

# Unfrozen Dragon: National Ethos and Identity in Bhutan as Constructed in Musical Performances at National Ceremonies

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Generally, from outsiders' perspective, Bhutan's image is that of a land of Buddhist spirituality and happiness. In Bhutan's Dzong (ཚང་)<sup>1</sup> and monasteries, I heard the traditional ritual music of Buddhism; on the roads, I saw some people wearing *gho* (གོ་) and *kira* (ཀི་), the national Bhutanese dress; and in bookstores, I bought books written in Dzongkha (ཚུང་ཀ་), Bhutan's official language. However, I rode in the hotel's elevator in Paro, I heard piped-in music by Kenny G. That is *Dying Young*. In a pub, a Bhutanese singer sang *What's Up* with the Western tourists singing along. On television, I heard a song sung in Dzongkha, but the melody was the same as *Gangnam Style*, the Korean pop hit. While Buddhist tradition and spirituality are an important part of the ethos of Bhutan today, its people have also embraced elements from cultures around the world.

In the seventeenth century, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (འབཛེ་བླ་མ་ 1594-1651), who belonged to the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud (འབྲུག་པ་བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་) sect, came from Tibet and unified the area in the seventeenth century. In 1907, a constitutional monarchy was established to rule the country. It was unavoidable that Tibetan religious and secular culture should influence Bhutan's culture in historical and social contexts; interaction with neighboring countries, immigration, and globalization have also played a part.

However, Bhutan's rulers have always tried to distinguish Bhutan from Tibet and made efforts to construct a clear identity for the Bhutanese nation-state. One strategy has been to rely on cultural events that assert "Bhutanness" to build that identity in multiple dimensions.

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<sup>1</sup> A religious and administrative institute.

<sup>2</sup> In English literatures, the terms in Dzongkha might be transcribed according to their pronunciation or in Wylie transliteration. If the terms are used to being transcribed based on the pronunciation, the terms in this article are written in this way and followed by Dzongkha. If not, the terms are transcribed in Wylie transliteration or translated and followed by Dzongkha.

This article focuses on musical culture and performance during national ceremonies to present the multi-layered ethos of Bhutan. It also considers how the strategy of using performance to construct the national identity connects historical past and the anticipated future.

### Historical context

The names of Bhutan represent the perspective of the originally Tibetan cultural center. Aside from generic descriptors the names, such as “land of medicine” (མཁན་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་) and “Land bestrewn with cypress” (ཅན་དན་བཞོན་པའི་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་) based on local natural resources, “dark area” (མོན་ཡུལ་) refers to a region covering parts of modern Bhutan, but also parts of surrounding countries. It has been suggested that “Mon” (མོན་) is derived from “mun”, which means darkness. The inhabitants of this region were uneducated and considered opposite to the people with Buddhist wisdom who lived in central Tibet. The region was also known as “Lho mon” (ལྷོ་མོན་), which means South darkness. Another name, “Lho mon kha bZhi” (ལྷོ་མོན་ཁ་བཞི་) references four entrances of the South Mon region (Karma Phuntsho 2013: 2-8). Although the exact locations of the four corners are not always agreed upon, this version of the name represents the concept of the geographical unity as understood at that time. Clearly, the term “south” indicated that Bhutan was the south of Tibet. These names all point to a view that held Tibet to be central.

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal unified the area in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, Bhutan had gradually become known as “Land of dragon” (འབྲུག་ཡུལ་) (Karma Phuntsho 2013: 10-11). “Dragon” (འབྲུག་) is the first character of 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud. Even today, this name is still used by Bhutanese themselves, and a dragon is the figure on Bhutan's national flag. This name represents Bhutanese identity via both religious lineage and the importance of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. It has been suggested that the first Europeans to Bhutan in the seventeenth century considered Tibet and Bhutan to be different, but Europeans generally called the whole region Tibet without distinguishing Bhutan. In the eighteenth century, George Bogle and a British mission visited Bhutan and Tibet, and Bogle made a distinction between the two, referring to Bhutan as “Boutan”. Although there were several sayings on the origin of the name, the name “Bhutan” is mainly regarded as derived from “Bod” (བོད་, Tibet) (Karma Phuntsho 2013: 11-14). At this point in time, Bhutan was usually strongly associated with Tibet.

Due to the scarcity of local literature and historical records, information on Bhutan's early history is usually derived from Buddhist narratives. One of these claims that Jampa Lhakhang (བྱམས་པ་ལྷ་ཁང་) and

Kyerchu Lhakhang (ལྷིང་ལྷ་གླ་ལང་), two important monasteries, were built by Srong bTsan sGam Po (སྟོང་བཙན་སྐམ་པོ་ 618-650), a Tibetan king. Padmasambhava (པདྨ་འབྲུང་གནས།), Buddhist master of rNying ma (རྟོང་མ་) sect, once visited the region. His representative legend is flying on the Taktsang (ལྷག་ཚང་) in Paro, an important local monument. Longchenpa (ལྷོང་ཆེན་པཎ་ 1308-64), a Tibetan master, once travelled to Bhutan, and Pema Lingpa (པདྨ་ལྷིང་པ་ 1450-1521), a local treasure texts' revealer (གཏེར་སྟོན་)<sup>3</sup> claimed to be an incarnation of Longchenpa. Other sects were also apparently active in Bhutan. It is said that Mi la ras pa (མི་ལ་རས་པ་ 1040-1123), the master of bKa' brgyud sect, had been to Takstang and transmitted doctrines. A special figure, Thangtong Gyalpo (ཐང་སྟོང་རྒྱལ་པོ་ 1385-1464/85?), a Buddhist monk, architect, and artist, may have visited Bhutan on three different occasions. In addition to creating Tibetan drama, this monk is famed for building iron-chain bridges across the Himalayas. (Karma Phuntsho 2013: 30, 76, 91-92, 108, 136-137, 177-178). These accounts relate the many religious and cultural connections between Bhutan and Tibet. Nowadays, religious monuments, such as the Taktsang in Paro, are famous sites visited by practicing Buddhists and tourists alike. The paintings of Mi la ras pa on the walls inside Paro Dzong and an iron chain left by Thangtong Gyalpo, exhibited in the National Museum in Paro, also point to the strong relationship with Tibet. The ethos of Tibetan Buddhism has been deeply embedded in Bhutanese culture. In the historical and current narratives and exhibitions in local monuments, Bhutan's history is always traced back to these most ancient Buddhist masters.

In addition to the institutions of Tibetan Buddhism, secular power also had influenced in Bhutan even today. Powerful heads of local families (གཏུང་) and clans functioning as landlords had governed regionally before unification (Karma Phuntsho 2013: 120-121). The religious power of 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud sect extended across western Bhutan, and its early patrons provided a powerful and supportive foundation for success of the country's eventual unification.

Because of the argument on the double incarnations of Pema Karpo (པདྨ་ཀར་པོ་ 1527-1592), a scholar, saint, and the head of the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud sect, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal accepted an invitation from the monastic community in Bhutan and left Tibet. With support of both the religious and secular powers, he founded "Chos-Srid" (ཚོས་སྤོང་), a dual system that coordinated religious and secular authority. Je Khenpo (ཇེ་མཁན་པོ་) was responsible for religious affairs, and the Druk

<sup>3</sup> It is claimed that revealers discovered the treasure texts buried by Padmasambhava.

Desid (འབྲུག་ལྗེ་མིང་) was charged with secular administration. However, Tibetan and Mongolian armies invaded Bhutan several times after unification, and once the great leader Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal had passed away, internal fighting over leadership lasted at least for 150 years (Lyonpo Om Pradhan 2017: 64-65, 75, 77). In 1907, Ugyen Wangchuk (ཨ་རྒྱུན་དབང་ལྷུག་ 1862-1926), established the monarchy and became the first king. The position of king replaced the political leadership of the incarnation of Zhabdrung and the Desid. Je Khenpo remains responsible for religious affairs.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, to support the interests of the British East India Company, the British army launched wars against Bhutan. With the signing of documents and treaties after the fighting was over, Bhutan lost control over the economy of several areas, such as Assam, and was forced to pay Britain. At the beginning of twentieth century, the British army invaded Tibet. Bhutan's king Ugyen Wangchuk negotiated between Britain and Tibet, strengthening his country's relationship with Britain. When the Indian government took over from Britain, Bhutan chose to ally itself with the Indian side over fears of invasion by China. From a cultural perspective, the clear difference between India and Bhutan made Bhutan feel safe. And because the Chinese government claimed ownership of Tibet, Bhutan did not wish to be regarded as part of Tibet and lose its independence (Lyonpo Om Pradhan 2017: 87-93, 102-105, 116-119). This meant Bhutan had to distinguish itself from Tibet.

Bhutan is home to various tribes speaking different dialects. The most distinct ethnic group is the Nepali community. Nepali craftsmen were said to have come to Bhutan to build stupas in the seventeenth century. From the end of nineteenth century into twentieth century, Nepalis migrating to Bhutan increased the manpower and tax base of the country. They mainly reside in the south and are known as Lhotshampa (ལྷོ་མཚམས་ལ་, people of the southern district). Bhutan's policy of assimilation, such as encouraging wearing the national dress and learning the national language, was an attempt to integrate the Nepalis, who came from a completely different culture. At the end of 1980s, when a population census was conducted, the fears of being expelled from Bhutan brought the Nepali protests and conflict (Lyonpo Om Pradhan 2017: 191-193).

The religious and cultural lineage of Buddhism is always foundational to the ethos of Bhutan, but the Bhutanese have succeeded in disconnecting from Tibet politically. Bhutan is not regarded as south Tibet, but an independent country. In addition to its political and diplomatic policies, cultural programs have also been used to assimilate different ethnic groups and construct a distinct identity of nation-state.

### Nationhood

Nowadays, Bhutan's image and ethos are based in historical events, cultural accumulation and contacts, and newly created traditions. In the historical context, Buddhist spirituality is not the only element to Bhutaness. As mentioned above, secular authorities also played a part in the country's founding. Wars were important historical events and created another kind of national and cultural ethos. The third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (འཇེགས་མེད་རྗེ་དབང་ཕྱག་མཚོ་། 1928-1972), devoted himself to promoting modernity, which remains the nation's goal. Thus, the nationhood and ethos of Bhutan are rooted in the narrative and performance of Buddhist and secular traditions, the bravery of its warriors, and its striving toward modernity.

*Driglam namzha* (ཐྱིག་ལམ་རྒྱལ་གཞན་།, the code of discipline) is claimed to be traced back to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who composed the *Tsa Yig Chen mo* (རྩ་ཡིག་ཆེན་མོ་།) to regular the moral and polite behavior of monks in the state monasteries. A Supreme Law Code (བཅའ་ཡིག་ཆེན་མོ་།) promulgated by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. *Driglam namzha* not only included the regulation of behavior but also the formal ceremonies of the 'Brug pa bKa' bgyud lineage (Whitecross 2017: 117-118). Therefore, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal constructed Bhutan's culture based mainly on the Tibetan Buddhist tradition though he is accredited with creating a nation distinct from Tibet.

Attempt on distinguish Bhutan from Tibet are still underway. A regulation on wearing Bhutanese dress on formal occasions was passed by the National Assembly in 1963. That can be regarded as the formal starting point for the imposition of *Driglam namzha* in the modern period. In 1989, *Driglam namzha* included assuming national dress (*gho* for men and *kira* for women) and speaking Dzongkha, the national language, and was proclaimed to promote a clearly Bhutanese identity (Whitecross 2017: 120-121). People in different districts speak their own dialects, but Dzongkha is the language spoken in administrative institutes and monasteries mainly in western Bhutan (Karma Phuntsho 2013: 52). The formal regulation of language and dress is part of the process of Bhutanization. The slogan, "one people, one nation," supported the dominant 'Brug pa tradition and was meant to encourage the various ethnic groups to assimilate to this culture (Mathou 2000: 245). However, the effort has raised protests from Lhotshampa, Bhuta's Nepali immigrants from a different culture.

Bhutan has not only accepted modernization but also actively innovates on its systems and processes. Jigme Dorje Wangchuck, the third king, regarded as a pioneer for his contribution to Bhutanese modernization, understood that the goal of development is the people's

prosperity and happiness, and this has been approach. The policy followed by his successors. In contrast to GDP, which measures purely economic development, Gross National Happiness (GNH) firstly introduced in 1979, as the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck (འཇིགས་མེད་མེད་ལོ་དབང་ཕུག་ 1955-) responded to the questions from Indian journalists. In 1980, the *New York Times* had picked up on the concept of GNH and discussed it in the articles. Promoting GNH has ever since been part of Bhutan's development plans (Verma 2019:12-14).

On the National Day in 2023, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (འཇིགས་མེད་ལོ་མང་རྒྱལ་རྒྱལ་དབང་ཕུག་ 1980-), the fifth King, announced the creation a new city, Gelephu, to help advance Bhutan's economic development. He also mentioned the idea of GNH, traditional culture, national identity, and the nation historically established by Zhabdrung Ngawan Namgyel in that speech ("Translation of the National Day Address").

In sum, Bhutan's rulers have been intentionally in their promotion of Bhutaness. While the country's Buddhism and culture were transmitted from Tibet, the historical conflicts, and wars, and the fear of China, have fueled Bhutan's attempts to disconnect from Tibet. Victory in wars that gave rise to the independent nation gave Bhutan the choice whether or not to identify with Tibet. Bhutan's rulers have also chosen to assimilate its various ethnic groups through national regulation. Modernity and happiness remain the national goals and have helped to construct nationhood and ethnos of Bhutan.

## National Ceremonies

The performance during national ceremonies of Bhutan embodies the images and ethos of the nation-state. They not only include rituals and folk traditions but also newly invented performance forms. The ceremonies discussed here are the Dochula Druk Wangyel Festival (རྫོགས་ལུག་འབྲུག་དབང་རྒྱལ་ཚོས་བསྟེ་) (2023.12.13) and the 116<sup>th</sup> National Day Celebration (2023.12.17). The religious expressions of Tibetan Buddhism are basic and important elements in these ceremonies. Some parts of the stage performances narrate the story of Tibetan Buddhist masters, or recreate historical events as religious performance. Folk songs and new music performed during these ceremonies were meant to celebrate the national identity.

### 1. Dochula Druk Wangyel Festival

The Dochula Druk Wangyel Festival was organized by Karma Ura at the request of Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck (རྫོགས་དབང་མོ་དབང་ཕུག་), the queen of the fourth king. It was revised according to the instructions

from the seventieth Je Khenpo, Trulku Jigme Choedra (ལྷུང་སྐུ་འཛིག་མ་མེད་ཚེས་གསལ་ 1955-). This festival commemorates the war against the United Liberation Front of Assam, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, and the Kamtapur Liberation Organization in 2003, and was first held in 2011 (Karma Ura 2011, 7-8). The performers were from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA), the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) Musical Band, and the Central Monastic Body (CMB). These organizations represent secular performers, modern warriors, and traditional monks.

The arrangement of performance is on a mound as the stage. From the angle of camera set up in the field, the performers showed up from the lower part to the higher center, and the crowds were seated around at the base of the mound as Figure 1.



Figure 1 A performance in the Dochula Druk Wangyel Festival

The mask dances include traditional Bhutanese movements, as well as the steps from Cameroonian and other African dances to portray rock demons, and the elements from Chinese opera. The texts of prayers in the dance “Vision of the Boddhisattvas” was written by the fifth king himself. The melody for that dance was inspired by He Xun Tian, a Chinese musician, and composed by Karma Ura (Karma Ura 2011, 13-16). All these elements demonstrate the event’s hybridity, using multiple references to global artforms.

“Mask dances of the Protectors” is categorized as *sKu ‘cham* (སྐུ་འཆམ་) and performed by the Central Monastic Body. “The dancers of the principal deities like... will be monks of the Central Monastic Body because these roles are traditionally carried out by monks” (Karma Ura 2011, 72-73). Although “Mask dances of Glimpse of the Boddhisattva” was performed by the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, it is also categorized as *sKu ‘cham*. This performance included four main historical figures: Guru Rinpoche, Kuenkhen Gyalwa Longchen Rabjam Drimed Ozer, Terton Pema Lingpa, and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel surround by *dakas* and *dakinis*. The four figures walked accompanied by cymbals, the lyrics written by the fifth king, and a

melody similar to folk based music composed by Karma Ura. *sKu* is an honorific term meaning “body”; it also means “image” and “statue”. Therefore, although the performance combined with different elements, the images of the four key figures in Bhutanese history from the Buddhist narratives represent high sacredness.

“Mask dances of Gatpo Ganmo,” “Jetsun Melarapa and the Five Goddesses of Long Life,” and “Dance of Heroes” are categorized as *Gar ‘cham* (གར་འཇམ་མེད་) and were performed by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) Musical Band. “Mask dance of Gatpo Ganmo” is performed to bring prosperity, longevity, and happiness (Karma Ura 2011, 19). “Dance of Jetsun Melarapa and the Five Goddesses of Long Life” is a narrative performance depicting how demons tried to distract *Mi la ras pa* from devotion, but in the end became protective deities.

“Dance of Heroes” is a narrative of historical events in Bhutan. The first part was “Going to war”, in which the performers as warriors wear *gho* with shields and swords as what *Pazaps* (པཙམ་མཚམས་པ་)<sup>4</sup> wore strapped to on the performers’ back and waist. In the middle part, the regular seven-beat rhythm of drum and cymbals accompanies warriors’ movements marching off to battle. The second part of performance was “Dance of Heroes’ War.” The performers are dressed as medieval warriors. They brandish shields and swords and yelled in imitation of the circumstances of war. At the end, they seemed to leave in sequence and disappear behind the mound. But they returned to the stage accompanied by rapid rhythm for dramatic effect. Then, they left the stage again. The third part was “Heroes’ Victory”. The performers still have shields on their backs and hold *phur pa* (ཕུར་པ་), a three-edged knife, which they brandish as they move. This symbolizes destroying obstacles. Then, the warriors dance holding their shields. Finally, they dance without the shields and leave the stage.

In addition to these mask dances, the Royal Academy of Performing Arts performed traditional and new songs between each mask dance performance. The last song is “Tashi Laybay” (བཀྲ་ཤིས་ལེགས་པ་ལྟེན་པ་) which is *zhungdra* (གཞུང་ལྷོ་མེད་), a traditional genre of Bhutan. The lyrics describe the sky as an the eight-spoked wheel and the land as a lotus-shape with eight auspicious signs that can vanish devils. The goddesses are invited to bring the land prosperity and happiness.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal’s warriors in the seventeenth century

<sup>5</sup> Mandala. ““Tashi Labay”: A Song for Auspicious Ending.” Accessed March 4, 2024. <https://av.mandala.library.virginia.edu/video/tashi-labay-song-auspicious-ending>.



## 2. National Day Celebration

On National Day, as the ceremony is about to start, members of the Bhutanese audience all take off their coats to display their national dress. This ceremony also consists of traditional and modern elements. The modern armed forces holding guns parade to martial music. Then, monks walk onto the field to with the traditional Tibetan Buddhist music. A *dramney* (ཐྲམ་ལྷན་), the representative instrument of Bhutanese folk music, is played to accompany the singing of a long-life prayer for the king of Bhutan (མེ་དབང་འཛིགས་མེད་གོ་སང་ནམ་རྒྱལ་དབང་ཕྱག་མཚོག་གི་ཞབས་བརྟན།).

Seven cultural programs are performed. “Black hat Cham” (ཞུ་གནག་རྩ་འཚམ་), a traditional Tibetan Buddhist dance, was performed by the Central Monastic Body. A classical dance “gZhas sNa Tshags” (གཞས་རྩ་ཚེགས་) usually performed by men was presented by the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, the Bhutan Royal Army, and the Royal Police. This dance is dedicated to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and represents the harmonic life of the country and the universe, as well as Bhutan as a united nation. The song, “Prosper Land of dGe legs phu” (དགོ་ལེགས་ཕུག་ལྷ་ག་ཡང་ཡོད།), was composed by the seventieth Je Khenpo and performed by the Royal Academy of Performing Arts. It celebrates the *chos-sri* system, the combination of sacred and secular cultures, that makes the country prosperous.

*Rigsar* songs (རིག་གསར་) and patriotic songs are also performed by secular performers to demonstrate young people’s energy and enthusiasm, the construction of country, celebration, strength, and to create a symphony of joy. A performance “Tashi Laybay” closes the festival, with the king, government officials, guests, and so on, all participating in a dance circle.

In addition to the ceremony, *Zhungdra* & *Boedra* (བོད་རྒྱུ་), traditional genres, musical concert was held to perform traditional music. Moreover, in *Rigsar* musical concert and the National-Day concert, foreign and Bhutanese singers performed *Rigsar* and pop music for celebrating the National Day.

In these two celebrations and relevant concerts, various kinds of music and dance were performed. Buddhist spirituality is a central theme. However, the forms of performance may be newly created, such as the narrative performance of Mi le ras pa’s story and “Dances of Heros”. *Zhungdra*, the Bhutanese folk music tradition, is always emphasized in such ceremonies, as in the closing performance of “Tashi Laybay”. *Zhungdra*, *boedra*, and *rigsar* are all celebrated in the concerts. The ethnos of bravery is embodied in the movements and music of both the medieval warriors and modern soldiers. Current performance is always connected with Bhutan’s historical events and the honorable

period constructing Bhutan's unity and identity in the seventeenth century. Although global and pop musical culture have had some influence on traditional music, they are instrumental in demonstrating Bhutan's modernity and happiness.

### Traditional Music

Early albums of Bhutanese music released by Western music companies were recorded by John Levy (Levy 1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1973d) and compiled by J.S Szuszkiewicz (1978). Levy received an invitation from the royal family to record music in late 1971 (Levy 1973a). In the explanatory notes on the albums, Levy quoted from *A Cultural History of Tibet* by David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson (2003 (1968)): "Of the whole enormous area which was once the spirited domain of Tibetan culture and religion...now only Bhutan seems to survive as the one resolute and self-contained representative of a fast disappearing civilization" (Levy 1973a; Snellgrove & Richardson (2003 (1968): 271). Scholars worried that Tibetan culture would disappear after Tibetans fled, and their culture was destroyed by the Chinese. They sought a pure and isolated land where Tibetan culture was well preserved. At that time, Bhutan was regarded as that place, a Shangri-la.

John Levy recorded music released in the albums "*Tibetan Buddhist Rites from the Monasteries of Bhutan*" and "*Tibetan and Bhutanese Instrumental and Folk Music*". These albums were produced with the notion that Tibetan and Bhutanese culture were closely connected. However, the musical culture of Bhutan contains not only Tibetan music. The album, "*Music of Bhutan*", collects traditional religious and folk music, especially, the Nepali music of the south (Szuszkiewicz 1978). Furthermore, the musical genres of Bhutan are not all identical to those of Tibet.

Various genres of traditional and religious music are distributed over different districts. Religious songs include *tshoglu* and *gurma*. Traditional songs that can be accompanied by dance are *zhungdra*, *boedra*, *yuedra*, *zhey*, and *zheyim* genre. Traditional songs not performed with dance are *tsangmo*, *alo*, *khorey*, and *ausa*. Although religion and spirituality are important themes, love and emotion are also popular subjects of these songs (Sonam Kinga 2001: 134).

Generally, of these genres, *zhungdra* and *boedra* are usually stated as the most representative of Bhutan's traditional music. *Zhungdra* is claimed to be attributed to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and originated in Bhutan; *boedra* is influenced by Tibetan music. The Music of

Bhutan Research Centre (MRBC)<sup>6</sup> has categorized *zhungdra* as a sub-category of *dangrem* with elements of spirituality; *boedra* was from Tibet, but music in this Tibetan style composed by Bhutanese is categorized as *drukdra* (འབྲུག་གླུ་) (Herman and Kheng Sonam Dorji 2013: 8, 10-11). As mentioned above, “druk” (འབྲུག་, dragon) is the national icon of Bhutan. Although the term “*drukdra*” has not been said in common, it represents that the Bhutanese musician attempts to stress that this is now a localized musical genre belonging to Bhutan.

### 1. *Zhungdra* (གཞུང་གླུ་)

“*Dra*” (གླུ་) means sound. “*zhung*” (གཞུང་) means “central” so this term has been translated as “means the “music of the central” in several academic literatures and album notes. In addition, “*zhung*” also means “government”, and it is said that when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal constructed Fortress of Great Bliss (ལྷུང་ལྷ་མོ་ཐང་གི་ཆེན་མོ་རྒྱུ་) in the seventeenth century, deities and people gathered there, and *zhungdra* was sung. Therefore, this musical form might have originated around the government activities. In addition, it is sung as an offering with singers standing in a line to symbolize offerings presented to the lamas and dignitaries. *Zhungdra* pieces, such as “Authentic Collection of Offering Songs” (མཚན་ལྡན་ཚོགས་པའི་ཚོགས་གླུ་) are sung during important festivals, such as Tshechu (ཚོས་བལྟ་)<sup>7</sup> (Kunzang Phrinlas 2004: 163-166). Hence, it is not only a folk genre but also has religious functions.

The melody of the national anthem of Bhutan<sup>8</sup> is from the *zhungdra* piece “The Unchanging Lotus Throne” (ཁྲི་ཉམས་པ་མེད་པ་པད་མའི་ཁྲི་). The first version of lyrics to the national anthem written by Gyaldon Thinley. Later, it was shortened and revised by Shingkar Lam, secretary to the king, and Sangay Dorji, an assistant. The first lines of the two versions are as below (Dorji Penjore and Sonam Kinga 2002: 14-18):

<sup>6</sup> MBRC was founded by Sonam Dorji, a performer of Bhutan’s traditional music, in 2008. This center conducts research and collects traditional music. It established small archive and published recordings and books collected from fieldwork (“About Music of Bhutan Research Centre”. Accessed March 23, 2024. <https://www.musicofbhutan.org/history>).

<sup>7</sup> The annual festivals held in the different districts of Bhutan. Religious and traditional arts are performed (Tshewang Dendup 2006: 39).

<sup>8</sup> In 1953, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third king, announced his intention to sponsor the composition of a national anthem. Aku Tongmi, who had studied in India and was the first bandmaster in Bhutan, composed the melody of national anthem for the visit of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharla Nehru in 1958. The lyrics were written by Gyaldon Thinley, the guest master of the State. The melody was revised twice by Bajan Singh and H. Joseph, both officers and bandmasters of the Indian Army (Dorji Penjore & Sonam Kinga 2002: 14-15).

The first version:

ལྷོ་ཙན་དན་བཀོད་པའི་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ནང་།

In the southern kingdom adorned with cypress trees

The second version:

འབྲུག་ཙན་དན་བཀོད་པའི་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ནང་།

In the Kingdom of Bhutan adorned with cypress trees

The opening word “southern” (ལྷོ) is replaced by “dragon” (འབྲུག). This removes geographical description of Bhutan from the Tibetan perspective and asserts nationhood with national symbol. The melody is not a *boedra* tune but *zhungdra*, which is recognized as clearly Bhutanese music and asserts differ from Tibet.

Sara Nuttall as the outsider of Bhutanese musical culture did fieldwork in Bhutan and analyzed the general and specific musical characteristics of Bhutanese music based on commercial recordings and pieces she collected while in the field. *Zhungdra* is sung with long melismatic phrases and ornamentation. *Boedra* is known for its short phrases and regular beats. Nuttall analyzed musicians’ personal interpretations on *zhungdra*. She looked at how different musicians produce continuous flow or a floating effect according to the points when they breath, the arrangement of the rhythm, and how they make *nyenku* (sweet sounds, mellifluous sounds) (Nuttall 1993: I: 19-20; II:4, 17).

As to instrumental music, the lute, “ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་”, is the representative instrument of both Bhutanese and Tibetan musical culture, and it usually accompanies *zhungdra* singing. The heads of Bhutanese lutes are carved in *chu sing* (ཆུ་སིང) forms, which are said to be sea monsters or crocodiles. The sound of the lute is said to attract spirits and animals. According to advice from the Goddess of Music, carving the head of a sea monster on a lute can keep devils away (Nuttall 1993: I: 15, 27-28). Ter Ellingson, an ethnomusicologist working on Tibetan musical culture, concluded that the shapes of Tibetan lutes’ heads could be a horse head, sea-monster (dragon), horned eagle (khyung), or unicorn (a kind of deer), according to the visual record in paintings and other scholars’ research. These shapes were associated with the heaven of shamanism or Tibetan prayer flags (Ellingson 1974: 20-21). The shape of Bhutanese lutes’ head is mainly *chu sing*, and the shape of most Tibetan lutes’ heads is usually a horse’ head shaped if not simple and flat.

While Tibetan lutes have the three pairs of strings, there are six and a half strings on Bhutanese lutes. Aup Dawpey, a traditional musician of Bhutan, has claimed that the sound from the seven strings symbolizes the voices of seven *dakinis* (Herman & Kheng Sonam Dorji 2013: 17). Bhutanese lute commonly features several spiritual or symbolic painted figure, such as dByangs can ma (དབྱངས་ཅན་མ་), the female deity of

music. One Bhutanese musician explained that dByangs can ma is the personal deity of the people who play music, so he prays to her for good voice, peace, harmony, and the happiness of sentient beings (Interviewee 2023). In Bhutan's folk belief, Bhutanese lute should be played with musicians' smile and is connected to the Upper world (Jigme Drukpa 2006: 374-375). Thus, music has a spiritual function in the religious and folk belief.

Theoretically, the three pairs of strings on the Tibetan lute are tuned to A-d-G. The six and a half strings on Bhutanese lute are tuned as aA-d'd-gg. Two and a half strings are in the middle part of Bhutanese lute. When the fingers do not press on the middle pair of long strings, the half string can be plucked with middle long strings to produce higher tone. Although it is said that these strings are tuned as aA-d'd d-gg, the tones could be tuned as lower pitch. For example, in Nuttall's research, the strings of lute were tuned to gG c'cc ff. (Nuttall 1993: I:16). Because the lute has no fret, microtones can be produced. If the strings are tuned to aA-d'd dd-gg, a note higher than f, near f#, might be played in *Zhungdra*.

*Zhungdra* is a free-rhythm music. A Bhutanese musician explained that *zhungdra* is based on the lyrics, not the rhythm or melody (Interviewee 2023). One passage of "Tashi Laybay", the *zhungdra* song performed at the end of Dochula Druk Wangyel Festival, as transcribed below by Praat software, is presented in Figure 2. It shows the melismatic melody with no regular beat.

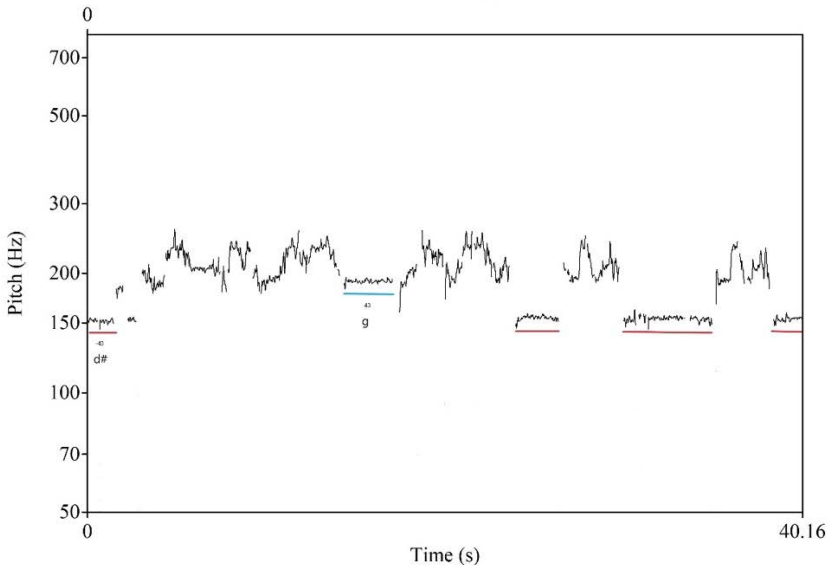


Figure 2 Part Transcription of "Tashi Laybay"

The clear notes in this piece are d#(-43.53 cents), f#(-25.42 cents), g(-44.71 cents), g#(-43cents), a#(+0.13 cents), c#(+11.31 cents)<sup>9</sup>. To illustrate this clearly, a transcription of these notes as played on Bhutanese lute in the Moveable Do system can be seen in as Figure 3. It is in pentatonic scale: 4, 5, 6, 1, 2. Especially, 4# was sung in this song.

6(a#+0.13 cents)	2(d#-43.53 cents)	5(g#-43 cents)
	6(a#+0.13 cents)	
1(c#+11.31 cents)	4 (f#-25.42 cents)	
	4#(g-44.71 cents)	

Figure 3 Notes on Bhutanese lute in the Moveable Do system with absolute pitch in the Fixed Do system in brackets

The long and sustained tone line on Figure 2 is 2(d#), the same note tuned as the tuning of the middle strings. It is sung at the beginning and end of the piece, representing the importance. The first phrase pauses at the long note 4# (g). This note is not in the regular pentatonic scale and creates a special sonic effect that cannot be found in *boedra*. This musical characteristic can also be found in Bhutan's national anthem.

In addition, unlike Tibetan musicians strongly plucking pairs of strings, Bhutanese musicians pluck each string softly. The shape of pick is also different from the pick used with the Tibetan lute. The Bhutanese lute's pick is long and thin, not designed for producing loud sound but small soft tones. These small tones form a continuous ornamental melodic line. Therefore, the strings, the notes played, and the manner of plucking the strings create special musical effects that make *zhungdra* distinct from *boedra*.

## 2. Boedra

“Boe” (བོེ) means Tibet, and again, “dra” (བློ) mean sound. There are two sayings about the origins of *boedra*. The one is that “aBod sGarp” (འབོད་སྐར་པ་) refers to the government's officials, so this genre was associate with government. The other claims that “Bod sGra” (བོད་སྐར་པ་) is more generally refers to music from Tibet (Kunzang Phrinlas 2004: 169-170). No matter which is correct, *boedra* is still attributed to the era of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. In addition, it is suggested that the third king of Bhutan loved the genre coined the name, *boedra* (Herman & Kheng Sonam Dorji 2013: 11).

The current ensemble to perform *boedra* usually consists of the lute,

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<sup>9</sup> These are the absolute pitch on the Fixed Do system.

flute (མྱེང་བྱུ་), fiddle (འི་མེང་), and dulcimer (རྒྱུང་མ་ཅན་). Research on Tibetan musical culture has asserted that the dulcimer was transmitted to Tibet from China in the eighteenth century (Gyesang Chugye 2000: 27). On the Bhutanese side, it is claimed that *boedra* came to Bhutan with Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and his attendants in the seventeenth century, before the dulcimer had been introduced. According to Nuttall's research, the dulcimer was introduced to Bhutan in the 1960s, when the Tibetan refugees fled to Bhutan and began to participate in the Royal Academy of Performing Arts. This multi-instrument ensemble accompanies only *boedra* but not *zhungdra* (Nuttall 1993: I:22). Although microtones can be played on the lute, flute, and fiddle, it is not possible to achieve them on dulcimer. Playing the tone near 4#, as in *zhungdra*, is not characteristic of *boedra*, nor can the dulcimer produce that tone.

The song "Welcome" (ཐོན་པ་ལེགས་པས།) performed in the *Zhungdra* & *Boedra* concert is transcribed in Figure 4 as an example. The melody is pentatonic with no special tonal effects. A regular rhythm and several musical ornamentations were marked the singing and were played in the melodic lines.



Figure 4 Transcription on ཐོན་པ་ལེགས་པས། (transcribed by Yanfang Liou)

### Musical Modernity

*Rigsar* (རིག་གསར་) is a new Bhutanese genre that has absorbed more and more foreign musical elements. It is suggested that "Zhendi Migo" is the first modern song in Bhutan and dates from the 1960s. The melody

comes from a song in *Love in Tokyo*, an Indian film. This song was even choreographed by the Royal Academy of Performing Arts and performed at Trongsa Tshechu, an annual festival in dzong. In the 1980s, because many songs were adapted from Hindi, Nepali, and English songs, Dasho Thinley Gyamtsho composed *dorozam*, a new subgenre in the national language Dzongkha, for teaching purposes in 1979-1980. In the mid-1980's, *Ngesem Ngesem*, a song and musical programme, was composed for entertainment and played on electronic instruments. In 1995, the popular album *Pangi Shawwa* was released that influenced the style of songs that followed. These songs forms are more closely related to the Hindi, Nepali, and English music (Sonam Kinga 2001: 145-146).

In addition to musical elements introduced through cultural contact and mass media, the third king's efforts to promote modernity also included the development of Bhutan's own music. He sent musicians to India to record traditional music in 1968 because there was no recording technology in Bhutan at that time. This was regarded as the first recording of traditional vocal music (Music of Bhutan Research Centre 2015:2). Aku Tongmi was sent to India for two years at the third king's request to learn band instruments. He returned to Bhutan to become the instructor for the new army band and composed the national anthem's melody (Hancock and Herman 2018).

The symbols and images of Bhutan's natural environment are an important theme in the lyrics of folk songs. It is claimed that this is the main difference between folk songs and *rigsar* songs. Most lyrics of the *rigsar* are related to love, but other themes included religious and social issues, health and environment, and social change. It has been argued that the popularity of *rigsar* songs challenges Bhutan's traditional values (Sonam Kinga 2001: 153-157).

On National Day, as the modern armed forces paraded in the ceremonial field, the tune, "Happiness in Bhutan" (འབྲུག་གཞུང་འདི་ན་དགའ་བ་ལྟ།), was performed by a brass band. This tune transcribed in Figure 5. The main theme is happiness. It resonates with promoting GNH and pursuing happiness, key Bhutan national policies, which means new genres can also become instrumental to promoting national goals.





Figure 5 Transcription on "Happiness in Bhutan" (འཕྲིན་ལྗང་འདི་ནི་དགའ་བ་ལྟ།) (transcribed by Yanfang Liou)

Furthermore, the brass band represents modernity promoted by the third king. The performers in the brass band wore *gho*, the national dress, and helmets of medieval times connecting the performance to the seventeenth century when Bhutan became a united country. The independence and identity of Bhutan are repeatedly expressed through the performances at its ceremonies. The National Day, *rigsar* songs performed by young people did not refer back to ancient times but look forward to the future. *Rigsar* is thus not only influenced by other musical cultures, but also promotes national goals and continues to build on Bhutan's image and ethos.

### Conclusion

In the narratives of performance, Bhutan's present is repeatedly connected with the nation's founder, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Just as Tibetan culture informs Bhutan's politics and religion, it is inevitable that Tibetanness is foundational for Bhutan's religious expression and cultural performances. Since Bhutan has chosen to pursue and present national independence, however, political and cultural actors create a Bhutan identity distinct from Tibet. In the process, however, the culture of the Nepali community is not represented; the nation-state identity created by the localized Tibetan descendants and local

inhabitants excludes its “other” immigrants.

In religious and folk musical performances, distinctive, localized, and new cultural forms continue to express Bhutaness. It is always claimed that *zhungdra* and *boedra* are attributed to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Newly created performances, such as “Dance of Heroes,” also refer back to the establishment of the country. These and other cultural events insist on the unitedness and independence of Bhutan. The constructed national ethos is not single but multiple. Bhutan’s narratives, music, and performance always connect its present to Buddhism and the glory of the past. Official policy and development goals are embodied in its music and performance to present national aspirations. The tradition of Bhutaness continues to change and be created. Bhutan is not a frozen dragon but flies between past, present and future.

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