

Written Treasures

a mirror of the past, a bridge to the future

Gangtey's Untold Treasures

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Abstract

This paper discusses the history and significance of the manuscript collection at Gangtey. A major monastery in Bhutan, Gangtey is a thriving centre of religious art and culture, and today represents a literary treasure trove that remains intact and unexplored. Gangtey's manuscript collection, which was written mostly in the late 17th and early 18th centuries as funerary tributes to its founders, holds a unique textual, artistic and historical value and immense religious significance to the local communities. In a pioneering attempt to unravel this treasure and assess its significance as a whole, I have undertaken a project to digitally document and study the manuscript holdings. This paper is a preliminary report of the study and its prospects, announcing Gangtey's collection as an outstanding literary heritage in its size, quality, antiquity and integrity.

Samuel Johnson (1709–84) one of the greatest names in the world's written culture, is reported to have observed: *'Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.'* The main thrust of my presentation, and I suppose that of this conference generally, is knowledge of the second category. Since knowledge of the first category, i.e. knowing a subject, is dependent on the knowledge of where one can find information upon it, it is indeed very appropriate and opportune that we explore the written traditions of Bhutan in order to further our knowledge about Bhutan. I am therefore very grateful to the National Library of Bhutan and the Royal Library of Denmark for organizing this conference on the written treasures of Bhutan, an excellent forum to unravel and assess Bhutan's literary heritage.

The second half of the twentieth century saw perhaps one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of Northern Buddhist literature. First, the rich literary wealth of the Tibetan Buddhist culture faced a wide spread destruction and dispersal during the cultural revolution and the subsequent days. This was then followed, particularly in recent years,

by numerous projects of reproduction, documentation and digitisation of texts as corrective efforts to preserve and consolidate the damaged and fragmented texts. Himalayan literary heritage has never seen before as massive and systematic reproduction and distribution as the ones happening today through institutions such as the dPal brtsegs Bod yig dPe rnying Zhib 'jug khang inside Tibet and Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center outside.

Bhutan, however, remained largely unscathed and untouched by these events which have reshaped the literary landscape of the Northern Buddhist world abroad. After the decline of Buddhism in Tibet, Mongolia and other Tibetan Buddhist countries, Bhutan is left as a unique repository of the cultural and religious wealth of the Buddhist Himalaya. Its secluded monasteries and temples today represent a literary treasure trove that is virtually unharmed and still unexplored. Gangtey,¹ founded by rGyal sras Padma 'Phrin las (1564-1642), the grandson of the famous Bhutanese saint Padma Gling pa (1450-1521), is one such monastery housing an enormous manuscript collection, that is of considerable literary, historical and religious importance.

¹ Gangtey is the most common phoneticized rendering of sGang steng, a name which refers variously to a sub-district polity, a village and a monastic centre. Here, I simply use the name 'Gangtey' to refer to the monastic centre.



Gangtey Monastery and its Collection

Perched on a hill overlooking the Phobjikha valley that has now become renowned as a migration ground for the endangered black neck cranes, Gangtey gSang sngags Chos gling is the most prominent rNying ma pa monastery in the traditional western Bhutan. Local accounts have it that when Padma Gling pa passed through the valley on one of his journeys, he prophesied that his treasure cycle of secret mantra teachings (*gsang sngags kyi chos*) will thrive on the hill (*sgang steng*) in the future.² Hence, the name.

Subsequently, gSung sprul bsTan 'dzin Grags pa (b. c. 1525), the first incarnation of Padma Gling pa was recognised from Gan la, a hamlet below Gangtey where Klong chen pa's seat 'Bras chag gling is located. bsTan 'dzin Grags pa went to Bumthang and got his training under Zla ba rGyal mtshan (b. 1499), one of the sons of Padma Gling pa. Zla ba

² bsTan 'dzin Chos rgyal, *rGyal kun khyab bdag 'gro ba i bla ma bstan 'dzin rin po che legs pa i don grub zhabs kyi mnam par thar pa ngo mtshar nor bu'i mchod sdong*, p.18

rGyal mtshan is said to have had several consorts,³ and bsTan 'dzin Grags pa was rumoured to have had an affair with one. This was probably Bu khrid, the daughter of Chos 'khor sDeb Thub pa bKra shis and the mother of Padma 'Phrin las. The current Gangtey Rinpoche says that Thugs sras Zla ba rGyal mtshan later gave this young consort to bsTan 'dzin Grags pa. Thus, Padma 'Phrin las is claimed to be a natural son of Thugs sras Zla ba rGyal mtshan but brought up and trained under the fosterage of bsTan 'dzin Grags pa, who on his return to Gan la brought Padma 'Phrin las with him.

It was at the behest of bsTan 'dzin Grags pa and through his own vision that Padma 'Phrin las began the establishment of the Gangtey around the beginning of the 10th *rab byung*. The inner sanctum of the current temple was formally finished in 1613, Water Ox Year, three years before the arrival of Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rNam rgyal in Bhutan. After Padma 'Phrin las's death, Gangtey continued to thrive under the supervision of his student, the third gSung sprul Tshul khrim rDo rje (d. 1654). However, Gangtey saw its heyday only during the life of bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub (1645-1726), the reincarnation of Padma 'Phrin las, who emerged as a leading rNying ma master in the country. With a close relationship with the new political power in Punakha, Gangtey developed into a major rNying ma establishment in the country. Padma 'Phrin las's temple was also expanded into a large *rdzong* and a massive project of writing books took place during the time of bsTan 'dzin Don grub.

³ 'Ja' tshon Me 'bar, *sPrul pa'i sras chen zla ba rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar rin chen rgyan mdzes*, n.p.n.d. The biography recounts that sDeb Thug pa bKra shis once teased Thugs sras Zla ba rGyal mtshan in a festival gathering saying: 'You, sons of Padma Gling pa do not practise dharma that you should but find a wife each and still discontent, go on chasing other pretty woman.' Thugs sras, a little abashed, says that everything is illusion for him and puts his fist into a hard rock. See also 'Ja' tshon Me 'bar (1978), *sPrul pa'i sras mchog zla ba rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar rin chen rgyan mdzes*, Kinnaur: Sumra gSang sngags Chos gling, ff.47, p. 409

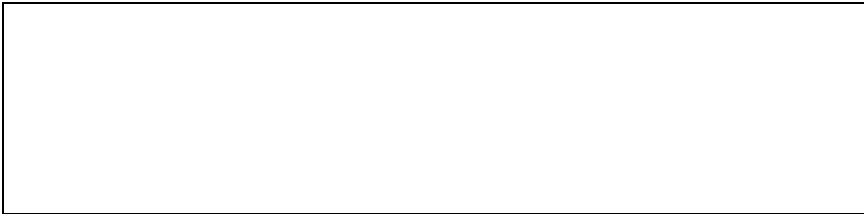
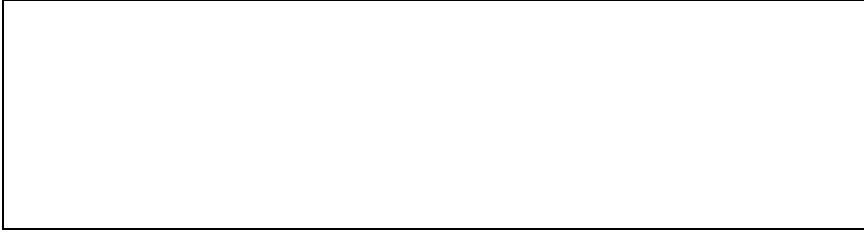
PICTURE

Gangtey's manuscript collection includes a set of *The Translation of the Buddha's Words* (*bKa' 'gyur*), two sets of *The Collected Tantras of the Ancients* (*rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*), and a large section of miscellaneous titles including what is perhaps the world's largest *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*). The library also contains a set of the sNar thang xylographic edition of *bKa' 'gyur* and wood blocks for some liturgical books from the Padma Gling pa's cycle of rediscovered treasures. Written and collected mostly in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the collection holds a unique textual, artistic and historical value and is of immense religious significance for the local community.

The *bKa' 'gyur* Manuscript

A great deal of work will have to be done to successfully unravel Gangtey's literary treasure trove and assess its significance as a whole. A preliminary study has already revealed that the *bKa' 'gyur* manuscript beginning with the *rGyud kyi rgyal po dpal bde mchog nyung ngu* (*Tantrarājaśrīlaghuśambara*) is a rare version, which may perhaps belong to a unique Bhutanese recension of *bKa' 'gyur* Them spang ma and is

closely affiliated to the exemplar/s from which the sTog Palace and Shel dkar *bKa' 'gyur* were copied.⁴ However, a lot more historical study and textual comparison will have to be done in order to make any definite codicological remarks.



In any case, the *bKa' 'gyur* forms the bulk of Gangtey's collection and is certainly a work of most impressive category. Written in exquisite and consistent *dbu can* calligraphy, it has the first pages generally in deep blue colour with letter embossed in gold. This is usually followed by a duplicate of the same page decorated by miniature paintings of the Buddhas and Buddhist hierarchs. Written on Bhutanese daphne paper of excellent quality, the average size of the page is 72cm by 20cm and a volume contains around 400 folios.

This manuscript, as in the case of the two *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* sets, however neither contains any colophon information about its creation nor have a separate *dkar chag*, which in Tibetan canonical corpus tradition usually documents the process of production, the scribes, the edi-

⁴ Harrison (1996). E. Gene Smith in a person communication (dated 12 May, 2004) wrote: "One of the important features characterizing the Bhutanese Drugpa redaction of the Kangyur is the fact that the rgyud section begins with the Bde mchog nyung ngu. This is how we know that the Stog Palace manuscript is based on a Bhutanese manuscript, probably from Seula."

tors and the sponsors. Thus, we are left with the sparse information we can draw from the biographies of Gangtey's hierarchs and oral accounts current in the community. Inferring from the accounts in bsTan 'dzin Chos rgyal's biography of bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub, the *bKa' 'gyur* manuscript was written in the final decade of the 17th century, probably about the years 1690-2.⁵ An exemplar was brought from Wangdiphodrang and the project was completed in three years. Among the twenty scribes was a certain sTang si sbi pa 'Brug rGya mtsho, who wrote the opening folios in gold, and dBu mdzad Be'u chung and Bla ma Dar rgyas are named as editorial proof-readers. The *bKa' 'gyur* is today stored in the sPyan ras gzigs lha khang, bundled in three layers of clothes and a thick pair of wooden covers.

The rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum Manuscripts

The *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* (henceforth NGB) or *The Collected Tantras of the Ancients*, as Germano renders it,⁶ is a canonical collection of esoteric tantric texts which are mostly left out of the bipartite *bKa' 'gyur* and *bsTan 'gyur* corpuses canonized in the 14th century. Claimed by its compilers to be authentic translations of the Indic tantras which were delivered by a Buddha figure in this world or a celestial realm, and translated into Tibetan during the Early Propagation of Buddhism into Tibet in the Imperial period, the NGB has revered canonical status to its adherents, who are mostly the followers of the rNying ma school. Structured according to the three tantric doxographical systems of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga, it enshrines the highest philosophies and practices of Vajrayāna Buddhism and excludes exoteric *sūtrayāna* and even outer tantras.

However, the NGB has a history shrouded in controversy being rejected by its critics as apocryphal writings of Tibetan origin. The tantras of

⁵ The year he finished the writing of *bKa' 'gyur*, he seems to have also visited sTag tshang temple with bsTan 'dzin Rab rgyas. This is perhaps the trip the latter made to found the main temple in sTag tshang, which would place the completion of *bKa' 'gyur* around 1692. See bsTan 'dzin Chos rgyal, *rGyal kun khyab bdag 'gro ba i bla ma bstan 'dzin rin po che legs pa i don grub zhabs kyi nam par thar pa ngo mtshar nor bu'i mchod sdong*, f. 67. See also Ardussi (1999a), p. 53 and note 61.

⁶ Germano (2002), p. 1

NGB, it is generally believed, are left out of the *bKa' gyur* collection due to their questionable status as translations of authentic Indian originals. Nevertheless, the question of Indian origin of the NGB tantras and the relationship between NGB and *bKa' gyur* collection is a tricky issue. Despite the harsh criticism by gSar ma scholars such as Khug pa Lha btsas, Chag lo tsā ba, Bri gung dPal 'dzin, et al. many masters both from rNying ma and gSar ma schools defended the authenticity of the NGB tantras. Beside, some editors of *bKa' gyur* who were sympathetic to the NGB tantras also included them in the *bKa' gyur* editions, as can be seen in Peking and Tawang *bKa' gyurs* and from the case of the *rNying rgyud* section of sDe dge *bKa' gyur*. Moreover, some well known tantras such as *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* and *Guhyasamāja* are shared by the *bKa' gyur* and NGB collections. Thus, although the NGB has never fully been incorporated into the standard canon of *bKa' gyur*, it has been passed down as a parallel canon of tantras, which supplemented and sometimes also overlapped with the *bKa' gyur* canon.

The problem of NGB's canonical status is further exacerbated by its quasi-revelational nature, a mode of literary production which is chiefly associated with the rNying ma school. Although the canon is generally purported to be consisted of transmitted scriptures, a lot of the tantras are rediscovered texts revealed by treasure-discoverers such as Ratna Gling pa, Sangs rgyas Gling pa, Gu ru Chos dbang and rDo rje Gling pa. Since the writing of the NGB commissioned by mNga' bdag 'Gro mgon dPal, the son of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'Od zer, in the beginning of the 13th century, many NGB version also contained the *gter ma* teachings of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'Od zer. Thus, the nature and history of the NGB is far from a simple and straightforward story.

The earliest version may be Kun spangs Grags rgyal's proto-NGB collection kept at gTsang 'Ug bya lung which can be dated as early as 11th or 12th century. Rob Mayer consulting Thub bstan Chos dar's list,⁷ which he considers more complete and detailed than earlier enumerations by Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Dan Martin, writes about early editions of the NGB:

⁷ Thub bstan Chos dar (2000)

We read of a collection written in gold in the opening years of the 13th century, commissioned by Mnga' bdag 'gro mgon dpal as a funerary offering for his father Nyang ral nyi ma'i 'od zer (to this day, many NGB editions include Nyang ral's gter ma); an NGB made in the 14th century by Zur bzang po dpal, said to have been after his second visit to Buyantu Khan's court in Peking; one made by Ratna gling pa in the 15th century; three made by Gong ra lo chen gzhan phan rdo rje in the 16th century; one that was kept at O rgyan smin grol gling, of unknown date; a further one made by Smin gling gter chen in the 17th century and also kept at O rgyan smin grol gling; one made by the 5th Dalai Lama and taken to Kokonor; one kept at Stag bu brag dmar dgon; one made by 'Jigs med gling pa; one made by the second Rdzogs chen incarnation in the 17th century; an older one kept at Kaḥ thog which predated Dge rtse Paṇḍita's early 19th century Sde dge xylograph; one made by a lama from Go 'jo at an unknown date; one made by the Mtsho na chief Padma bstan skyong with followers of Rdo rje snying po; one made by 'Bri gung rig 'dzin chos kyi grags pa; and one kept at Dpal spungs. No doubt there were many others - it is hard to imagine major Rnying ma foundations without an NGB.⁸

It is a common belief among NGB scholars that there may have been about a couple hundred versions of NGB and that most rNying ma establishments would have possessed a copy. At this rate, it is not unusual that Gangtey, being an eminent rNying ma centre, has the NGB collection. But, it was surprising to discover that the temple contained two copies, and even more so because not much was known about the existence of two sets even by the monks in Gangtey.

The current Gangtey Rinpoche claims that at least one of the NGB versions in Gangtey was prepared by the third Pad gling gSung sprul, Kun mkhyen Tshul khri ms rDo rje, as a funerary tribute to his master, Padma 'Phrin las. Padma 'Phrin las had a long-standing wish to create a copy of the NGB and receive its transmission, but it was only after his death that his wish was fulfilled by his disciple, the third Pad gling gSung sprul. Thus, we can assume one of the NGB sets to have been written sometime between 1640-1650. The actual writing of at least one

⁸ Mayer (2004), pp. 7-8

of the Gangtey's NGBs is supposed to have taken place in Lha lung with paper taken from Bhutan. I am tempted to speculate that this version may be the one with poorer paper and calligraphy of the two, which I shall arbitrarily call here Gangtey A. It is my hope that more information will come to light on this when we have access to the biography of Pad ma 'Phrin las by gSung sprul Tshul khirms rDo rje.

The second set, Gangtey B, with the first folios in gold script on deep blue background, was created as a funerary tribute to bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub under the aegis of Mi pham dBang po (d. 1739), the reincarnation of bsTan 'dzin Rab rgyas (1638-98). This can be confirmed from the reports of funerary activities that took place following the death of bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub in 1726. However, no detailed account of the project of writing is given. There is also an equivocal oral account among the lamas in Gangtey that the NGB was written in a temple above Nor bu lding across the pass from Gangtey, which is now lying in ruins. It may be plausible that the former set was written in Lha lung in Tibet, and the latter set produced in honour of bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub in Gangtey or/and nearby.

This latter set, Gangtey B, is now known to have striking affinity with the mTshams brag NGB manuscript from Bhutan, which is estimated to have been made roughly between 1728-48 and has long been available to the international scholars. Rob Mayer and Cathy Cantwell have undertaken a stemmatic analysis of a number of tantras in all the available editions of NGB and have concluded that the 46-volume Gangtey and mTshams brag manuscripts are almost near identical twins in content and organization,⁹ either with a common *ma phyi* exemplar or one copied from the other. Despite the usual scribal errors and lapses, the mTshams brag edition and Gangtey B, Rob Mayer informed me in a personal communication, also share many 'good ancient readings' lost in other versions. Thus, there is substantial internal textual evidence to suppose that Gangtey B and mTshams brag editions not only belong to the same recension, but may have been redacted from a common original.

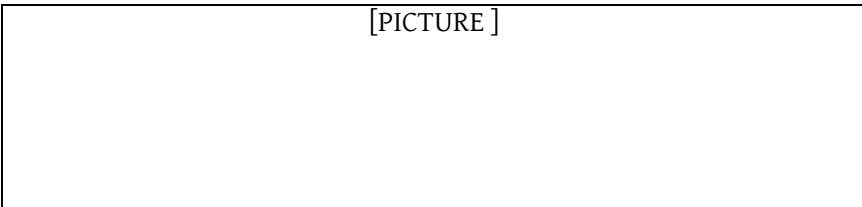
⁹ Mayer (2004), pp. 12-3. See also Mayer, Cantwell and Phuntscho (2005), pp. 3-4

This does not come as a surprise because Gangtey and mTshams brag had close historical links around the time the two NGBs were written. mTsham brag sPrul sku Ngag dbang Grub pa (1682-1748), who is attributed with the production of mTshams brag NGB, was a close disciple of bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub and was in Gangtey on numerous occasions. Thus, both historical and textual evidence seems to reinforce Gene Smith's assertion in the introduction to his digital edition of the mTshams brag NGB¹⁰ that it was copied from Gangtey NGB. It is very plausible that both Gangtey B and mTshams brag editions were copied from Gangtey A, which at the moment awaits proper textual and codicological analysis.

The close affinity between Gangtey B and mTshams brag reinforces the general belief among NGB scholars of a unique tradition of a Bhutanese NGB. Other Bhutanese editions such as the one at sGra med rtse and those as yet uncharted are expected to belong to this Bhutanese family, which, partly due to geographical location and partly due to religious affiliation centred on the Pad gling institutions, could vary significantly from all other surviving Tibetan editions. It is hoped that a thorough study of all NGBs in Bhutan will reveal a unique Bhutanese recension of a 46-volume NGB.

Both Gangtey A and B are composed of 46 volumes each; volumes of Gangtey A are smaller than Gangtey B because its paper is thinner. The average leaf of Gangtey A is 61.5cm by 20cm while that of Gangtey B is 65cm by 16.5cm. Gangtey A has generally 8 lines on a page while Gangtey B has only 7 lines on each page. The calligraphy of Gangtey B is considerably better and more consistent than Gangtey A and its paper much stronger and refined.

[PICTURE]



¹⁰ Smith (2005), Lists of Contents of External Hard Drive # 1, p. 2

[PICTURE]



The knowledge of the two Gangtey editions of NGB is a highly significant development to the scholarship on NGB. Prior to the availability of Gangtey, only six editions of the NGB, the sDe dge, the mTshams brag, gTing skyes, Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang Nor bu, Kathmandu and Nubri were known and available to international scholars. The Gangtey B, which is already available to scholars, is now known to be remarkably consistent with high quality of calligraphy and so far the finest version of written NGBs.¹¹ They are also the first ones to be reproduced in digital format with full-colour images which are by far the most convenient and clearest edition for scholars to consult.

Miscellaneous Manuscripts

In addition to the canonical corpuses, Gangtey's holdings also include a wide range of texts on philosophy, history, religious rituals and practices. Among them is the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikāpraṅgāpāramitā*, *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa brgyad stong pa*), which is probably the largest of its kind measuring 78.5cm by 35.5cm. It is claimed by some locals to be the copy that Thos pa dga' (Milarepa) read after he ran away from Mar pa. However, calligraphic, orthographic and physical features seem to show that it is a much later work. The temple in Gangtey's monastic college houses another *Aṣṭasāhasrikāpraṅgāpāramitā* written in gold. Other *sūtras* in manuscript include the *Sūtra of Fortunate Aeon* (*Bhadrakalpikasūtra*, *bsKal pa bzang po'i mdo*), the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Vajracchedikāpraṅgāpāramitā*, *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa*), the *mDo mangs* collection of numerous *sūtras*, the *Sūtra of Golden Light* (*Suvarṇaprabhāsottamasūtreṅdra*, *gSer 'od dam pa*

¹¹ Mayer, Cantwell and Phuntsho (2005), p. 3

mdo sde'i dbang po), the Hundred Thousand Names of the Buddhas (*Sangs rgyas mtshan 'bum*), etc.

[PICTURE]

A large bulk of the miscellaneous section consists of *gter ma* teachings. Being a major centre for the study and practice of Padma Gling pa's *gter ma* tradition, Gangtey holds a substantial collection of literature, including some rare books, related to this cycle. There are also rediscovered treasures of most major *gter stons*, including Nyang ral, Sangs rgyas Gling pa, Ratna Gling pa, Karma Gling pa, O rgyan Gling pa, rDo rje Gling pa, Rig 'dzin rGod ldem, Padma Las 'brel rtsal and gTer bdag Gling pa. These *gter ma* cycles cover a wide range of topics but are largely liturgies and manuals for various rituals and religious practices including those for elongating life, bestowing empowerments, making holy substances, supplicating deities, performing black magic, affecting meditative visualization, etc. The collection also contains scrolls and illustrations used for various religious rituals.

There are also manuscript copies of other religious books such as the *Dohakośa*, Klong chen pa's *Sems nyid ngal gso* and *Tshig don mdzod* and the Seventeen rDzogs chen tantras. A large number of the texts also belong to the instruction or *gdams ngag/khrid* genre used for meditative instructions. Beside the religious texts, there are also books on medicine, astrology, language and poetry, and folk literatures such as the *Ro dngos grub sgrung*. The collection is expected to contain also a few biographical and historical works; two titles, *sNying thig gi lo rgyus* and *'Ja' mtshon snying po'i rnam thar*, have been spotted so far.

Most of the texts are in *dbu med 'bru tsha* script and approximately a few hundred years old. Some books may go back to the 14th century. The

leaves often are inadvertently stuck to each other due to lack of use. There is no hand list or catalogue for the holdings and even the labels or title tags that traditional books have hanging on the cover were cut off by Gangtey's priests in the beginning of the twentieth century to prevent the books from being borrowed or stolen. A thorough assessment of the miscellanea, including a complete catalogue and digital photography is yet to happen and nothing definite can be said about the age, background and the strength of the collection until such a survey is finished.

Textual, historical and religious significance

The Gangtey manuscript collection is undoubtedly an outstanding literary body in its size, quality, antiquity and integrity. For the world at large and Bhutan in particular, it is an astounding heritage of enormous value and significance. I shall briefly point out here three distinct ways in which the collection can be seen as highly valuable:

Textual and Codicological: One of the main benefits of Gangtey's collection to the scholars is its use in codicological study and textual criticism of Tibetan Buddhist literature. Both in the case of *bKa' gyur* and NGB, Gangtey offers hitherto unavailable editions for comparative and critical study of texts. Rob Mayer and Cathy Cantwell have already made good use of the one of the Gangtey NGBs to do a stemmatic study of two tantras: *Phur pa bcu gnyis* and *Phur bu mya ngan las 'das pa'i rgyud*. Through their stemmatic analysis they have traced the textual variants in the different editions and are closer to their aim of constructing a genealogical tree which would show the relationship between the various editions of NGB.¹² Beside its uniqueness as a body of manuscripts, the collection may also reveal works that are previously unknown.

Historical: For the wider scholarship on Bhutan and the Himalayas, the manuscripts of Gangtey have a much greater historical value than its use in codicology for textual comparison. Although not much can be said about the precise production of the texts, the quality and the size of the collection is indicative of the magnitude of the project of writing and thereby of Gangtey's status as thriving religious centre. It is an ef-

¹² Mayer (2004)

fective tool with which a historian can gauge the socio-religious standing and economic prosperity of the Gangtey monastic establishment in the mid-17th and 18th centuries.

The majority of the collection, we know, was created soon after Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rNam rgyal established his theocratic rule in Bhutan. Most religious groups confronting the dominant 'Brug pa school, commonly enumerated as the five lamaist factions,¹³ were then routed and banished from Bhutan. Yet ever since the inception of 'Brug pa power, Gangtey, like other Pad gling institutions, enjoyed an amicable relationship with Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rNam rgyal and his new government. The Zhabs drung is said to have highly regarded Padma 'Phrin las, and both Padma 'Phrin las and his successor, bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub, paid numerous visits to Punakha, where they were received with great honour. After Zhabs drung's demise, the cordial relationship between Punakha and Gangtey continued with the *sde srids* culminating in the strong mutual affection and respect shared between bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub and the fourth *sde srid* bsTan 'dzin Rab rgyas. This close rapport seems to have suffered a setback during the early years of the reign of the fifth *sde srid* dGe 'dun Chos 'phel.

There is no doubt that Gangtey has emerged as the largest and most influential rNying ma pa establishment in the country by the end of 17th century and its chief incumbent, bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub, was the most renowned rNying ma pa master in Bhutan.¹⁴ He travelled across much of Bhutan and bsTan 'dzin Chos rgyal, his biographer, even talks of his religious journeys to Bengal. Surprisingly, some of the clothes used for wrapping the texts in Gangtey were manufactured in England, and were perhaps imported from Bengal. Beside the historical records,

¹³ It is not very clear which lamaist groups the 'Brug pa antagonised are to be included in the list. The schools of lHa pa, gNas snying pa, Ka' thog pa, 'Ba' ra ba, dGe ldan shing rta pa and lCags zam pa all seems to varyingly appear among the five factions. Thus, despite the common use of term, *lham khag lnga*, the list is far from fixed.

¹⁴ John Ardussi even describes bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub as "the nominal head of the Nyingmapa establishment in Bhutan during this period." See Ardussi (1999a), note 61. Although bsTan 'dzin Legs pa'i Don grub appears to have been the most influential and renowned rNying ma pa master in Bhutan in his days, one has to wonder whether there was actually a system or practice of conferring him the post of, or of specifically referring to him as, 'the nominal head of Nyingmapa establishment' then.

the massive literary production and other religious activities¹⁵ that took place in Gangtey then also amply demonstrate Gangtey's prosperity and pre-eminence among rNying ma centres in medieval Bhutan. The collection at Gangtey and others such as mTshams brag also tell us that the art of canonical compilation and redaction and of textual creation was thriving in Bhutan as were the general religious scholarship and transmissions.

Religious significance: To the local community, the religious significance of the collection transcends its codicological and historical use. It is the body of the precious teachings of the Buddha and his followers, and the embodiment of the soteriological paths and practices which lead one to enlightenment. As in the cults of the books such as Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras and the Lotus Sūtra in ancient India and China, the Bhutanese communities view the books as holy objects which are repositories of sacred dharma. Just as a stupa represents the enlightened mind of the Buddha, the books are the scriptural representation of the Buddha's speech, *gsung rten*, the receptacle of the Buddha's words. In this respect, the books are cherished more as a powerful relic than as a reading material. They are worshipped, circumbulated and prostrated to, and people touch them with their heads to receive blessings. They are produced with great care to very high artistic and scribal standards, and are carefully wrapped and stored in the upper sanctums of the temple space, from where they radiate blessings or spiritual power upon the whole environment. Occasionally they are paraded through the valley to bless the environment and protect it from natural calamities such as drought and flood.

Beside their role as relics, the books are also read for both ritual and academic/scholarly purposes. During the ritual readings, the monks or lay priests loudly read through the book without any attempt to understand them. Every year the two NGBs are alternately read in the sixth month of Bhutanese calendar. The *bKa' 'gyur* is read on special occasions and whenever there are sponsors. Many popular *sūtras* such as those in the *mDo mangs* collection are specifically designed and produced for this

¹⁵ The list of Gangtey's religious artefacts, compiled by the National Commission for Cultural Affairs, is about six hundred pages long. In addition to the vast wealth of statues and other artefacts, Gangtey also owns a huge collection of religious painting.

purpose and are read very frequently. Such ritual reading is usually done to accumulate merit, remedy illnesses, dispel obstacles or as a funerary rite. Similarly, a large number of texts, mostly belonging to the esoteric tantric form of Buddhism, are utilised by the priests as liturgical manuals for tantric rituals and practices.

Although the books are profusely used for rituals, it would nevertheless be misleading to attribute solely a ritualistic function to them. A large number of books are also seriously studied by scholars and many are included in the monastic curriculum. Some scholars read the entire collections of *bKa' 'gyur* or NGB several times in their life and use them as references. To the Buddhist virtuosi, the scriptural corpuses constitute the actual teachings of the Buddha and their proper use lies in the scholarly study and practical application of the content. Reading and reflection are chief components of the Buddhist soteriological path. Rituals are merely skill-in-means and propaedeutic methods to lead the world to the higher goal of enlightenment. Thus, the books are viewed as profound scriptures which are to be read and understood, and as sources of inspiration and wisdom. They constitute the doctrinal truth, the *bstan pa chos kyi sku / śāsanadharmakāya*.

The role of books, such as Gangtey's collection, is thus multifarious and very significant. The use of text permeates all facets of the Himalayan Buddhist culture so much so that David Germano¹⁶ even describes Tibetan Buddhism as 'a culture of the Text'. It is only through the full understanding of the role, use and spiritual value the books hold for the communities to which they belong, that one can sufficiently appreciate their social and religious significance.

However, the task of unravelling and assessing the full literary strength and historical value of the collection is still waiting. With the dual aim of preserving the collection in digital surrogates and disseminating copies to the wider domain of scholarship, I have photographed in 2003 and 2004 one set of NGB for Rob Mayer and Cathy Cantwell. This was followed in 2005 and 2006 by a major project of digitising the entire manuscript holdings at Gangtey in JPEG and raw images under the aegis of the Gangtey Monastery and with generous financial assistance from

¹⁶ Germano (2002), p. 1

British Library's Endangered Archives Programme. A complete digital copy of the entire manuscript collection is now available and it is our wish to supplement it with a full catalogue of Gangtey's untold treasures.

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