Journal of Bhutan Studies

Volume 45, Winter 2021

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JOURNAL OF BHUTAN STUDIES

POLICIES

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So Old and Yet So New: Buddhist Education and the Monastic Curriculum in Contemporary Bhutan[*]

Dorji Gyeltshen[**] and Manuel Lopez[***]

Abstract

The emergence of a modern secular educational system in Bhutan in the 1960s forced the monastic institutions in the country to adapt and change to the new social, political and educational landscape. This article explores the transformation and changes to monastic education in Bhutan during the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century, with a particular focus on the introduction of a new monastic curriculum in the 1980s and the rise of the *Shedra* (Tib. *bshad grwa*) or monastic college as the central religious educational institution in contemporary Bhutan. The article is based on research that took place during the summers of 2018 and 2019, where the authors visited dozens of monasteries, collected various curricula, and talked to monks and officials

[**] Associate Professor, Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law, (JSWSL). Email: dorji.gyeltshen@jswlaw.bt
[***] Associate Professor, New College of Florida (NCF). Email: mlopezzafra@ncf.edu

all over the country. We argue that Bhutan is in the midst of a new transformational period in which Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum are being revitalized through a series of innovations and changes that have to do as much with a dialogue with secular education as with the impact of other factors: the influence of transnational Buddhist movements and ideas, the introduction of the commentarial curriculum from Tibetan monasteries in India, and the loss of political power after the introduction of the Bhutanese constitution in 2008, among others. The result is a monastic curriculum that asserts specific Bhutanese sectarian and national identity, and introduces a religious education that is transforming monastic life and education in ways that we are only beginning to see.

Keywords: monastic education, curriculum, *shedra*, Central Monastic Body, Khenpo Shenga, Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies

Introduction

The formal introduction by the government of Bhutan of a secular educational system in the 1950s challenged the monopoly that monasteries had held in the country for centuries as the only places where individuals could receive an education of any kind.[1] After some initial skepticism (Karma Phuntsho, 2000), the positive effects of secular education became evident, with literacy doubling from an estimate of 17% in 1959 to 35.2% in 1991, and reaching 66.5% as of the latest census data (2017).[2] The first few decades of coexistence

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[1] For a discussion on the introduction of secular education in Bhutan see Jagar Dorji, 2003, Schuelka & Maxwell, 2016, Robles, 2016, and Mancall, 2017.

[2] The most recent data can be found in the World Bank website at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=BT, retrieved January 11, 2022. Other studies offer slightly different numbers, but all of them point towards a rapid increase in literacy in the country. The *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000*, for example, estimated a much lower level of literacy of 10% in 1970, 21.1% in 1984 and 47.5% in 1994. See Karma Phuntsho, 2000. The standardization of Dzongkha as a national language in the

between the traditional monastic educational system and the new modern secular one were not easy, and constant tensions and conflicts emerged (Karma Phuntsho, 2000; Zangley Dukpa, 2016). According to Karma Phuntsho

> Conflicts between the two institutions became more apparent and vehement. While the traditionists continued to see modern education as a profane non-Buddhist pursuit, the new class of modern educated youth looked down on the traditional system as a resilient leftover from the past, rendered inefficacious by time. Monastic communities were viewed in economic terms as non-productive consumers and as social parasites hindering the material progress of the nation. Traditional education, as represented by monastic learning, from their viewpoint, was a repetition of rituals and non-reflective chanting[3]

For Karma Phuntsho, these "two ways of learning," as he called them, initially run in parallel tracks looking at each other with suspicion.[4] Various scholars and intellectuals saw promise in the interactions between both traditions (Aris, 1990; Prakke, 1999; Karma Phuntsho, 2000), but there was also an acknowledgement that compromises needed to be made for the two systems of education to coexist in modern Bhutan. As Phuntsho argued "modernists may have to give their domineering attitude and the view that tradition is a

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1970's (it officially became the national language in 1971) also helped formalize the educational system in the country. Thanks to one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

[3] Karma Phuntsho, 2000, p.112.

[4] These tensions are exemplified in a personal anecdote by my co-investigator Prof. Dorji Gyeltshen. In 1998, when he was a monk at the newly created Tango College, a few monks, including himself, were painting on the side of a van the name of the Tango University, when they were approached by an individual who told them that Tango could not be a college since a university is a place for secular education, and Tango was certainly not such a place, therefore they did not deserve to use that name.

degenerate system to be superseded by [a] more technologically advanced system," and traditionalists, "may have to come out of their conservative isolation and open up to meaningful dialogue with the modernists." (Karma Phuntsho, 2000, pp. 119-120). That initial period of suspicion was followed in the 1980s with what Brian Denman and Singye Namgyel, called a period of convergence, a "coming together between the approaches of the monastic order and those of modern education" (Denman & Singye Namgyel, 2008, p. 487). This process was evident in the creation of institutions such as Tango College in 1988, and Sang Chokkor Buddhist College in 1991, which introduced a Buddhist monastic curriculum that was, in part, a response and a reaction to the success of the modern system of secular education that was now well established in the country. This article argues that, after those periods of tension and convergence, now Bhutan is in the midst of a new transformational period in which Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum are being revitalized through a series of changes and innovations that have to do as much with a dialogue with secular education as with the impact of other factors: the influence of transnational Buddhist movements and ideas, the introduction of the commentarial curriculum from Tibetan monasteries in India, and the loss of political power after the introduction of the Bhutanese constitution in 2008, among others. The result is a monastic curriculum that asserts specific Bhutanese sectarian and national identity, and introduces a religious education that is transforming monastic life and education in ways that we are only beginning to see. The article is divided in three parts. The first one, offers a brief introduction to the history of Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum in Tibet, paying particular attention to the development of the commentarial curriculum in the late 19th century. The second part will discuss the introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan in the 1980s, symbolized by the creation of Tango College in 1988 and the emergence of the Shedra or monastic college as the central institution of religious learning in the country. The third part will explore the structural and curricular changes made to the curriculum over the last twenty years that have gradually seen

the emergence of a more assertive and confident monastic institution. For reasons of space, we will not include in this article the current status and parallel transformation of religious education and the monastic curriculum in Bhutanese nunneries, since this is the focus of another piece we have already published.[5]

This article is the result of two research trips in the summers of 2018 and 2019, in which we interviewed leaders of the Central Monastic Body (CMB)[6], dozens of monks, khenpos, and

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[5] For our research on the transformation of religious education in Bhutanese nunneries see Dorji Gyeltshen & Lopez, 2020. The final goal of our multi-year research project is a book, under the provisional title of "The Monk, the Nun, and the Curriculum: Tensions and Transformations of Monastic Education in Modern Bhutan," that will explore the current transformation of religious education and the monastic curriculum in contemporary Bhutan by focusing on 1) the introduction and transformation of a new monastic curriculum in the 1980s and the rise of the Shedra or monastic college as the most relevant educational monastic institution in Bhutan, 2) the emergence of a more gender inclusive environment with the construction of nunneries all over the country, and the creation of various monastic curricula for nuns, and 3) the creation of the *Institute for the Science of the Mind*, a three year Buddhist Studies B.A. program sponsored by the Central Monastic Body taught by monks, but intended for a secular audience. The book intends to be a case study that will contribute to our understanding of modern transformations of religious education in a variety of Buddhist countries, as well as an analysis of the social and historical context that has shaped that transformation, including the international networks of Buddhist institutions and ideas that influence them.

[6] The Central Monastic Body (Dz. gzhung grwa tshang), CMB from now on, is led by the figure of the Je Khenpo (Dz. rje mkhan po) and it is the religious organization in charge of setting policy for all Drukpa Kagyu institutions in the country. Drukpa Kagyu monasteries and nunneries are organized in a very hierarchical way and they have to follow the rules and regulations of the CMB. The other important tradition is the Nyingma sect, with old roots in the history of Bhutan that stretch back to the 7th century. Most of the Nyingma monasteries in the country (with a few exceptions) are run by independent charismatic lamas and they do not receive funds from the central

Bhutanese scholars. Our interviews were mostly informal, and focused on the personal experiences and recollections of older monks who studied the commentarial curriculum in India as well as the younger ones who are studying it in Bhutan. The CMB provided us with copies of the curriculum used at the Drukpa Kagyu Shedras, and we also collected several curricula from Nyingma institutions such as Phajoding (Dz. *Pha jo sdings*) and Nyimalung (Dz. *Nyi ma lung*). We also collected and examined the curricula of newer institutions such as the Institute for Advanced Vajrayana Studies at Tango (Dz. *Gsang chen rdo rje theg pa'i slob sbyong spel khang*), the curriculum for the three-year retreat (Dz. Lo gsum phyogs gsum), and that for the Institute for the Science of Mind (Dz. *Sems rtogs kha sems don rig pa'i spel khang*).[7] From a methodological perspective, we have approached our study following Justin McDaniel's suggestion that the 'curriculum,' as a concept, as well as a practice, should be explored as an "interpretive category for the history of religion and for South Asian studies," one that can offer an alternative to our attempts to define Buddhism in abstract or absolute terms and, instead, focus on how knowledge referred as 'Buddhist' has been formed and transmitted in very specific local communities (McDaniel, pp. 7-8). A study of the Bhutanese curriculum, therefore, would allow us to examine not only how Buddhism is understood in this unique Himalayan Kingdom, but also how a new form of Buddhism, one shaped by current social, political, and national pressures is being produced in the 21st century.

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monastic body and do not have to follow their rules and regulations. This duality (of Drukpa Kagyu and Nyingma) has played an important role in the different speeds at which the monasteries of the Nyingma and those under the CMB have implemented changes to the status and the education of monks in Bhutan. For the history of these two Buddhist sects in Bhutan see Aris (1979) and Karma Phuntsho (2013), among others.

[7] This last one is particularly interesting since it is the equivalent of a Buddhist Master of Divinity, created and taught by the CMB, but targeted for a secular audience.

Finally, we want to contribute to the research done on Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum in the country over the last few decades by scholars such as Aris (1990), Karma Phuntsho (2000), Denman & Singye Namgyel (2008), Rennie & Mason (2008), Gandhi (2009), Stiles (2010), Schuelka (2012) and Zangley Dukpa (2016). At the same time, though, we also want to participate, offering Bhutan as a case study, in the recent research done on Buddhist education and the monastic curricula in other Buddhist countries, such as the one done by Khammai Dhammasami in Burma and Thailand (2018), Justin McDaniel in Laos and Thailand (2008), Uri Kaplan in Korea (2015), Thomas Borcher (2017) and Douglas Gildow (2016) in China, among others.

Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum in Tibet

The history of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan is deeply rooted in its shared religious history with Tibet.[8] When Buddhism was first introduced in Tibet in the 7th century, it attempted to introduce and replicate the forms of learning found in the larger monastic institutions in India, such as Nālandā and Vikramaśīla. When Samyé (Tib. *bSam yas*), the first monastery in Tibet, was founded in the 8th century (775-79), the Tibetan Emperor Trisong Detsen (Tib. *Khri srong lde btsan*) invited Śāntarakṣita, the abbot of Nālandā at the time, as well as his disciple, Kamalaśīla, in order to introduce the Indian curriculum into the Land of Snows.[9]

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[8] The early history of Bhutan is, in fact, closely linked to the early history of Tibet, and the oldest historical accounts of Bhutan are connected to the early dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet, with references to temples built in the country by the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (Tib. *Srong btsan sgam po*, 605-649 CE) and the important presence of Guru Rinpoche as a central figure in establishing Buddhism as the most important religion in the region. See Aris (1979), Hasrat (1980), and Karma Phuntsho (2013) among others.

[9] The history of the foundation of Samyé is much more complex, and there is evidence of competing monastic models coexisting during the early period of the monastery, mostly represented by the tension between Chinese and Indian monastic communities coexisting at

The collapse of the Tibetan Empire in the 9th century gave rise to a more idiosyncratic and diverse form of institutional learning in Tibet with the emergence of a much more fragmented and sectarian landscape.[10] In the aftermath of the Empire, and without a central monastic institution supported by the state, Buddhist knowledge became decentralized, and as Dreyfus points out, monks paid "little attention to sectarian affiliation," and went "from monastery to monastery to study with teachers of particular specializations regardless of their school" (Dreyfus, 2003, p.139)

One of the most important institutions of this period was Sangpu Neutok (Tib. *gSang phu ne'u thog*), founded in 1073 by Ngok Lekbai Sherab (Tib. *rNgok legs pa'i shes rab*, 1059-1109 CE) in central Tibet.[11] This institution became famous for its emphasis on scholasticism and debate, attracting students from a variety of traditions. Scholars such as Ngok Lotsaba (Tib. *rNgok lo tsA ba legs pa'i shes rab*), nephew of Ngok Lekbai Sherab, and Chaba (Tib. *Phwya pa chos kyi seng ge* 1109–1169) developed a curriculum for Sangpu Neutok focused on logic and epistemology (Skt. pramāṇa), and while following the Indian Shastric or commentarial model, they also introduced important Tibetan innovations, like the development of outlines (Tib. *sa bcad*) to facilitate the study of Indian texts (Dreyfus, 2003, p. 138). After having studied a variety of texts

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Samyé. Those models clashed in what became known as the Samyé Debate, in which according to various sources, the Indian and Chinese models debated each other. The traditional narrative presents the Chinese monks as the losing side and, since then, Tibetan Buddhism has rooted itself in India forms of Buddhism and the Indian monastic tradition. The historicity of the debate has been called into question by some scholars, see (Van der Kuijp, 1984; Ruegg, 1989, who called it a "dehistoricized topos"), but there is no doubt that the narrative about the debate framed what was considered an important tension in early Tibetan Buddhism, mainly the methods by which to achieve enlightenment. Some important sources for the debate are (Demiéville, 1952; Tucci, 1956; Houston, 1980; Faber, 1986).

[10] See Davidson (2005)

[11] On the history of Sangpu Neutok see van der Kuijp (1987) and Onodo (1990).

(logic, epistemology, Vinaya, Abhidharma), scholars would tour other centers to be examined on the knowledge of those textual traditions" (Dreyfus, 2003, p. 139). Beginning in the 13th century, various Tibetan sects began granting monastic degrees in order to recognize the intellectual achievements of those who pursued intellectual studies. The early Kadampa (Tib. *bka' gdams pa*) tradition, for example, created the title of "One Who has Mastered Four Texts," (Tib. *bka' bzhi pa*) to those who proved their knowledge of four central topics (Perfection of Wisdom, logic and epistemology, Vinaya, and Abhidharma), and the Sakya developed the title of the "One Who has Mastered Ten Texts" (Tib. *bka' bcu pa*).[12]

An important moment in the history of the curriculum in Tibet began with the ascent of the Gelukpa (Tib. *dge lugs pa*) tradition in the 14th and 15th centuries. The Gelukpa tradition, founded by Tshongkhapa (Tib. *Tsong kha pa*,1357-1419 CE) placed particular emphasis on monastic discipline and Buddhist education, and developed a curriculum focused on five primary topics (Perfection of Wisdom, Madhyamaka philosophy, Pramāṇa, Abhidharma, and Vinaya). The curriculum was immediately successful and was introduced in the three main seats for the tradition founded by Tshongkhapa and some of his main disciples, Drepung (Tib. *'Bras spungs*, founded in 1416), Sera (Tib. *Se ra*, founded in 1419), and Ganden (Tib. *dGa' ldan*, founded in 1409), which soon became the largest monastic institutions in the country. In order to add structure to the curriculum, the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Tib. *Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1672-1682) added a yearly system of exams, and the seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso (Tib. *bsKal bzang rgya mtsho* 1708-1757) codified it with different titles such as that of Geshe Lharampa (Tib. *lha rams pa'i dge bshes*) (Dreyfus, 2003, pp. 144-45). The convergence of religious and political power on the figure of the Dalai Lama during the Ganden Phodrang

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[12] For a discussion on the early history of the monastic curriculum in Tibet see Dreyfus' *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, particularly chapters 4 ("The General Structure of the Tibetan Curriculum"), and 5 "Two Curricular Models" (Dreyfus, 2003).

period (Tib. *dGa' ldan pho brang*, 1652-1959) allowed the Gelukpa to become the dominant sect in Tibet imposing (sometimes by force) their monastic model and curriculum throughout the country.[13]

It will not be until the 19th century when an alternative to the hegemonic Gelukpa curriculum will emerge as part of the non-sectarian movement (Tib. *ris med*) that swept Eastern Tibet in the 19th century, with figures such as Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (Tib. *'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po*, 1820-1892) and Jamyang Khongtrul (Tib. *'Jam dgon kong sprul* 1813-1899), who revitalize the lineages, ritual, and textual traditions that had been under pressure during the dominant rule of the Dalai Lamas.[14] A central figure in the development of this alternative curriculum was Khenpo Shenphen Nangba (Tib. *mKhan po gZhan phan snang ba*, 1871-1927), most commonly known as Khenpo Shenphen, a Nyingma scholar who wrote what became known as the Thirteen Great Texts (Tib. *gzhung chen bcu gsum*), a series of commentaries to thirteen classic Indian texts.[15]

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[13] On this period of the history of Tibet, see Shakabpa (1967). On the Geluk suppression of other schools, see Samten Karmay (1998).

[14] On the history and impact of the Rime movement see Ringu Tulku (2006).

[15] The thirteen texts are: 1) Prātimokṣa Sūtra (Tib. *'Dul ba mdo*), 2) Vinaya Sūtra by Guṇaprabha (Tib. *So sor thar pa'i mdo*), 3) Abidharma-samuccaya by Asaṅga (Tib. *Theg pa chen po'i chos mngon pa kun las btus pa'i mchan 'grel Nor bu'i me long*), 4) Abhidharmakośa by Vasubandhu (Tib. *Chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi tshig le'ur byas pa'i mchan 'grel Shes bya'i me long*), 5) Mūlamadhyamakakārikā by Nāgārjuna (Tib. *dBu ma rtsa ba'i tshigs le'ur byas pa shes rab zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 6) Madhyamakāvatāra by Candrakīrti (Tib. *dBu ma la 'jug pa zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 7) Catuhasatakashastra by Aryadeva (Tib. *bsTan bcos bZhi brgya pa zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa'i mchan 'grel*), 8) Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra by Śāntideva (Tib. *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa zhes bya ba'i mchan'grel*), 9) Abhisamayālaṅkāra by Asaṅga (Tib. *mngon rtogs rgyan*), 10) Mahāyāna Sūtrālamkāra by Asaṅga (Tib. *Theg pa chen po mDo sde rgyan zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 11) Madhyāntavibhāga by Asaṅga

Since the curriculum was supposed to echo the non-sectarian outlook of the period in Eastern Tibet, it mostly focused on commentaries by some of the most important Indian scholars such as Guṇaprabha, Asaṅga, Vasubhandu, and Nāgārjuna, among others. The curriculum avoided Tibetan texts and commentaries, as well as Tantric scriptures, in order to avoid sectarian lineages and preferences. The curriculum also avoided Pramāṇa texts, a central feature of the Geluk school, and focused mostly on commentarial and textual interpretation (Dreyfus, 2003; Pearcey, 2015). The curriculum was meant to be studied in five years, and the texts were structured around the categories of Vinaya (Tib. *'dul ba*), Abhidharma (Tib. *mngon pa*), and Sūtra (Tib. *mdo*).[16]

(Tib. *dBus dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa zhes bya ba'i mchan 'grel*), 12) Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga by Asaṅga (Tib. *Chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa'i mchan 'grel*), 13) Mahāyānottaratantra by Asaṅga (Tib. *Theg pa chen po rGyud bla ma'i bstan bcos zhes bya ba'i mchan'grel*). Adam Pearcey has written an excellent article outlining the history of the Khenpo Shenphen's curriculum and its recent adaptations in monasteries in India such as Namdroling and Sakya College. As Pearcey writes in the article, the history of the commentarial curriculum as designed by Khenpo Shenga could be traced even further back to the establishment of Śrī Simha Shedra at Dzogchen Monastery by Gyalse Zhenphen Thaye (Tib. *rGyal sras gzhan phan mtha' yas*) in 1848, although there is little doubt that the content and structure of the curriculum was mostly developed by Khenpo Shenga. Also see Bayer (1999). See also Appendix 1 for a table of collection.

[16] The Sūtra section was divided in two parts, the Profound View (Tib. *zab mo lta ba*) with texts by Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Āryadeva and Śāntideva, and the Great Conduct (Tib. *rgya chen chos pa*), which focused on the five texts attributed to Maitreya. Pearcey argues that this divison "represents a progression through the so-called 'Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma' (Skt. *tridharmacakra*; Tib. *chos 'khor rim pa gsum*), in which the Vinaya and Abhidharma both correspond to the initial turning (*bka' dang po*), the four treatises of the Profound View to the intermediate turning (Tib. *bka' bar pa*) and the so-called "five treatises of Maitreya" (Tib. *byams chos sde lnga*), here labelled Vast Conduct, to the intermediate and final turnings (Tib. *bka' mtha' ma*)". See Pearcey (2015, p. 455).

Khenpo Shenga first taught the curriculum at Śrī Simha Shedra (Tib. *ShrI simha bshad grwa*) at Dzogchen Monastery (Tib. *rDzogs chen*), a key Nyingma institution in Kham, and then was invited by Tai Situ Wangchuck Gyalpo (Tib. *Ta'i sit u dbang phyug rgyal po*, 1886-1952) to institute the same curriculum at Palpung (Tib. *dPal spungs*), a central Kagyu institution, which he did between 1910-1918. In 1918, he founded the Khamje Shedra (Tib. *Khams bye*) at Dzongsar (Tib. *rDzong gsar*). The curriculum was also accepted by the Sakya school, although they added five Pramāṇa texts, becoming the Eighteen Texts of Great Renown (Tib. *grags chen bco brgyad*) to it, becoming a sort of compromise between the commentarial emphasis of the non-sectarian movement, and the emphasis on logic and debate of the Gelukpa school.[17]

From Tibet to Bhutan (and from ritual to scholastic education)

Before the arrival of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Dz. *Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rnam rgyal*, 1594-1651), to Bhutan in 1616 and the formation of the country as an independent polity, the history of Buddhism and, by extension, of monastic education in Bhutan was deeply rooted in Tibetan monastic institutions in Tibet.[18] There are no records regarding the content and structure of monastic education in Bhutan during its early history, and although there is obviously a rich history of Buddhist activity since its introduction in the country in the 8th century, it seems that most Bhutanese monks who wanted to get an education had to cross the Himalayas and study in the most important monastic centers in Tibet.

The arrival of the Shabdrung in the 17th century and the establishment of the Drukpa Kagyu as the dominant sect in the

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[17] The five texts are: Pramāṇa-*samuccaya* by Dignāga, Pramāṇavārttika by Dharmakīrti, Pramāṇaviniścaya by Dharmakīrti, the *Treasury of Valid Reasoning* (Tib. *tshad ma rigs gter*) by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen, and the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Sets of Vows* (Tib. *sdom gsum rab dbye*) by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen. See Pearcey (2015).

[18] See Aris (1979,1986), and Karma Phuntsho (2013).

country changed the religious landscape, with the creation of Drukpa Kagyu monasteries throughout the country, beginning with Cheri (Dz. *lcags ri*, in 1619 in Thimphu and then Semthoka (Dz. *Sems rtogs kha*, 1628) and Punakha (Dz. *sPung thang kha*, 1636), where he established the main center of religious and political power for Bhutan in 1636. With very few exceptions, the only other dominant tradition that will thrive in Bhutan until the present will be the Nyingma school, with a network of independent temples and monasteries led by charismatic lamas. In order to govern the country, the Shabdrung wrote in 1629 the Great Code of Law (Dz. *bca' yig chen mo*), which included some rules and regulations for the monastic body. Unlike the monastic curriculum that was being developed in Tibet at that time by the Gelukpa tradition, the focus of the Great Code of Law was mostly on ritual, and was generally more concerned with orthopraxy than with orthodoxy since "active scholarship remained outside the focus of their routines, and most monks became only literate enough to read monastic liturgies and perform rituals" (Lopon Nado, 1986).[19]

The success of the commentarial curriculum in Tibet sparked some attempts at introducing it into Bhutan during the first half of the 20th century at some Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu monasteries such as Tharpaling, Nyimalung, Phajoding, and Cheri, which in several interviews were referred to as "proto-Shedras."[20] The non-sectarian nature of the curriculum, and the fact that it had been embraced by all non-Gelukpa sects in Tibet, made it ideal for the religious make-up of the country, officially a Drukpa Kagyu state with a strong Nyingma presence. The lack of traction of this early introduction though can be surmised by the fact that figures like the 69th Je Khenpo (Dz. *dGe 'dun rin chen*), who studied for a year in Nyimalung in central Bhutan in the early 1950s, still went to Tibet to complete his education. Gendun Rinchen played a very important role in laying the foundations for the institutional

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[19] For the Code of Law see Whitecross (2007, 2014).
[20] Personal interview Karma Phuntsho, June 6, 2018, and Central Monastic Body, June 8, 2018.

introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan. While in Tibet, he studied the Thirteen Great Texts and received important teachings and tantric transmissions by Rahor Palden Chokyi Dragpa (Tib. *Rwa hor dPal ldan Chos kyi grags pa*), a direct student of Khenpo Shenga. Upon his return to Bhutan, he took important positions in Punakha (1960-1970), became the head of Tango Shedra (1970-1980) and Phajoding Shedra (1980-1985), and at all of those institutions, he implemented various versions of the commentarial curriculum, while writing his own commentaries to some of the texts in the curriculum (Schwerk, 2020).[21]

While Gendun Rinchen was a pioneer in the introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan, it would be hard to explain the profound transformation of religious education in Bhutan without discussing three key developments that occurred during the second half of the 20th century that help explain the radical rethinking of religious education in the country: the occupation of Tibet by China in the 1950s, the creation of a strong secular educational system in Bhutan in the 1960s, and the establishment of Tango College, the first Shedra or monastic college in the country in 1988.

The occupation of Tibet by China in 1959 forced many Tibetan religious leaders and scholars to flee Tibet and establish themselves in the exile of India, Nepal, and Bhutan. With the help of the Tibetan Government in Exile (created in 1960),[22] many religious leaders from the most important Tibetan Buddhist sects, tried to replicate with significant success some of the most important monastic seats in India, such as the Gelukpa monasteries of Ganden (1971), Sera (1970), and Drepung (1971), as well as Nyingma institutions such as

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[21] Schwerk offers a detailed account of the life of the 69th Je Khenpo in the second chapter of her book *A Timely Message from the Cave: The Mahāmudrā and Intellectual Agenda of dGe-bshes Brag-phug-pa dGe-'dun-rin-chen (1926-1997), the Sixty-Ninth rJe-mkhan-po of Bhutan.*

[22] On the history of the CTA see Römer (2008).

Namdroling (1963), bringing with them the monastic curriculum into exile.

Particularly influential was the creation by the Tibetan Government in Exile in collaboration with the Indian government of a new, more progressive and less sectarian institution such as the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in 1967, under the leadership of Kyabje Zong Rinpoche (Tib. *sKyabs rdzong rje*). As stated in their initial mission, their goal was "to take care of the cultural and educational needs of the youth among the Tibetan diaspora in India, and those of the Himalayan regions of India, who earlier had the opportunity of being educated in Tibet, [which] came to be discontinued in the wake of the Chinese occupation."[23] Since CIHTS was also under the purview of the Department of Culture, Ministry of Education, Government of India, it also attempted to "combine traditional wisdom with modern educational pedagogy, and courses are offered in a graded fashion leading up to M.Phil and Ph.D. levels." The hybrid nature of CIHTS would be very influential in the creation of most of the Shedras in exile, and it will play a key role in adapting Tibetan Buddhist education and the monastic curriculum to the modern educational requirements as expected under the secular Indian educational system. Some of the changes were structural, adapting the monastic curriculum to resemble that of secular institutions, with semesters, grades, etc., while other changes were in content, incorporating subjects like English and later computer skills. CHITS became a model for what it became, arguably, the single most influential institution for the introduction of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan, the Nyingma Shedra at Namdroling, the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute (Tib. *snga 'gyur mdo sngags rig pa'i 'byung gling*), founded in 1978, with its first monks graduating in 1989. Since Namdroling was the main seat of the Nyingma tradition in exile, its monastic college became one of the most

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[23] From CIHTS website. http://www.cuts.ac.in and http://www.cuts.ac.in/index.php?url=content/ab1vcd.

important intellectual centers for the study of the monastic curriculum in exile.

At Namdroling Shedra, the commentarial curriculum designed by Khenpo Shenga in Tibet was adapted in significant ways to adapt to the new historical and social context of India. Following CIHTS, the curriculum went from five to nine years, and it followed a similar structure. At the same time, important changes were introduced. While the curriculum at CIHTS was intended to be non-sectarian (with tradition specific classes being optional), the curriculum at Namdroling would include important Nyingma texts and commentaries. Although Khenpo Shenga's Thirteen Commentaries would still be an important of the curriculum, now they would be complemented by other commentaries by important Nyingma scholars such as Mipham (Tib. *Mi pham*, 1846-1912) and Longchenpa (Tib. *Klong chen pa*, 1308-1364). Khenpo Shenga's texts were mostly "annotated commentaries" (Tib. *mchan 'grel*), which were intentionally non-sectarian, and proudly tried not to add much in terms of personal interpretation.[24] Namdroling leaders decided instead to use Mipham's commentaries, with his unique philosophical depth, to become the central lens through which Namdroling monks would understand the Nyingma tradition. Following the CIHTS format, after the completion of the nine-year curriculum, students receive the title of Ācarya (Tib. *blo spon*), and the title of Khenpo (Tib. *mkhan po*) after having taught at another monastic college for three years after the completion of the curriculum.

The sudden and dramatic influx of religious leaders, as well of hundreds of monks, and nuns into exile, including Bhutan, as well as the development of new monastic institutions in India and Nepal that tried to replicate the Tibetan monastic curricula, exposed Bhutanese monastics to a generation of monks who had been educated using the commentarial curriculum developed by Khenpo Shenga. Many Bhutanese

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[24] See Pearcey (2015, p. 453). Karma Phuntsho also shared this opinion during an interview (June 6, 2018).

monks began travelling to India, mostly to Namdroling to learn the new curriculum, while figures of the caliber of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a towering figure within the Rimé movement in Tibet who established himself in Bhutan after the Chinese occupation of 1959, introduced a new generation of monks to many of the works in the curriculum.[25]

The second development that will be central to the introduction of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan will be the creation of a secular universal system of education in the country. Although there were early attempts at introducing modern education under King Ugyen Wangchuck (reigned 1907-1926), it will not be until the 1950s that the educational situation in the country will dramatically change, offering for the first time to many children, the possibility of getting an education that did not involve joining a monastery. The relatively rapid success of the new secular educational system forced the Central Monastic Body (Dz. *gzhung grwa tshang*) to institute reforms to the monastic education in order to modernize it, but also to maintain it relevant and appealing in the face of the success of the secular educational system.[26]

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many Bhutanese monks went to India, particularly Namdroling, to study the new commentarial curriculum, brought to India by Tibetans in exile, and transformed and restructured to reflect to influence of secular education by CIHTS. After graduating and returning to Bhutan, those educated monks did not have a formal institution in which to teach what they had learned. This situation, combined with the internal pressures monastic education was undergoing in Bhutan after the implementation of modern education in the country since 1959, forced the CMB to rethink religious education and the monastic curriculum in the country. To oversee this transformation, the CMB created in 1984 Council for Religious Affairs (Dz. *Grwa tshang lhen*

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[25] For a bibliographical account of Dilgo Khyentse's life, including his years in Bhutan see his autobiography (2008).
[26] For the history of secular education in Bhutan see Gandhi (2009), Robles (2016), and Mancall (2017).

tshog) which under the leadership of the 68th Je Khenpo Tenzin Dendup (Dz. *bsTan 'dzin don grub*) was charged with the responsibility of reviewing and rethinking monastic education along the lines of modern secular education (Zangley Dukpa, p. 50).[27]

Finally, the third and last important development central to our understanding of the transformation of Buddhist monastic education in Bhutan is the creation of the first modern Shedra or monastic college in the country: Tango College. The 3rd King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (Dz. *'Jigs med rdo rje dbang phyug*) and the 65th Je Khenpo (Dz. *Ye shes seng ge*) had converted Tango Monastery into a Shedra in the early 1960s, introducing the commentarial curriculum in the country, although in a less structured way than it was being taught in India. In 1988, though, Tango Shedra was transformed into Tango College, the first monastic college in Bhutan, in order to offer an intellectual and academic alternative to the secular educational system now so successful in the country.[28] The new monastic institutions in exile, particularly Namdroling allowed Bhutanese access to the commentarial curriculum developed for non-Geluk schools, once finalized the curriculum it only made sense that many of them returned to Bhutan, only to find that there was no institutional support to share what they had learned. Tango played a central role in the transformation of monastic education in Bhutan by becoming an institutional and educational model that will allow the CMB to train its own monks in a curriculum that over the following three decades will assert a new role for monastic institutions in the country as well as for monks. Tango Shedra will also allow Bhutanese

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[27] The 68th Je Khenpo had also learned the commentarial curriculum in Tibet, which was also instrumental in its centrality to monastic education in Bhutan in the 20th century. Conversation with Khenpo Sonam Bumden (June 2nd, 2018).

[28] There had been some proto-Shedras in Bhutan, such as those of Tharpaling and Phajoding, but it was not until the creation of Tango College (now University) that Bhutan finally introduced the academic curriculum developed first in Tibet and later in Exile into Bhutan. Interview with Secretary, June 12, 2019.

to be trained in their own country, instead of having to leave for India in order to receive a religious education. With the creation of Tango, we also see the beginning of a more assertive religious establishment in Bhutan, which seen the dramatic events that had occurred in Tibet during the second half of the 20th century, will now see its own religious and intellectual history as a source of pride and strength, instead of always looking at Tibet as the source of most, if not all, legitimate religious training.

It is the confluence of those three developments that help explain the introduction of the commentarial curriculum in Bhutan, as well as its early structure and content. As we will see though, over the last two decades, very important changes have been introduced to the curriculum that have shaped it to reflect a unique Bhutanese religious and cultural identity.

The transformation of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan: Asserting sectarian and national identity

After centuries of feeling subservient to the historical and political developments of Tibet, the divergent fates of Tibet and Bhutan in the 20th century have allowed Bhutan to become more assertive politically, but also culturally, feeling more comfortable creating and affirming a distinctive religious national identity. This new confident approach can be seen in the many curricular changes, structural as well as of content, that the CMB has introduced in the curriculum over the last few years.

Structural changes to the curriculum

At the structural level, the most important mandate of the Council for Religious Education when it was created in 1984 was to rethink and restructure religious education along the lines of the modern secular system.[29] Traditional religious education in Bhutan focused on ritual, which was learned at the Lobdra (Tib. *slob grwa*) or ritual school, and practice in the

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[29] See Denman & Singye Namgyel (2008).

Dratshang (Tib. *grwa tshang*) or ritual college.[30] Under the new plans, the Lobdra education would be followed by the study of the commentarial curriculum at the commentarial college or Shedra. The new educational path was structured in stages that mirrored modern education. An important early effect of the formal introduction of the curriculum was the shift from an overwhelming ritual focus to one that prioritized intellectual and academic learning. If before the establishment of Tango and the introduction of the monastic curriculum, ritual was at the core of monastic education, now it became the early foundation, which is expected to be followed by the rigorous academic training of the Shedra.

The traditional ritual learning that happened at the Lobdra, now takes place in more structured way during the eight years Zhirim Lobdra (Dz. *gzhi rim*) or Primary School.[31] This is followed by the study of the commentarial curriculum at the Shedra or monastic college which is divided in four years of Dringrim (Dz. *'bring rim*) or Higher Secondary (equivalent of High School), two years of Thorim (Dz. *mtho rim*) or the equivalent of a BA, and three years of Tsuglag (Dz, *gtsug lag*), the equivalent of an M.A. In 2017, the CMB also added three years of optional graduate studies, the equivalent of a Ph.D.

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[30] Dratshang means monastic (Tib. *grwa*) quarters (Tib. *tshang*), but it generally refers to the place where the monks learn ritual practice.
[31] For a complete list of all the Zhirim Lobdra institutions in the country see https://www.dl.gov.bt/monastic-institutions/lobdras/

Education level	Content	Secular equivalent	Years	Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF)	Institution
Ph.D (Dz. Rigs gcig mkhas pa'i mchog 'dzin)[32]		Ph.D. (Graduate School)	3	8	*mkhas pa'i 'byung gnas gling*[33]
Tsuglag (Dz. *gtsug lag*)	Vinaya (Dz. *'dul ba*)	M.A. (University)	2	7	Shedra (Commentarial School)
Thorim (Dz. *mtho rim*)	Abhidharma and Prajñāpāramitā training (Dz. *bstan bcos*),	B.A. (College)	3	6	
Dringrim (Dz. *'bring rim*)	Two years of "Higher Madhyamaka" training (Dz. *dbu ma gong ma*)	Secondary School	4	5	
	two years of "Lower Madhyamaka" training (Dz. *dbu ma'i 'og ma*)				
Zhirim (Dz. *gzhi rim*)	Basic Literacy	Primary School	8	3	Lobdra (Ritual School)

Table 1. *Structure of the modern monastic educational system*[34]

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[32] At the time of writing this article (September 2019), the program just began the program and no one has graduated from the program.
[33] Although the Ph.D. program takes place at Tango College, there is still no institutional name for the program. See note above.
[34] This table outlines the new structure of religious monastic education in Bhutan, and includes an equivalency to the secular educational system, in which it has been formally modeled. The Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF) is a tool developed by the Bhutan Accreditation Council (BAC) to enable the comparison of

Structurally, the curriculum is also different to that of Namdroling in the way content is learned. The one in Namdroling is a nine-year curriculum divided into four years of so-called "Lower Sūtra" (Tib. *mtha bral smra ba'i dbang 'phug*) training, followed by two years of "Higher Sūtra" (Tib. *phar phyin rab 'byams pa*) training, and capped by three years mostly focused on the Tantric textual tradition (Tib. *nges gsang legs bshad mdzod 'chang*).[35] In Bhutan, the curriculum is divided into two years of "Lower Madhyamaka" training (Dz. *dbu ma'i 'og ma*), two years of "Higher Madhyamaka" training (Dz. dbu ma gong ma), three years of Abhidharma and Prajñāpāramitā training (Dz. *bstan bcos*), which would result in the degree of Shastri, and two years of Vinaya and the "Three Vows" literature, (Dz. rig gzhung slob dpon) with would result in the degree of Ācārya (Tib. *A tsarya*). In the case of both

university, vocational, and monastic education. According to the BAC, the BQF has been created to meet the challenges of the 21st century and as a tool to measure the outcomes of various educational institutions in the country. In their own words, "tertiary education, through formal settings as well as continuing education programs, requires a system that is able to facilitate the recognition of diverse kinds of qualifications and create equivalency and professional pathways. A qualifications framework plays an important role in developing degree systems as well as in developing study programs in tertiary education institutions. It not only facilitates the recognition of qualifications, but it is also important for those who make use of qualifications, particularly learners and employers." In http://www.dahe.gov.bt/images/pdf/Bhutan%20Qualifications%20 Framework%20Inside%20Content.pdf, retrieved 13 January, 2022. The fact that religious education is part of the BQF framework is telling of the attempts by the Bhutanese government to measure monastic education according to some of the standards and expectations of secular education.

According to the BAC, "it facilitates lifelong learning and enables individuals to pursue their goals according to their aspirations. It supports and aspires to create alternate pathways to the development of human resources with appropriate capabilities and competitiveness."

[35] For a view of the curriculum see their website http://www.palyul.org/eng_shed_popup.htm.

institutions, those degrees were borrowed from CIHTS and reflected a look back at traditional Buddhist education in India. This different division of the material also responds to the fact that in the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, the tantric material is mostly studied and practiced during the three-year retreat (Dz. *lo gsum phyogs gsum*) that is to follow graduation from the Shedra. This change allows the non-tantric material to be spread over the nine-year curriculum.

Over the last few years, the Commission for Monastic Affairs (Dz. *grwa tshang lhan tshogs*)[36] has also added other structural changes such as the notion of semesters (two per year), credit hours, and a more transparent system of examination. This last change has been part of a larger plan by the CMB to make monastic institutions part of the university accreditation system, which would mean that monastic institutions under control of the CMB would need to follow some of the same standards of other government institutions such as the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) in order to fulfill the educational requirements of the government.[37]

The emphasis on the new monastic curriculum has transformed the Shedra or monastic college into the single most important monastic educational institution in Bhutan. While the older generation of monks was not expected to study the new curriculum, all new monks are expected to do so, forcing the CMB to create several monastic colleges throughout the country to allow monks to pursue their studies. The success of Tango college can be seen in the growth of Shedras all across the country which went from one in 1988 to 31 in 2019, with 11 of them as Dringrim (secondary school), four as

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[36] The Commission for Monastic Affairs is responsible for overseeing the Drukpa Kagyu institutions in the country. It is formed by seven members: the Je Khenpo, five Lopons, and a civil servant secretary. For more information see http://zhungdratshang.org/

[37] See http://www.dahe.gov.bt/index.php/governing-boards/bhutan-accreditation-council

Thorim (College), and with Tango remaining the only one were monks under the CMB can receive the degree of khenpo.[38]

The impact of Tango has been also felt in the Nyingma monasteries in the country, which are not under the control of the CMB. Following the success, of Tango, several Nyingma shedras opened throughout the country. Gante monastery (*sgang steng*), under the leadership of Gante Tulku, opened its own in 1985, and Lhodrak Karchu monastery (*Lho brag mkhar chu*), under the guidance of Namkhai Nyingpo opened in 1996. Unlike the shedras under the CMB, Nyingma institutions still follow closely the curriculum developed at Namdroling, particularly at the level of structure. As we will see though, at the level of content, Bhutanese Nyingma institutions are also asserting a unique Bhutanese identity by including works by Bhutanese scholars. The Shedra effect has also affected the status and education of nuns throughout the country, with many monastic colleges, Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu alike opened through the country over the last two decades. The particular status of nuns and their fight for educational opportunities though, is out of the scope of this article, although it is part of our larger project in religious education in Bhutan.[39]

In conclusion, from a structural point of view, the changes to the curriculum mostly reflect the process of convergence with secular education explored by Denman and Singye Namgyel, with the CMB adapting religious monastic education in the country to the current times by replicating some of the structures and processes of secular education.

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[38] For a list of all the Shedras in the country under the Central Monastic Body see https://www.dl.gov.bt/monastic-institutions/shedras/

[39] On this topic see Azim (2011), Robles (2014), Pommaret (2015), among others.

Changes in content

The changes to the commentarial curriculum have not only been structural and it incorporates substantial changes in content. The curriculum now includes subjects like English and basic computer skills, something that can also be found in the Namdroling and CIHTS curricula. At the same time, the inclusion of non-religious material is very limited, compared to its Indian counterparts, with no math or science, something that has gradually been incorporated in some of the monastic colleges in Exile.[40] As Karma Phuntsho pointed out in a conversation, the changes are not as radical as in India, since in Bhutan the CMB has taken a more conservative approach and has not embraced the study of science as the Dalai Lama has done in Tibetan monasteries in India.[41] In this sense, the CMB shows a willingness to incorporate change but always within a fairly conservative framework. As some leaders of the CMB shared with us, a lot of the changes are more superficial than of content, since they always feel the tension of preserving what they consider the essential of the Buddhist tradition without getting swept away by what they consider distractions or radical rethinking of Buddhist education that might have unintended consequences. The changes at Dzongzar Shedra in 2004, for example, with its use of modern style classroom, projectors, and modern pedagogical techniques, is a path they are not considering right now.[42]

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[40] See Impey (2014), and Gray & Eisen (2019). Some Nyingma institutions in Bhutan, such as Sechen Ugyen Chozong (Dz. *Zhe chen btsun dgon O rgyan chos rdzong*) do include some basic science and environmental courses, although their curriculum is mostly imported from their parent monastery in Nepal, Sechen Monastery (Tib. *Zhe chen bstan gnyis dar rgyas gling*).

[41] Personal interview Karma Phuntsho, June 6, 2018. During a visit to Sechen Monastery in Nepal in May of 2018 it was not unusual to see monks doing math while some others read scripture sitting side by side.

[42] On the introduction of modern pedagogies into the monastic curriculum at Dzongsar's Shedra see https://khyentsefoundation.org/dzongsar-khyentse-chokyi-lodro-college/ and https://khyentsefoundation.org/dkcli-highlights/

The commentarial curriculum of Namdroling leans heavily on Nyingma commentaries, particularly the thirteen commentaries by Khenpo Shenga, which form the spine of the curriculum, although it also includes up to nineteen commentaries by Mipham. In contrast, the Bhutanese curriculum as adapted by the Central Monastic Body only includes ten commentaries by Khenpo Shenga, and merely three by Mipham, while including fourteen commentaries by the foremost scholar of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, Pema Karpo (1527-1592, *Pad+ma dkar po*). These are changes that reflect an attempt by the Central Monastic Body to assert national as well as sectarian identity in the new curriculum. The curriculum acknowledges its roots in the Tibetan Nyingma tradition but it is also increasingly asserting a distinctive Bhutanese identity.[43]

In 2016, the CMB ordered further reform of the monastic curriculum, which very soon will include very detailed syllabi for each of the years of the Shedra, as well as description of goals and objectives and a clear division of what monks are expected to study each semester. The CMB is also creating new documents outlining clear rules and regulations of what is expected by all teachers and khenpos at the various Shedras under the CMB. When asked about the influences behind the new detailed syllabi, the CMB pointed out similar documents at other Bhutanese institutions such as RUB and RTC, as well as Naropa Institute in Colorado, a name that came up in several conversations since some of the current leaders of the Council for Religious Affairs have studied and/or taught there.[44] Naropa Institute has also been an influence in the

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[43] On a side note, Nyingma masters, although maintaining most of the curriculum from Namdroling, have also started to implement some changes to assert their Bhutanese identity, mostly by including texts by local Nyingma masters such as Pema Lingpa (mostly at Peling monasteries).

[44] On as side but relevant note, Naropa Institute has also been an influence in the creation of the new 3-year academic program at the Institute for the Science of the Mind (ISM) created in 2017 (2016), under the control of the CMB, with monastic faculty, but focused on

creation of a new three-year academic program, the Institute for the Science of the Mind (Dz. *Sems rtogs kha sems don rig pa'i spel khang*) created in 2017, under the control of the CMB, with monastic faculty, but focused on lay students who want to learn about Buddhism without becoming monks.[45] The impact of institutions like Naropa, as well as that of the Tibetan monasteries in exile, speaks to a larger trend of influence from a wide network of transnational Buddhist movements, ideas, and institutions. Another example is the recently created three-year Ph.D. program (Dz. rigs gcig mkhas pa'i mchog 'dzin) at Tango College. Founded in 2017 with the help of Bhutanese scholar Dorji Wangchuk, from the University of Hamburg, the main goal of the Ph.D. program is to train Buddhist monks who have graduated from the shedra in modern academic approaches, focusing less on traditional memorization and commentary, and more in the production of critical and original scholarship.[46] In order to receive the new degree, monks are not only expected to know the texts of the tradition and being proficient in debate, but if they join the program, they have to work on original research and write a thesis on a specific Buddhist topic. At the time of publication of this article (2022), there were five monks in the program and none of them had graduated. Recently, the CMB has also inaugurated (November 2020) a two-year Tantric College (*sngags grang*) where students who have graduated from the Shedra could join as an alternative option to the Ph.D. program to study the contemplative texts and traditions that are part of the tantric

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lay students who want to learn about Buddhism without becoming monks.

[45] A discussion of this new institute is included in our upcoming book *The Monk, the Nun, and the Curriculum: Tensions and Transformations of Monastic Education in Modern Bhutan.*

[46] It is quite telling, though, that the website of Tango College has a link to the Ph.D. program, but no content in it just yet. https://tangouniversity.org.bt/academic/academic-programmes/phd-program/ Retrieved 14 January, 2022.

curriculum of the three-year retreat through a more intellectual an academic lens.[47]

Conclusion

Justin McDaniel argued in his study of modern monastic education in Laos and Thailand that "one cannot study the vicissitudes in a religious community unless one studies its forms of education, and any study of education must begin with a mapping and analysis of the curriculum" (McDaniel, 2008, pp. 8-9) The main goal of this article has been to do just that by focusing on the history of the monastic curriculum in Bhutan, as well as in the changes of content and structure that the curriculum has seen over the last few decades. If Karma Phuntsho argued that the emergence of secular education in 1959 was seen as a thread by monastic institutions in the country, and Denman and Singye Namgyel explored the process of convergence that followed that initial tension between both systems, we argue that recent changes to the curriculum, either the structural ones (such as adding a gap year, the new Ph.D program as well as the recently created Tantric College), or those of content (such as the inclusion of texts specific to the Drukpa Kagyu tradition and to Bhutan specific religious or national history) demonstrate also a creative process that goes beyond simply mimicking modern secular education, and it shows a CMB more confident in its place in the social and educational landscape of modern Bhutan. The result is a more assertive approach to religious education one that, while still willing to implement changes learned from the advances of secular education in Bhutan as well as from the reforms to religious education developed in Tibetan monasteries in India, it is also beginning to assert the unique historical and religious legacy of Bhutan.

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[47] The idea of a tantric is modeled on the Gelukpa tantric colleges such as Gyuto, and it also speaks as to the push for an intellectual approach to the Buddhist tradition following the lines of modern secular education.

This transformation of the curriculum, though, having clear positive impact, it is also changing the nature of religious education in the country in ways that we are only beginning to see. One of the most important complains we heard during our interviews was that the emphasis on the monastic curriculum was driving monks away from their home monasteries in order to study at the few shedras spread throughout the country. That meant that in an era of already decreased interest in joining the monastery, local monasteries have a shortage of monks who can perform the rituals needed on a daily basis by the local community. In order to address this problem, the CMB has implemented a gap year between Dingrim and Thorim education, so monks can return to their home monasteries and help with the ritual needs of their communities. The CMB has also developed a new curriculum for smaller institutions that cannot afford a Shedra that allows monks in those monasteries to fulfill some of the educational requirements of the curriculum without leaving their local monasteries.[48]

But this issue also speaks as to a possible growing gap between the lay people understanding of the role of monks and monasteries in general, and the increasing academic and intellectual education of monks. In other words, changes to the monastic curriculum are not only affecting the content and the structure of monastic education, but also changing what it means to be a monk and the role of monasteries in modern Bhutan.

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[48] The CMB has created an alternative curriculum, the dgon 'dzin, that combines the education of the Dratshang with that of the gZhi rim. It follows a similar curriculum, but it is structured as a different pace, so monks can stay longer in their home communities before they leave, if they so wish, to study at the Shedra. Personal Interview with Khenpo Karma Lhundrup, Secretary of Monastic Education, June 12, 2018.

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Appendix 1
Thirteen Great Texts

གཞུང་ཆེན་བཅུ་གསུམ

The Thirteen Great Texts (Tib. *gzhung chen bcu gsum*) were a series of commentaries to thirteen classic Indian texts written by Khenpo Shenphen Nangba (Tib. *mKhan po gZhan phan snang ba*, 1871-1927). These texts became the backbone of the curriculum for the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya sects.

Collection	Title	Author	ཚོས་སྐད་
Vinaya འདུལ་བ	Prātimokṣa Sūtra	Guṇaprabha	སོར་མདོ།
	Vinaya Sūtra	Asaṅga	མདོ་རྩ་བ།
Abhidharma ཆོས་མངོན་པ	Abidharma-samuccaya	Asaṅga	མངོན་པ་ཀུན་བཏུས།
	Abhidharmakośa	Vasubandhu	མངོན་པ་མཛོད།
Profound View ཟབ་མོའི་ལྟ་བ་	Mūlamadhyamakakārikā	Nāgārjuna	དབུ་མ་རྩ་བ་ཤེས་རབ།
	Madhyamakāvatāra	Candrakīrti	དབུ་མ་འཇུག་པ།
	Catuḥśataka Śāstra	Aryadeva	དབུ་མ་བཞི་བརྒྱ་པ།
	Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra	Śāntideva	སྤྱོད་འཇུག་
Vast Conduct རྒྱ་ཆེན་སྤྱོད་པ་	Abhisamayālaṅkāra	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	མངོན་རྟོགས་རྒྱན།
	Māhayānasūtrālaṃkāra	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	མདོ་སྡེ་རྒྱན།
	Madhyāntavibhāga	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	དབུས་མཐའ་རྣམ་འབྱེད།
	Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	ཆོས་ཉིད་རྣམ་འབྱེད།
	Uttaratantra Śāstra	Maitreya (Asaṅga)	རྒྱུད་བླ་མ།

A Critical Analysis of Degrowth Debates Through the Lens of Gross National Happiness (GNH): Refraining from the Conventional View of Plurality*

*Katsu Masaki***

Abstract

This study problematises degrowth's goal of abandoning economic growth as a policy objective on the grounds that its advocates base their arguments on a binary growth/no-growth dichotomy and unwittingly activate the same economistic frame as the growth paradigm. To explore a remedy against this pitfall arising from the conventional view of plurality that segregates study materials into distinctive categories and prioritises one of them, Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is taken up. The policy does not lapse into the growth/degrowth trap, refrains from rejecting economic growth of all kinds, and instead ascertains its potentially diverse connotations. GNH accordingly weighs growth-related indicators on equal terms with various others concerning social, cultural, spiritual and emotional contentment. The holistic approach of GNH helps rectify the prevailing hegemony of economic growth and thus provides a more effective pathway for attaining a postgrowth order.

Keywords: degrowth, Gross National Happiness (GNH), postplural view, marginalising the economy, postgrowth order

Introduction

There is a growing realisation that the relentless pursuit of economic growth, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP), is ecologically and socially unsustainable and infringes on human wellbeing. Accordingly, attention has been paid to

** Professor, Konan University. Email: masakik101@gmail.com

the term 'degrowth'. Proponents of degrowth argue for the 'abolishment of economic growth as a social objective' (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 3) on the grounds that the narrow framing founded on GDP is far from an accurate indicator of prosperity. They therefore call for an 'equitable downscaling of production and consumption' (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 512).

This study, while sharing these concerns, problematises degrowth advocates' goal of removing economic growth as a social objective, referencing Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). GNH is a 'multidimensional development approach that seeks to achieve a harmonious balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional and cultural needs of our society' or to balance non-economic concerns with economic growth (GNH Commission, n.d.). Under GNH, economic growth is not ruled out, given that what matters is not whether the economy grows in monetary terms, but whether growth is subservient to greater happiness. It is agnostic about the pursuit of economic growth, in line with what J.C.J.M. Van den Bergh (2011) terms 'agrowth', heeding the numerous, concrete manifestations of economic growth.

As with degrowth, GNH rejects a growth-for-growth's sake approach. However, it has been largely overlooked by degrowth advocates, who thereby miss the opportunity to gain valuable insights (Verma, 2017, p. 485). Even where taken up, its agrowth stance is not given due regard, with Bhutan erroneously placed within the category of 'societies living without growth', to borrow a phrase used in a review article co-authored by six advocates (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 302).

This study attributes the disregard of GNH by degrowth proponents to the conventional view of plurality (Strathern, 2004, p. xvi) underlying degrowth debates. The orthodox view is founded on a hierarchical 'whole-part' distinction and segregates the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order into the degrowth 'part' and the growth-seeking 'part'. Accordingly, degrowth treats growth-oriented measures and degrowth

initiatives as separate endeavours and lapses into '"no alternatives" fatalism', rejecting growth of all kinds (Stirling, 2016a). Degrowth advocates thus give little regard to GNH on the grounds that it does not abandon the pursuit of economic growth.

How does the binary logic upheld in degrowth debates hamper a foundational shift to a postgrowth era? What insights can we gain from the agrowth approach of GNH, in view of the problematique in degrowth debates? 'GNH may have grown in the context of Bhutanese culture' but 'the universals that are important to all people in the world should be underlined and made more prominent' given that there are similarities among various peoples of the world, including the Bhutanese who have embraced democracy, markets and technology (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 60). What are those 'universals', then, which can be elucidated by weighing up the divergent stances of GNH and degrowth debates?

With these questions in mind, this study starts with an overview of degrowth debates, followed by an analysis of the conventional view of plurality underlying them. GNH is then taken up to examine how it embodies a postplural worldview that avoids dividing the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order between the degrowth and growth 'parts', and instead explores compatibility between them to depart from a '"no alternatives" fatalism'. GNH refrains from rejecting economic growth of all kinds and ascertains its potentially diverse connotations: there exist myriad ways of ordering social life beyond the growth/no-growth binary. This study concludes by dissecting the 'universals' that are potentially conducive to our endeavours to establish a postgrowth order.

An overview of degrowth debates

Degrowth's approach to advancing its 'paradigmatic proposition'

Proponents of degrowth claim to put forth a 'paradigmatic proposition': 'human progress without growth' can possibly be

made through a 'project with the ambition of getting closer to ecological sustainability and socio-environmental justice worldwide' (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 511). Degrowth is 'ambitious' in that '[o]ur society's fate is tied up with an organization that is based upon endless accumulation' (Latouche, 2009, p. 16).

Accordingly, degrowth encompasses more than the critique of economic growth, as it pursues a radical, multifaceted transformation of the ongoing growth-oriented social order. For this purpose, degrowth debates draw on such intellectual traditions as environmentalism, anthropological and structural critiques of economism, postdevelopment critiques of the ideological construction of development, and political ecology against technofascism (Muracca, 2013). Degrowth is based on ecological economics, historical analyses of the growth paradigm, anthropological research on steady-state societies, and studies of appropriate technologies as well as of alternative political institutions and practices (Kallis et al., 2018).

In practical terms, degrowth advocates envision the promotion of 'green, caring and communal' economies, in which people's lives are organised differently than today, with greater emphasis on 'sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality', 'care' and the 'commons' (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 3). Degrowth seeks to liberate people from growth imperatives, thus creating greater space for them to democratically pursue 'what they define as the good life' (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 5). This also implies that a 'cultural revolution' is to be ushered in, redefining what constitutes the 'good life' (Akbulut et al., 2019, p. 3). As a result, in lieu of the existing expansionist order, localisation is advanced to reduce material throughput; to increase the circularity of resource extraction, production and consumption; to boost sharing of space, resources, work and expertise; to decommodify labour, land and money; and to enhance human wellbeing through closer ties among residents (Kallis, 2018, pp. 119−122).

This is meant 'not as a blueprint but as a canvas that nourishes new imaginaries', implying that degrowth should be 'open, malleable and plural—a project to be worked out democratically, not one that is predefined in detail in advance' (Kallis, 2018, pp. 124−125). 'Green, caring and communal' economies take the form of a range of practices, including eco-communities, farmers' cooperatives and markets, back-to-the-landers, associations of child and health care, urban gardening, community currencies and work sharing (D'Alisa et al., 2015).

While degrowth advocates consider it insufficient to call for the abolishment of growth as a social objective, this is 'the degrowth thesis at its simplest' (Kallis, 2018, p. 112). According to them, moreover, the pursuit of economic growth is neither desirable nor mandatory for market mechanisms to function. This is dwelt on in the co-authored article referred to above, which reviews literature falsifying growth imperatives (Kallis et al., 2018, pp. 298−300): nongrowing economies may increase unemployment, which can nevertheless be curtailed by decreasing average working hours, or by creating employment in labour-intensive sectors; market economies function with zero net investments, or with increased investments in socially and ecologically sound sectors as well as disinvestments in others; even when governmental revenue declines as a result of degrowth, an equal distribution of income and wealth can be attained through progressive taxation and social spending, as well as by eliminating 'dirty' subsidies; and growth imperatives can be contained through economic legislation imposing carbon caps and taxes, while promoting collective firm ownership or not-for-profit corporations.

Degrowth debates' relevance/irrelevance to the Global South

A systemic change required for degrowth can be advanced by forging 'a coalition of the global social and environmental justice movements' (Kallis, 2017, p. 29). First, although degrowth initiatives originated in the North, they can also serve to liberate the South from 'the exploitation of its natural and human resources at low cost by the North'; it should accord

the Southern countries and peoples greater space to 'find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life' (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 5). Second, the potential relevance of degrowth to the Global South is also demonstrated by a growing volume of studies on similar movements and practices initiated in the Global South (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019, p. 248).

At the same time, as one study on environmental justice movements in the Global South illustrated, issues are framed differently from degrowth in the following aspect: the size of GDP is not of paramount importance for Southern groups that struggle to protect their own localities from the onslaught of global capitalism while confronting elite appropriation and control (Rodoríguez-Labajos et al., 2019, pp. 177–179). It is therefore advisable that degrowth advocates the avoidance of imposing a 'global' agenda in a neo-colonial manner in view of 'the lived realities of the subaltern groups in the Global South': they can instead pursue 'a gradual, bottom-up process rather than a radical, top-down rupture' (Dengler & Seebacher, 2019, p. 249).

Degrowth advocates are not necessarily unaware of these issues. For example, Susan Paulson (2017, p. 436) proposes to 'shift ambition away from determining which of these is the right answer ... toward building potential for synergy among many kinds of answers and solutions playing out differently across spaces, scales and social groups'. Similarly, Joan Martínez-Alier (2012, p. 66) admits that '[t]he Southern potential alliance with the small degrowth movement in Europe cannot mandate an agreement to stop economic growth everywhere'.

Moreover, the Declaration adopted at a seminal conference held in Paris in 2008 did include the following exceptional clause: 'In countries where severe poverty remains, right-sizing implies increasing consumption by those in poverty as quickly as possible, in a sustainable way, to a level adequate for a decent life, following locally determined poverty-reduction

paths' (Research and Degrowth, 2010, pp. 523−524). The conference is widely seen to have 'marked the birth of an international research community of researcher-activists' (Kallis, 2018, p. 6).

However, it is not desirable to limit this clause to 'countries where severe poverty remains'. This is because, as noted by Kate Raworth who put forth the notion of 'doughnut economics' as a roadmap for a sustainable transition, every nation is required to stay within the ecological ceiling (the outer ring of a doughnut) while securing minimum standards of living (the inner ring): 'We simply cannot be certain of how GDP will respond and evolve as we make this unprecedented transition into the Doughnut's safe and just space' (Raworth, 2017, p. 267).

A sustainable transition necessitates an expansion of investments in distributive and regenerative enterprises[1], as well as a contraction of environmentally and socially harmful industries, such as oil and gas, mining, industrial livestock production, demolition and landfill, and speculative finance (Raworth, 2017, p. 267). In countries where such polluting industries prevail, economic growth becomes 'uneconomic', in the words of Herman E. Daly (2014), because it increases environmental and social costs faster than its production benefits. In other 'developing' countries, economic growth can be 'economic', that is, the marginal benefits of growth can be greater than its marginal costs (Daly, 2014, p. 89). There are opportunities, in the latter category of 'developing' countries, to channel GDP growth into promoting distributive and regenerative undertakings, while avoiding developing harmful industries (Raworth, 2017, p. 254).

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[1] Distributive enterprises are businesses that contribute to 'transforming the underlying dynamics of wealth' and 'reducing both poverty and inequality' (Raworth, 2017, p. 178). Regenerative enterprises catalyse the metamorphosis from the throwaway economy to a circular economy in which 'the leftovers from one production process ... become the source materials for the next' (Raworth, 2017, p. 221).

Against this background, it is crucial to assign the duty of limiting growth primarily to 'rich' countries immersing in mass production and consumption, which are required to make available ecological space for 'developing' countries to converge on a common, optimal level of material throughput (Daly, 2014, p. 75). Many 'developing' countries are at what Walt W. Rostow termed the take-off stage, whereby economic growth serves to expand the range of socio-economic choices available to individuals and groups (Raworth, 2017, p. 254).

Degrowth's pitfall of dichotomising growth and degrowth

Theoretical framework: The conventional view of plurality

Nevertheless, should we follow degrowth debates and 'mandate an agreement to stop economic growth everywhere', except for 'countries where severe poverty remains'? To address this question, it is useful to seek to liberate ourselves from the shackles of the conventional view of plurality, which Marilyn Strathern problematises in favour of an alternative postplural perception of the world (2004, p. xvi).

Under the sway of the conventional notion of plurality, scholars tend to complacently accept the binary 'whole-part' distinction. They are consequently prone to hold a simplistic view that the relation between a 'part' and the 'whole' is irreducibly hierarchical, or that the 'whole' is composed of distinctive 'parts' that require separate treatment. However, '[t]he more closely you look, the more detailed things are bound to become' (Strathern, 2004, p. xiii). This is because a close inspection of the particular 'whole-part' distinction opens up possibilities for a wider range of categorisation (Strathern, 2004, p. xv).

In studying Strathern's contribution, for example, M. Holbraad and M.A. Pedersen (2017, p. 131) use an example of classifying a dog as a quadruped (a distinct 'part' or category of the 'entire' life form). This analytic category helps reduce the complexity of data on various life forms to enable a comparative analysis of quadrupeds and bipeds. However, it simultaneously albeit

unwittingly incurs information loss in that a dog and a human being can also be grouped into a single category such as that of mammals or vertebrates.

'The perception of increasable complication—that there are always potentially "more" things to take into account' is therefore called for (Satrathern, 2004, p. xiv). To put it inversely, we should not be complacent with a particular 'whole-part' divide that regards the 'entire' debate as consisting merely of distinctive 'parts'. Categorisation purports to order the complexity surrounding the materials under study, but insidiously ends up as a conduit to further amplify the complexity.

In dealing with this conundrum, it is imperative to draw on the postplural view of the world, under which the very 'whole-part' or 'complexity-simplicity' distinction loses its sense (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 124–125). To refrain from the hierarchical 'whole-part' distinction, partial connections are ascertained, for instance, between a dog as a quadruped and a human being as a biped, given that the two are both mammals and vertebrates. 'Comparability is not intrinsic to anything' (Strathern, 2004, p. 53), but there is fertile ground for forging a 'working compatibility' between different analytic categories (Strathern, 2004, p. 35).

Moreover, under the postplural view, analytic categories are not rigidly separated with recourse to a particular type of categorisation, nor are they compared with each other to make abstract, generalised arguments. On the contrary, 'comparison does no longer occur with reference to a high level of abstraction and generalization' but is accompanied by efforts to unearth differentiations within each category to explore compatibility between different categories (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 138). In this way, what Strathern terms 'the perception of increasable complication' is attained while embracing the postplural view.

As a logical consequence, categorical distinctions between the objects under study are no longer accepted a priori, and the categorisation used to separate them dissipate into 'self-comparisons' within each object under investigation (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 133). This leads us to 'the postplural injunction', that is, that any given category entails 'the latent potential to be "scaled" into what it is not (yet)' (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 154). Instead of complacently accepting given analytical categories, efforts are made to identify 'something more' and to go 'beyond the original answer to the question' (Strathern, 2004, p. xxii).

The conventional view of plurality underlying degrowth debates

The postplural worldview, put forth by Strathern, which points to the potential of identifying compatibility between analytical categories, helps dissect the pitfalls of degrowth debates. Degrowth advocates devised the new analytic category of 'degrowth', assuming that by making a clear-cut binary distinction between the degrowth and growth 'parts', they amplify information about the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order. The notion of degrowth supposedly helps 'open up a space for the inventiveness and creativity of the imagination' that has been blocked by the prevailing idiom of economism (Latouche, 2009, p. 9).

At the same time, in line with the conventional view of plurality, degrowth advocates regard growth-seeking and degrowth measures as distinctively separate endeavours, with recourse to a unidimensional scale to assess whether the abolition of economic growth as a social objective is attained. As long as they overemphasise the two categories' comparability, they incur information loss and overlook the potential of exploring compatibility between the two.

While degrowth rightfully calls into question our expansionist society, it should not downplay growth-seeking measures altogether, because to attain a fully-fledged postgrowth order,

the co-optimisation of economic development, environmental quality and employment concerns needs to be prioritised (Ashford & Hall, 2019, p. 459). Economic development represents the entire gamut of change required to widen the distribution of basic life-sustaining goods and services, to raise standards of living and to expand the range of socioeconomic choices available to individuals and nations (Todaro & Smith, 2015, p. 24). Economic development is distinguishable from economic growth, although the former does not preclude the latter, given that there is 'good GDP' and 'bad GDP' (Ashford & Hall, 2019, p. 164).

Therefore, it is imperative to avoid placing unnecessary constraints on economic growth, and we need not contract every material throughput and output as long as stringent measures are in place to curtail undesirable externalities that flow from growth (Van den Bergh, 2011, p. 890). Indeed, 'positive progress towards more just and sustainable societies will necessarily entail exponential rates of growth in particular practices, technologies and sectors' including 'peaceful dispute resolution; open source seeds; ecological farming; collective land tenure; co-operative enterprises; renewable energy; community utilities; grassroots innovations... and so on' (Stirling, 2016b).

This is supposedly in line with the assertion made by proponents of degrowth that it is not a retrograde step back to premodern styles or standards of living. As stated by a noted advocate, Serge Latouche, it is aimed at 'doing more, and doing better, with less' than the business-as-usual, with recourse to 'better technologies and better management', such as those relating to renewable energy sources, material efficiency improvements and low-carbon devices (Latouche, 2009, pp. 55−56). If so, degrowth advocates may agree with Van den Bergh (2011, p. 885) who puts forth the notion of 'agrowth' on the grounds that 'being against GDP or against unconditional GDP growth is not the same as being against growth'.

'Marginalising the economy' beyond the growth/no-growth binary

From the postplural viewpoint which ascertains the potential of identifying compatibility between different categories, therefore, it is imperative to ensure that 'comparison does no longer occur with reference to such a high level of abstraction and generalisation' as degrowth debates. The polarised 'growth/degrowth trap' should be superseded on the understanding that 'growth can be a far more nuanced and subtle process, than this dismal zero sum calculus suggests' (Stirling, 2016c)[2].

'So, by simply inverting the terms of its target, a narrow "degrowth" critique risks counterproductively reinforcing the prevailing hegemony of monetary value in current real world-politics' (Stirling, 2016c). Degrowth is not framed differently from the growth paradigm, in that both draw on the crude binary logic of growth/no-growth to prescribe policies either to increase, decrease or stabilise the size of the economy (Andy Stirling's commentary, cited in Kallis, 2017, pp. 167−169).

The problematique surrounding the polarised 'growth/degrowth trap' can be further elucidated by drawing on Steffen Roth's article on anti-capitalism (2015). Anti-capitalism 'creates its own problems' and insidiously facilitates the continuation of capitalism (Roth, 2015, p. 111). This is because it distinguishes capitalism from non-capitalism, clarifies the distinct nature of the former and elucidates issues thus far unnoticed or neglected by capitalists, who learn how

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[2] This drawback manifests itself in the review article referred to above, which intends to reinvigorate 'studies of economic stability in the absence of growth and of societies that have managed well without growth' (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 292). In the article, Bhutan is erroneously included among those societies that have sustained themselves without growth (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 302). By implicitly interpreting GNH as rejecting economic growth, the authors of the article grasp it 'only superficially and as a kind of exotic curiosity', to borrow a phrase from Ross McDonald (2009, p. 614).

best to reorient and prolong the status quo. It is therefore advisable that proponents of anti-capitalism refrain from activating the same economistic frame as capitalism, the object of criticism. Unless they shed themselves of their economy-bias, 'the sharpest problem focus cannot help but sharpen the problem' (Roth, 2015, p. 107).

Similarly, degrowth debates are beset with the economy-bias in that they remain trapped in the same binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth' as the growth paradigm (Roth, 2017, p. 1034). A more effective solution lies in 'marginalizing the economy' or avoiding reinforcing its prevailing hegemony (Roth, 2017, p. 1043). However, degrowth advocates are immersed in the binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth' and instead help growth advocates sharpen their counterarguments, even if unintentionally.

To rectify this pitfall, it is useful to pay attention to the separation of the economy as a distinct sphere of social life, which became entrenched in the 1950s to give rise to the growth paradigm (Kallis et al., 2018, p. 294). The separation of the economic sphere can be done away with while illuminating the existence of various other non-economic domains such as 'political system', 'science', 'art', 'religion', 'legal system', 'sport', 'health', 'education' and 'social media' (Roth, 2017, p. 1040). When all these domains are accounted for in tandem with the economic sphere, it is plausible to relegate 'economy' to being merely one of them, and to conceive myriad ways of ordering social life (Roth, 2015, p. 118).

In this way, issues regarding economic growth can be grasped in 'contextual, relational and ever-changing' terms: its unfolding is seen to hinge on how economic growth intersects with the non-economic domains (Stirling, 2016c). This is in line with the postplural worldview that repudiates the conventional notion of plurality founded on the orthodoxy of complacently accepting rigid analytical categories: scholars are liable to draw on the latter to make abstract, generalised comparisons

without exploring compatibility between ostensibly divergent analytical categories.

Degrowth proponents should move away from the restrictive, binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth' founded on the conventional notion of plurality. Instead, they can ascertain myriad connotations of economic growth beyond monetary value and heed the potential of linking growth to social values, such as equality, longevity, health, justice, care, liberty, fulfilment, education and sustainability (Stirling, 2016b). Such a 'many-growth analysis means reshaping and balancing activities measured in conventional economic terms, with radically more prominent and dynamic diversities of cultures, institutions, practices' and so on (Stirling, 2016c).

Gross National Happiness (GNH) and its postplural stance

In facilitating degrowth to move away from the conventional view of plurality, it is imperative that its advocates 'shift ambition ... toward building potential for synergy among many kinds of answers and solutions playing out differently across spaces, scales and social groups', as noted earlier. In this regard, Bhutan's GNH can serve as an illuminating model in both conceptual and practical terms.

This is against the background that the role of religion in development has gained significance since the start of the 21st century, as a key to ascertaining alternative and multiple views of 'progress' (Bompani, 2019). GNH has won acclaim among development scholars as an alternative development approach founded on Buddhist principles of holistic wellbeing and harmony with the natural environment (Willis, 2021, pp. 170–171). As pointed out by degrowth proponents, there is a growing realisation that the growth-oriented world order has proven ecologically and socially unsustainable, thus calling for a fundamental redefinition of what constitutes 'progress' or 'development'.

GNH denotes 'the distinctive Bhutanese perception of the fundamental purpose of development', founded on the country's rich tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, and is not 'an intellectual construct detached from practical experience' (Priesner, 1999, p. 27). 'For most Bhutanese, Buddhism permeates all facets of their lives' and 'informs their worldview, lifestyle, social behaviour, economic practices and political thinking' (Karma Phuntsho, 2013, p. 42). For the public, the promotion of Buddhist values of happiness in the country's development plans is nothing novel or revolutionary, although it was visionary for the Fourth King (rein: 1972–2006) to have initiated the process of translating the country's rich tradition of Mahayana Buddhism into a formal national policy (Karma Phuntsho, 2013, p. 596).

GNH began to be applied to Bhutan's development plans in the 1970s, as the Fourth King started stressing on the need to prioritise happiness in defiance of the propensity of development elsewhere to revolve around the maximisation of GDP, in his public speeches and statements (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, pp. 32−35)[3]. In this sense, GNH predates degrowth by a few decades, and thus provides 'a wealth of experience to learn from' in order that the latter can evolve into a more concrete approach defying the business as usual (Verma, 2017, p. 485). Degrowth is still a hypothesis that requires empirical studies, as admitted by a noted proponent (Kallis, 2018, p. 155).

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[3] It was in a policy document entitled *Bhutan 2020* (Planning Commission, 1999) that, for the first time, the government explicitly articulated GNH as its long-term vision. GNH had not been mentioned in the country's earlier development plans, but had been de facto put into practice by 'people who had intuitively internalised it' (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, p. 34). Accordingly, various policy measures, which would later be incorporated into the systems of GNH measurement, were adopted in various plans, including the fifth (1981–1986), the sixth (1987–1992) and the seventh (1992–1997) five-year plans (Masaki et al., 2021).

Moreover, in conceptual terms, GNH gives insight to degrowth advocates as it is agonistic about economic growth: those involved in GNH implicitly avoid the conventional view of plurality that leads degrowth advocates to reject growth a priori. This stance is attested to by its composite index, encompassing both indicators of wellbeing stemming from economic growth and those relating to non-economic spheres. In line with the Buddhist worldview, as described below, GNH adopts a postplural stance of abstaining from rejecting economic growth of all kinds. This is to instead ascertain its myriad connotations depending on how it intersects with non-economic domains. GNH thus avoids making an abstract, generalised comparison and is resultantly more capable of 'marginalising the economy' or rectifying its prevailing hegemony: it criticises the narrow framing founded on GDP while refraining from the economistic frame of 'more-versus-less growth'.

GNH's 'holistic' approach founded on Buddhism

GNH seeks to strike a harmonious balance between economic and non-economic wellbeing of the society through 'sustainable and equitable socio-economic development', 'environmental conservation', 'cultural preservation and promotion' and 'good governance'. These four pillars are further subdivided into the nine domains that compose the GNH index, namely, 'living standards', 'education', 'health', 'cultural diversity and resilience', 'community vitality', 'time use', 'psychological wellbeing', 'ecological diversity and resilience' and 'good governance'.

In this way, GNH embodies a holistic (recognising all aspects of people's needs, be these spiritual or material, physical or social) and balanced approach (emphasising balanced progress towards the attainment of GNH) (Karma Ura et al., 2012, p. 7). The GNH's stance of conceptualising development as interdependent economic, ecological, social, cultural and good governance concerns is rooted in Mahayana Buddhism, which advocates interdependence as opposed to the dominant either–

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or worldview (Schroeder & Schroeder, 2014). Any perceived either–or dichotomy infringes on the ultimate nature of the universe (Givel, 2015, pp. 20–21).

Although GNH is akin to degrowth positions in rejecting a growth-for-growth's sake approach, it differs from the latter in not ruling out the pursuit of economic growth. This is attested to by the fact that the nine domains include 'living standards' in income, land and quality of housing: the domain concerns the economic wellbeing required for the Bhutanese people to fulfil their basic needs for a comfortable lifestyle (Karma Ura et al., 2012, p. 168). Therefore, according to the first policy document entitled *Bhutan 2020,* which explicitly articulated GNH as the government's long-term vision, 'the concept of Gross National Happiness does not reject economic growth' but regards it as 'a precondition for ... increasing standards of living and enlarging the opportunities and choices of our people' (Planning Commission, 1999, p. 11). *Bhutan 2020* continues to serve as a benchmark for the government's development policies.

According to the Bhutanese government's report, prepared for the 2021 High-Level Political Forum of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 'sustainable economic growth' is called for, to address the country's 'persistent challenges' concerning 'vulnerabilities associated with the economy' (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, p. 73). The country's economic vulnerabilities are related to its reliance on capital-intensive investment in hydropower generation for state coffers. The sector is not highly correlated with employment generation, thereby necessitating the promotion of non-hydropower sectors such as agricultural processing, cottage and small industries, and green tourism.

There is ample room within Bhutan to expand the economic choices available to the disadvantaged segments as a means to curtail regional and social disparities. As noted in the SDGs report, income poverty rates in the country's 20 districts range from more than 30 percent to less than 1 percent, while

unemployment is high among youths, especially women (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, p. 39, p. 80). The government commits itself to 'sustainable and equitable socio-economic development', one of GNH's four pillars, and economic growth can therefore serve as a reasonable approximation of 'living standards'. This denotes that GDP per capita possibly correlates with people's access to the subsistence essentials such as food, clothing, housing and health care.

Simultaneously, for the marginal benefits of economic growth to outweigh its marginal costs in Bhutan, the government prioritises 'environmental conservation', another pillar of GNH. Environmental sustainability is positioned as a defining point of economic growth, given that the latter is measured by GDP or the total value of all goods and services traded in the country, and thus increases material throughput and waste[4].

At a more fundamental level, the promotion of 'sustainable growth' has been the mainstay of the country's development, that is, 'economic growth is seen, not as an end in itself, but as 'an important means for achieving higher ends', as stated in *Bhutan 2020* (Planning Commission, 1999, p. 11). The stance is derived from Buddhist economics, which positions the economy as part of a broader ethical order, unlike mainstream economics, which privileges it as a separate, important domain of social life (Long, 2019, pp. 64–69). Buddhist economics moves beyond the popular view that 'getting more is always good' and measures economic performance more holistically while taking into consideration 'the protection of the

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[4] To avoid environmental degradation, the government has formulated the National Sustainable Consumption and Production Strategy and Action Plan (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, p. 90). It is also committed to remaining carbon neutral by endeavouring to decouple growth from greenhouse gas emissions. 'Bhutan's carbon sink … will be surpassed in the 2035–2040 period' unless efforts are made to decouple growth from greenhouse gas emissions (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021, pp. 94–95).

environment, the state of the human spirit, and the quality of life of all people' (Brown, 2017, p. 6). GNH conceptualises development as interdependent economic, ecological, social, cultural and good governance concerns, as noted above.

These attributes enable GNH to embody a parallelism with the above-stated dictum of Roth, that is, the importance of 'marginalising the economy' or rectifying the prevailing hegemony of economic growth. In order to refrain from activating the same economy-bias as the growth paradigm, GNH places a stronger focus on non-economic domains but does not reject growth across the board, thus departing from the binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth'. The attainment of 'right livelihood', wherein economic activities 'satisfy the test of ecology, future generations, and society' is what matters in Buddhist economics (Zslonai, 2011, cited in Ng, 2020, pp. 61–62), as opposed to the monetary scale. This does not imply that the pursuit of material prosperity is prohibited, but points to the need to use resources including monetary wealth mindfully, to let go of human ego and self-centred attachment to material comfort (Brown, 2017, pp. 22–23).

GNH measurement conducive to 'marginalising the economy'

To verify the overarching status and progress of GNH outcomes and to provide decision-makers with information on how best to advance future policies and projects, GNH surveys are conducted regularly using the GNH index. The quantitative scores of the nine domains are summed into an overall value of national GNH[5], which is also disaggregated for geographical and demographical comparisons. The scores are also used to ascertain changes over time, and to assess the relative

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[5] GNH exemplifies a 'nondollar index' that aggregates a holistic range of variables into an overall measure of people's wellbeing, as opposed to a 'dashboard' that provides a variety of indicators of wellbeing (Brown, 2017, pp. 110−112).

significance of the nine domains for the Bhutanese people to live happily.

In measuring people's wellbeing in this way, the nine domains are given equivalent weight in view of the equal importance of each domain for happiness (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 128). The performance of economic growth is primarily assessed under 'living standards' (closely linked to GDP per capita), while this and other domains are weighed on equal terms, thereby positioning economic growth as one among a range of variables conducive to human wellbeing.

As a result, 'the required combination of variables [for each person to achieve happiness] may vary depending on personal circumstances at a given point in time' (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 132). As noted in the report on the 2015 GNH survey, 'people themselves find fulfilment in a multiplicity of ways': 'GNH in Bhutan is relatively well balanced across domains' in that each of the nine domains contributes almost equally to overall happiness (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, p. 60).

This attribute of GNH resonates with the above-mentioned importance of heeding the possibility of myriad ways of ordering social life while taking into consideration a range of domains, both economic and non-economic. Unlike degrowth debates immersed in the binary logic of 'more-versus-less economic growth', GNH avoids lapsing into the conventional view of plurality that rigidly distinguishes degrowth from growth, and instead ascertains potentially diverse connotations of economic growth: its unfolding is seen to hinge on how it intersects with other non-economic affairs and is thus grasped in 'contextual, relational and ever-changing' terms.

At the same time, in reality, '[b]alancing between GNH and GDP poses an ever-greater challenge to governance' (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 117). GDP measures the volume of economic

exchanges, irrespective of their social or environmental implications: it increases even when economic growth adds to income disparity or environmental degradation, and ignores exchanges that do not involve monetary transactions[6]. Moreover, a globalised world dominated by GDP poses challenges to the promotion of GNH: given the worldwide phenomena of deepening international trade and investment ties, 'Bhutan has not been immune to capitalism, resulting in increased materialism and the emergences of a status-conscious consumer class with disposable income' (Verma, 2017, p. 486).

It is noted in *Bhutan 2020* that GNH does focus on 'ensuring that nonmaterial aspects are not overwhelmed by the negative forces of modernization' (Planning Commission, 1999, p. 12). According to a report entitled *Happiness: Towards a New Paradigm of Development*, '[t]he process of our transformation from the current to the new paradigm must harmonise and reconcile seemingly contradictory choices such as short-term and long-term goals, individual and collective goals, and growth and sustainable goals': 'The journey … has to begin with the recognition of the complexity and interrelatedness of our reality' (New Development Paradigm Steering Committee and Secretariat, 2013, p. 7).

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[6] In this respect, GDP is in a stark contrast to GNH that promotes 'community vitality' as one of its nine domains. 'Community vitality' is concerned with social support and community relations entailing non-monetary transactions of goods and services. Its inclusion in GNH tallies with the following view held among scholars concerned with postgrowth transitions: material security hardly constitutes the sole goal of human beings who also value the quality of their relationships with each other and take pride in what they contribute to their own communities (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, pp. 21–22). It is plausible to draw on this consideration to operationalise a 'community economy' that capitalises on a broader range of transactions than those based merely on individuals' calculations of gains and outcomes (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, p. xix). The author provides a case study of the operationalisation of a 'community economy' in a village in Bhutan in another article (Masaki, 2021b).

GNH's agrowth approach to economic growth

This brings us back to the need to see the dynamics of economic growth as being 'contextual, relational and ever-changing' to clarify what constitutes 'good GDP' or 'bad GDP'. According to a report detailing the recommendations contained in the *New Paradigm of Development* report, '[t]here is no point in being against economic growth as such because economic growth can in principle manifest in so many different ways', and at the same time 'we should try to minimize any collateral problems that may entail' (Hirata, 2017, pp. 381–382). This is in line with the agrowth stance that is agnostic about 'more-versus-less economic growth'.

From the perspective of GNH, care should be taken not to be judgmental about a growth path or a non-growth scenario when examining its implications for employment (Hirata, 2017, pp. 382–384). While GNH prioritises addressing involuntary unemployment, it is not vital 'to react to a productivity increase and to the resultant fall in demand for labor with an increase in production [or with resource to economic growth] in order to keep people in jobs' (Hirata, 2017, p. 382). This is because increased labour productivity results in reduction in working time, which can otherwise be tapped for work sharing to contain the rise in unemployment. Moreover, it is plausible to advance deliberate reductions in productivity, which can be promoted by replacing socially and environmentally destructive industries with more sustainable and labour-intensive industries. This is a practice pursued in several parts of the world, with recourse to a shift from fossil fuel power generation to community-based renewable energy sources.

Similarly, the GNH perspective accords importance to reducing income inequality, but leaves whether the issue can be better addressed in the presence or absence of economic growth as an open question (Hirata, 2017, pp. 384–385). Although the worldwide trend is that within-country income disparity widens in times of economic growth, the latter can also serve to narrow the former when it is promoted in ways to equitably

expand socio-economic choices available to the populace. In this respect, the following precept warrants attention, which Ernest F. Schumacher put forth in his classic *Small is Beautiful*, originally published in 1973: it is imperative to depart from the unfounded and yet popular idea that 'the modern sector can be expanded to absorb virtually the entire population' (Schumacher, 2010, p. 178). To avoid inflicting internal imbalances on the economy, modern industrial development needs to proceed in tandem with the promotion of 'production by the masses' in Schumacher's words (2010, p. 79). The latter can be attained with the development of vibrant local communities, which serves to create 'a dynamic situation capable of generating growth' albeit with less total output (Schumacher, 2010, p. 184).

The effect of economic growth on environmental conservation is not black or white (Hirata, 2017, pp. 387–388). It may create the material affluence required to maintain adequate ecosystem services such as fresh water, air purification and pest control, but can also create polluting industries and contribute to carbon emissions owing to the increased consumption of energy and resources. Simultaneously, nations worldwide, including 'developing' ones, cannot afford to seek to 'grow now and clean up later', but are instead required to channel economic growth into promoting distributive and regenerative economies (Raworth, 2017, p. 254). This is because the world economy is pushing against the ecological ceiling. It is vital for every nation to constrain undesirable externalities that flow from growth, even when this means slowing it down, and to explore possibilities of resource-saving technological progress or substitution of material goods by services.

GNH's 'ethical' approach to 'marginalising the economy'

GNH can 'marginalise the economy' or rectify the prevailing hegemony of economic growth, not only because it allows myriad ways of ordering social life, as noted above, but also because it embeds wellbeing within Buddhist ethics. GNH weighs various indicators of economic and non-economic

wellbeing in light of ethics (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 55). 'When you see a society that is happy but it is tending towards unethical actions or an individual finding happiness but in a very unethical manner, there ought to be some sort of an adjustment downward in the hedonic value of that happiness' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 56).

GNH's ethical approach to 'marginalising the economy' is based on the following Buddhist values of happiness (Karma Ura, 2017, p. 125). First, happiness is attained when a person abandons the false belief in the possibility of a clear and separated self, and instead arrives at a relational view whereby the self/other boundaries are diluted. Second, happiness arises from inner contentment and compassion for others, rather than self-centred attachment to material comfort and fleeting pleasures. These have much to offer at a time when material prosperity has become the bedrock of public policy, under the sway of a 'debilitating and short-sighted vision of individualism' that conceives the self in terms of appetites and wants (Halkias, 2012, p. 16).

In other words, GNH represents the secularisation of Buddhist teachings on 'meaningful happiness and deeper values in life' (Verma, 2019, pp. 24–25). In this respect, GNH is founded on two imperatives that human wellbeing hinges on: relationships and the environment (Jigmi Y. Thinley, 2012, pp. 12–13). Human beings derive happiness not only from individual gains and outcomes but also from the quality of relationships with each other as well as those with the environment. GNH thus seeks to attain ends that are collective (viewing happiness as an all-encompassing collective phenomenon), sustainable (pursuing wellbeing for both current and future generations), and equitable (ensuring everyone a reasonable level of wellbeing) in nature (Karma Ura et al., 2012, p. 7).

Given that GNH thus enables 'a deeper assessment of development that directly gives much greater space to happiness defined in a broader way' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 55),

its argument that relates wellbeing to individuals' sense of ethics is more capable of 'marginalising the economy' than degrowth. This is because Buddhist values of happiness help people to internalise frugality 'without falling into a severe form of ascetics': frugality is underlined by people's greater sense of interdependence with human and non-human others (Ng, 2020, p. 134).

This comparative advantage of GNH can be illuminated by contrasting its stance with the 'ethical' approach put forth by degrowth advocates (Koch et al., 2017). They similarly warn against material comfort and fleeting pleasures arising from a convenient but unsustainable lifestyle. The disadvantage is that degrowth fails to consider the significance of people's inward disposition to abstain from an overly materialistic lifestyle. Limitations are imposed on such material comfort as meat consumption, air travel and the use of electronic gadgets (Koch et al., 2017, p. 76) but 'it seems rather too optimistic for us to hope for an overall increase in subjective wellbeing, at least in the short-term' (Koch et al., 2017, p. 80).

In this way, degrowth hands down the moral imperative with mere reference to objective, science-based knowledge pointing to the need to constrain the spread of self-centred, materialistic values. The ethical approach of degrowth is therefore not effective in shedding the economy-bias that is built on individuals' liability to prioritise the goal of increased income and consumerism. People's logical understanding of the importance of pursuing a more sustainable mode of happiness is not a sufficient condition to motivate them to change their lifestyles[7].

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[7] This tallies with the theory of ethics 'based on the action of the will' which Nishida Kitaro propounded based on his Zen practices, to problematise the 'rational or intellectual theory' in *An Inquiry into the Good*, originally published in 1911 (Nishida, 1990, p. 111). While the 'rational or intellectual theory' can depict the universality of certain moral laws (such as 'love thy neighbour'), one's logical understanding of those laws does not necessarily motivate one to obey them, as 'the will arises from feelings or impulses, not from mere abstract logic'

GNH, on the contrary, refrains from privileging objective knowledge based on scientific studies as follows. Progress occurs through 'an inward journey towards realization of the true nature of mind' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 58). As noted above, happiness arises when individuals abandon self-centred attachment to myopic comfort and pleasure in favour of inner contentment and compassion for others. 'Objective knowledge and belief in scientific proof are not the main routes towards knowledge of the true nature of mind' (Karma Ura, 2010, pp. 58–59).

This does not mean that GNH is not aligned with an objective, standardised system of measurement: on the contrary, the promotion of GNH requires a 'navigation tool' that guides society to the desired destination (Karma Ura, 2010, pp. 54–55). This stance has been given a concrete expression in the above-mentioned index used to quantitatively measure GNH. GNH resultantly encompasses both objectively verifiable indicators and individuals' subjective consciousness, in contrast to degrowth that prioritises the former with scant regard for the latter.

This approach helps conceptualise a more effective postgrowth transition because GNH, contrary to degrowth, refrains from the subjective/objective dichotomy, another manifestation of the conventional view of plurality that divides study materials into distinctive categories and prioritises one of them. The

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(Nishida, 1990, p. 113). According to Nishida, one can arrive at a situation in which 'knowledge [about ultimate reality] is ... accompanied by the performance of the will [to translate it into conduct]' (Nishida, 1990, pp. 90–91). Nishida's theory of ethics is founded on his notion of pure experience, in which we 'rid ourselves of the [subjective] self and merge with the object of thought' (Nishida, 1990, p. 13). This assertion accords with Zen practices aimed at reaching the transcendental unity that surpasses the subject/object dichotomy and thus brings about a revelation of the essence of reality from within oneself (Schinzinger, 1958, p. 15).

subjective/objective dichotomy underlies the growth paradigm that erroneously treats GDP as a proxy of human wellbeing. The growth paradigm resultantly downplays subjective experiences in favour of objective GDP data. GNH supersedes the subjective/objective dichotomy and is not confined to being 'an arithmetical exercise, derived from indicators': it is also about 'developing a vision that is in concert with all the deeply thinking members of society' (Karma Ura, 2010, p. 54).

Conclusion

As described in this study, a postgrowth transition should be pursued with recourse to the postplural perspective, under which analytic categories are not rigidly separated: efforts should instead be made to explore compatibility between ostensibly divergent categories to avoid making abstract, generalised arguments. This allows us to arrive at a more nuanced and subtle understanding than the binary calculus of degrowth suggests, that is, the polarised growth/degrowth trap. Otherwise, our endeavours to move towards a postgrowth order may merely end up flipping the growth paradigm on its head: so long as the same parameter of 'more-versus-less economic growth' remains, as with the growth paradigm, degrowth advocates continue to reinforce the way of viewing economy in terms of economic growth[8].

The postplural worldview is embedded in Bhutan's policy of GNH, which offers an illuminating alternative to degrowth in both conceptual and practical terms. GNH is well designed to 'marginalise the economy' or rectify the prevailing hegemony of economic growth through its holistic, balanced approach that ascertains myriad ways of attaining happiness. Accordingly, the GNH index accords equal weight to all the nine domains,

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[8] A related strand of postdevelopment studies, lambasting development as top-down, ethnocentric, homogenising endeavours, is not 'radical' enough to abandon a similar binary logic entailed in its rival developmentalism (Masaki, 2021a). As noted above, degrowth debates draw on postdevelopment studies, as well as on environmentalism and anthropological and structural critiques of economism.

including that of 'living standards' which is closely related to 'more-versus-less economic growth'. Moreover, GNH effectively 'marginalises the economy' by encompassing the pursuit of subjective introspection, thereby constraining the economy-bias founded on the subjective/objective dichotomy.

As noted in the document detailing the *New Paradigm of Development* report, referenced above, 'there can be no doubt that societies are worse off when they are forced to have economic growth than when they are free to choose whether economic growth should be part of their conception of truly good development' (Hirata, 2017, p. 392). This does not mean that 'societies should be forced to have degrowth'. On the contrary, a postgrowth transition should be 'a project to be worked out democratically, not one that is predefined in detail in advance', to repeat the quote of a degrowth advocate taken up earlier.

It is therefore crucial to revert to and bring to the fore the principle of valuing 'locally determined paths', which was contained in the declaration adopted at the 2008 conference (but not as an exceptional clause, as originally implied). For this purpose, the conventional view of plurality, segregating the 'entire' debate on a postgrowth order into the degrowth and growth 'parts', should be done away with to avert a '"no alternatives" fatalism' that rejects growth of all kinds. It is instead crucial to uphold the freedom of different nations 'to choose whether and how economic growth should be part of truly good development'.

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The Impact on Early Bhutanese Coinage of Contentious Relations Between Bhutan and Cooch Behar from 1772 to 1774

*Michael Givel**

Abstract

Bhutan's coinage has been thoroughly documented related to design and mintage variability. In addition, as noted for the first time in this paper, one of Bhutan's late 18th to early 20th century core governmental missions is reflected through changes in Bhutan's coinage. This is based on Bhutan's conflict with Cooch Behar including interactions with the British East India Company and the legacy and aftermath of that conflict. While 18th to early 19th century versions of the symbols on Bhutanese coins reflected Hindu and national icons of Cooch Behar, the later versions to 1910 contained Cooch Behar symbols and definitive Buddhist symbols reflecting the sovereignty and a core mission to promote a Bhutanese Buddhist state where citizens became Enlightened.

Keywords: Bhutan, Cooch Behar, British East India Company, numismatic, Narayan, Buddhism

Introduction

This paper will examine the historical context and governmental and societal purpose of early Bhutan as reflected in early Bhutanese coins first minted in 1772 and then to 1910. For this paper, modern (versus early) Bhutanese coinage is defined when only Bhutanese symbols, starting in 1910, appeared on the coins (Bronny, 2014; Royal Monetary Authority, 2015). Several scholarly publications have been written concerning the design and mintage variability in Bhutanese coins before 1910 (Bose, 1996; Bronny, 2014;

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* Professor, Department of Political Science, The University of Oklahoma. Email: mgivel@ou.edu

Cruyce, 2015; Eden, Permberton, Griffiths, & Bose, 1865; Panish, 1989; Rhodes, 1991, 1993, 1999, 2000; Rhodes & Bose, 1999; Royal Monetary Authority, 2015). Also prior to 1910, the script appearing on the coins has been utilized by scholars and coin collectors primarily only to distinguish the coins from one another, and to divide them into "types" (Bronny, 2014; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). These types are, for the most part, based purely upon literal deviations of symbols and defined spans of time.

However, with respect to the symbols on the coins themselves, no scholarly work other than this paper has addressed, in detail, the overall historical intent, context, and symbolic meaning of the coins associated with Bhutan from 1772 to 1910. Numismatics makes up an important part of archaeological evidence and its development offers ways in which to trace the historical development of the country and its national identity (Davies, 2002; Dorji, 2004; Dutta, 2013; Menger, 1892). More specifically, the overall purpose of the mintage of money in a society is a socially-constructed concept that reflect set societal beliefs, norms, and political agendas and is not neutral (Davies, 2002; Ingham, 2004). For example, expansion of the money and credit supply has been utilized as one modern policy approach to promote greater consumer demand (Davies, 2002).

Trade routes between Tibet, Nepal, and other larger countries represented an early direct outside influence on Bhutan's usage of coins for payment of imports and exports (Karma Phuntsho, 2013; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). Cooch Behar coins circulating in Bhutan due to trade likely existed in limited quantities on or before 1583 (Rhodes, 2000). The other early and major usage of coins in Bhutan, which was almost entirely a barter economy were for the exchange of ceremonial and monastic gifts (Bose, 1996; Pemberton, 1837-1838; Karma Phuntsho, 2013; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). At the beginning of the conflict in 1772 between Bhutan and Cooch Behar, Cooch Behar coin dies were removed and used inside Bhutan to mint

replicas of Cooch Behar coins (Bose, 1996, 2013; Rhodes, 1999). As a result, many of the conclusions made in this paper are based upon Bhutan's historical interactions with Cooch Behar, as Bhutan's coins originated from this neighboring country.

Methods

In the investigation of the Bhutanese coinage system, this research focused on the broader historical view and context of its changes across multiple decades. In the first section of this paper, there is a succinct chronological review and overview based on scholarly documents of any underlying historical trends from 1765 to 1774 of Bhutanese relations and conflicts with respect to Cooch Behar and the British East India Company. The year 1765 was used as this was the starting point of the events that led to the military conflict between Bhutan and Cooch Behar in 1772 and then Bhutan and Cooch Behar and the British East India Company in 1773. The military hostilities ceased in 1774.

As a crosscheck to this historical analysis, an examination was made of the plain meaning of national symbols on any early Bhutanese coins minted from 1772 to 1910. The year 1772 was used in this analysis because this was the time when Bhutan first commenced minting coins using Cooch Behar coin dies. Were the symbols on the coins from 1772 to 1910 solely from Cooch Behar, a combination of Cooch Behar and Bhutanese symbols, or solely Bhutanese symbols? This analysis was done to determine whether Bhutanese coin designs were influenced in total, in part, or not at all by Hindu Cooch Behar icons and symbols. And whether Bhutan minted coins in part or in entirely with symbols and icons representing its own unique culture and governance. If Bhutan minted coins representing its own unique culture and governance then the symbols on the coinage would reflect the nature and meaning of these symbols and icons.

Sources for the historical research from 1765 to 1774 and Bhutanese coin research from 1772 to 1910 included: Google

Scholar, JSTOR, LexisNexis Academic, Cooch Behar government sources, and *Journal of Bhutan Studies* online archive located at: https://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/category/journal-of-bhutan-studies/. Search terms for all databases other than Cooch Behar government sources and *Journal of Bhutan Studies* included: "Bhutan and coin," "Bhutan and numismatic," "Bhutan and Koch Bihar," Bhutan and Koch Behar," "Bhutan and Cooch Bihar," and "Bhutan and Cooch Behar." The symbols on Bhutanese coins are interpreted "as is" in terms of their meaning derived from definitive interpretations from the above scholarly sources.

An additional "audit trail" method of quality control and countering bias has been employed for this article in which all research and reporting steps in this methods section have been transparently described above (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2021) All relevant publications that directly reference Bhutanese history related to Cooch Behar or meanings of Bhutanese coinage are also listed in the text and bibliography section of this paper for examination by interested third parties.

Results

Cooch Behar, was a Hindu Kingdom, situated in the Himalayan foothills and south of modern-day Bhutan (Dutra, 2015; Chandra, 1989; Booth and Dendup Chophel, 2021). In 1765, Dhairjendra Narayan became the ruler of Cooch Behar. (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017; National Infomatics Centre, 2012; Whyte, 2002). During this period the Ambassador to Cooch Behar from Bhutan, Pensuthma, effectively and behind-the-scenes, governed Cooch Behar (Cooch Behar Government, 2018).

In 1770, Dhairjendra was no longer favored by the Bhutanese who captured and then imprisoned him in the Bhutanese national capital in Punakah (Pommaret, 2000). Later in 1770, the Bhutanese placed Rajendra Narayan, Dhairjendra's second

oldest brother, into power (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017; National Infomatics Centre, 2012; Whyte, 2002). In 1772, Rajendra died of a severe fever and infection (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017). Cooch Behar court officials then tried to promote Dharendra Narayan, a son of Dhairjendra, but this was opposed by Bhutan with at least 18,000 troops (Cooch Behar Princely State, 2017; Whyte, 2002).

Beginning in 1772, Bhutan engaged in a brief military occupation of Cooch Behar. Due to this occupation, Cooch Behar signed a military pact on April 5, 1773 with the British East India Company (Bowman, 2000). In 1774, Cooch Behar and British East India Company military forces succeeded in removing Bhutan from Cooch Behar (Bose, 2013).

This led to a Peace Treaty in 1774 between the British East India Company and Bhutan (White, 1909; Whyte, 2002). The terms of the Peace Treaty were based on a prior Bhutanese proposal that included: withdrawal and return of Cooch Behar lands by Bhutan; return of Dhairjendra Narayan; free trade without duties through Bhutan; disputes in British East India Company territory decided by a Magistrate of the British East India Company; harvesting of timber being duty free and without interference; a ceasefire; mutual exchange of prisoners; and return of deserters (British East India Company & Kingdom of Bhutan, 1774; Whyte, 2002). With the signing of the Peace Treaty, this began an era of peace between Bhutan and Cooch Behar.

Early Bhutanese coins

From the 1580s to 1772, trade between Cooch Behar through Bhutan to Tibet resulted in very few Cooch Behar coins circulating in Bhutan (Table 1) (Bose, 1996; Deb, 1973; Dutta, 2013; Panish, 1989; Pemberton, 1837-1838; Rhodes, 2000). The main purpose of the very limited amount of coins circulating in this period were for gifts particularly monastic, trade payments, and exchange for Bhutanese silver bullion (Table 1) (Rhodes, 1999, 2000; White, 1909). Also, during this period up to 1772, Bhutan was almost totally a barter society

(Rhodes, 1993, 1999). Bhutan continued to be almost entirely a barter society up to 1910 and then into the 1960s (Rhodes, 1999).

Table 1. *Timeline of history of early Cooch Behar and Bhutanese coinage*

Date	Historical milestone
1587-1627	Reign of Lakshmi Narayan in Cooch Behar; fine silver rupees were struck.
1619	Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, founder of Bhutan, received presents from the Raja (King) of Cooch Behar, including silver and gold coins.
1627-1633	Reign of Vira Narayan, Lakshmi's successor. Few coins are known of this ruler.
1633-1666	Reign of Prana Narayan, Vira's successor. Struck large numbers of half rupees, and a few full rupees.
1640-1643	Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal receives ma-tang (silver) coins as gifts from India.
1680	Tenzin Rabgye enthroned as Fourth Druk Desi (secular ruler) of Bhutan; received presents of 1000 gold and 1000 silver coins from the Raja of Ladakh, and 700 gold coins and 1000 silver coins from the Raja of Cooch Behar.
1707	Enthronement of the Eighth Druk Desi of Bhutan, one silver coin given to each monk and general public of Bhutan.
1744-1763	Rule of the 13th Druk Desi, Sherab Wangchuck, who distributed gifts of one silver coin to each citizen eight times during his reign.
1747	Coronation of second reincarnated Shabdrung, Jigsmed grags-pa, where gifts were described in detail and valued in Ma-tam (copper coins).
1770-1772	Rajendra Narayana coins are minted in Cooch Behar. Only pieces with a cross to the right of 'RNDRA', and hence are easily identifiable.
1772-1910	Bhutan mints coins identical, nearly identical, or somewhat identical to Cooch Behar mintage. Coins that were nearly or somewhat identical contained Bhutanese symbols.

1783	British Diplomat Samuel Turner visits Bhutan and describes the Narainee, a base silver coin struck in Cooch Behar and now minted in Bhutan.
1785	First outside reference to coins in Bhutan in a letter from Bhutan's Deb Raja to Governor General of India.
1788	Cooch Behar mint closed by British East India Company.
1823-1831	Druk Desi Chhoki Gyaltshen's reign, during which he distributed gifts of one silver coin to each citizen of the country four times.

In 1772, as noted earlier, Cooch Behar dies made it to Bhutan resulting in the first mintage of Cooch Behar coins in Bhutan (Bose, 1996; Panish, 1989). These first coins minted in Bhutan were under the auspices of several powerful regional rulers (Royal Monetary Authority, 2015). According to Rhodes, these rulers included: the Penlops (Governors) of Paro, Daga, and Trongsa and Dzongpens (administrator of forts) of Thimphu, Wangdue Phodrang, and Punakah (Rhodes, 1999). In 1783, British Diplomat, Samuel Turner also corroborated this in a diplomatic report and description of Cooch Behar coins that were minted in Bhutan (Lipscombe, 2016; Turner, 1800).

In 1785, the Bhutanese requested to Cooch Behar that a limited amount of Narayana coins for a short period be minted by the mint at Cooch Behar in exchange for silver payment by the Bhutanese (Ahamada, 1942; Rhodes, 1999). This is the first confirmed reference outside of Bhutan to the mintage of these coins (Rhodes, 1999). This request was approved by the ruler of Cooch Behar (Ahamada, 1942). In 1788, the British East India Company closed the mint in Cooch Behar (Rhodes, 2000). In line with the usage of coins in Bhutan mostly as gifts and for ceremonial reasons, Druk Desi of Bhutan, Chhoki Gyaltshen, in the 19th century provided a limited number of silver coins to Bhutanese citizens as gifts (Rhodes, 1999).

Interpretation of symbols on Bhutanese coins

As noted in Table 2, from 1772 to 1774 and from 1774 to 1790, coins minted in Bhutan continued to contain only Cooch Behar symbols. These coins were minted in silver from 1772

until 1790. The only alteration was part of a succession of Cooch Behar Narayana rulers' names with the inscription being: 'NDRA' or 'RNDRA" (Bose, 1996; Panish, 1989).

From 1790 to 1910, the Hindu and national symbols of Cooch Behar were partially replaced with Buddhist Bhutanese symbols (Table 2). These coins were minted in copper and brass (Bronny, 2014; Rhodes, 1999, 2000). From 1790 to 1910 and to the present, the core beliefs of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan have included impermanent, non-dualistic, and egoless reality; Karma; transmigration or rebirth; and Enlightenment (Givel, 2015, 2019). Like all types of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism focuses on practices like mediation to become Enlightened by acquiring deeper insights into the realities of the universe (Kakol, 2002). This includes deeper understandings of the nature of a non-dualistic universe (Gethin 1998; Keown 2013; Leighton 2012; Williams, 2008).

Table 2. *Evolution from 1772 to 1910 of Bhutanese minted coinage*

Historical period	Coins include Bhutanese, Cooch Behar, or both?	Description of metal content and appearance of coins
Period 1: 1772 - 1774	Entirely Cooch Behar symbols	Silver
Period 2: 1774 - 1910	Entirely Cooch Behar symbols from 1774 – 1790; Cooch Behar and Bhutanese symbols from 1790 to 1910	Silver until 1830; Weight of coins reduced due to being silver washed from 1830-1840 without alteration of general appearance or silver content; After 1840 copper and brass

Non-duality in Mahayana Buddhism means that all in the universe is interconnected and unified with any seeming dualities being illusions (C. T. Dorji, 2008). Additionally,

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Mahayana Buddhism, teaches that undue and excessive ego craving of things, political power, and sensual pleasure promotes suffering and prevents an individual from becoming Enlightenment. A primary goal of Mahayana Buddhism, therefore, is to counter and eliminate egoism (Givel, 2015 and 2019). Finally, transmigration in Mahayana reflects the practice of good or bad Karma or deeds in past lives that provide the conditions for a future birth (Snelling 1998). If an individual's present life is full of bad Karma they may be reborn in a more hellish realm. On the other hand, practicing good Karma leads to a possible future birth that is more Buddha-like (Lopez, 2001). In Buddhism, enlightenment occurs with a growing awareness of the vast and infinite cosmos, which is a place beyond death and known space-time limitations (Gethin, 1998). This is known as cosmic emptiness or Shunyta. When one is enlightened, Buddhists believe this results in a state of compassion, harmony, bliss, and joy (Gethin, 1998).

Hindu icons appearing from 1772 to 1910 on Bhutanese coins included such symbols as a trident (a weapon of Lord Shiva) or swastika (derived from Sanskrit and meaning good fortune) (Bronny, 2014; Rhodes, 1999, 2000; Rhodes & Bose, 1999; Sullivan, 2001). Buddhist symbols appearing on Bhutanese coins from 1790 to 1910 were primarily the Eight Auspicious symbols reflecting Buddhist beliefs. The Eight Auspicious symbols include: two golden fish (living in happiness and fearlessness without drowning in a sea of suffering); conch shell (sound of the Buddha); endless knot (awareness of eternity and Enlightenment); victory banner (victory of Buddhism and Enlightenment); lotus flower (purification of body, speech, and mind in blissful liberation and Enlightenment); wheel of life (symbolic of teachings to become Enlightened); treasure vase (treasure of Buddhist doctrines); and parasol (wholesome and good Karmic activities) (Bronny, 2014; Buddha DharmaEducation Association & Buddhanet, 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

From 1772 to 1774, Bhutan and Cooch Behar maintained acrimonious relations. In 1772, during the final era of brief occupation and control, Cooch Behar dies were removed to Bhutan. Subsequently, from 1772 to 1774 and the period ending in 1910, various forms of coinage was minted in Bhutan with Cooch Behar symbols. There was no change in the design of Bhutanese coins except occasionally 'NARA" or 'RNDRA' reflecting Narayan leaders in the original Cooch Behar symbols until 1790. Over the next 120 years until 1910, Bhutan added Buddhist symbols to the original Hindu and national symbols of the Cooch Behar coins. From 1910 to the present in the modern era of Bhutanese coinage, the coins only contained Bhutanese symbols (Royal Monetary Authority, 2015).

This study shows that the legacy of some conflicts lasts for a long period of time. This legacy of conflict is not only the socially constructed narratives and depictions of nations that were formerly occupied (Prakash, 1990; Said, 1979; Tibawi, 1964). Also, inherent in the power relationship between Bhutan and Cooch Behar was the use of solely Cooch Behar narratives and symbols from 1772 to 1790 in Bhutanese coinage for the direct material and economic advancement, uses, and benefit of Bhutan. From 1790 to 1910, Bhutanese coins contained Cooch Bihar and Hindi symbols and Bhutanese and Buddhist symbols. It took 138 years until Bhutan moved out of this legacy in 1910 as reflected in the mintage of modern coinage with strictly Bhutanese and Buddhist symbols.

The use of Buddhist icons and symbols on Bhutanese minted coinage from 1790 to 1910 also reflected a direct confirmation of a primary core mission of sovereign rule of Bhutan in this period. This was the governmental promotion of Buddhism to obtain Enlightenment, bliss, and happiness. Governmental rulers of Bhutan through state power and authority were announcing and promoting on Bhutanese coinage the national necessity and need for individual Bhutanese and Buddhist

citizens to become Enlightened. This meshing of religion and governmental authority also reflected the nature of the Bhutanese governmental system at that time, namely, the theocratic two-fold system of government known as *Chhyosi Nyidhen* (Givel & Figueroa, 2014). The study of the history of coinage, which is not only a neutral source of exchange, as shown in this case study, provides a vivid portrayal of this key orientation of Bhutan from 1792 to 1910.

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Performance and Accountability: A Case of Bhutanese Civil Service

*Singay**

Abstract

There has been substantial research undertaken on the performance management system (PMS) and accountability. Despite a recent increase in the literature on PMS and accountability, far less research has been carried out on the impact of the PMS in strengthening accountability in Bhutanese civil service. As a result, critical gaps exist between PMS and actual practice in strengthening the accountability of Bhutanese civil servants in the field. To fill this gap, this study set out to examine the impact of the PMS in strengthening accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. This study uses interviews and content analysis of the annual reports to answer the research questions. Results showed that agencies introduced various systems to strengthen accountability, such as accountability initiatives, performance-based accountability, and effective disciplinary regime. However, interview data indicated that the current PMS failed to strengthen accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. A possible explanation for these results may be the lack of fair and reasonable measurement tools, the priority level of accountability, and supervisor accountability. Policy recommendations for strengthening accountability and suggestions for future research are provided.

Keywords: performance management system; accountability; Bhutanese civil service

* Sr. Research Officer, Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies. Email: singay@bhutanstudies.org.bt

Introduction

More recently, there has been growing interest in civil service reform by implementing a performance management system (PMS) as a tool to enhance accountability (Lewis, 2011; Moynihan & Ingraham, 2003; Park & Kim, 2015). Despite a recent increase in the literature on PMS and accountability, far less research has been carried out on the effectiveness of the PMS in strengthening accountability in the public service (notable exceptions include Arun et al., 2021; Askim et al., 2015; Shahan et al., 2021; Shelton et al., 2013). Instead, most of the research has focused on reforming civil service by implementing new PMS to address accountability issues. To date, there has been little empirical evidence that investigated the efficacy of the PMS in addressing accountability issues. As a result, critical gaps exist between PMS and actual practice in strengthening accountability in the field.

Additionally, PMS plays a significant role in addressing the issue of accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. However, there have been no attempts to examine the effectiveness of PMS in addressing the accountability problems in Bhutan. Moreover, a national integrity assessment conducted by the Anti-Corruption Commission of Bhutan [ACC] (2020) found that civil servants and leadership accountability scored low indicating a need for strengthening accountability in organizations. In another study, ACC (2016) found that there is misplaced compassion, absence of integrity role, and weak enforcement in human resource management. Thus, a study recommends improving accountability in the human resource management processes in civil service. More research is needed, however, to understand how effective is the PMS specifically Managing for Excellence (MaX) in addressing accountability issues in Bhutanese civil service.

To fill this gap, this study set out to examine the impact of the PMS to enhance accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. This study uses interviews and content analysis of the annual reports to answer the research questions. This study provides new insights and fills a gap in the research on accountability

in Bhutan. Therefore, this research seeks to address the following questions:

1. How do institutions and agencies enhance accountability in the Bhutanese civil service?

2. How effective is the PMS in strengthening accountability in the Bhutanese civil service?

Literature review

Accountability and Performance Management System

Numerous terms are used to describe accountability in education, civil service, politics, and society. However, the most common of which is described by Mulgan (2000) as 'ever-expanding, chameleon-like and complex, accountability began as a term to describe being called to account for one's actions and has since been expanded to cover a range of activities, relationships, and behaviors' (p. 555). Likewise, the International Federation of Accountants [IFAC] (2010) defined accountability as a 'process whereby public sector entities, and the individuals within them, are responsible for their decisions and actions, including their stewardship of public funds and all aspects of performance, and submit themselves to appropriate external scrutiny' (p. 12). While a variety of definitions of accountability has been suggested, this study will use the definition provided by the Civil Service Act of Bhutan (CSAB). The CSAB defines accountability as '[a] civil servant is responsible for his/her decisions and actions and must be accountable to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to his/her office as prescribed by law and the BCSR' (RCSC, 2010, p.4). The definitions provided so far captured several important features of accountability, such as action, responsibility, and performance. Therefore, a generally accepted definition of accountability is challenging because accountability is a rather nebulous term. Next, how a PMS is employed to strengthen accountability in the Bhutanese civil service will be discussed.

In Bhutanese civil service, accountability is mostly evaluated based on the performance of the given tasks or activities annually through an individual work plan (IWP). To illustrate further, PMS was introduced by the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) with an objective to strengthen accountability (see RCSC, 2018a for a review). However, realizing accountability through the PMS is rather questionable. The PMS uses two forms namely work planning and review form; and summative form. To briefly explain the implementation of the performance assessment, the employee and the supervisor set specific targets to achieve, and in addition to those targets, they must identify relevant competencies to achieve targets. The targets are set for six months according to the annual work plan. The evaluation and review of the performance output are conducted after six months. However, the PMS has not escaped criticism from governments, agencies, and civil servants. A major problem with the PMS is that most of the civil servants were rated in an outstanding category. Another added problem was the limited involvement of staff in planning and during evaluation. Due to the abovementioned problems, RCSC introduced a new PMS popularly known as MaX in February 2017. The RCSC claimed that the MaX system differs greatly from the earlier system in many ways and this system could help in realizations of core objectives of the PMS. The MaX was introduced to realize the core objective of the PMS which is to 'strengthen accountability and alignment to the organizational and national objectives' (RCSC, 2018, p. 269). According to the manual for MaX (see RCSC, 2018b, for more detail), the main objectives are: to align individual performance targets with the organization's strategic objectives; to ensure organizational effectiveness by cascading institutional accountabilities to the various levels of the organization's hierarchy; and to enhance agency's overall performance by differentiating performer from non-performer. However, further research is needed to better understand the efficacy of the implementation of MaX in strengthening accountability. This will give us a clearer picture of MaX system implementation, challenges, and opportunities.

Numerous studies have attempted to investigate whether the PMS has been successful in enhancing accountability (e.g., Arun et al., 2021; Shahan et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). To determine whether the performance assessment has been successful in strengthening accountability. Shahan et al. (2021) carried out a study on Bangladesh's government agencies. The study employed in-depth interviews with 42 civil servants. Results revealed that the new performance-based assessment was successful in enhancing accountability but the study did not find at what level the accountability was enhanced. In another study, Taylor et al. (2021) conducted a study to find the efficacy of a PMS on public servants' accountability. The data collection instruments employed were documents and interviews. The result indicated that using different PMS affected public servants' accountability. In the same vein, Arun et al. (2021) investigated the challenges associated with the institutionalization of learning accountability in the public sector in Kerala. The study revealed that imposing accountability changes on public officials, such as the PMS, will be ineffective unless learning responsibility is prioritized. All the studies reviewed here support the claim that implementing a PMS could enhance accountability in the public service.

Methods

The present study employs qualitative data collection methods using in-depth interviews and content analysis. Qualitative methods were chosen since they offer an effective way to study phenomena under investigation. On one hand, in-depth interviews were carried out to seek civil servants' opinions and attitudes toward accountability in Bhutanese civil service. On other hand, content analysis was carried out to find whether agencies like the RCSC, ACC, and Royal Audit Authority (RAA) use the opportunity to educate and communicate with the public on accountability in their annual reports.

Content analysis

A content analysis was adopted to obtain further in-depth information on the accountability in the annual reports of ACC (ACC, 2021), RCSC (RCSC, 2021), and RAA (RAA, 2021). According to Stemler (2001), content analysis has widespread popularity in analyzing a large number of data with ease in a systematic way. A content analysis of a agencies' annual report involved the extraction of a checklist of the significant items of information about performance indicators and accountability. The content analysis involves the process of analyzing each agency's annual report by searching specifically for accountability. For the content analysis, annual reports of the RCSC, ACC, and RAA are chosen. These agencies were chosen specifically because they are among the most important agencies of the Bhutanese government that promotes and ensure transparency, accountability, and integrity amongst Bhutanese civil servants.

Interview

According to Burgess (2003), interviews have widespread popularity because interview gives 'the opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply to uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of a problem, and to secure vivid, accurate inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience' (p. 107). Moreover, Yin (2003) identifies several advantages of the interview, for example, it can help to obtain targeted information on the studied topic and insightful information by providing causal inference. This research aims to uncover ideas, attitudes, and reflections on the aspects of accountability, particularly the accountability related to PMS. An interview was carried out to examine the effectiveness of the PMS in strengthening accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. The interviews were semi-structured with nine questions. The first two questions were asked to collect participants' background information and other questions to collect information on the PMS and the accountability. The participants were recruited voluntarily. In total, 22 civil servants were interviewed across 13 departments (see Table 1).

The interview lasted for thirty minutes depending on the detail provided by the respondents.

Table 1. *Participants' background information*

Ministry/Department	Position title	Position level
Department of Macroeconomic Affairs	Sr. Program Officer	P3
Ministry of Finance	Asst. Finance Officer	P3
Department of Regional Organization	Desk Officer	P4
Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies	Dy. Chief ICT Officer	P2
Department of Cottage and Small Industry	Industries Officer	P4
Royal Audit Authority	Asst. Audit Officer	P5
Bhutan Narcotics Control Authority	Asst. Program Officer	P5
Ministry of Finance	Assistant Collector	P5
Dzongkhag Engineering and Human settlement sector	Urban planner	P4
Ministry of Agriculture and Forest	Livestock Officer	P4
Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs	Asst. Program Officer	P5
Ministry of Education	Sr. Program Officer	P3
Anti-Corruption Commission	Dy. Chief IPO	P2
Anti-Corruption Commission	Sr. Integrity Officer	P3
Anti-Corruption Commission	Dy. Chief Finance Officer	P2
Ministry of Economic Affairs	Industries Officer	P4
Ministry of Health	Sr. Drungtsho	P3
Ministry of Agriculture and Forest	Sr. Livestock Officer	P3
Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies	Researcher	P4
Anti-Corruption Commission	Asst. Research Officer	P5
Anti-Corruption Commission	Research officer	P4
Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies	Research Officer	P4

Data analysis

Data collected from the interview and annual reports were analyzed qualitatively. Annual reports were analyzed using content analysis and interview data were analyzed thematically.

Results

Research question one examines how institutions and agencies enhance accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. To investigate this question, annual reports of three constitutional offices were analyzed in detail. Important categories that emerged from the content analysis are accountability initiative, performance-based accountability, and effective disciplinary regime.

Accountability initiative

A content analysis of the agencies' annual reports found that few agencies have initiated accountability through various PMS, for example, development and accountability framework. According to RCSC's annual report, one of the notable initiatives under the leadership development and management program was the Senior Civil Service Development and Accountability Framework (SCSDAF):

> An effective system requires that those responsible for policy-making, implementation, and public expenditure are held accountable for their actions and performance. Therefore, to complement current systems, SCSDAF aims to establish clear expectations for sound management practices and performance, and at the same time provide avenues to continuously work towards self-development (RCSC, 2021, p. 42).

Performance-based accountability

Performance-based accountability was another initiative of RCSC to strengthen accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. However, the existing PMS cannot provide an overall performance landscape of civil servants in terms of strengths

and weaknesses. Therefore, RCSC plans to strengthen and expand the PMS as an accountability tool by proposing a support function assessment (SuFA):

> From the review of literature and surveys that assess public and civil service effectiveness, the current agency assessments do not evaluate the 'Mission support' functions and organizational culture contours which are key characteristics of high-performing organizations and underpin the effectiveness of all agencies. To address this, the RCSC is proposing a Support Function Assessment (SuFA) (RCSC, 2021, p. 26).

Effective discipline regime

The most obvious finding to emerge from the content analysis was that most of the complaints received by the ACC were administrative complaints related to abuse of function by the public servants. The findings of the ACC complaint analysis indicated that:

> Complaints on Abuse of Functions have been consistently on the rise over the years and this trend clearly indicates the need to enhance ethics, integrity, and professionalism of public servants, particularly the standards of integrity in leadership positions (ACC, 2021, p. 43)

In addition, the ACC's (2021) annual report revealed that most of the actions taken by the agencies are either inconsistent or deemed baseless. For example, the highest penalty was a reprimand. Likewise, the RCSC (2021) has taken administrative action against 23 civil servants and one prosecuted before the court of law.

Moreover, RCSC wants to strengthen the PMS by introducing a reward and recognition system to motivate civil servants to work with the highest accountability. It could also drive

integrity and ethics amongst civil servants. As per the RCSC's annual report:

> With the introduction of the Managing for Excellence (MaX) system and the moderation exercise, we now have sufficient performance-related data to initiate a Reward and Recognition system. Beginning modest, we expect to scale up to more categories of reward and recognition in the coming years (RCSC, 2021, p. 27).

Taken together, these results provide important insights into how agencies enhance accountability in the Bhutanese civil service through various initiatives and sharing information related to accountability through annual reports to the public. The second research question addressed how effective is the PMS in strengthening accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. The interview data collected from 22 participants were analyzed thematically. The important theme to emerge from the interview was the ineffectiveness of PMS in addressing accountability in Bhutanese civil service.

Ineffectiveness of PMS in addressing accountability in Bhutanese civil service

The purpose of the interview was to investigate whether the PMS (for example, MaX) initiated by RCSC was able to strengthen accountability in terms of organizational, supervisor, and public accountability. The majority of those who were interviewed felt that the current PMS is ineffective in enhancing or strengthening accountability in Bhutanese civil service. When interviewees were asked how management uses performance appraisal findings to increase organizational accountability, most of the respondents reported that performance appraisal's ineffectiveness in strengthening organizational accountability. One interviewee argued that:

> The accountability is fixed mostly based on the outcome of an individual task or activities assigned to the concerned official. Overall accountability of an individual is not specifically mentioned in the performance

appraisals, except for those tasks, which can be practically performable are mostly mentioned and rated accordingly.

However, in one case, the participant believed that performance appraisal is effective in strengthening accountability but proper follow up and constant monitoring must be there:

> The performance appraisal of an agency in the form of an annual performance target is cascaded down to respective departments, divisions, and ultimately to the individual employee. Towards the end of the evaluation, if the target is not achieved, the concerned department and division's score is affected. This will lead to a poor rating of the responsible employee. In that way, the performance appraisal if implemented without any compromises can improve organizational accountability. However, I feel that many agencies do not follow through till individual employees fix accountability.

Most importantly, when the participants were asked whether the current PMS is effective in addressing accountability problems in the Bhutanese civil service, the majority commented that the present PMS is ineffective in addressing accountability issues in the Bhutanese civil service. For example, one interviewee said:

> The current system is redundant and should be replaced since the system hardly detects any underperformer. The scores awarded often place the agency in an outstanding category when much is left to be achieved or no fruitful results are achieved which could benefit the public. Furthermore, the scores are always subject to change owing to the different reasonings provided by higher authorities when a success indicator is not achieved which adds to precedence being set that could prompt

the others to do the same when failing to achieve their task.

And another commented:

> While in theory and concept, the MAX system can have the accountability issues addressed, it is the practical implementation of the MAX system that is not taking care of the accountability. The MAX implementation by ministries and agencies varies, and there is no uniformity in the Civil Services.

These results suggest that majority of the respondents disagree with the statement that the PMS enhances accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. The overwhelming majority of the interviewee(s) commented that inconsistency in implementation, unfair rating, lack of recognition and to name a few are some of the possible reasons why PMS was ineffective in addressing accountability.

An important issue that emerged from the interviews was that there is a lack of priority placed on accountability by the current PMS. It was suggested that the present PMS placed more importance on the completion of activities, attainment of success indicators, and target setting. As one interviewee put it:

> Not exactly because I have not experienced any of the accountability issues discussed, rather mostly focused on the completion of activities framed during the departmental annual plan.

Another informant reported that:

> No. While there is potential, the current PMS has become just another formality that has replaced the old annual promotion system.

The participants on the whole argued that the PMS is not a fair and reasonable measurement tool to enhance accountability. A common view amongst interviewees was that the PMS was more of trial and error, and the intention and working of the system are not meant for enhancing accountability. One participant commented:

> I do not think the current system is fair. In our case, as I have mentioned earlier, we have the same individual work plan of the entire team. In a team, there are usually three to four members. All of us share the same work description when in reality some of us have to do more while others are simply riding on others' work.

Another interviewee said:

> For the PMS to work, everyone across the levels must understand and appreciate the intention and working of the system. Proper training for the civil servants, the managers, and the executives could be imparted and a robust monitoring system should be institutionalized.

Taken together, the majority of those who were interviewed felt that the current PMS is ineffective in enhancing or strengthening accountability in Bhutanese civil service. Therefore, this study has shown the current PMS ineffectiveness in strengthening accountability in the Bhutanese civil service.

Discussion

Research question one examined how do institutions and agencies enhance accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. To answer this question, annual reports of three constitutional offices were analyzed by employing content analysis. Results revealed that agencies enhance accountability through accountability initiative, performance-based accountability, and effective disciplinary regime. A possible explanation for these results may be that these agencies are mandated to

enhance accountability and their annual reports showed these accountability initiatives. This is evident in the case of the senior civil service development and accountability framework initiated by the RCSC. Another important finding was strengthening accountability by introducing support function assessment by the RCSC. These results reflect those of Siti-Nabiha and Salleh (2011) who also found that a result-based accountability system needs to be initiated to address accountability issues in the civil service. Similar results were also accorded by Manaf et al. (2022) who found that accountability initiatives have to be introduced from a top-down approach. These findings echoed what RCSC has introduced many accountability tools through the PMS.

Research question two investigated the effectiveness of the PMS in strengthening accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. The interview data collected from 22 participants showed the current PMS's ineffectiveness in addressing accountability in Bhutanese civil service. There are several possible explanations for this result. First, many interviewees(s) commented that inconsistency in implementation, unfair rating, lack of recognition and to name a few are some of the possible reasons why PMS is ineffective in addressing accountability. Second, an important issue that emerged from the interviews was that there is a lack of priority placed on accountability by the current PMS. It was suggested that the present PMS placed more importance on the completion of activities, achievement of success indicators, and target setting. Lastly, participants, on the whole, argued that the PMS is an unfair and unreasonable measurement tool to enhance accountability. A common view amongst interviewees was that the PMS was more of trial and error, and the intention and working of the system are not meant for enhancing accountability. These results are in agreement with Christensen and Lægreid's (2015) findings which showed accountability as a distinct dimension and there is no relationship between accountability and performance. In the same vein, Jantz et al. (2015) argue that the relationship between accountability and performance management is more

complex. Due to its complexity, performance management failed to create accountability but rather resulted in an accountability paradox. More importantly, these findings are somewhat surprising given the fact that other research shows that PMS does enhance accountability. For example, Shahan et al. (2021), however, found that the new PMS introduced in Bangladesh has greatly improved the accountability of civil servants. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2021) found that PMS enables accountability, especially amongst policymakers and senior civil servants.

Conclusion

In this study, annual reports of three constitutional offices were analyzed and interview data collected from 22 civil servants to examine the impact of the PMS in strengthening accountability in the Bhutanese civil service. By conducting a content analysis of annual reports, results showed that agencies play a vital role in strengthening accountability through accountability initiative, performance-based accountability, and effective disciplinary regime. Thematic analysis of interview data indicated that the current PMS has failed to strengthen accountability in Bhutanese civil service. A possible explanation for these results may be due to the lack of fair and reasonable measurement tools, a priority level of accountability, and supervisor accountability.

The study contributes to our understanding of the association between the PMS and accountability and how civil servants perceive the PMS as a tool to enhance and strengthen accountability. The present study will serve as a base for future studies and the present study's findings could inform possible research topics in the future.

A number of caveats need to be noted regarding the present study. First, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to general civil servants. Second, the responses relating to accountability were subjective and were therefore susceptible to recall bias. Lastly,

the sample represents civil servants but would tend to miss people who were at the chief and executive levels. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into PMS and accountability.

This research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. Further research is needed to examine the long-term efficacy of PMS on accountability using the survey method. In addition, the study should be repeated using executive and senior civil servants as participants. Taken together, these findings support strong recommendations to RCSC to revisit PMS, for example, MaX. Therefore, this study recommends PMS place priority on accountability. This research finding also points to the need for a fair and reasonable measurement tool for accountability and to make supervisors accountable for the civil servants' rating.

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