to draft a Constitution which will be relevant and beneficial for Bhutan ('Draft Constitution to be distributed to all Bhutanese', *Kuensel*, 23 March 2005).

Thus, even if the King accepts the premise that he has conceived the constitution, he now believes that it is possible to promote ownership through popular debate between the monarchy and the 'people'. This raises questions about the effect of this kind of top-down discussion on processes of constructing citizenship in a cultural context so distinctively different from a western social imaginary (as described by Taylor (2004)). The principal argument of this article is that the process of 'gifting' the constitution serves to reproduce earlier understandings of authority by emphasising the relationship between the citizens and the state as one that is characterised by loyalty, divinity and unequal worth. As a consequence, it runs the risk of promoting processes of subjugation rather than deliberation. This raises the principal question of how the debates construct the role of the Bhutanese as citizens. Do they effectively construct them as participants in and carriers of a culture of political engagement, or do they have the perverse effect of constructing them as subjects of state authorities?

The article deconstructs the idea of the constitution as a gift in the following ways. First, it places the process in the historical context of state formation. Next, it scrutinises the implicit strategic purpose of the

debates, and, as an extension of this, the effect that the discourse of 'gifting' the constitution has on the way in which the locals are constructed as citizens. Finally, it places the process within the context of the hierarchies of the field.

### **The state as a symbolic apparatus**

It goes without saying that the Bhutanese decision to adopt a western style constitution is an important step in redefining the relationship between the Bhutanese state and its citizens. The academic literature on the Bhutanese constitutional process generally views it as a process of transferring sovereign power from the monarchy to the 'people', metaphorically expressed in the idea of the constitution as 'the King's Gift' (Whitecross, forthcoming; Mathou 2008; Sinpeng 2007).

Although this formalistic perspective is not necessarily wrong, it has limited analytical scope. By contrast, I suggest that much stands to be gained by adopting Bourdieu's perspective on the state as being both a physical and symbolic apparatus (1972: 59). The inception of the constitution can thus be understood against the background of larger trajectories of state formation. These are seen as not simply contestations over the formal issue of rights, but equally, or even more so, as contestations over the language in which the state can be imagined. Seen from this viewpoint, the production and reproduction of languages of authority are formative in the development of the relationship between the state and its citizens. Moreover, these languages are enmeshed in the material, cultural as well as symbolic hierarchies of the field.

From this perspective, the constitutional process is much more than just the enactment of a written document. It is equally a process of constructing the future citizen role, because it represents a discursive meeting that frames the future relationship between the state and its citizens. This presents a view of citizenship as constructed, rather than as simply constituted through historic processes of expanding formal citizen rights, as is most famously presented by T.S. Marshall (1950). It reflects a contrasting move in development research, from a view of citizenship as a formal and static attribute to a more processual view of citizenship as a set of practices that are constantly negotiated (see Gaventa and Jones 2002). This perspective, however, tends to ignore how the citizenship role is equally constructed by larger discourses on authority. In order

to compensate for this, I apply Barbara Cruikshank's understanding of citizenship as a socially constructed role, as opposed to a natural category into which the individual is born. As she eloquently puts it, 'Citizens are not born; they are made' (1999: 1-2). Inspired by her analytical approach, I place my main emphasis on the ways in which discourses on authority impact upon the process of constructing the citizen role. In order to pursue this perspective, I draw on Somers' narrative methodology (1994). Somers' approach is useful as a way of understanding how meta-narratives, or what Foucault terms 'discourse', are translated into public narratives that cover Bhutanese society in its entirety, and how these eventually form the 'social imaginary' of the actors; i.e. the shared cognitive map held by the agents of the field (Taylor 2004: 19).

This article bases itself on participant observation of a ceremony in the western part of Bhutan in which the constitution was handed over to the people. It also draws upon *Kuensel's* account of the constitutional debates, with a particular focus on the debate in Thimphu.<sup>1</sup> But most importantly, it is rooted in a thorough ethnographic understanding of Bhutanese social relations, derived from interviews with 160 citizens at the rural site and 37 elite interviews conducted nation wide. In order to keep my promises and to ensure the safety of my respondents, personal and place names have been removed from the published version of this article.

### **Trajectories of state formation**

Lamas from the Drukpa Kargypa lineage of Buddhism consolidated the Bhutanese state in its present form in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Led by their charismatic abbot, best known as the Zhabdrung, the Drukpa lamas established their dominant position as governors over state and society in competition with other Buddhist lineages. When the theocracy was replaced by a monarchy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this elite maintained its dominant position under the leadership of the Wangchuck dynasty. Bhutan's main defence during the early phases of the monarchy was a passive and introvert policy of invisibility through isolation.

Until the end of the 1950s, the country remained little affected by outside discourses. After 1960, however, its approach to state formation

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1 *Kuensel* was a government controlled newspaper, and Bhutan's only newspaper, at the time.

became thoroughly entangled with two meta-narratives originating in the enlightenment period: first the modernity narrative, and later the essentialist narrative. The underlying motive can be ascribed to a perceived need to defend Bhutan's vulnerable position as a small state, located with its tiny population between the two most populous countries in the world. Until the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Bhutan shared a number of similarities with that country. Both were Buddhist states organised around a feudalistic relationship between local power holders and their subjects, often with lamas in the role as feudal lords (Aris 1994a: 53). When Mao occupied Tibet militarily in 1959, he used the ideological rationalisation that his mission was to free the Tibetans from an oppressive and feudal system. In light of the fact that the Chinese had never abandoned their historical view of Bhutan as a part of the territories of the 'Kingdom in the Middle' (Aris, 1994a: 99, Mathou 1994: 52), Bhutan's previous policy of 'invisibility through isolation' provided a poor defence and it was left with little choice but to turn towards India. Along with this shift it adopted the modernity narrative as its principal guideline for state formation, albeit tailored to fit a Bhutanese context. As a consequence, Bhutanese citizens were increasingly defined as bearers of social rights to development and political rights to representation.

However, this narrative lost its credibility as a means of ensuring national sovereignty after India's absorption of Sikkim, where demands for political change spearheaded by the Nepali population were instrumental in the downfall of the monarchy. These events produced an escalating fear that the Bhutanese monarchy might suffer a similar fate, particularly in light of the growing economic power of the Nepali (Lhotshampa) population inside Bhutan. With the succession of the fourth King, conservative forces gained in influence, and the response to this real or perceived threat meant that the understanding of the state as an engine of modernisation was gradually replaced by an essentialist approach. This brought with it new ways of understanding sovereignty. The basic 'truth' that was adopted from the essentialist narrative was the argument that the ability of small states to project a shared and unique cultural tradition ensures their national survival. Such a view is evident from the argument of the fourth King:

The emergence of Bhutan as a nation-state has been dependent

upon the articulation of a distinct Bhutanese identity, founded upon our Buddhist beliefs and values, and the promotion of a common language. These have been defining elements in our history and they have made it possible to unify the country and to achieve national homogeneity and cohesion among various linguistic and ethnic groups (RGoB 1999: 18).

This discourse advanced an essentialist understanding of citizenship in terms of 'oneness'. The question of identity, in a country that held several, was interpreted in terms of a Drukpa Kargyupa Buddhist identity (Hutt 2003, chapter 11). According to Aris, culture was deliberately promoted in order to ensure the cultural unification and homogenisation of the country, and to foster a sense of loyalty towards the state (1994b: 17-18). The citizens were 'nationalised' and made to adopt a set of practices under the cultural umbrella of Driglam Namzha. The most visible part of these elaborate practices was the dress code, but they actually covered a whole range of areas, most significantly the display of a properly respectful behaviour towards state officials. However, this culture is associated with the followers of the Drukpa Kargyupa religion, who represent but one of the three largest minorities of the country. In reaction to this perceived 'drukpanisation' of the state, the Lhotshampas, the majority of whom are Hindus, and the Sharchops, who are mostly followers of Nyingmapa Buddhism, rebelled. Towards the end of the 1980s the Lhotshampas demonstrated for cultural and political rights, whilst Gomchens (religious practitioners) spearheaded Sharchop protests for social, political and religious rights at the beginning of the 1990s (Hutt 2003, Sinha 2001).

These protests were perceived as betrayals of the monarchy and the state. As a counter move, an ethnic nationalism was aroused under the nationalist trinity of *tsawasum*, connoting a bond of loyalty between King, Country and People. In the subsequent escalation of events, ethnic groups were set against each other, the army was used against the rebels, and the political stability of the country was shattered. The flight of a seventh of the population (approximately 100,000 Lhotshampas and a smaller number of Sharchops) testifies to the devastating effect of the conflict. These events have been more thoroughly described elsewhere (*ibid*). What is interesting for the purposes of this article is how the response to these protests generated a change in the normative relation between the

state and its citizens. This makes it imperative that we understand the semantic change in ways of understanding authority in the aftermath of the conflict.

### **Traditionalising authority**

The principal argument of this article is that the debates on the constitution need to be analysed against the background of the turn towards an essentialist understanding of statehood. This change is highlighted by Aris, who points at the emerging tension between the primary teachings of Buddhism and the militant aspects of the institutionalised Drukpa Kargyupa school as a root cause (Aris 1994b: 11). Behind this change lay the belief that Bhutan could only defend its *raison d'être* by projecting an image of its cultural tradition as unique. Whilst this worldview would appear to be the main underlying cause of the conflict, it was somewhat ironically reified by it. It led to a state-centric understanding of culture which lay behind the policy of freezing ancient traditions (ibid: 17-18).

Hobsbawn and Ranger point out that tradition is rarely neutral. Drawing on the English case, they observe how the reinvention of the past served to reintroduce the idea of the superior and the inferior (1983:10). In Bhutan, 'ancient traditions' were politicised, popularised and standardised, and in the process attributed different meanings, as convincingly argued by Phuntsho (2004). This politicisation happened primarily through the appropriation and re-articulation of central notions of tantric Buddhism: *tha damtsig*, *tsawasum* and *driglam*. My analysis draws on studies by Dargey and Phuntsho. Whereas Dargey can be seen as an academic spokesperson for the conservative sections of society, Phuntsho represents a liberal group whose members have pursued academic studies outside Bhutan.

According to Dargey, one can distinguish two essentially different political meanings of *tha damtsig*. In my reading, these lie at the root of the politicisation of two cultural notions: *tsawasum* and *driglam*. In the first understanding offered by Dargey, *tha damtsig* denotes a bond of loyalty. In tantric Buddhism it refers to the religious initiation ceremony bestowed by a lama upon his disciple (2005: 14). It symbolises the establishment of a bond of 'pure loyalty' between the two, implying the unquestioned obedience of the disciple. During the theocratic period, this norm became

formative for the relationship between the local lords and their subjects, often with feudal undertones of dependency (Aris 1994a: 53). In the quest to establish national unity, *tha damtsig* likewise became a means of evoking popular loyalty towards governmental authorities (Phuntsho 2004: 571, Whitecross 2010). *Tsawasum* can, in my reading, best be seen as the ideological extension of this reinterpretation.

In a tantric Buddhist context, *tsawasum* denotes the three roots that are expected to assist the disciple in his efforts to obtain enlightenment, and serve as a source of 'blessings, attainments and activities' (Dargey 2005: 39). According to Phuntsho, the notion has been appropriated from Buddhism to fit modern political purposes as the trinity of Bhutanese nationhood. In the search for a shared national identity understood in terms of oneness, it came to signify a bond of loyalty between the population and the political authorities (2004: 571). Dargey describes the character of this bond:

...It basically conveys the three basic foundations of the country—the King, the Government and the People, which means His Majesty as the most benevolent of benefactors, the Royal government as the most considerate and beneficent of governments, and the subjects as the devoted and faithful citizens (2005: 40).

At the heart of this lies the idea of a reciprocal relationship between the governors, who are expected to take on roles as kind, caring and benevolent parents, and the people, who in return are expected to obey the former with unquestioned loyalty. Although the discourse in principle is secular, metaphors that sacralise the rulers have a tendency to slip through. An example is Dargey's projection of the king: 'He is the sun whose rays of loving kindness shine equally on the people'. This is related to the historic view of the monarchs as famous reincarnations and the tendency to perceive and treat them as Bodhisattvas (Aris 1994a: 109).

There are two distinctively different perspectives on the origin of *Driglam Namzha*, one religious and one secular, both of which are presented by Dargey. These perspectives may or may not be exclusive. According to the religious argument, *driglam* is seen to originate from the Buddhist Vajras, namely 'body', 'speech' and 'mind'. In tantric



Buddhism the taming of these elements is seen as essential to achieve enlightenment. The secular argument for the genesis of this concept is related to the second interpretation of *tha damtsig*, in a view of society as organised through five relations, which according to Dargey consists of relationships between ‘peers and subordinates, between parents and children, between religious persons and lay people, between husband and wife, and between friends, relatives and neighbours’ (2005: 15).

Dargey describes how the relationship between peers and subordinates includes the entire hierarchical ranking in the government service as well as society at large, beginning with the relationship between king and ministers. In this, the anticipation is that authorities are respected and served, whilst they are in return expected to help and support their subordinates. This philosophy is seen to originate from the Buddha himself, according to Dargey:

The Buddha is known to have said: When a ruler of a country is good, the ministers will become good. When the ministers are just and good, the higher officials are just and good. When the higher officials are just and good, the rank and file will become just and good (ibid.: 37).<sup>2</sup>

The idea of society as organised through relations can be traced back to the ‘sixteen moral principles’ (*Michoe Tsangma Chudrug*), the first temporal law implemented in Bhutan by the first Desi, Udez Tenzong Drugyel (Lam and Tenzing 1999: 150). These principles, in turn, presumably have their roots in the first general law promulgated by

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2 The idea of taming of speech, mind and body is derived from the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the fourth of the five *nikayas* in the *Sutta Pitaka*, which is one of the three foundations of Theravada Buddhism. According to K. Sri Dhammanada, the quote also originates from this source (2002: 315). The ideal of a harmonious society as organized through five or six sets of hierarchical relations (*ren*), which are maintained through the practice of rituals (*yi*), however, also bears some resemblance to Confucian thought (as is equally hinted at by Whitecross (2010)). Although this is a rather crude way of presenting Confucius’ philosophy, these are usually named as the relationships between: King and minister (or ruler and subject), father and son, older brother and younger brother (or elder and younger), husband and wife, and between friends. Equally important is the relationship between the teacher and the student (or the ‘wise’ and his learner/disciple) although this is less often emphasised (Analects XII, 11, translation, Legge (1893: 18, 83); Chan (2008: 113-39). Whether there is a relationship between Confucian and Bhutanese thought is a subject for further research.

Songtsen Gampo in Tibet in the 7th century (Dargey 2001: 199, 224). During the theocratic period these principles were institutionalised in the monastic and administrative systems, and later adopted at court during the Wangchuck dynasty. My interviews in eastern, western and central Bhutan lead me to concur with Phuntsho that these principally remained important aspects of elite rather than popular culture (2004: 573). In seeking to establish national unity by nationalising culture in the image of Drukpa Kargyupa tradition, *driglam* was codified in order to ensure that it represented 'true' tradition. With the semantic addition of *namzha*, connoting 'system', it became systematised and made obligatory for the entire population, whose members were tutored on how to follow 'their' traditional culture in correct ways. In the process this diffuse set of practices was ritualised, standardised and homogenised and came to epitomise a Buddhist national identity (Bothe 2011: 523). In its traditionalised version, the 'taming' of body, speech and mind came to signify the right way of behaving in the hierarchical relationship between the governors and the governed (Dargey 2005: 36). According to this interpretation, the subordinates (the citizens) treat their superiors (the state officials) with the utmost respect, whilst the latter in return govern with benevolence.

This fusing of a traditionalised version of Buddhism with modern forms of governance has left an important trace. It has ingrained an image of the state as a benevolent, paternalistic and semi-divine apparatus in the minds of the citizens. Moreover, the superiority of the authorities has been embodied in the ritualisation of encounters between state officials and citizens (Bothe 2011: 300-322, e.g. narrative of female, 77 years, western Bhutan).

The following analysis will show how these traditionalised discourses of authority frame the process of constitutionalising the state. It will do so by scrutinising the argument that there was no popular pressure for change, and then analyse the strategic purposes served by the process of gifting the constitution.

### **The birth of the constitution**

The constitution drafting process was initiated in 2001 and lasted for over four years. Before proceeding to an analysis of this process, a timeline is a helpful starting point:

2001	26 Mar 2005	29 Oct 2005 – 24 Dec 2005	14 Dec 2005	28 Dec 2005 – 27 May 2006	18 Jul 2008
The draft- ing proc- ess com- mences	Distribution of the con- stitution	The IV King meets the 'people'	The IV King abdicates	The Crown Prince (Fu- ture V King) meets the 'people'	The con- stitution is enacted

The idea of the constitutional process as 'gift giving' rests on the assumption that the King decided to adopt the constitution voluntarily and was under no pressure to do so. From an external perspective, this was confirmed by Western donors who said they asserted no direct pressure for change (conversation, Torben Beller, Head of Danish Representation, June 2005). It is hard to gauge whether there was any pressure from Bhutan's close friend, India. It is, however, noteworthy that India's aid to Bhutan increased by 50 per cent immediately after the process was initiated (Hutt 2006: 123). In addition, India returned full independence to Bhutan with respect to its external affairs in 2008 when the constitution was implemented.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps more fitting to speak of indirect pressure in the form of positive encouragement by its powerful neighbour, on whom Bhutan is dependent in terms of its defence and development and a market for its hydropower.

Inside Bhutan there was an intriguing lack of public pressure for change. In the years prior to the inception of the process there were no mass demonstrations in the streets, no general strikes and no protests. In effect, there was a striking absence of any open demand for democracy at all. Nonetheless, the claim that the constitution was enacted in a situation without any pressure should be treated with caution. Crucially, it fails to take into account the historicity of popular organisations for citizen rights inside Bhutan, more specifically the indirect pressure from the approximately 100,000 refugees, who criticise the absence of democracy from outside the country. The neglect of these factors is important

3 In Article 2 of the original treaty of 1949, Bhutan is 'guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations'. The new article states that Bhutan and India 'shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests'.

because they are likely to have made citizenship reforms a prerequisite for the future stability and survival of the state.

From a historical perspective, the lack of outspoken claims for rights is more likely to be a product of the shared imaginary of the Bhutanese. Most importantly, the image of social order is constituted through a bond of unconditional loyalty between the individual and the state authorities, rooted in the politicised and nationalised ideology of *tsawasum*. The main effect of the promulgation of this normative principle was the semantic separation between the monarchists, defined as loyal citizens, from those who agitated for rights, who were branded as traitors (Phuntsho 2004: 576). Criticising political authorities was defined as treason and penalised by prison or exile, and even capital punishment, though this was never applied and was abolished in 2004 (*Kuensel*, March 27, 2004). These penalties were codified in detail in the law on *tsawasum*, i.e. the National Security Act of Bhutan 1992. Such punitive practices were, at least to my knowledge, no longer applied by the time of the constitutional process. Nevertheless, the historical trace of these experiences still governed the imaginary of most Bhutanese, who had come to associate criticism of state authorities with such consequences. These experiences therefore still shaped the way in which they conceived of their political role as one characterised by fear and submission. As a result, few respondents had the courage to imagine, let alone advocate, any kind of governance other than one led by the King. Instead, a culture of silence had emerged in which criticism of state authorities was perceived as practically unthinkable. Nonetheless, there was a sense of rising discontent within the system, one that was whispered behind closed doors, yet apparently with increasing strength. Demands for rights were rising, in particular amongst the educated and increasingly unemployed young people,<sup>4</sup> who found their opportunities hampered by the older and less-educated people who generally held the top positions in the bureaucracy. Moreover, although the King was highly popular, frustration was growing over the way in which his extended family, which was increasingly perceived as unaccountable, was seen to exploit its position of power. As an effect of the decentralisation reforms, the obligation to supply labour for these dignitaries had for many come to be seen as illegitimate and unjust, in contrast to their labour contribution

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4 As was noted by Whitecross to this author (correspondence, 19 January 2012).

for projects that benefitted their local communities (female 30 years and female 65 years, central Bhutan, interviewed May 2005). The experience shared by the local citizens is reflected in a narrative of a village elder who was exempted from volunteer labour, but shared the experience of those in her village:

R: All the households have to do work for this dignitary. /.../ I was told they do not get paid and they do not get food or even water, and if you do not work real hard he will take his stick and just point his stick right in your stomach (gesturing).

I: What would you do if he pointed his stick in your stomach?

R: I would just make sure that I would work real hard! (Female 65, central Bhutan)

Her response reflects how to many locals the supply of volunteer labour was connected with feelings spanning anger, apathy and despair. Such feelings were expressed most forcefully in the area of the Ngalongs, the group that formed the main support base of the monarchy. Although this criticism was not as yet directed towards the King or the monarchy in general, discontent was thus smouldering beneath the surface even though everything appeared calm at the top (see also Bothe 2011: 277, 425).

If its internal legitimacy was fragile, the government was by contrast highly successful in creating a positive brand for its state project in the outside world. In the new millennium it successfully projected Bhutan as a country with the highly appealing development strategy of 'gross national happiness'. This philosophy maintained the essentialist view of the state, but simultaneously attempted to merge this with the modernity narrative. Such attempts were reflected in the gradual opening up of the political system for competition at local as well as at national level. The inception of the constitution can best be understood as just one reform (albeit a highly important one) in this sequence of redefining the relationship between the state and its citizens. It simultaneously addressed the need to adjust the political system to be more compatible with contemporary norms of governance as controlled by the people, while also accommodating the unspoken pressure for change.

In the calm that existed at the beginning of the new millennium, one

without popular agitation for political reform, the moment was thus seen as opportune for constitutionalising the state while the process could still remain under the control of the governing elite. This motive is evident from the King's opening speech of the constitutional debates:

Bhutan, through good fortune and fate, cannot hope for a better moment than now for this historical development and will never find another opportunity like this. Today the King, government, and the people in all sections of society, enjoy a level of trust and fidelity that have never been seen before ('Draft Constitution to be distributed to all Bhutanese', *Kuensel*, 23 March 2005).

This opens up the possibility of new understandings of governance, but what is equally apparent in the King's speech is the anticipation that the process can be maintained within the normative boundary of *tsawasum*. As will be shown in the following section, the traditionalised normative context sets the stage for the constitutional process.

### **The process of 'gifting' the constitution**

On 26 March 2005 I attended a ceremony in which the constitution was handed over to the people at a remote Dzong<sup>5</sup> in western Bhutan. As Dasho Dzongdag (the district governor) proceeded past the line of attendants, they, in turn, respectfully stepped backward in prostration, whilst stretching their *kabneys* and *rachus* (sashes) forward and displaying their palms.<sup>6</sup> Following the code of Driglam Namzha, they were paying tribute to his high rank. His position was symbolised in the way he enjoyed the privilege of wearing a *patang* (sword) as well as his fully red coloured scarf, which went with his title of *dasho*, equivalent to the designation of nobility. The procession proceeded into the main temple, where the monks performed a series of prayers and religious rituals. The chair of the DYT (district development council) opened the speeches:

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5 The Dzong is historically a fortress, which even today serves as the district centre for the administrative and religious bodies.

6 This refers to the traditional clothes worn at official buildings. A *kabney* is a scarf worn by men and *rachus* are silk embroidered cloths carried over the shoulder by women.

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Today is a historical occasion to take the constitution due to the King's kindness. Therefore we have to be grateful to the King for his visionary leadership. Normally you get power through fighting and pressure groups, but here you get power from the throne... It is the responsibility of the DYT members to read the constitution and give feedback to the ministers and the King with all our commitment and dedication.

Dasho Dzungdag continued:

The King has made a royal command to read out the constitution... This is the noble thought of the Royal Government... The King will visit all the 20 Dzongkhags to speak about the constitution to the people. The people will have to provide feedback to the King during his visits. We hope to fulfil the vision of gross national happiness!

Concluding, he held the constitution high above his head, before handing it over to the local representatives, who received it with their heads bowed and palms turned upward, according to the codex of Driglam Namzha.

The discourse at the ceremony articulates the idea of the constitution as a gift, but the implications are much more profound than this image would imply. It projects a discourse on rulership that closely follows the norms of *tsawasum*. This is seen from the way in which both the DYT Chair and the Dzungdag envision the constitution as a document written by benevolent, visionary and kind governors. In return, the attendants are expected to embrace the constitution with gratitude. This way of imagining the relationship between state authorities and the 'people' is explicitly reflected in the Prime Minister's opening speech in the debates:

All this is possible because of the complete trust and faith between the King and the people who have full faith in His Majesty... ('Draft Constitution to be distributed to all Bhutanese', *Kuensel*, 23 March 2005).

As an implication of these norms the governing elite in general were uncomfortable with the idea of democracy. As the Chairman of the Royal

Advisory Council, who was also a member of the constitutional committee, contemplated as the process commenced:<sup>7</sup>

...the people are concerned about how the constitution would affect the Monarchy and they are disturbed by the idea of political parties, believing that party politics will be unhealthy for a small country like Bhutan ('The first draft of the Constitution submitted to His Majesty', *Kuensel*, 13 December 2002).

This apprehension was generally reflected in interviews with the governing elite, who associated democracy with instability and inequality, and party politics with ethnic conflict and corruption. Monarchy, on the other hand, was linked to peace and national survival.

Regardless of this apprehension, the King set out to mobilise popular support for the constitution. In *Kuensel's* summary, he comes across as a ruler with a genuine commitment to engaging the people in a dialogue, continually encouraging them to speak their views freely. However, although the 'people' engage in the debates they do so on the premise that the monarch, and in his image the state officials, are the unquestioned authority. Such a view is reflected in *Kuensel's* summary of the King's meeting with the 'people' in Thimphu:

Apart from specific responses on the 34 articles, a palpable emotion was their deep concern about a future that remained, to many, unfathomable ('A Constitution for the future of Bhutan', *Kuensel*, 29 Oct 2005).

In this context, the idea of the constitution as a 'gift' serves its strategic purposes. It implies a special relation of reciprocity between the benevolent 'gift giver' (the state authorities) and the recipients (the citizens), who in appreciation of the gift vest their loyalty in the giver. It is, however, also a highly hierarchical relationship that is differentiated according to one's position in it, as prescribed by Driglam Namzha. The meetings are

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7 The drafting committee of 39 members was chaired by the Chief Justice, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye. It was comprised of the Speaker of the National Assembly, one representative each from the 20 dzongkhags elected by the DYT, the members of the Royal Advisory Council, five representatives of the government, and two lawyers from the High Court.



effectively penetrated by these rituals, as was reflected in the ceremony. Specifically, the ritualisation of the reciprocity in ‘gift giving’ is described in a manual on Driglam Namzha, which has a specific section on how to offer a present to the King when asking for *kidu*, i.e. a gift. Whilst prostrating three times the citizens are instructed to envision him as their ‘beloved King’ (Lam and Tenzing 1999: 201). This way of imagining the monarch underlies the discourse in Thimphu. Its effect is to render the participants powerless, as is evident from the reference to them as ‘overwhelmed’ and their view of the future as ‘unfathomable’ (‘A Constitution for the future of Bhutan’, *Kuensel*, 29 Oct 2005). The normative root of such feelings is most vividly reflected in the opening speech of the Speaker:

The place for a baby to cry is on its mother’s lap.... that is why we submit our concerns here (ibid).

This discourse draws on the image of the state authorities as benevolent and kind parents, whilst it simultaneously imagines the citizens as children of the state—and children by definition do not take responsibility. It positions them as inferiors whilst elevating the state authorities to a superior position. Seen from the perspective of a western social imaginary, this is somewhat at odds with the King’s own view of the ‘people’ as responsible and competent participants. From the perspective of a traditionalised cultural context, however, the role of a political participant is rather one of ‘submission to the ruling government’, to borrow Dargey’s phrase (2005:15). Whilst the King is thus emphasising their ownership of the constitution, the attendants ritually confirm their unquestioned faith in his initiative:

...a common submission on the draft Constitution was that their faith in any initiative introduced by His Majesty was so complete that they would not question the wisdom of the royal vision... (‘A Constitution for the future of Bhutan’, *Kuensel*, 29 Oct 2005).

This was accompanied by a specific image of the citizen, most vividly captured by the Crown Prince:

One of the main reasons for the success of the past 33 years...is the

unflinching loyalty, faith and support the people place in the King...  
 ('People of Tsirang discuss the draft Constitution with the Crown Prince', *Kuensel*, 11 February 2006).

The idea of the constitution as a gift from above, in effect, left the local elite (the Gups (elected leaders of a District) and Chimis (assembly members)) little option but to accept a change they had neither asked for nor wanted:

... today, in the presence of His Majesty the King, the representatives of Punakha dzongkhag pledge their full support for the Constitution although it represented a change that they had not even imagined in their dreams ('The unfolding of a new era', *Kuensel*, 30 November 2005).

The choice of the word 'pledge' harks back to the coronation of the first Wangchuck monarch in this same Dzong in 1907, where the regional leaders agreed to submit to his rule, albeit with a certain degree of coercion. When the local representatives pledge their support to the constitution during the King's visit, by contrast, they predominantly do so out of their loyalty to the monarch. As such, the legitimacy of the change remains attached to the monarchy rather than to the process itself.

The practical effect of this discourse is reflected in a subsequent *geog* meeting (a sub-level of a district), which I happened to stumble across. During the meeting the constitution was handed over to the Tshogpas (village representatives) by the Chimi:

When you get a copy, instead of keeping it in the safe you should read it thoroughly and explain it to the people. Then the King will come to all the Geogs and discuss. He will visit all the Geogs including ours. He will hear if the people have understood the constitution. When the King visits, if you cannot answer about the constitution, then the King will not think we have informed you. People will have to understand the constitution, and if the King asks any questions they will have to clarify it to the King. If you feel there are certain doubts to clarify in the constitution, you will have to clarify to the King. Otherwise it will seem as if I have not explained about it to the people. In that case you and I will have to debate about it (Participant observation of geog meeting, Western Bhutan, 28 March, 2005)

In this, the Chimi emphasises the Tshogpas' responsibility to explain the constitution to the people. However, his speech takes on a slightly different tone, as he projects the image of the King as a teacher, who will rehearse the 'people' in the constitution. Moreover, the word 'clarify' indicates the possibility of posing questions to the King, but only in so far as the Chimi has approved of these questions. It reflects the way in which the local elite easily takes control of the process, due to inequalities in education and exposure. Meanwhile, the response by the Tshogpas expresses their feelings of inadequacy in fulfilling this responsibility:

Tshogpa (male): If you do not understand, don't expect the paper to fly down from above! [laughter] If you don't understand then drink heavily and read! [laughter].

Male: Or put it under the pillow at night and sleep on it [more laughter].

Their jokes need to be understood in light of the 'culture of silence', which makes humour their only mean of protest. Because they are illiterate, or have had only a few years of schooling, it is an impossible task for them to read, let alone to explain the constitution. And even if they were able to understand the words, concepts such as 'freedom of expression', 'opposition' and 'political parties' hold little meaning for them, because they lie outside their cognitive field of experience. They were, nevertheless, expected to explain the constitution to the people, regardless of their lack of competence to do so. In spite of these reactions, in the National Assembly the local Chimi subsequently portrayed the people of this Geog as

eagerly waiting for discussions on the Constitution so that they can learn more about their responsibilities ('The Constitution: a grave responsibility', *Kuensel*, National Assembly, 2005).

The event poses the question as to why there is a need to engage the local citizens in such an obviously impossible task. The answer may be found in the way in which the 'gift' easily transmutes into a 'royal command', a phrase applied by the Dzongdag in the ceremony described earlier. This discourse became even more outspoken in the debates between the

Crown Prince and the people of Dagana, where he legitimised the change with a reference to the King:

His Royal Highness encouraged the people to fulfill His Majesty's command by taking active part in the discussions ('Crown Prince conducts public consultations on the Constitution in Dagana', *Kuensel*, 8 February 2006).

This was, of course, in line with the political system at this point in time. In this context the difference between the idea of a 'gift' given by the King and a royal command was of little relevance. Nevertheless, it signifies a need to uphold the cultural norms by applying more overt forms of discipline. It displays the apparent paradox between the expectation that the people should take on roles as active participants, but do so in obedience to a command. The paradox is reflected in the impressive representation of every household in the discussions, as observed by the Crown Prince:

His Royal Highness said that His Majesty the King would be particularly happy to know that every gewog and household had taken part in the fruitful discussions that he had conducted in Lhuentse, Trashy Yangtse, and Pema Gatshel ('The Crown Prince explains the Constitution to the people of Pemagatshel', *Kuensel*, 4 January 2006)

At the same time, however, the following explanation from a Bhutanese UN employee indicates that participation may not have been entirely voluntary: 'All households have to go to the village meetings. In some cases they have to pay for it if they fail to show up'.<sup>8</sup> This followed the widespread practice of fining those who were absent from village meetings (see Bothe 2011: 457). To the outside observer, there appeared to be some discrepancy between the image of faithful, loyal and obedient citizens and the need to discipline them to take on roles as participants. To the local governors, however, there was seemingly no contradiction. Rather, the need to civilise the citizens into cultured participants through disciplinary sanctions was altogether seen as intrinsically interlinked. In effect, one geog even used income from fines derived from absenteeism to

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8 Interview with Bhutanese working for an international organisation, Thimphu, 2005.

help fund courses on Driglam Namzha (interview, Mang Ap (deputy Gup), eastern Bhutan, July 2005).

Curiously, the King himself comes across as one of the few agents who poses a slightly alternative discourse to the dominant one of loyalty and unconditional obedience, as for instance can be seen in the way in which he applies the word ‘discussion’ to the process. However, when the King uses such words the participants are well socialised to interpret these in the normative context of *tsawasum*. This is apparent from his opening of the debates, where he presents the constitution as a product of the ‘trust and fidelity’ between ‘King, government, and the people’ (‘Draft Constitution to be distributed to all Bhutanese’ *Kuensel*, 23 March, 2005). These norms are reflected in public references to the debates, which are semantically described with sentences such as ‘explaining the constitution’ or ‘proposals for change’, and most frequently ‘clarifying doubts’. The absence of a vocabulary of ‘criticism’ and ‘influence’ in the discourse is equally noticeable. Words have real meaning, and reflect a normative context in which criticising the constitution is perceived as a betrayal of *tsawasum*.

The analysis, however, raises the question of whether the debates, as described in the summaries published in *Kuensel*, truly represent the views and sentiments of the ‘people’. What is striking is the absence of critical questions posed by the more liberal minded intellectual elite, quite a few of whom were sceptical about the constitution. This lack of critique is particularly remarkable at the meeting in Thimphu, given that it is the base of the educated middle class, which is normally seen to constitute a more vibrant and assertive section of the population. The editor of *Kuensel* illuminates this paradox:

Some of the comments were predictable, meaning that speakers focused on broad compliments and on His Majesty’s own phenomenal achievements more than the issues in the draft Constitution itself... There is, of course, the dilemma that we all face. We all know that the draft Constitution of the kingdom of Bhutan is a special document. Not only has it been initially drafted by a committee of selected representatives of Bhutanese society, it has been done so under the close guidance of His Majesty the King himself. Many of the citizens attending the Thimphu meeting did say that, given this formidable

background to the Constitution and their complete trust in it as an initiative of His Majesty the King, they did not even see the need to question any aspect of it ('The Constitution: much to learn', *Kuensel* editorial, 29 October 2005).

If one reads between the lines, this could be seen as a criticism of members of the elite for not daring to risk their careers by taking up critical issues. Interestingly, the author of the editorial includes himself in this critique with his remark that it is 'the dilemma that we all face'. In effect, it took an ordinary farmer to pose the only critical question at the meeting, although *Kuensel* refrained from referring to this. The lack of criticism reflects a general feeling of powerlessness and apathy among the liberal oriented elite with respect to their marginalisation in a process over which they held little influence, as narrated by an intellectual:

I did not attend, because I was not obliged to go. I did not want to attend, because it is like a mock session. Not real. You are not being true to yourself. You are being so artificial. Like when you have a drama: 'Let's have the mock session, and the real one will come out better afterwards.' Only there will be no real session. It wouldn't be the real thing. It would not be genuine. /.../. The Head went because he had to go, it was obligatory for him to go. But he came back early. He said: 'It's so boring. The people are thinking: 'The King' all the time (communication with public employee, 2006).

The narrative draws an analogy between the discussions and a rehearsal for a theatre play, but one without a first night. It is a play in which the script is already defined by the traditionalised norms of how to act, and even how to think. The debates therefore became a site for celebrating the myth of the King's wisdom and benevolence. This, in effect, is also likely to reflect how the vast majority of the citizens actually felt, though only a few were given the option of gaining knowledge of other ways of organising the relationship between the governors and the governed.

As the constitution was about to be enacted, there was a subtle, but important, change in the discourse on authority, which imbued the process with a sacralised undertone. The monastic members of Parliament naturally articulated such divine metaphors of authority most vividly, for

instance the Dorji Lopon (second highest religious leader):

May the wisdom of the Constitution, which is drafted with the help of jangchu sempas [bodhisattva, i.e. an enlightened being who renounces Nirvana] grow from strength to strength and cover the four corners of the world ('The Constitution: a grave responsibility', *Kuensel*, 22 June, 2005).

It is as if the historic myth of the Kings as Bodhisattvas (Aris 1994a: 109) had finally come true through the King's decision to involve the citizenry in the political process. Evidently, a document created with the help of a Bodhisattva is divine by nature. Even the 'people's' responsibility to participate in the process is given divine connotations as seen from the way in which the Prime Minister concludes with a plea to: 'fulfill this sacred responsibility' (The Constitution: a grave responsibility', *Kuensel*, 22 June 2005).

In contrast to the discourse in the National Assembly, the King promotes a secular discourse during his meetings with the people, both on issues of state authority in general and on the constitution in particular. The Crown Prince continues his father's discourse by encouraging the people's active participation. Yet there is a significant change from the secular to the sacred, as is also observed by Whitecross (forthcoming). With the loss of the King as a legitimising force, the secular discourse on the constitution seems to lose its persuasiveness. To reassert its legitimacy, the discourse on authority is sanctified, as is apparent from the speech of the Crown Prince in his opening consultation:

To me, personally, His Majesty is my King, my teacher, my inspiration, and my Tsawai Lam [root guru] ('Crown Prince holds his first historic consultation', *Kuensel*, 28 December 2005, reporting from Lhuentse).

Divine metaphors such as these serve the implicit purpose of legitimising the transfer of power by invoking the image of the divine King, who symbolises the state in the imagination of the citizens. However, this legitimacy is insufficient in a situation where this very symbol is abdicating. My interviews in rural communities suggest that such a situation can be expected to raise an array of local fears of chaos, war and

anarchy, because this is what the citizens have been taught will happen in a situation without the King (male 29 years and male 51 years, central Bhutan, interviewed May 2005). This, however, needs to be understood against the fact that their dependence on the King was a frequent topic at village meetings (male 49 years, eastern Bhutan, interviewed July 2005). His abdication therefore presents a compelling need to reassure them that order is being restored. In the process, the discussions change their strategic purpose, and now become occasions for reasserting the position of the next King in line:

While I am his oldest son – a Crown Prince – I have never in my life thought of myself as a Prince. I have always been, first and foremost, an ordinary subject whose only duty is to serve my King and country ('Crown Prince holds his first historic consultations', *Kuensel*, 28 December 2005, reporting from Lhuentse).

Despite the Crown Prince's claim to be an ordinary citizen—which of course every ordinary citizen will know he is not—he fulfils the people's expectations by reproducing the image of a king who humbly serves his people. By placing himself at the level of the ordinary citizens, he thus transgresses his role and elevates himself beyond the position of these, by carving out his image as a selfless ruler:

When I was granted the title of Trongsa Penlop here two years ago, I had only one thought. Every Trongsa Penlop has gone on to serve his nation and country selflessly in immeasurable ways. That is the legacy and duty to which I aspire. That is my goal ('Dzongkhag consultations ends, the future begins', *Kuensel*, 27 May 2006, reporting from Trongsa).

In this manner, the disorder the constitution threatens to bring is replaced by a sense of order represented by the continuity of the Wangchuck dynasty. During this drama one enlightened King retires, but is immediately replaced by the next in line with equivalent divine lineage and character. This discourse has real effects on the way in which authority is conceived of in the *Kuensel* narrative:



the people of Lhuentse said that they were overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia, given the changing times, and reassured by the confidence conveyed by His Royal Highness as he concluded his first Constitution meeting. Many shed tears. Many expressed their hope for the future ('Crown Prince holds his first historic consultations', *Kuensel*, 28 December 2005, reporting from Lhuentse).

Although *Kuensel* is likely to be selective in its presentation of the 'people's feelings', the statements are nevertheless likely to reflect the depth of the discourse on the monarchy.

This process of sacralising authority can be placed in a cultural perspective by the chapter on 'gift giving' in the aforementioned manual on Driglam Namzha:

When you prostrate to the His Holiness the Je Khenpo (highest religious authority) you should visualize him as the Buddha ... You also prostrate to His Majesty the King as the beloved Monarch (Lam and Tenzing 1999: 201).

In spite of the clear distinction between the religious and the mundane, this separation becomes blurred in practice. Both the Je Khenpo and the King carry a full yellow scarf, and the etiquette observed by their subjects in their presence are identical. Nevertheless, the discursive separation between the King as the beloved ruler and the Je Khenpo as a Buddha figure is important. During the process of debating the constitution, the discourse however seems to slip from that of the 'beloved monarch' to one in which the citizens are expected to also think of the monarch as a Buddha figure. This establishes an image of a sacralised relation between the state authority and the citizens, in which the King is elevated to a position of a divine being, and in his image the state nobility as such.

### **The hierarchies behind the drama**

Drawing on Bourdieu, deeper insight into the process can be gained by analysing it in the context of the hierarchies of the field. In this, interest is understood as formed by the field, or what Bourdieu terms *illusio*, as opposed to a narrow economic definition. The background for understanding the situation is the economic organisation of the

relationship between the state and its citizens, in which the farmers live in a subsistence economy and the state represents the principal venue for economic and symbolic profit.

The state nobility is situated at the top of the hierarchy. Unlike the metaphorical usage of this term by Bourdieu, the term 'nobility' should, in a Bhutanese context, be taken at face value, because high-ranking officials are awarded titles of nobility. They are firm believers in the idea that Bhutanese sovereignty is intricately linked with its ability to project the unified image of a traditionalised society to the outside world. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that they have a stake in maintaining one of the essential features of the traditionalised monarchy, i.e. the symbolic elevation of their authority. It is, effectively, in the image of the King that they are bestowed their noble titles and hence their position elevated above ordinary citizens. This is reflected in the way in which they are awarded scarfs of different colours that mark their different position in the hierarchy. It is, however, not that they crave this prestige and honour. Rather, they have come to see this symbolic hierarchy as the foundation of social order (see also Bothe 2011: 226-228).

Located in between the state nobility and the local citizens are the local elites. During the debates on the constitution, it is almost invariably these who pose the questions. They have little exposure to liberal discourses. Instead, they essentially view social order as being upheld by the ritualisation of the hierarchies that are defined by the traditionalised cultural system. Because the King legitimises the system, social order is seen to revolve around his figure. This, however, also cannot be separated from the fact that they are the group most likely to have the strongest interests vested in the monarchy at the local level. In effect, their role as mediators between the population and the monarchy has elevated their position of power to one above that of the ordinary citizenry, in both symbolic and economic terms. What they want is therefore for the King to remain in power, judging from their questions as printed in *Kuensel*. This is evident from this assertion by a local representative:

The Druk Gyalpo should continue to be the final appellate authority to whom the Bhutanese people should continue to appeal for justice ... ('The unfolding of a new era', *Kuensel*, 30 November 2005, reporting from Punakha).

Placed at the bottom of the hierarchy are the local citizens, who are situated in a position of what Mann terms ‘organizational outflanking’—a situation formed by their lack of knowledge, alliance partners and organisational resources, in combination with their ignorance of the strategies of power (1986: 7). A principal cause of this position is their isolation from the outside world, which means that their political horizon is demarcated by the national borders, and for the majority even by the slopes of the surrounding mountains. There are, however, also more profound reasons for this. During a human rights campaign prior to the elections, international development workers were clearly instructed not to discuss the political and civil rights aspects of the human rights charter with Bhutanese citizens (conversation with international development worker, December 2010). Hence, whilst the citizens were in the process of being granted new rights, they were not allowed to become acquainted with these. Rather, according to their accounts, they were repeatedly imprinted with narratives of the benevolent and paternalistic King, and in his image the governmental authorities who take good care of their subjects. This was set in contrast to a situation of chaos, anarchy and war in other countries. It contextualises why the citizens were ‘fearful of the potential threat to their beloved monarch and his son’, as noted by Whitecross (forthcoming).

Seen in this light, the process of ‘gifting’ the constitution appears to serve a purpose other than that of popularising it—namely, to convince the subjects, and in particular the local elite, that the reform follows the historic tradition of guided reform, with the Wangchuck monarchy as the principal catalyst of change. Its effect is to legitimise the reform by attaching it to the norms of a reciprocal obligation, which induces the unwilling elite to embrace the King’s ‘gift’ with loyalty and dedication.

In this analysis lies the clue to understanding the strategic purpose served by the discourse of ‘gifting the constitution’ (although this, in a Foucauldian spirit, should not be seen as a conscious strategy). It evidently does not serve the principal purpose of introducing the citizens to the political and civil rights given to them in the constitution, with which they are not allowed to become acquainted. Rather, it serves to reproduce a relationship of reciprocity under the normative prescription of *tsawasum* and *Driglam Namzha*. In this they are given the right to choose their leaders, but they are also kept in their position as subjects of the

state. This is a highly hierarchical relationship, which provides the state representatives with an aura of divinity whilst the citizens are relegated to an inferior position.

### Conclusion

'Forgetting', wrote the distinguished historian Ernest Renan, 'is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation' (1990: 11). In Bhutanese discourse the constitution is imagined as a gift, in the argument that it is not claimed by the people, but given to them by their benevolent monarch. Meanwhile, the popular campaigns for democracy and citizenship rights that took place only a decade before the reforms seem to have been forgotten, along with the voices of the Bhutanese living in exile. Instead, the narrative of the constitution as a gift seems to serve an implicit strategy of delinking the reforms from those events.

The idea of the constitution as a gift, however, makes it a rather unusual one. It is one that is presumably neither intended by the giver, the King, who wants the citizens to take responsibility for the process, nor do the receivers, the 'people', whose imaginary is shaped by the paternalistic narrative of the King, necessarily want it.

Rather than representing an absolute truth, the notion of the gift serves the purpose of reproducing a traditionalised image of authority. This places the idea of the constitution as a gift in a different light. It is a gift that implies a relationship of reciprocity between the 'gift givers', in the image of the benevolent and deified authorities, and the 'giftees', viewed as their loyal subjects. In this sense, the 'gift' renews the contractual relation between the state and the people. The citizens gain the right to choose their leaders, but continue to be expected to vest their unconditional loyalty and trust in the state authorities. The main strategic effect of the debate is therefore to reproduce the normative bond of loyalty between the governors and the governed, under the norm-set of *tsawasum*.

Translated into a local reality, the drama therefore serves to alter the political landscape on its surface, but not in any depth. While the system is reformed, the worldview of the Drukpa establishment retains its dominant position, upheld by the continuation of the Wangchuck dynasty. As such, the debates came to be a scene for legitimising the change, whilst reproducing authoritarian discourses and relations of authority.

The process of 'gifting' the constitution to the people therefore appears

to serve highly contemporary strategies of power. It can, arguably, best be understood from Bourdieu's perspective, as a process of consolidating the symbolic domination of the governing elite over the citizens. In contrast to overt coercion, he argues, symbolic domination is a gentle and invisible process, because of the obligation of trust and personal loyalty implied in the process of giving such a selfless and benevolent gift. Borrowing his eloquent formulation, gift giving

...enables domination to be established and maintained through strategies which are softened and disguised and which conceal domination beneath the veil of an enchanted relation... It enables those who benefit most from the system to convince those who benefit least from grasping the basis of their own deprivation (1991: 24-25).

As such, the 'gift' discourse seems more suited to promoting the interests of those who are already in privileged positions of power, rather than including those who are marginalised. The ones to gain the least from the process are the local citizens, who are spectators in a process that lies far beyond their framework of knowledge. Following Mann, it is because of their position of organisational outflanking that they consent to a situation in which they are dominated by others (1986: 7). This is caused by the unequal distribution of knowledge. At the top are the state nobility who are well educated and exposed to the world, and who have the power to manage the development funds provided by the international community. At the other extreme are the rural citizens who are kept isolated from external discourses on rights and political deliberations. What is remarkable is how such practices, which strategically aim at isolating the citizens from this knowledge, occur during an announced reorganisation of political practices that is designed to lead to the introduction of these very same rights. Instead, narratives of state authorities as protective paternal figures form their imaginary. They therefore lack the crucial knowledge that might enable them to understand the process in which they are compelled to engage. It would, however, be too un-nuanced to view this as a conscious elite attempt at seizing power. Rather, their worldview conditions them to maintain the hierarchies in a way that will not threaten or upset the current social order and the normative 'bond of

loyalty' that defines the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The ones who gain the most are the members of the Drukpa elite, who have come to view the narrative of 'culture as national self-defence' as an unquestioned truth. They have, to a high degree, managed to divert attention from Bhutan's image during the 1990s of a country torn by ethnic conflict and dissent over citizen rights. Instead, they have succeeded in painting an image of the country as a lost 'Shangri la' that promotes a policy of happiness. The narrative of the benevolent King who gives the constitution as a gift to his people has served this strategy well. As one of its rewards, it has gained India's recognition of Bhutan as a fully-fledged sovereign state in the shape of a document that is gifted to Bhutan on the eve of its constitutional monarchy— and this is a gift that is, indeed, both intended and wanted.

Seen from the outside, the Bhutanese process is testimony to how the current tendency to romanticise traditional, oriental and nationalist discourses facilitates the maintenance of forms of authority that are essentially authoritarian in nature. This orientalist view has guided the governing elite on a path that is barely compatible with liberal ideas of freedom and equal worth, and which serves to refer the citizens to the role of supplicants, as opposed to becoming an engaged demos in the future. This, I argue, is no coincidence, but rather an effect of the essentialist view of state formation. As argued by Calhoun:

... where nationalist rhetoric stresses oneness at the expense of a notion of a differentiated public, it becomes repressive not just of minorities, but of all citizens (1995: 254).

It is not that liberalism is incompatible with traditional Bhutanese culture. Rather, it is the homogenisation, standardisation and politicisation of tradition that is incompatible with liberalism. As such, the main problem lies with the essentialist discourse itself, and in particular the idea that the national security of a small country is contingent upon its ability to project a unique culture shared by the entire nation.

Meanwhile, one should not be blind to the fact that the rights of citizens are, for the first time in Bhutanese history, inscribed in the fundamental law of the state. This makes the constitution a rather potent tool for future contestations. Thus, in spite of the ceremonial revitalisation of autocratic

forms of authority, the process may yet open up new spaces for claiming rights, once ordinary citizens are acquainted with them.

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