

The Historical Anecdotes of Kheng Nobilities*

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Abstract

Social roles and political power of various kheng nobilities like Dung (gDung), Khoche, Gadpo (rgad-po) and Ponpo (dpon-po) of medieaval Bhutan declined especially after many social and political reforms initiated by the Third King in the early 1950s. This landmark reform abolished serfdom which then prevailed all over the country. These noble families did not enjoy social ascendancy or respect of the past and their noble ancestral claims were cast aside as anachronistic past as the country progressed through several reforms of the successive monarchs. Modern education has further diminished knowledge about them and only a few descendants know a little about their lineages. Until now, research on this subject has appeared almost insurmountable, as available literatures are either lost or inaccessible. The old people are the only reliable sources of information who transmit information orally if they can remember anything.

In absence of any scholarship on the subject, this article

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draws heavily on the oral sources to construct a rough hi(story), and shed some light on the subject. Where available, literary sources were referred. This discrete chronicle does not focus on one topic, but explores various themes that are related to the nobility.

Decline of Kheng Nobilities

Families of dung, ponpo, khoche and gadpo in kheng enjoyed immense social, political and religious dominance in the region until some powerful religious lineages or 'aristocratic families' called choje (lords of religion) emerged to countervail them during the pre-17th century. These families were confined to their own territorial space and were not necessarily unified. But some inter-marriages took place among them and they often joined their small forces against their common local hegemony and rival elites. Zhabdrung Rinpoche's arrival in 1616 further changed their social and functional dominance. Emergence of the centralised state gradually degraded their power since the theocratic state found it difficult to function efficiently amidst contending noble families. It was crucial for the state to prevail over territorial rulers and unite them under one central rule. The unification process resulted in military campaign in the eastern and central regions led by Tongsa Penlop Chogyal Minjur Tenpa (1613-1680) and Lama Namsey Dorji. The government forces defeated the local elites of Kheng along with many other petty rulers in eastern and central Bhutan who were forced to conform to the new political regime though they were not seriously weakened. It was important for the state not to deprive them of their privileges completely in order to obtain their consent to the changing social and political institutions. Their subjections were acknowledged through an oath of loyalty to Drukpa state and government. The state distributed to them statues of Zhabdrung Rinpoche to recognize them as Zhabdrung's privileged subjects. These statues are preserved now in many of the nobles' houses.

The expansion of the central authority, however, did not absolutely eliminate them as a socio-political force, until the

third king abolished the slavery system in 1950s. The nobilities continued to dominate the public affairs and collected revenue for the government. They also made the Mon villagers to toil on dung's manor farms for some specific months and pay tax in kind. The government allowed such informal subordination of the monpas to extent that it did not bear too strongly on the state function. Until recent period, the nobles monopolized the hereditary post of the gup and took over some administrative roles and religious responsibilities.

Consolidation of power transformed them spiritually from pre-Buddhist faith to Buddhism. The practice of pre-Buddhist faith was indispensable because honouring and propitiating gods of heavens was a spiritual means of exerting their noble ancestry, and hence guaranteeing the respect of the community. Spread of Buddhism in the region on the one hand and their aspirations to maintain their spiritual superiority encouraged them to become patrons (dbyin bdag) of many Buddhist luminaries who visited Kheng.

Contended Origin of *Kheng Nobilities*

'Dung' refers to the patrilineal noble families of Bumthang, Kheng and Kurtoe. The term was used either as a title of an adult male noble or referred to a noble's household. According to various written sources,¹ dung nobilities in kheng spread from Ura Dung Nagpo (ura gdung gnag po) believed to have descended from the sky.² Guse Langling alias Lhagon Pelchen ruled Ura and adjoining places for many years. His son Dung Nagpo Dragpa Wangchuk continued to rule the domain but he died without any heir. His reincarnation, Lhawang Dragpa was born in Yarlung Drongmoche in Central Tibet and was later ennobled as Ura Dung. Chume Dung, Domkhar Dung, Dur Dung and Gyatsa Dung were the descendants of his legitimate sons from Chokor Ashi Drenzom. While visiting his landed estates in kheng to collect annual taxes, he fathered a son called Nima Wangyal through an extramarital affair with Ponmo Tashi Wangmo. The noble son then became the main progenitor of Nyakhar Dung and other dung lineages in

kheng.

The origin of dung discussed by John Ardussi (2004:60-72) proves contrary to the ancestral myths of dung described in the other Bhutanese sources. By Ardussi's theory, the Gdung were not primarily an aboriginal people of Bhutan, but rather a somewhat scattered 'southern' (Ch. Lho-pa) population occupying the highlands of south-central Tibet, from Phari in the west to Lhobrak in the east, living of the land and by hunting. Branch families may have inhabited parts of Bhutan, but they were not the main body.³ Aris (1979) conversely ascertained that the term 'dung' was associated with Lhasay Tsangma's descendants in 12th century, before Gelugpa's invasion of the dung-reng and lho-dung in South Tibet who fled to Bhutan and Tawang only in 14th Century. The rGyal-rigs (f.11b) records a local tradition concerning two 'important clans' (rus che-ba) in the west, the rGyal-dung of Apa-grop and gDung-'brog of Thimphu, both of whom descended from a son of Prince Tsangma. It is only... 'clan'. No one seems to remember the rGyal-gdung and gDung-'brog today, though a motley group of jungle -dwellers living far to the south of sPagro are still called the gDung (Aris, 1979).

Khoches were the noble families of lower kheng who were dominant in areas close to Assam and Bengal. At this stage, it is impossible to explain if khoches of Bhutan shared blood kinship with lost tribes of Khen and Khoch in Assam and Bengal. There was a significant trade relationship between khengpas and Indians. During winter seasons the people of hill had to migrate to the plains with their goats and sheep. Khengpas were known for their excellence in warfare and statecraft. A Khen chief established a dynasty in Kamata (kamrupa) by virtue of his courage and skill. We have evidence of three kheng kings of this dynasty who ruled Kamrupa (Kamta). According to Pelgen and Rigden (2000), Khoches of kheng once ruled the Assamese provinces of Kokabari, Rangapani and Gohali.⁴ Whether the khoches mentioned by these authors were the descents of Khen dynasty of Kamta needs to be ascertained. Local tradition

holds that Khoches were the direct descendants of Lhasey Tsangma, a grandson of Tibetan king Thrisong Deutsen. Lhasey Tsangma came to Bhutan in the 9th century. This can be substantiated by the fact that the descendants of this prince established Byar-pa⁵ families in Kheng Joka and Ngangla where khoches were based. I would hypothesize that Byar-pa families in Joka and Ngangla once ruled the khen and koch tribes of the plains. Through this association Byar-pa families came to be known as Joka and Ngangla khoches.

Dakpai, Kikhar Jang, Tali and Buli Ponpos were another group of noble families who dominated the middle *kheng*. It is unlikely that these families descended from *dung* nobility though local tradition traces their ancestors to *dung* families. They should be considered a different group of nobilities, otherwise it would not justify the titles being different. This category of noble family could have existed as early as *dung's* historical origin in *kheng* or even earlier. One plausible hypothesis is that this nobility originated far back to Lhasey Tsangma's period. It is mentioned in *Gyalrig* that Lhasey Tsangma passed through *Kheng* Tali and Buli while on his route to Jamkhar. Known for his royal ancestry, wealthy local families would have hosted the prince. If so, these families would have been later distinguished as 'ponpo' to recognize their association with the prince (locally called 'pon'). Kikhar and Dakpai were two other villages where *ponpos* lived, but mention of these places is not made in *Gyalrig*. However, it is possible that Lhasey Tsangma passed through them as these places fall on the lateral route to Tali, and the name Kikhar may have originated from Lhasey Tsangma's concept of 'khar' or Dzong which are prevalent in eastern Bhutan.

The title 'ponmo' had been given to Ura Dung Dragpa Wangchuk's mistress Tashi Wangmo of Kheng Nyakhar. It is difficult to determine if she had been thus titled even before her affair with Ura Dung. Local tradition holds that Lhasey Tsangma visited Nyakhar. It was he who named the place Nya-khar locally meaning 'break of day'. He prophesized that a man from Bumthang would bring in power and prosperity

to the host family just like the breaking of dawn.⁶ The man of the prophecy could have been Ura Dung Dragpa Wangchuk.

Another theory regarding the origin of ponpo is that they would have descended from the Ponpos of Bumthang. According to *Gyalrig*, the king Langdarma's campaign to destroy the teachings of Buddha in Tibet led to the escape of the six Dorji (vajra) brothers of Lhalung Palgye Dorji from Tibet to southern lands. Three brothers arrived at Bumthang and settled in Tang and Chokor. Their descendants became the ponpos of Tang and Chokor. The other three brothers came from Lhodrak and arrived at Kurilung. The descendants of Dragpa Dorji gained power over Kurilung and started the families of Kurilung Ponchen and Zhelngo. Changrig Dorji's descendants went to Zhongar Molbalungpa and gained control over Khengpa.⁷ The descendants of Changrig Dorji might have started ponpo nobility.

Gadpo families were equally influential but were believed to have no noble ancestry. They were ennobled based on their intelligence (saila), strength (khego), and wealth (junor). Gadpos were known for their courage and skills during warfare. Because of such qualities, people unanimously recognized them as their leader who would give them protection from adversaries and dispense justice in the community. Gadpopa is referred to a performer during a local festival called Chodpa in Goshing. He performs dances and prays for longevity, wisdom, and prosperity through exhaustive use of mockery and obscene language. He traces his origin to the abode of Lha-Jajin (Lord Indra). As revealed by his ritual recitation, he makes his psychic journey from the heaven through Ura to the present place. This is clear from the verses about his encounter with Ura Nad-mo (female host of Ura).⁸ It is uncertain whether gadpo nobility of kheng can claim their noble ancestry like Gadpopa.

Religious superiority for Social Distinctions

The expansion of religious aristocrats' (cho-je) control over western Bhutan entailed non-religious nobilities to express

their superiority through their faith in pre-Buddhist practices that constitute a mix of animism, Bon religion, and Buddhism, and later as Buddhist patrons. Most of the kheng nobilities worshipped the god of heavens, nature, and local deities. They played important roles in religious invocations of non-Buddhist gods and local deities. This is clear from some ritualistic prayer verses. An invocation verse of Bonpo during Goleng roop asserts that Tenpa Shenrab, the founder of Bon, had introduced various rituals and festivals in kheng like roop in Goleng dung, Shu in Tali and Buli Ponpo, mitshim in Tagma Dung, kharphu in Shar Tongpa and gadang in Ngala and Bjoka Khoches. It is an exaggeration to claim that Tenpa Shenrab had visited Kheng, but it is possible that his followers came to Monyul following Guru Rinpoche's widespread annihilation of Bon religion in Tibet. A few of them might have traveled to or through kheng leaving a legacy of Bon practices that blended well with existing animism.

While their [dung in particular] origin were never associated with religious schools as were chojes, and although they never functioned (except somewhat fortuitously) as lamas, it would have been impossible for them to claim legitimacy of their rule without associating their line with certain divine properties.⁹ Most of the non-Buddhist rituals begin from the attic, floor, or surrounding areas of noble houses where offerings are made to Ode-Gongyal, Tenpa Shenrab, Ama Gung-lhai-gyalmo and others. Local people believe that the houses of nobles are closer to the heavens. It would make it easier for gods to descend to earth through the houses of nobles who are already believed to have ancestral linkages with the gods of heaven. Later with the spread of Buddhism, some of these Bon practices had either become completely extinct like Tagma Dung or they are practiced in a simplified form like roop in Goleng Dung.

The nobilities continued to dominate religious affairs even after major replacement of the traditional faith with Buddhism. The emerging state recognized Buddhism as

indispensable if social order was to be created uniformly. The nobles were central in public affairs. They also took important responsibilities in the community's religious function, aside from their social and political role as the functionary agents of the state government. They were distinguished from the rest through their possession of Zhabdrung's statue in their houses. Most of the important religious ceremonies had to be initiated in these houses. Nobles' mansions functioned as temples before the community temples were built. Even the oldest temples, if there were any, were taken care by these noble families. Some of them were also privileged hosts and patrons of important Buddhist saints such as Pema Lingpa, Thuksey Dawa Gyeltshen and others. All these indicate the religious superiority enjoyed by these nobilities.

Space of Nobilities within *Khenrig Nam Sum*

Traditional division of kheng into three regions was purely based on physical proximity of each division to Zhemgang Dzong. Such division was instituted to ease out the administrative difficulties and to simplify tax collection and labour mobilization for the state. Tagma Chogpa (Lower Kheng), Nangkorpa (Middle Kheng) and Chikorpa (Upper Kheng) were the three major divisions. Zhemgang Dzongpon was responsible for administering all three regions. But with repeated damage of the Dzong by earthquakes and fire, it became inconvenient for the people of upper kheng to mobilize labour frequently owing to remoteness of the regions from the Dzong. In the late 19th century, following a revolt against the Dzongpon, the upper kheng was directly administered from Wangdicholing in Bumthang and the inhabitants were known as Wangleng Suma. They were exempted from taxes and labour services to the state government. This short-term arrangement later led to conflict between Tunglabi Dung under Chikor division and rest of the nobilities of Tamachok and Nangkor divisions led by Nyakhar Dung.

Nobilities under Tamachok division were Tagma Dung, Samkhar Dung, Subrang Dung, Zurphai Dung, Gomphu

Gadpo, Nangla Khoche and Joka Khoche. Virtually, all noble families were powerful, but two of them had prerogative by virtue of their geographical locations. The axioms, Tagma Dung tagi guyung (tiger's head) and Joka (Dogar) Koche sergy di mig (the golden key) or Go tagma dung; Jug Joka khoche (head-Tagma Dung and Tail-Joka Khoche) provide evidence to their leadership roles among the nobilities. The nobilities under Nangkor division included Dakpai Ponpo, Kikhar Jang Ponpo, Buli Ponpo, Tali Ponpo, Goleng Dung and Nyakhar Dung. Shingkar Dung, Tunlabi Dung, Kuther Dung, Wamling Gadpo, Bardo Gadpo and Khomshar Gadpo were the nobilities under Chikor division.

Tagma Dung's Extraordinary Encounter with Terton Pema Lingpa

As mentioned earlier, Tagma is located close to Zhemgang Dzong on the hilltop facing Jowo-Durshing. Tagma and Samkhar are also mentioned in Guru Rinpoche's Nye-yig of Jowo Durshing. The names of the places associated with this village were mostly derived from a female tigress (tag-mo) that roamed the hill, frequently killing inhabitants and domestic animals. Talagang (tiger- hill), Tagabi (tiger-meadow), Talajong (tiger-land), Tagkhai (twenty-tigers) and Ta-gam (tiger-gorge) are some other adjoining places. An Assamese saint was said to have visited the village and tamed the tigress by feeding it with milk. His statue is preserved until today, but it cannot be identified.

Tagma Dung's mansion was also known by another name, Kharsangpong Chukpo. Local history accounts that Tagma Dung alias Kharsangpong Chugpo met Pema Lingpa. It was an extraordinary meeting because the latter made a supernatural visit to Kharsangpong Chugpo. Tagma Dung had intense faith in Pema Lingpa but did not have the privilege of meeting him. Driven by his unwavering faith in him, he prayed to the terton even during his meals to visit his house. On one of his meals, he envisaged Pema Lingpa seated in front of him on the animal hide. He offered his imaginary terton with foods and drinks, saying, "Lama, relish on my

offering, while I eat in your company."

While Lama did not appear physically in front of him, the tertön paid him an unusual visit. It was later known from a man from Berti that Pema Lingpa came to Kharsangpong Chugpo's house. A man was returning from his village to his master's house when he saw a lay-monk sleeping near a rock in Takhai. The monk told him that he was invited by Kharsangpong Chugpo for a meal and got drunk. He found out later that no such monk ever visited his master. It was, as discussed earlier, a miraculous visit. Perhaps, Chugpo would have seen him, though the other people in the house did not see him.¹⁰ Local belief that Pema Lingpa might have pre-determined the arrival of his body relics (kudung) in Tagma after more than hundred years to remain there hidden for years under Tagma Dung's custody can be true.

The Arrival of Pema Lingpa's *Kudung* in Tagma

The previous bond between Pema Lingpa and Kharsangpong Chugpo brought the kudung of tertön in Tagma Gonphai some hundred years later. It so happened that Zhabdrung Rinpoche decreed Chogyal Minjur Tenpa in 1656 (?) to secure the relic to Punakha Dzong from Tamzhing Lhundrupcholing. Intending to safeguard the relic and avoid it being taken to Punakha Dzong, his custodian and other devotees escaped to Tagma Gonphai. At that time, Tagma Gonphai was inaccessible area, and it was home to many wild animals including elephants and tigers.

The kudung was moved from Tamzhing to Tagma Gonphai through Phromzor Mon and Nabji Korphu. The places along the route got their names from this event. The kudung had to be rested in several places along the route. The first place that I can account at this stage is Pemathang, just opposite Korphu; the other places before it have not been ascertained. Pemathang was thus named because it resembled a lotus flower. In Tashithang, a group of nuns offered a Tashi Mendey to the kudung. The kudung was then carried across Tashiphu and arrived at Thridangbi (thri - oral transmission, nang -

give and bi - ground). The natives were given religious oral transmission and received the kudung's blessings. They crossed various streams and passed through a thick jungle called Zegang Yungba (ze-leopard and yungba-jungle) infested with leopards. When they arrived at Torsengmed (tor-offer) they made water offering to the kudung. They climbed down to a Mon village of Berti where they met some folks involved in a bitter brawl. The place was thus known as Berti, 'ber' locally mean a brawl. They came to a place where Tagma Dung and his subjects came to receive the relic. This place was later named as Lama-gam (Lama- refers to kudung, gam-receive). The relic was then taken through Dung-jud, a place where men from Tagma Dung's household used to contest and test their strengths and skills by jumping over a huge rock, traveled farther through Takhai (twenty-tigers) and arrived at Zhuthrithang (zhuthri-throne, thang-ground) where the kudung was kept on a throne prepared by Tagma Dung. The relic finally reached Tharpacholing, which was their proposed destination. 'Tharpa' in local dialect means escaped from someone or something. It must have been so named to indicate that the relic was saved from its enemy.¹¹

The kudung was retained inside a rectangular pit on a mound resembling an elephant's nose. This hill was known to be a sanctuary for wild elephants, tigers, and other animals. They dug trenches around it to protect the relic from beasts. It was then moved to a base close to a pond (dawar) to keep it away from the strong winter winds. One of the devotees went to Lhodrak and brought Jangchub Choten to preserve the sacred remains. Tagma Dung helped in building a temple to house the relic. The entire relics were taken care of by Tagma Dung. Bi-annual religious ceremony in honour of Terton Pema Lingpa was initiated and conducted by several generations of Tagma Dung. The descendants of Tagma Dung have to send butter (mar-phod) and flour (phi-phod) offerings today while conducting Peling Kuchey. Until recently, this nobility had an authority to reveal the relics to public. In absence of Dung, Khraipa Apa was allowed to do so. Later on, Lama Phuntsho and Khyentshe Rinpoche were authorized by

the government to handle the relics.

Another oral history accounts that Pema Lingpa visited Tharpacholing in the form of a white bird. While visiting kheng Buli, he turned into a white bird and flew to Tagma Gonphai. The bird perched on a hill like an elephant's nose. It was at this time that he destined the arrival of his body remains in Tagma.¹² But, according to Rigden and Pelgen,¹³ Pema Lingpa built Tharpacholing monastery in Tagma Gonphai while on his way from Kurtoe to Tagma via Nabji Korphu. He dedicated the temple to Palden Lhamo to tame tigers and elephants, which posed dangers to villagers of Tagma and bordering areas.

The kudung is said to have remained there for more than two and half centuries, until Choje Ugyen Phuntsho took it to Yudrungcholing in Trongsa. It is accepted in the official dominion that the kudung is in Punakha Dzong in Machen Lhakhang. Another view contends that it was not moved anywhere from Yudrungcholing. The attempt to take it back to Tamshing failed after a route to Tamshing was damaged by landslide. It was taken as a bad omen and the kudung was not moved out of Yudrungcholing.¹⁴ Although the kudung had been moved, the other relics including his wardrobe and masterworks were retained, some of which were taken to Khorphu Lhakhang by Lama Phuntsho.

Tagma Dung's Subordination of Berti Mon

Tagma Dung ruled his subjects like Berti Mon and khraipa from his manor house called Umpang Dzong. It was a tall three-storied building with nine doors. It is not known when the Dzong was built, but it must have collapsed around 1882 when Drongsep Singye Namgyal was assisting Jakar Dzongpon Pema Tenzin in a war against Trongsa Penlop Dungkar Gyeltshen. Dzongpon Tsangla, the second Dzongpon of Zhemgang Dzong rebuilt it. He was known to have come from Buli Ponpo nobility and married Prengpa, the daughter of Tagma Dung. The ruins of the Dzong are visible today.

Berti Mon were the community living in the black mountain areas similar to monpas of Chunseng and Phrumzor. Tagma Dung maintained intimate personal servitude of Berti Mon and exerted some control over Phrumzor Mon. It is difficult to determine the exact period when such slave institution began, but some evidence points that it existed back to 12th century when Kharsangpong Chugpo had the spiritual encounter with Terton Pema Lingpa. The meeting of Pema Lingpa in Tagkhai by a 'so-called Kharsangpong Chugpo's servant from Berti' bore witness to bondage relationship between them. The power of noble lordship was defined by an agreement (gen-ja) signed in the presence of local deities like Nadpo Rinchen Drakpo, Chunglai Lhasang Karpo, Dhongai Tsanchen Marpo, Kibulungtsan and Aka Raja. This relationship was personal rather than territorial in nature. The conditions laid down in the gen-ja speaks so much about the services that Berti Mon would have to render to Tagma Dung until crows turned white.

This is clear from the Berti Mon's commitment to a close bond of personal serfdom even with the change in social and political institution in the country. One reason for such commitment could have been an extra-ordinary agreement between them. Betraying the conditions laid down in the gen-ja meant death and famines in Berti. One of the conditions stated that Berti Mon would serve Tagma Dung with loyalty until crow turns white. To further strengthen the bond and re-affirm their loyalty, the elders of Berti Mon came to pledge their commitment during an annual ritual in Tagma Dung's house. Such commitment was made to Dung Wangdi, possibly three generations ago. The other motive behind this was to escape the subjugation by the regional aristocrats of Pelri and Lame Gompa in Bumthang.¹⁵ They feared that becoming their subject would necessitate them to work harder, pay more taxes and deliver load farther.

Some generations of Tagma Dung were said to have exerted coercive rule over their domestic servants who had to carry out intense manorial labours- almost day and night- for

meager amount of foods. They were levied heavy meat, fish and grain taxes, sometimes even to the threshold of starvation. Elderly people from Berti recount the hard work and extreme punishment they were subjected to by their stern lords, barely getting time even to attend to nature's call. Berti community had to provide one man as Dung Apa's personal servant (arpo) on a rotation basis until 1970s.

In the course of time, the number of days Berti Mon had to work in Dung's household was reduced to ten days. During the second King's reign, Berti community made some attempt to violate the agreement. They appealed to the King to relieve them from Dung's control and upgrade them to the status of khraipa. But, since non-human witnesses were involved in bond-agreement, breaking the bondage resulted in a series of misfortunes such as famines and death of the community members. Apologies were made to the deities several times; however, breaking the oath is believed to have incensed the deities further bringing inflictions to both the parties involved. To redress the situation, Dung Thinley Dorji took an initiative to desecrate the genja by involving the descendants of Berti Mon. It was burnt during one of the religious ceremonies organized by Meme Thinley in 1990 with extensive ceremonies, and both the parties made prayers of apologies to the deities. Chumi Gonpa Lama Yeshey Dorji performed desecration rituals.

Disintegration of Samkhar Dung

Samkhar Dung once controlled the community of Samkhar and Chungseng Monpa, the communities located close to Surey- today's Jigmecholing (Sarpang Dzongkhag). Instabilities within the family disintegrated Samkhar Dung, thus leading to a 'deserted village' that was later re-settled by Lhotsampas in 1950s. The internal dispute between brothers over family rights and inheritance was the principal cause of the family breakdown. To make matters worse, their mother allied with the younger brother, and explored whatever means available to ensure that manorial holdings and entitlements were passed to him, deviating from patrilineal tradition of

Dung that required the eldest son to become the heir.

She obliged her two sons to accept the contest that she had devised in such a way to favour the younger son. Two sons were called to a ground above their manor house and made to jump on a cow skin laid on the ground, with the criterion that whoever stood firm on the skin was to take over the family rights. She laid the skin in such a position that the elder brother skidded down. She altered its position when the younger brother jumped on it that the hairs gripped his feet firmly. The younger brother's victory, however, did not resolve the conflict. Instead it flared into a war that the subjects were even forced to flee to Shar Wotap. He became aware of a fatal outcome of his leadership rivaled by his own brother. To safeguard his own life, he ceded all his holdings to Lame Gonpa aristocrats. The latter acknowledged him with a decree authorizing two brothers to settle on any land located between the boundaries of Joka Khoche and Tama Dung.

The mother grew weary of the situation that bore too much on her and their subjects. She cursed her sons and prayed that no male descendants be born to future generations, thus ending the Dung lineage. The females dominated several generations of Samkhar Dung; the born males were mostly disabled. The intra-family tussle infuriated the protective deities who chased the entire family up to Pong Angla Ungli¹⁶ (hill) above Tama Gonpa. Local tradition holds that an unknown saint from India came to save them from the deities. He would have been the same saint who was believed to have tamed the tigress in Tagma. Stones resembling statues of Guru Rinpoche and Jitsun Drolma were discovered in Pong Ungla Ungling.¹⁷ The family members of Samkhar Dung escaped to the territory of Zurphai Dung, who provided them with land in exchange for a pig and a matangma of ara.

Fateful Collapse of Nyakhar Dung and Its Cause

The pretentious conduct of Nyakhar Dung and his ambitious hunt to become a regional hegemony led to the fateful end of his lineage. The other nobilities and the central government

alike dreaded his aggressive nature over others, which led the central force to crush it. This nobility as a direct descendant of Dung Nima Wangyal, the illegitimate son of Ura Dung Dragpa Wangchuk and as the family who hosted Lhasey Tsangma, enjoyed the sense of superiority over others.

The way Nyakhar Dung (maybe Nima Wangyal) had looked for an appropriate site to build his temple reveals much about his supernatural qualities. He climbed a hill and threw a cymbal¹⁸, assured that the site where the cymbal had landed would be suitable for the construction. The cymbal, at first whirled horizontally over Melongbi, swirled farther and then settled on the ground where Nyakhar Lhaxhang stands now. He had prophesized that water would flow from the site as a gift from the lord of serpent (klu),¹⁹ which proved true.

Meme Tshampa identifies imprints on the rocks above Zhobleng as those of Guru Rinpoche. But, others consider that Nyakhar Dung left those imprints to mark his victory over a serpent god. The serpent god was hacked into several pieces. These bodies turned into a long stretch of rocks that looked like serpent, and are seen even now. The snake had vowed, "My life lasted short; so will the lineage of Nyakhar Dung be totally wiped out." This is confirmed by the present situation where no trace of his lineage exists at all, and if so, only a few of them.

His innate tendency to exhibit his power and influence in the region through warfare made several local nobilities angry and provoked their jealousies. Tunglabi Dung was the strongest rival, who intending to eliminate its relentless opponent took advantage of Chogyal Minjur Tenpa's military campaign in Kheng. Norbu Wangchuk also known as Tunglabi Dung sounded in secret to Lam Namsey about Nyakhar Dung's mounting influence and his potential threat to the process of unification. This led to the central government's crusade against Nyakhar Dung, in which the latter was devastated despite its strong resistance. The Dzong was set on fire and the family members were taken as

captives. He demonstrated his extraordinary strength in this war. He was known to have endured several bullets fired by soldiers of the central government.²⁰

Although the Drukpa army crushed Nyakhar Dung, Zhabdrung looked at him with delight and compassion and returned his privileges after the golden yoke of secular law and silken knot of religious principle had been administered on him and other nobilities of the east and central regions. This is summed up as follows: “But on seeing with loving compassion that king dGa’-ba and the Great Chief Dar-ma of Gung=gdung, the gDung of Nya-mkhar, the descendants of Bla-ma rGyal-mtshan and, more over, all those who had not abided to commands were [now] performing whatever works of service that came their way in a state of repentance that forsook their previous actions and purified their present deeds, those that had been imprisoned and those sons who had been kept a hostages were favoured with remissions and [re-]granted whatever houses, fields, articles of wealth, officers and subjects they each had in their various homes”.²¹

At one point in time, Nyakhar Dung fought with the warriors of Assam. An oral source explains how Assamese forces were driven back to plains by supernatural means. To contend the enemies before they could take hold of strategic position, he took a handful of sand, prayed to his protective deities and threw it towards the military camp. These sand turned into thousand of pikes (meri in Khengkha) that headed towards the camp forcing the soldiers to flee. The place was later named as Meripang.²² The Bodo folk-songs of Kamrup, Goalpara and Darrang contain lyric²³ pertaining to conflicts between Bhutanese and the Bodos. This song must have been sung during the Bodo’s wars with Nyakhar Dung and Joka Khoche.

Goleng Dung: A Renegade Nobility

The turn of an unfortunate event within the family of Tagma Dung gave birth to a new branch of nobility in Goleng. It so happened that Dung Wugpa and his son-in-law quarreled

during Peling Kuchey in Tagma Gonphai. The son-in-law was drunk and was nagging his uncle. Intending to avoid further friction, Dung Wugpa left the scene. He was hiding in Umpang Dzong when his son-in-law caught him again. In effort to save himself, he accidentally stabbed the son-in-law to death, forcing him to flee to Goleng. He started a subsidiary Dung family in Goleng. However, other oral sources construe it differently. According to Meme Tshewang Namgay, a descendant of Tagma Dung came to Geloeng as magpa (male spouse) and started the noble family.²⁴

Three important households such as Dung, Kudrung and Mamai co-existed and held different social and political responsibilities. Whereas Dung household was respected as an elite group, Kudrung household served as Shingkar Dungpa's local agency responsible for collecting local taxes for Pangtey Pon and Mamai household. The Dung had little control over the community since most of them were controlled directly by Pangtey aristocrats such as Suma. The Mamai stemmed out of zurpa household that was created as favour from Pangtey Pon mainly to exempt taxes. It so happened that an ordinary girl, then the groom in Dung's household sought her brother's help in exempting her from paying taxes. As a servant in the court of Pangtey Pon, he appealed to his master to excuse his sister from paying taxes who right away decreed that she would be tax-exempted. But, this brought about some anxiety to Goleng Dung, who dreaded that she might possibly bear influence over him, especially with her brother's support. To evade her influence, he isolated her and she was then forced to establish her own household anew, then known as zurpa.

One of the existing social privileges that Goleng Dung is entitled to is its lead role in indigenous communal festival called Roop that is celebrated annually to invoke local deities for bumper harvests and general well being. Invocation rituals begins from the attic of Dung's house and ends in the field where Dung has to sow ceremonial seeds, before which no community members is allowed to do so. This throws true

light on how the community respects this nobility as being 'sanctified enough' to consecrate the sowing season.

Jang Ponpo's Dungkar (conch) flew to Kurtoe Dungkar Choje

While Guru Rinpoche was mediating in Jampe Lhakhang, he was believed to have instructed Monmo Tashi Kheudon, the daughter of the king Sindhu Raja, to go to Mon area of southern Bumthang in Kikhar, a place naturally endowed with peace and silence. He gave teachings and taught her how to mediate on them. As directed, she traveled to Kheng and found a small cave resembling a stack of Buddhist texts in Kikhar where she had mediated and practiced those teaching for several months.

There is ample evidence to prove that followers of Guru Rinpoche had blessed Kheng Kikhar. Monmo Tokto Lhakhang featuring more of Tibetan architectural design stands as a testimony. It is believed that the temple, located not far from Monmo's holy cave, is based on a huge mass of sacred rock. Irrespective of written record, local accounts date this temple to the period of Jampe and Kyichu Lhakhangs. It seems this temple was built in honour of Monmo Tashi Kheudon as indicated by its name. One of the main relics was a dark statue known as Sam-ye ku, which was supposed to have flown miraculously to the temple's site on its own all the way from Lhasa. But, the statue had been unfortunately stolen a few years ago. It was such a portentous bronze statue endowed with mystical power to foretell ill-fated events such as sickness and death in the entire village. If someone were to fall sick, the statue would lie down on its back, and reverting to its normal position signified recovery of the sick. For ages, Jang Ponpo owned the temple and it is still being taken care of by his descendants.

Below this temple is a huge rock from which an unknown treasure revealer was believed to have extracted a pair of conches (dung-kar). The opening on the rock shaped like two conches supports this belief²⁵. One of the sacred conches is

said to have flown to Kurtoe Dungkar while the other is still preserved in an old mansion of Jang Ponpo. If this belief is true, I think there is some possibility of the said 'Kurtoe Choje' having derived its name from this conch or dungkar.

The house of Jang Ponpo is located a short distance away from the temple. The ruins of the houses of khraipa and drapa bear witness to Jang Ponpo's pre-eminence and the size of his subjects. The ruin of a watchtower indicates the presence of rivals as well as his involvement in wars.

Buli Ponpo's Power and Myth

I have proposed different theories to the origin of Ponpos in Kheng, but the origin of Buli Ponpo is traced to three brothers (Mayung, Khanyok and Lopen) from Tibet who settled in Bumthang Buli. The three brothers were hunting wild boars that ravaged their wheat fields. They pursued the animals and came to what is now known as Buli.

According to the oral source²⁶, Buli Ponpo derived its wealth and power from Buli Manmo (goddess of lake). She lived near Zhemgang Dzong, but she could not tolerate the place after people started to dump animal carcasses into her lake and defiled her abode. So she ran away to a more congenial environment. She headed towards Buli, where she took a shelter in the house of so-called Buli Ponpo feigning herself as an old human lady. She preferred to occupy the ground floor stating that she needed more space to accommodate all her companions, which appeared too unusual for the host. The host was further amazed with her request to leave her alone throughout the night. The night passed on with rattling sounds emerging from the ground floor. Not able to restrain his curiosity, he ventured to peep through a small hole despite the visitor's request not to disturb her in any manner. He found out that snakes of all shapes and colours had filled up the ground floor. She left the house early morning wishing that the host should not have peeped through the hole. However, she invited him to the lake located some distance away. When he went there, he found at the lake's edge a

bronze pot with a broken rim (zang thro). It is said that had he not disturbed the guests, he would have been gifted with many pots.

Another version says that soon after the guest had left the house, the host's daughter went missing frequently without any knowledge of where she was going. Her father, grew curious of her daughter's periodic running away that he fastened a thin string on her cloth so that he could trace her using it. The string unfolded itself all along the way she had walked, the other end of which was with the father. He followed the string and came to a lake where he saw his daughter descending into the lake; her hand spinning the thread, and that was where he last saw her. All of a sudden, he saw the edges of the lake filled with thousands of pots of all kinds. He saw a pot, broken at its rim - too unusual from the rest- to capture his pathos that he touched it with his finger. Within no moment, the rest of the pots vanished except the one that he had managed to touch. He brought home this pot after which he grew in power and wealth and this continued throughout all his generations, later known as Buli Ponpo. It was later known that his daughter had been taken as Manmo's groom for which he had been compensated with the pot. He was also later given a dark boy as compensation, whom he did not keep with him for his laziness but gave to Joka Khoche.

This 'legendary pot' is preserved up to this day in Punakha Dzong. According to the oral source again, the war that broke out between the central authority and Buli Ponpo was all due to this pot. Because the pot was a super-human's gift, its presence in the house enhanced Buli Ponpo's wealth and raised his fame. His swelling influence in the region became a source of apprehension to them that they sent a troop several times to eliminate Buli Ponpo's family, but did not succeed.

In the later period of the history, Buli Ponpo Singye Namgyal joined the court of Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyal. Through his loyalty and role in the internal strife, he rose to a position

of Drongsep earning him the title of Drongsep Singye Namgyal. His bravery and skill is revealed: “He was a giant man whose strength and power assumed mythical proportion. A man of divine birth, he could jump across nine paddy field terraces forward and three terraces backward. Three men of superhuman strength and size, Chumed Wangyel, Mangdep Dhendup and Buli Karchung were his assistants.”

In the midst of his growing fame came a severe blow upon him. According to Lama Sanga (1994), he led the force of Trongsa Penlop Pema Tenzin against Jakar Dzongpon Dungkar Gyeltshen and defeated him. Pema Tenzin, who was at that time in conflict with Dungkar Gyeltshen over the post of Trongsa Penlop, engaged Drongsep Singye Namgyal in the war promising him the highest post if he managed to defeat his enemy. But, Pema Tenzin did not keep his own promise, and the post was given to his brother-in-law, leaving Drongsep Singye resentful. Singye Namgyal employed two men who were annoyed by Pema Tenzin for expelling them from employment in construction of Lame Gonpa. The two men killed Pema Tenzin in 1882 in Byakar Dzong. Singye Namgyal occupied the post of Jakar Penlop. But, the matter did not end easily. Pema Tenzin’s sister sought the help of Ugyen Wangchuk to avenge the death of her brother, who came to fight Singye Namgyal with a huge force. They surrounded Jakar Dzong, but because Ugyen Wangchuk’s aunt and cousins were inside the Dzong and Singye Namgyal threatened them to blow up the Dzong with gunpowder if ever they attacked him, the attack had to be suspended. Determined to kill Singye Namgyal, Pema Choki and Ugyen Wangchuk pretended that they had surrendered and entered the Dzong with the force bearing gifts for him. It was on this occasion that Singye Namgyal was killed and his supporters were gradually executed. The dead Penlop’s property in Buli, was permanently confiscated from his family, and given to Dasho Thinley Namgyal of Pangtey (Chummey), Bumthang. The ‘legendary pot’ must have been among these chattels. His [Singye Namgyal] crime was considered a humiliation not only for his family, but also for whole Buli community, and he was

not talked about until recently.

Age-old Rivalry Between Tunglabi and Nyakhar Dungs

At one time, Tunglabi Dung served directly under Wangdicholing, but later Zhongar Dzungpon controlled it, owing to its proximity. It was easy for this nobility and subjects to pay taxes and services to Zhongar Dzung than to Zhemgang Dzung. His desertion of his former Dzung provoked other nobilities, as decrease in the number of subjects meant higher tax and service burden for the rest of the Kheng nobilities. It led to conflicts between Tunglabi Dung and Nyakhar Dung, the latter was backed by other nobilities. Nyakhar Dung demanded that Tunglabi Dung should rejoin them since he fell under Zhemgang's jurisdiction. But, the other party refused to do so stating that he had nothing to do with it. Further, he went on to say that it would not matter much whether he served the east or central as he was in any case serving the same government. When no choice was left to change his mind, Nyakhar Dung declared a war. Tunglabi Dung signaled his courage to challenge the rest of the nobilities if they were to come to his territory. Nyakhar Dung prepared his army of fifteen men and marched towards Tunglabi. He [Tunglabi] invoked all his deities before his enemies arrived. Kuther Dung, a younger brother of Tunglabi Dung tried to mediate between them but in vain. On the day of the war, Tunglabi Dung conveyed to his enemy that he would prefer the fight one to one with Nyakhar Dung rather than making their men fight. He laid the condition that he would surrender his land and subject to Nyakhar Dung if he lost the fight while the latter would also do the same. Amidst a huge gathering, two of them wrestled and knocked each other to the ground to almost to the point of exhaustion. During the peak of the fight, the wife of Tunglabi Dung intervened from the crowd shouting, "oro oro! sem ma yeng cho , rog gadang sengpa, phin bi" (In Sharchop language, 'do not get distracted; he lifted his arm, stabbed him). This somewhat diverted Nyakhar Dung's attention as he did not understand the language, and at a spur of movement, Tunglabu Dung killed him on the spot.

The Nobilities and the Annual Tax

Subsequent to the consolidation of the eastern and central regions under Drukpa regime, the nobilities of the middle and lower Kheng conducted themselves as the principal taxpayers (ma-khrai), separate from the ordinary tax-payers (khrai-pa) who were grouped under two major administrative units: Tama Drungwog and Tali Drungwog, then administered by an official known as Drung. There were other groups of taxpayers like Rimonbitapa, Samkharpa and Ka-pa families. The taxes were paid in money and kind ranging from garments to dyes, vegetables, and dairy products. The nobilities had to submit their taxes (ma-khral) to Zhemgang Dzong on 10th day of 10th Bhutanese month, which then were further conveyed to Trongsa Chhotse Penlop.

The nobilities of Tamachog region customarily met in Berti, on 7th day of 10th Bhutanese month, before moving together in groups to Zhemgang Dzong with loads of tax. Berti Mon and Tagma Khraipa would submit their taxes first to Tagma Dung, and were also responsible to deliver them to Zhemgang Dzong. Berti Mon would carry taxes from Tagma up to Berti and Tagma Khraipa Chungwa would then carry them to Zhemgang. Each of these nobilities would bring with them their own personal servants known as arpo.

On the way, it was traditional for these nobilities to take rest on shaima gor (stone). Those stone slabs were arranged in the form of a seat specifically for the nobilities to take rest when they traveled to Zhemgang Dzong for administrative purposes. It was here that they would celebrate their journey with foods and drinks. Tagma Dung, by virtue of being close to Zhemgang Dzong would occupy the top seat while Joka Khoche had to sit on the last stone slab.

The nobilities from Nangkor and Tamachog would assemble in Zhemgang Dzong on 8th day and take a break on 9th. They would camp below the Dzong, but would stay with their traditional host families in Trong in case of bad weather. The

host families were known as Nadpo and Nadmo, who would normally welcome their guests by saying, "we have been hosting your family since Zhabdrung's time, and would welcome you for generations." Such relationship exists even now, particularly among the people of Ngangla and Joka.

On the tenth day, they would gather in the Dzong along with their taxes. Tamachogpa would occupy the middle row, Tagma Dung seated on the lead, while Nangkorpa would occupy the left line with Dakpai Ponpo at the top. Chupon of Trong and Dangkhar would occupy the right row. It was mandatory for Tagma Dung to present first a sample of his Dzongbub (cloth tax). Chepon, an official appointed from Tongsa Dzong would measure the length and width of the cloth and examine its quality. His recognition of the sample meant that rests of the taxes were accepted. In the end, Dzongpon would also host them a grand meal. Ironically, the meat used to be collected from the nobilities themselves in advance. The people of Namthir and Dangdung would then transfer the taxes to Trongsa. Some people from Kheng would also go with them.

Conclusion

I have written so much on different aspects of Kheng nobilities, including several legends linked with them, some of which may seem rather irrelevant in the present context. The purpose behind this article is to record whatever we can-the reminiscence of the past- that I presume would be lost forever. The richness of each individual society that emerged through distinct social processes is evident from the rich oral tradition. As a 'society' that relied heavily on oral information until recent past, and with a sudden shift to print and mass media, it is likely that those resources would fade away as our 'living libraries' die one after another. It is thus crucial for us to translate the oral sources to print medium so that generations hence can still appreciate our glorious past, and later use them for some in-depth analysis of our socio-political transformation. I have not been able to document even a fraction of what exists on Kheng nobilities. There is

still more research to do and add to our limited literature, especially in English.

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Endnotes

¹ The legendary origin of Dung families in Bumthang is described in various literature like Gyalrig by Gelong Nawang, H'brug gi smyos rabs gsel ba'I me long (Genealogical history of Bhutan) by Dasho Lama Sanga

² According to the existing literature, the origin of Dung in Bumthang centers on a legend of Guse Langling alias Lhagon Pelchen.² During the reign of the king Khikha Rathoed, the people of Bumthang prayed to O-de Gungyal (God of Heaven) to give them a leader who can bring an end to their constant internal strife. Guse Langling was sent to the valley as an answer to their prayers. He is believed to have come down from the sky to Ura valley grasping a divine cord and was born to Sonam Peldon. His divine parentage earned him respect from the people as result of which he became the powerful nobleman of the community. H'brug gi smyos rabs gsel ba'I me long (Genealogical history of Bhutan) by Dasho Lama Sanga, published in 1983.

³ See Ardussi (2004), The Gdung Lineages of Eastern and Central

Bhutan, in *Spider and Piglet*, p. 68.

⁴ Ugyen Pelgen and Tenzin Rigden, *Khenrig Namsum: A Historical Profile of Zhemgang Dzongkhag*.

⁵ According to Gyalrigs, the youngest son [of Thonglegpal –mThong-legs-dpal], Ong-ma, after going to U-dza-rong, took control of a royal castle and, gaining power over the subjects and officers, acted as their chief. The descendants of Byar Ong-ma are all Byar-pa families who are at U-dza-rong, gTor-ma-gzhong, Yong-ka-la, lCags-mkhar-bzung, Kuri-smad, rGya-ras-zur, Byog-kang (present Joka), Ngang-la, Khomshar, Netola and Kheng-rigs rNam-gsum.

⁶ Meme Tshanmpa, Kheng Nykhar

⁷ See Gyalrig

⁸ Wayo, Wayo- Voices from the Past, Phuntsho Rapten, Goshing Chodpa, the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu. PP. 86

⁹ Michael Aris, *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, 1979, Aris & Phillips Ltd., Warminster, Wilshire, England, Page 116.

¹⁰ As narrated to me by Meme Dzongtho. He is one of descendants of Tama Dung. His grandmother had passed down this story to him.

¹¹ This was narrated to me by Ap Zontho of Tagma. He heard this story from his grandmothers.

¹² Meme Penden Dorji, younger brother of Tagma Gup Thinley Dorji.

¹³ Authors of *Khenrig Namsum: the Historical Profile of Zhemgang Dzongkhag*, 1999: 57

¹⁴ Kengnyer, Yudrungcholing, Trongsa. He believes that the kudung is in Yudrupcholing monastery. The caretaker in the temple should normally come from Tagma because of the long-term association of kudung with the people of Tagma Gonphai.

¹⁵ According to Meme Thinley Dorji, Tama Gup who was the last generation of Tagma Dung who enjoyed the privilege of employing a male attendant (arpo) from Berti while on his official errand to Zhemgang Dzong.

¹⁶ Reference to Angling Ungling is also found in Dorji Penjore's article on Wamling Kharphue. In this article, Angling Ungling refers to mythical world of god on the way from the human world to abode of 'Ode Gongjan in heaven. However, in the present context, Angling Ungling refers to a place located above Tagma Gonphai

¹⁷ Interview with Meme Penden Dorji and Ap Dzo-tho.

¹⁸ I had the opportunity to see this cymbal during one of field studies in Kheng. The cymbal has become too old and torn.

¹⁹ Meme Tshampa from Tshaidang presently living in Tingtibi.

²⁰ Lam Tshang Nga's Biogrpahy on Lineages

²¹ Aris, Michael (1986). Sources for History of Bhutan in Lo-rgyus, pp. 113

²² As accounted to me by Meme Tshampa.

²³ The Bodo girls encouraged the heroes to win the battle by singing this song:

Drive fast your steed Bachiram

A hero you are,

The Bhutiya Soldiers are marching

Tieghten the rein and use your spur,

Drive your steed fast, Bachiram

Look, here they come.

This is extracted from B. Chakravarti's 'A Cultural History of Bhutan' published in 1979, pp. 18.

²⁴ Lham Dorji, "Goleng Roop" in *Wayo Wayo- Voices from the Past*, 2004, The Centre for Bhutan Studies.

²⁵ I had an opportunity to visit this temple. On the rock, one can see an opening that is exactly conch in shape. I have also seen one of the conches. The other conch is said to have been taken to Kurtoe Dungkar Choje.

²⁶ As narrated to me by my 72 years old grandmother Aum Penden, from Tagma. She heard this legend from Meme Chepon Tashi Namgay of Zhemgang Trong, who claims to be the direct descendant of Buli Ponpo.