

Signs of the Degenerate Age: the Desecration of *Chorten* and *Lhakhang* in Bhutan¹

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“They destroy the *ku sung thukten*, they destroy human life. Truly, we live in a degenerate age!”²

Introduction

According to the official figures issued in July 1999, 136 *lhakhang* and 1,132 *chorten* had been subject to theft, arson, desecration and their caretakers attacked and murdered.³ The thefts and the desecrations were a recurrent topic which fuelled discussion, and at times, disagreement. Arguably, they serve as a metaphor for the changes and the problems facing contemporary Bhutan.

The events discussed focus on a major issue, which has caused widespread concern amongst both the government and the ordinary people. As if to reinforce the significance of the *chorten* and *lhakhang* in Bhutan, there have been several recent examples which highlight their importance. One photograph in Kuensel showed a new “Enlightenment Stupa” erected by high school children at Daga High School to mark the Silver Jubilee in 1999.⁴ More recently, in late December 1999, the Khamsum Yuelly Namgyel *chorten* was formally consecrated in Punakha valley. Its purpose to “help remove negative forces and promote peace, stability and harmony in a changing world”.⁵

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Forgetting the Alphabet: Reactions to the Desecrations of *Lhakhang* and *Chorten*

When discussing the attacks on *chorten* and *lhakhang*, three main themes emerge. First, is the reaction to the violence which is now associated with the robberies. The second, a belief that those engaging in these actions are being encouraged by individuals or groups of individuals residing outside the country. The stolen items are then transported out of Bhutan and clandestinely sold to collectors. The third theme is concerned with the spiritual harm caused to the local area and to the country as a whole arising from the desecrations. In this section, these three aspects are outlined in order to demonstrate how ordinary Bhutanese perceive the increase in *chorten* and *lhakhang* robberies. This serves as a valuable background for the following section which focuses on debate in the National Assembly and the role of the judiciary.

Broken Statues and Shattered Security: Tales of Desecration

“As a small child, maybe five or six, I recall hearing my mother and father talking with my uncle, who had just arrived at our house. At that point, we were living in Lhuntse. He had come with news that the local *lhakhang* had just been robbed. The *lhakhang* had been founded by Tenzin Rabgye (*Gyelse Tulku*)”.

As Tshering described the events surrounding the robbery and damage to his village *lhakhang*, he commented on the effect it had on him. Even as a small child he was distressed by the damage caused to the statues inside the *lhakhang*. The village was stunned by the event, and uncertain how to repair the damage. Fortunately, a highly respected *Lama*, *Lama Sonam Zangpo* undertook the repairs of the *nangten*. This story was by no means rare, virtually every Bhutanese interviewed, including in casual conversation has direct knowledge of a *chorten* or *lhakhang*, which has been robbed, in or near their own villages.

The frequency of attacks on sacred sites is such that Kuensel recently commented in a report of the arrest of two young men from Geykhar that *chorten* vandalism is now the main crime committed in Mongar *dzongkhags*.⁶ A central element in many of the incidents recounted highlight the increasing use of violence by those engaging in the robberies.

Tshering provided a detailed account of a robbery and murder, which took place at Pangsho Goemba in May 1999. He had met the survivor from the attack in which the caretaker was brutally murdered and was able to provide the survivor's description of the attack. The murder of caretakers and attending monks has deeply shocked people. One incident which shocked many Bhutanese in 1993 was the murder of a *Lama* and his two novices at 'Chi med Lhakhang by a gang of five young men. After arriving at the *lhakhang* they had been offered food and drink by the elderly *Lama* and his novices. When they attacked, they slit the throat of the *Lama* and used axes to smash the skulls of his two novices. However, they were disturbed from screams below the *lhakhang* and fled. The violence of this attack and the ruthlessness of the young men who carried it out is significant. Not only had they accepted the hospitality of the *Lama* and his novices, but also they were willing to take human life in order to steal the few relics owned by the *Lama*. The lack of respect for both the *Lama*, his life and those of his novices was a feature of the discussions of the problem of *chorten* and *lhakhang* robberies among those interviewed.

The lack of respect, or *thamdasthi*, was central to the criticism of those who undertake such crimes. For many Bhutanese, there is a strong sense of respect and proper behaviour, which shapes their daily lives. Tshering commented that those who engage in these crimes "are not remembering the *dge bcu*.... Instead, they kill and they steal. Why? Because they are greedy and hold wrong views. They have forgotten the alphabet of being Bhutanese".⁷ For Tshering, as with many of the people I spoke with, the underlying basis of their daily lives is governed by Buddhist teachings. As "enemies of the dharma", those engaged in the desecration and theft of the *ku sung thukten* are perceived as forgetting the heaviest of the ten non-virtuous actions,

the denial of karma. The representative for the Central Monk Body described them during the 77th National Assembly as “people who have neither faith, nor the ability to discriminate between good and evil”.

Yet, the lack of respect was not described as restricted to those who committed the crimes being discussed. It was an underlying theme to which people returned when discussing changes in Bhutanese society. The *chorten* and *lhakhang* robberies highlight what for many represents a more general decline in traditional values which many people fear will undermine their society. Many spoke of the need for more religious education for young people, and for them to understand how important the traditional values of respect are to the social well being of all Bhutanese. These views were not restricted to older people. Many of the young Bhutanese interviewed commented on the social changes and the need for a balance between an openness to new opportunities and the importance of traditional values which have held Bhutanese society, and especially, families together.

Many of these themes were incorporated in a Bhutanese film entitled “Karma’s Chair”. The film is set in rural Bhutan and follows a young man who after seeing a “chair” wants to become a chair maker. Despite his father’s desire for him to lead a religious life he is, eventually, permitted to leave for Thimphu. In Thimphu, Karma experiences the impact of the “modern” and returns to the village to present his father with a chair. However, his father prefers his cushion and the chair is subsequently rejected by other villagers in turn. In the end, the only person with a sewing machine uses it. “Karma’s Chair” highlights the tensions between rural and urban life and the problem of rural-urban migration. More significantly for the purpose of this paper, is the sense of the erosion of religious values, partly demonstrated by a *chorten* robbery, and partly by the desire of the main character to follow a secular life away from the village.⁸

Although, there are those who argue that the robberies are mainly the work of anti-nationals (*ngolop*), most Bhutanese I spoke with felt this was not necessarily always the case.⁹ It was generally accepted that *ngolop*¹⁰ were responsible for the theft and desecration of Geleg

Lhakhang in 1999 and other robberies¹¹. However, many people described the robbers as “poor, ignorant farmers”, “young, bored and greedy men” and “those who do not respect the dharma or the gods”. There is no consistency or agreement as to whether they believe those engaging in such actions are primarily from the rural villages or the poorer elements of the developing towns of Thimphu, Phuntsholing and Samdrup Jongkhar. Nor even as to their ages – it is not simply a question of juvenile delinquency. However, there is consistency, as we shall see, in perceiving these people as “enemies of the dharma”.

Directly linked to these comments were concerns over the appointment and suitability of individuals to be caretakers. Caretakers are usually drawn, as I understand, from the local community and serve for a period of time as caretaker. There have been a number of robberies from *lhakhang* where jewels and precious *gzi* and other items have found to be missing, usually replaced with counterfeit pieces. In a recent case two men from Isu *geog* in Haa were both charged with the theft of six *gzi* from the *goenkhang* of Paro Rinpung Dzong. One of the men, Wangdi aged 33, was the caretaker of the *goenkhang* at the time that a complaint was made to the police by the Paro Rinpung *dratshang* about the loss of one *gzi*. On investigation a further five *gzi* were found to be missing. A further twelve former caretakers covering a period stretching as far back as 1979 were also being questioned.¹² One informant commented that “the government needs to check these people. Many are good people. But there are always those who are willing to break the trust given to them”.¹³

These individuals are believed to be for the most part dupes in a wider network of thieves, often linked to anti-national elements, who have links beyond the country in India, Nepal and further afield. It appears, at least to my informants, that the incidence of attacks on the *lhakhang* and *chorten* started in the late 1970s as more “westerners” visited the country. The numbers of thefts escalated and I was told by various people about “tourists” taking photographs of objects and arranging for them to be stolen for them. Certainly, many religious buildings have been closed to tourists since January 1988, and access to sacred sites tightly controlled¹⁴. The official reason given is that tourists disturb the monks living in the *lhakhang* and *monasteries*.

In recent newspaper reports, the Royal Government has commented on the problem of the burgeoning trade in Himalayan art and the demand for pieces from western and Far Eastern collectors. One newspaper article stated, perhaps unwisely, that a rare nine-eye *gzi* was worth up to Nu. 1.5 million.¹⁵ There is undoubtedly a great degree of truth in the belief that the thefts, and by implication the violence, have been encouraged by an illegal market in cultural artifacts.¹⁶ However, people in connection with issues of developing expectations also discuss the link between western demands for antiquities and the thefts and the social problems associated with development and exposure to “new” ideas and material desires.¹⁷

Bhutanese frequently commented on the spiritual significance and role of *chorten* and *lhakhang*. Emphasis was often given to the pacification and honouring of local deities through the construction and location of these sacred sites. Tshering commented on the displeasure, which is caused to the local deities when these sites are vandalized and the relics removed from them. Whilst, Tshering expressed a fear that these deities, if angered, may chose to leave typically, they are believed to display their displeasure by causing disease or the death of livestock. The importance of the local deities cannot be underestimated. The role of these deities in daily life is a prominent feature. The local deities are “geared towards solving the daily problems of a person or community” (Pommaret 1996:53, see also Schicklegruber 1997). To anger them, even through the actions of a criminal, is taken seriously. As one *chimi* commented, the desecrations “will affect the good fortune of the communities in the concerned areas”.¹⁸ Indeed, it was stated by a number of informants that the thieves would never take from their own village *lhakhang* or *chorten* but would travel to other villages, though typically not that far from their own, to carry out their thefts. This may be true in most cases. However, the Mongar incident recounted above provides evidence that thieves are prepared to rob from sacred sites within the area of their own community.

Perhaps, the belief that thieves are unwilling to incur the wrath of the local deity by traveling beyond their own community reflects an unspoken hope that these individuals are not so devoid of social

consciousness that they are willing to avoid bringing unnecessary hardship to their community. The more prosaic answer may simply be that thieves are trying to avoid recognition, rather than any social concern for their own community. Nor, can it be overlooked that “some of these criminals are local inhabitants who are knowledgeable about the *nangtens* in the *lhakhang* and *goendeys* ”.¹⁹

The Khrimsgzhung Chen mo and the National Assembly: to Kill or Not to Kill

Under Section *Tha* 1 which deals with the construction and maintenance of *lhakhang* and other religious buildings in Bhutan it states:

Tha 1 – 9 Any person/persons committing an act of theft/robbery of *ku sung thukten* from a private or a government owned *lhakhang* or *goenkhang* shall be sentenced to life imprisonment.

Tha 1 – 11 Any person/persons breaking open a *chorten* or an image and removing the *Zung* shall be sentenced to life imprisonment.

Tha 1 – 12 A person who has already been convicted once for committing theft of a *lhakhang* or a *chorten* and repeats the crime again shall be punished with capital punishment.

These provisions in the Khrimsgzhung Chen mo, the Supreme Law Code of Bhutan, set out the position of the formal laws to guide judges when passing sentence on those convicted of robbing sacred sites in Bhutan.

And yet, whilst it would appear that the law code is unambiguous about the punishments which are to be imposed on those found guilty of such acts, the practice differs from the formal statement. The seriousness of these crimes was subtly, though indirectly, reflected in

the recent amnesty granted by the King in December 1999. Political figures were granted amnesty, but those convicted of *lhakhang* or *chorten* robberies and murder were excluded. Typically, those convicted are subject to life imprisonment. In recent years, there have been fierce debates during the National Assembly over the application of section *Tha* 1 – 12, the clause setting down the death penalty for those who have robbed more than once from a *lhakhang* or *chorten*.

In the case of the recent attempt to rob the sPyan ldan sbis *chorten*, the three men accused of the attempted robbery were sentenced by Trongsa *Dzongkhag* Court to life imprisonment. It is not reported whether those convicted, Som Bahadur Tamang, Dawa Tamang and Chime had previously committed a similar offence. In the absence of prior convictions, the life sentences passed by the court are in keeping with the provisions of *Tha* 1 – 9. However, in the case of Gonpo, a 40-year-old man from near Paro, the court did not follow the provisions of *Tha* 1 – 12. Although, he had several prior convictions involving the desecration and theft of at least three *lhakhangs* and several *chortens*, on passing judgment on him in October 1998 Gonpo was sentenced to life imprisonment. This judgment was issued jointly by the courts in Paro and Thimphu shortly after the 76th National Assembly during which there were calls “for capital punishment to be awarded for criminals who repeated the offence”.²⁰

During the 77th National Assembly held in the summer of 1999, the issue of capital punishment was once more raised for discussion. In one of the longest debates of the National Assembly, the representatives (*chimi*) expressed a wide range of views. The representative from the capital, Thimphu, argued that Bhutan’s sacred sites and temples were being “regularly desecrated and robbed by anti-dharma elements within the country and ngolops from outside”.²¹ He argued that “the anti-dharma elements are exploiting a society firmly entrenched in Buddhist values...to deter these criminals and for the overall security of the country those who are caught must be imprisoned for life, and for the more serious cases, capital punishment must be imposed”²².

Other representatives supported the call for the implementation of *Tha* 1 – 12. In words reminiscent to those found in the eighteenth century law code, the bKa khriims²³, and the representative for Chhukha argued that the increase in the number of robberies was a direct result of the leniency in enforcing the law. Developing this idea the *chimi* stated “Life imprisonment involves a long legal wrangle by the end of which the criminal might even escape. Capital punishment will send the right message and put an end to the desecration of monasteries and *chorten*”.²⁴ The representative for Haa took up the problems of imprisonment arguing that those convicted do not “undergo rigorous imprisonment. They enjoy many facilities and have an easy life in prison”²⁵.

The 'Brug rgyal sgang representative who stressed the spiritual damage caused to the country recognized the difficulty facing the National Assembly. “As Buddhists, it hurts us to propose the death penalty. But the alternative is the loss of the very essence of our spiritual well being”²⁶. The Punakha representative took up this idea when he stated “if evil is not suppressed, good will not prosper”.²⁷ And yet, for all the strength of feeling displayed in these statements there were many who argued against the enforcement of *Tha* 1- 12.

Several representatives stressed that as a Buddhist nation it would be more appropriate to take steps to prevent further robberies and acts of sacrilege than to take the lives of those convicted. Emphasizing the wider dimensions of the debate on capital punishment, various representatives pointed out that Bhutan was a member of the United Nations and was seeking to uphold human rights. To impose capital punishment would therefore be a counterproductive measure.²⁸ The representative from Wangdue Phodrang argued that often the most vulnerable sites were remote, privately owned rather than those under government care with caretakers. Therefore, as suggested by the Trongsa representative, more monk caretakers should be appointed to safeguard the *lhakhang*.

The representatives from Trashi Yangtse and Toebesa both argued that capital punishment was unthinkable in a Buddhist nation. Rather, it was up to the people to “help protect the country’s heritage. In this

era of deteriorating values, every citizen must come forward to help guard the country's priceless possessions".²⁹ This stress on the collective responsibility for the safety and maintenance of the *lhakhang* and *chorten* was raised by several of my informants who felt that it was an issue, which required to be tackled by local communities. Many felt that local communities had failed to respond fully to a *Kasho* issued by the king in 1993, which entrusted the care of *lhakhangs*, *chortens* and so forth in their respective areas to the local communities.

At the end of the debate the Speaker of the National Assembly, *Lyonpo* Kinzang Dorji, noted that the "members were satisfied with the existing laws of the land although some felt it was not adequately implemented". In addition, he noted that although no change was being suggested to the existing laws that "representatives of the government, *dratshang* and the people suggested that it should be enforced more strictly". The Assembly resolved that the judiciary should "strictly enforce *Tha 1- 9*" of the *Khrimsgzhung* Chenmo and "not show any leniency to those found guilty of desecrating *lhakhangs* and *chortens* and robbery of *ku sung thukten*".³⁰ More significantly, "the Royal Bhutan Police must not keep such criminals in the same prison with other convicts". Instead those convicted under *Tha 1 – 9* "must be kept in strict confinement".³¹

The judiciary faced with the task of maintaining and applying the laws has come under heavy criticism. One informant when asked about the possible use of capital punishment in case of *lhakhang* and *chorten* robberies declared:

"They should be executed. What use is it if these people are allowed to live? Where is the message to others that may plan to do the same? They are put in prison but manage to escape. No. The judges should sentence these people to death. It may be harsh. But, if we don't act now when will these despicable acts stop?"

Informants often remarked upon the apparent failure or impotence of the law to curb the increase in the occurrence of these thefts and the violence associated with them. Yet, it was also illustrative of the difference of opinion to be found among ordinary people. Whilst the informant mentioned above had no doubts about the necessity of the death penalty, others were less certain that it was either justifiable or beneficial. Those opposing the implementation of capital punishment in these cases commented on the ignorance of those involved in these crimes and the problems caused by developing material expectations and unemployment. As mentioned above, many felt that the thieves were “dupes” in a game in which they were the losers. Nor was it lost on my informants that the level of *chorten* and *lhakhang* robberies has risen since the late 1970s. Although not articulated, there was a strong sense from at least three-quarters of the informants that the increase mirrors the difficulties facing Bhutan in its attempt to accommodate tradition and change.

In explaining the life sentence passed on Gonpo by the courts in Thimphu and Paro, a judiciary official stressed that the “law [does] not exist merely to impart penalties. The judiciary aim[s] to correct and rehabilitate wayward individuals as [a] means to human and social development”.³² By asserting its independence from the executive, the judiciary has sought to take a less rigid view of the need to strictly apply the provisions of Section *Tha* 1 – 12. This is not perhaps the place for a discussion of the role of “imprisonment” and the significance of removing an individual’s personal liberty, but the role of the judiciary as an active, social institution which draws on everyday ideas and sensitivities is significant. It contradicts the image of a rigid, formal institution and reflects the fluidity to be encountered in everyday life as it negotiates its position within the complex interrelationship between formal institutions and the social, mundane world of the individual subject.

Towards a Conclusion: the Significance of the Robberies and Popular Reaction to Them

What can we learn from the issues arising out of the discussion of the *chorten* and *lhakhang* robberies? Do the stories and accounts cast a

different light upon these events? By the same token, do these acts of violence serve to cast light on the values, which are the foundation for both the informal and formal aspects of the legal system of Bhutan?

In “The Division of Labour” Durkheim presents a theory of punishment, which treats punishment as a matter of morality and social solidarity. Beginning his discussion of “crimes” he points out, rightly, that crimes are neither “given” nor “natural” categories. Rather, they represent in his opinion those acts, which seriously violate a society’s common conscience (conscience collective). As Durkheim develops this idea he links the violation of the sacred norms of the common conscience with a punitive reaction. The function of the “state” as guardian of the common conscience is “to create respect for the beliefs, traditions and collective practices: that is, to defend the common conscience against all enemies within and without” (Durkheim 1984:73). The sanctions set out in the *Khrimsgzhung* Chen mo therefore represent not simple conventions or regulations, but sacred prohibitions which command wide social assent. Or as Durkheim wrote “what gives penal law its peculiar character is the ...extraordinary authority of the rules which it sanctions” (1984:141). As reflected in the reactions of those I spoke with and of the representatives to the National Assembly, there is a strong sense of a shared perception of the social and moral order, even among those not directly involved, which informs their discussion of the *chorten* and *lhakhang* robberies. These reactions “caused by the criminal’s desecration of sacred things” are the basis for the authority and importance of Section *Tha*. This sense of outrage, Durkheim argues, creates a passionate desire for the criminal to be punished. “Passion... is the soul of punishment” (1984:86).

The strength of outrage conveyed by those I spoke with, and which can be seen in the National Assembly debates certainly appears to follow Durkheim’s analysis of “punishment”. Yet, if we accept that the state, or in this case the judiciary, is to act as the guardian of tradition and social values, how then do we interpret the decision not to implement Section *Tha* 1 – 12, and the reaction to this decision? The judiciary has sought, arguably, to highlight and indeed respond to changing perceptions of “punishment” in Bhutan. The National

Assembly has endorsed the judiciary to apply strictly Section *Tha* 1 – 9, rather than capital punishment for repeat or multiple offences. In effect, the judiciary has responded to the most important aspect underlying punishment “to maintain social cohesion intact, while maintaining all its vitality in the common conscience” (Durkheim 1984:108). This in turn is linked with statements emphasizing Bhutan as a “Buddhist nation”.³³

Implicit through out the debates and discussions on the desecration of *chorten* and *lhakhang* is the concept of karma (*las*).³⁴ The immense negativity associated with these crimes was treated, as so awful, that many felt that it was not necessary to execute these criminals. Rather, it would be better for them and for society, to try to rehabilitate them.³⁵ Of course, rehabilitation for repeat offenders was also recognized as perhaps too late, so strict confinement was all that could be done for those individuals. Several commented on the importance of allowing these individuals time to regret their actions, and indeed felt it was important for society, as represented by the courts, to show compassion to these people.

In a Kuensel editorial on “deeper values”, notably the difficulty of balancing traditional values with the ongoing changes in Bhutanese society, one can sense the balancing act which faces the courts in contemporary Bhutan. When acts are carried out which directly confront and break with deeply held values, the courts have to be seen to uphold societal values yet must temper “extreme views” which “discolour the view of tradition itself”.³⁶ To date, it is clear that the judiciary has acted in a sensitive manner, which has successfully balanced upholding traditional values and sensibilities, whilst being attuned to wider sensibilities over the use of capital punishment.

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Note: the names of the authors and titles of Bhutanese works are given here in the transliteration for research purposes, following the international Wylie standard.

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Table of Equivalencies Transcription - Transliteration

The names and terms appear in the order they appear in the article.

Chorten: mChod rten
Ku sung thukten: sku gsung thugs rten
Daga: Dar dkar
Khamsum Yuelly Namgyel: khams gsum yul las rman rgyal
Punakha: sPu na kha
Ngawang Thinley: Nga dbang 'Phrin las
Lopen Degun Rinchen: slob dpon bGe 'bdun rin chen
Lhuntse: lHun rtse
Tenzin Rabgye: bsTan 'dzin rab gyas
Gyelse Tulku: rGyal sras sprul ku
Sonam Zangpo: bSod nams bzang po
Mongar: Mon sgar
Pangsho Goemba: sPang sho dgon pa
Chime lhakhang: 'Chimed lha khang
Tshering Wangdi: Tshe ring dbang 'dus
Thadamtshi: mtha' dam tshig
Geley: dGe legs
Phuentsholing: Phun tshogs gling
Samdrup Jongkhar: bSam grub ljong mkhar
Paro Rinpung Dzong: sParo rin spungs rdzong
Goenkhang: mgon khang
Wangdi: dBang 'dus
Goemba: dgon pa
Chimi: spyi mi
Wangdue Phodrang: dBang 'dus pho drang
Nangten: nang rten
Goendey: dGon sde
Chendebji: sPyan ldan sbis
Trongsa: Krong gsar
Gonpo: mGon po
Chhukha : Chu kha
Trashig Yangtse: bKra shis g-yang stse
Dujeygang: 'Brug rgyal sgang
Toebesa: gTod sbe sa

Kasho: bka' shog
Lyonpo: blon po
Kinzang Dorji: Kun bzang rdo rje

Notes

¹ This paper is based on fieldwork carried out between June 1999 and June 2000 among the Bhutanese community visiting, or living in and around Zhe chen bstan gnyis dar rgyas gling *Nying ma* monastery, Boudhanath, Nepal and in Thimphu, Bhutan. The research was funded by ESRC Award ROO429824743. This paper represents work in progress examining law in everyday life in contemporary Bhutan and its development since the 1950s. An earlier, and longer version was presented in January 2000 at the University of Edinburgh, Postgraduate Seminar in Social Anthropology. I would like to thank Professor J. Spencer, Dr. F. Pommaret, Dr. R. Baker, Lopon dGe ldan rin chen, Dr. M. Dujardin for their comments and assistance with the paper.

² Nga dbang 'Phrin las, oral communication, October 3, 1999.

³ *Kuensel*, vol XIV, No 27 July 10th 1999, p.18

⁴ *Kuensel*, vol XIV, No 25 June 26th 1999, p. 6

⁵ *Kuensel*, vol. XV, No 1 January 2nd 2000, p.1

⁶ *Kuensel*, vol. XIV no 27 July 10 1999, p.1.

⁷ Tshering Wangdi, oral communication, 22nd August 1999.

⁸ “Karma’s Chair” 1998. “Phorpa” 1999 (The Cup) by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche in a gentle way also touches on the pressures facing even monasteries as external, secular events impact on the monks and the life and discipline of the monastery.

⁹ It should also be noted that several informants stated that the incidence of attacks on sacred sites started in the late 1970s before the current “*ngolop*” problem. However, they did argue that by the attack on *kusunghukten* a person was undermining the wellbeing of the nation so could be called a “*ngolop*”.

¹⁰ The term “*ngolop*” refers to a traitor or anti-national. See Chapter 17 of the *Khrimsgzhung Chen mo*.

¹¹ *Kuensel*, vol.XIV, No 27, July 10th 1999, p.4 “*Ngolops* responsible for robbery of monasteries”.

¹² *Kuensel* July 3 1999, p. 6.

¹³ Nga dbang ‘Phrin las, Oral communication, August 30, 1999.

¹⁴ Dr. Pomparet advised that the monasteries were closed to foreigners from 01/01/1988.

¹⁵ *Kuensel* vol. XIV, No 2 July 1999.

¹⁶ Throughout South and South East Asia, there are increasing incidences of thefts of sacred art and stolen items appearing in auction houses around the world.

¹⁷ These issues have been raised in the letters and editorials appearing in *Kuensel*. Although I do not deal with them in any depth in this paper I intend to examine these issues in future papers.

¹⁸ *Kuensel*, vol XIV, No 37, 77th National Assembly Supplement, September 17th 1999, p.14.

¹⁹ *Ibid* - remarks made by the Home Minister.

²⁰ *Kuensel*, Editorial, October 10th 1998

²¹ *Kuensel*, vol. XIV, No. 27 July 10th 1999, p.18.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ See Aris, M (1986) *Sources for the History of Bhutan*.

²⁴ *Kuensel*, vol. XIV, No. 27 July 10th 1999, p.18.

²⁵ *ibid*.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *Kuensel*, 77th National Assembly Supplement, September 17th 1999:15.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *Kuensel*, 77th National Assembly Supplement, September 18th 1999:15.

³² *Kuensel*, 10th October 1998 p.1.

³³ It is important of course, to be cautious when dealing with what people understand or believe (for example, M. Spiro, 1970, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*). I do not want to suggest that all Bhutanese share the same understandings, or depth of knowledge. However, there is a level at which those I spoke to among the lay community view themselves as Buddhist and present a “Buddhist” perspective.

³⁴ One aspect I have had to leave out of the discussion in this paper is the inclusion of *chorten* robbery and desecration as one of the five nearly boundless actions (*mtshams med pa dang nye ba lnga*).

³⁵ The importance of rehabilitation of offenders can be seen with the opening of a Juvenile Offenders Rehabilitation Centre in 1997. Although, the young offenders are there due to petty crimes, it reflects a desire to provide help to reintegrate offenders into society. One story told to me emphasized that people can change once they see the damage they have caused and develop regret.

³⁶ *Kuensel*, vol XIV, No. 27, July 10th 1999, p.2.