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The Development of Language in Bhutan*

by *Lopon Nado*

The Kingdom of Bhutan or, as it is called by its inhabitants, Druk Yul, "Land of the Drukpa Kargupa Sect," is situated on the southern slope of the great Himalayas, between Tibet in the north and India in the south. It is surrounded by numerous mountains, and countless rivers and streams rise from its glaciers and flow down its valleys to the Brahmaputra River to the south. The fauna and flora are rich and the country abounds in medicinal plants. This is the reason why Bhutan is also known as Menjong, which means "the country of medicine."

The population and size of the country are small, but its history can be traced for well over a thousand years. Throughout its history, Bhutan has preserved its independence. It has developed unique cultural traditions, quite distinct from those of its neighbours. These are clearly reflected in its distinctive traditions and customs, language, manner of dress, arts and crafts, and so forth.

King Songtsen Gampo unified Tibet in the first half of the seventh century A.D. Before then there was no written script in Tibet. According to tradition, Songtsen Gampo sent Thonmi Sambhota, son of the minister Thonmi, to India to study Indian languages and scripts. Under different teachers, such as the Brahmin Lipikara and Deva Vidyasinha, he mastered Indian philology and scripts. According to the *Lalitavistara* (*Gyacher rol pa'i mdo*), there were as many as sixty-four scripts in India. Thonmi Sambhota chose the Devanagari script and adapted it to the Tibetan language.

There are in Sanskrit 16 vowels and 34 consonants, so the Devanagari script has in all 50 letters and signs. Thonmi Sambhota omitted some which were not needed for Tibetan and

added a few which did not exist in the Devanagari. Finally, he fixed a set of 4 vowel signs and 30 consonants.

Tibetans transcribed the words of the Buddha—the sūtras and tantras—which had been preached in different places in India and Uddiyana (Ogyen) and preserved in different languages, such as Sanskrit and Pāli.

The new alphabet was also of great importance for political and administrative purposes. Laws were written down and Tibetan civilization began to develop socially and spiritually.

In Tibet itself, although the basic form of the script remained unchanged, different adaptations developed for special purposes. Among numerous scribes who left models of letters, Khyungpo Yukhribar is famous and had many disciples. He fixed the proportion of letters, the methods of fabricating pen and paper, and standardized calligraphy. His method spread widely in Tibet.

The introduction of the script into Bhutan is closely related to the spread of Buddhism. Padmasambhava, known in Bhutan as Gūru Rinpoche, came to Bumthang in central Bhutan in the 8th century A.D. He taught the Dharma to the King of Bumthang and his subjects. At that time the Bhutanese had no written language. Therefore, Denman Tsemang, who was in the retinue of Guru Rinpoche, wrote down certain important scriptures for the King of Bumthang. He also taught the Bhutanese how to read and write.

Denna Tsemang was a famous scribe who legends claim could write innumerable texts in a moment. He is the purported scribe of the majority of the concealed texts (*terma*) recorded in Bhutanese script—which is different from the Tibetan script. One name for this cursive form is *lhoyig*. This literally means “southern script,” so named because Bhutan is situated to the south of Tibet. The other name is *juyig* which refers to the use of this script for ordinary correspondence. The origin of the Bhutanese scripts thus is traditionally traced back to the 8th century A.D.

Some specimens of the script of this period are still extant. At Samye Chimphu in Tibet Guru Rinpoche revealed the teaching of the *Kagye desheg dupa* cycle to King Krisong Detsen and 24 subjects. All of them received the initiation, explanation and precept from the Guru himself. After practice, they at-

tained perfection (and showed different signs of it). Guru Rinpoche then ordered Denma Tsemang to write down on yellow paper the teaching of the *Kagye desheg dupa* for the King. Then, in order to transmit these teachings to Nyang Nyima Oezer, the future reincarnation of the King, the manuscripts written out by Denma Tsemang were hidden behind a statue of Vairocana, which is the principal image of the Khomthing Lhakang temple in Lhobrag, southern Tibet. In accordance with the prophecy of Guru Rinpoche, the *terton* or “discoverer of treasures,” Nyang Nyima Oezer discovered the manuscripts of Denma Tsemang. Fragments of these manuscripts discovered by Nyang Nyima Oezer are still preserved today. Between the form of writing used by Denma Tsemang and the actual Bhutanese script in use today, there is a striking similarity. This offers evidence that the writing of Denma Tsemang is the model from which today’s Bhutanese script originated.

In his *Deb ther dkar po*, or “White Annals,” the eminent Tibetan historian of the 20th century, Gendun Choephel, states: “The Tibetan alphabet was invented by Thonmi Sambhota on the basis of the Devanagari alphabet. Other scripts such as *teryig* (script used in the *terma* literature) are very similar to the Indian scripts of the Gupta period. It seems, therefore, that the difference between *ucen* formal script and *ume* cursive script didn’t exist when the Tibetan alphabet was invented, and that the *ume* script resulted from the quick handwriting style of *ucen* letters. In ancient script and the Bhutanese scripts of the present, there is no differentiation into *ucen* and *ume*, and they seem to represent a state which existed before the emergence of the difference between the *ucen* and *ume* scripts. Tibetan scripts changed in the course of time, and their actual forms differ much from the Gupta-period Indian scripts of more than one thousand years ago.”

As pointed out in this passage by Gendun Choephel, the Bhutanese script differs only slightly from the ancient scripts, and its origin goes back to Denma Tsemang in the 8th century A.D. Moreover, the contemporary manuscripts found at Tunhuang appear to bear the same similarity to the Bhutanese script of today as those of Denma Tsemang. After the creation of the Tibetan alphabet, the Tibetans started a vast project of translating Buddhist literature from Sanskrit, Pāli, Chinese and

other languages into Tibetan. Songtsen Gampo, Khrisong Detsen and Khri Ralpacen are the three Tibetan religious kings who are considered to have been incarnations of the Rigsum Gonpo, that is Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī and Vajrapāṇi. Under the patronage of these kings, the translation project was carried out by Indian pandits and Tibetan *lotsawas* (translators). The most famous among them are Padmasambhava, Vimālamitra, Śāntirakṣita, Jinamitra, Vairocana, Kawa Peltsek, Chokro Lui Gyeltshen and Yeshede. To ascertain an exact and faithful translation, the orthography, grammar and terminology were revised and unified; the Kesarche, or “newly fixed language,” was worked out in the first half of the 9th century A.D. The standard fixed classical Tibetan became the religious language for all Buddhists in the vast region which include Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan and other Himalayan areas. Thanks to the efforts of kings, pandits and translators, a comprehensive collection of Buddhist literature has been translated into classical Tibetan with remarkable accuracy and fidelity. The Tibetan Buddhist Canon consists of two major collections, the Kanjur and the Tenjur. The Kanjur, of 108 volumes, comprises the teachings of the Buddha and the Tenjur, of more than 200 volumes, comprises the commentaries of pandits. These two collections in *Choeke* or the “classical religious language” are still in use in Bhutan, and they form the foundation of Buddhist teaching and practice.

In the 17th century A.D., the great spiritual and temporal leader Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel unified Bhutan. A *zong* (fortress) was established as an administrative centre in each region. These buildings are also the regional religious centres which house the monastic communities known as *dratshang* or *rabdey*. Officers such as *penlops*, *dzongpons*, *drungpas* and *thrimpons* were appointed throughout the country. The linguistic situation of this unified Bhutan is complex and there are many dialects. The most important are the Ngalonoggikha of western Bhutan, the Tsangla or Sharchhobikha of eastern Bhutan, the Bumthangpaikha of central Bhutan, the Kurtoeparkha of northeastern Bhutan, and the Khyenkha of central-south Bhutan.

In the past, written communications in Bhutan, both of an official and private nature, always had been in *Choeke*, the classi-

cal religious language written in *juyig*, the Bhutanese cursive script. Because of its classical nature, *Choeke* can be understood only by people who have received a traditional education. To become intelligible to the common man, it has to be interpreted into the local language or dialect. Despite this, *Choeke* is still in wide use among educated persons, both in ordinary correspondence and in the broader context of religious teaching and practice.

In addition to *Choeke*, which exists only in written form, Bhutan has long used an official form of speech known as *Dzongkha*. *Dzong* means fortress, *kha* means language; therefore the "language of the fortress."

Dzongkha is based on the major language group of *Nga-longkikha*, prevailing in western Bhutan, but it most closely resembles the vernacular speech of *Punakha*, the valley where the ancient winter capital was situated. From the 17th century A.D. onwards, *Dzongkha* has been the language of government used in all *dzongkhag*, administrative units of local government centred in the fortress or *dzong* of each district.

When five-year economic and social development plans were launched to modernise the country two decades ago, the Royal Government decided to develop *Dzongkha* as a modern language. For this purpose, the *Dzongkha* Division was established in 1961 in the Department of Education, then headed by Mr. Dawa Tsering.

The principal reason for adopting *Dzongkha* as the national language was that, except for a few differences of accent, spelling and grammar, *Dzongkha* maintains the basic standard set by *Choeke* and lends itself readily to written standardization. The initial problems of choosing the most convenient written form for *Dzongkha* were solved about a decade ago by the *Dzongkha* Division, and now textbooks written in *Dzongkha* are used by students in schools throughout the country. In each school, *Dzongkha* is taught from Classes I to XII. Textbooks in *Dzongkha* for use in college are being prepared at present. These *Dzongkha* textbooks cover the history of Bhutan, history of religion, poetry, literature, and so on. Religious subjects, which have usually been treated only in *Choeke*, will also gradually be translated into *Dzongkha*. It is hoped that in this way the full heritage of Buddhist culture, formerly the preserve

largely of monks, will be brought within the reach of the common men.

In this context, the Simtokha Rigney School deserves a special mention. This school was established in 1961 in the historical site of Simtokha Dzong, built in 1629 and situated 7 km. to the south of Thimphu, the present capital of Bhutan. In this specialised school, traditional Buddhist philosophy and literature are taught together with Dzongkha. In this way, students learn both the classical and the modern Bhutanese language. Degrees equivalent to Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts are awarded in this school. Graduates of the school are employed either in government offices or as teachers in schools, and they contribute to the promotion of both classical literature and the Dzongkha language.

There is another department whose contributions to the development of Dzongkha are considerable. This is the Department of Information, which publishes a quarterly magazine and a weekly news magazine. The former publication contains a variety of articles in Dzongkha on different subjects, including religious and traditional themes that are difficult to understand in *Choeke*. The latter is an official bulletin on current affairs and events.

In order that Dzongkha fulfil the functions of a modern language in a period of rapid economic, social and technological development in Bhutan, Dzongkha must develop a sufficient range of terminology, especially with regard to science and technology. For this reason, the Department of Education is compiling a dictionary of Dzongkha containing a fundamental vocabulary of scientific and technical words. We hope, in due course, to have a sufficient Dzongkha vocabulary to meet the needs of both traditional and modern usage. The other benefit derived from developing a written form for Dzongkha is that it has enabled us to record our oral literature for the first time. This includes folk poetry, minor epics and various legends which must be preserved in writing if they are to survive for posterity.

*This paper was originally presented at The 5th Conference of the IABS, at Oxford, England. It was translated by Rigzin Dorji.