

Memorial to Michael Aris

The week after Michael died, Kuensel, a bilingual weekly, and the only newspaper in Bhutan, reported the demise of the doyen of Bhutan Studies. The whole kingdom of Bhutan joined Michael's family, to mourn the untimely death of one of her greatest historians and friends, chanting prayers and lighting thousands of butter lamps in major temples and monasteries. To many Bhutanese, old and young, it was a loss of scholarship on Buddhism and Bhutan in the person of Michael.

Michael's contact with Bhutan and for that matter other Himalayan regions, started when he obtained the exceptional privilege to go to Bhutan in 1967 as a royal tutor arranged through his friend Marco Pallis. Young and adventurous Michael found himself a stranger in an unknown corner of the world, where there were no vehicle roads, hospitals and electricity and only few who knew the language he spoke. Soon after his arrival, he was appointed the English tutor to the princes and princesses of King of Bhutan. He loved his royal pupils and they loved him too. During our long walks or afternoon teas, he would often tell me how much he adored the country, the exotic culture and hospitable people.

The first time I met Michael was in 1997 when I joined Oxford. I vividly remember that cold evening on 29th September, 1997 sitting in a small house in Wolvercote having just reached Oxford when Michael rang me to say "Kuzug Zangpola" (*sku-gzugs bzang-po-la*, Good Health) and welcomed me to Oxford with his benign character and fluent Dzongkha. He was the first and the only foreigner I have met who easily impressed me with his knowledge of Dzongkha, the official language of Bhutan. Since then, Michael and I spent so much time together talking about things, places and people we had in common and a strong bond grew between us, mainly due to our common interest in Tibet, Buddhism, and specially Bhutan.

He enjoyed narrating the pranks the naughty princesses played on him. He once told me how the princesses instructed him to greet a minister who was coming to their classroom. They taught him how he should bow down and say, *O lyonpo shang bom dug la*. As the minister entered the room, he conveyed his greetings with utmost courtesy while his mischievous pupils burst into laughter behind him. His greeting meant: O minister, (your) nose is enormous. His pupils also insisted that he find a local girl to marry and during the festivals, they would ask him to choose one from the dancing girls. He always declined

sensing their tricks. However, to his astonishment, they found him 'a maiden', who, when they brought in, turned out to be an old woman with a huge goitre dangling down her throat. Michael's time in Bhutan was full of adventure and fun, and at the same time productive, something rarely obtained by a foreigner. For sometime, he lived in a house in Uchu, bought for him by the dowager queen. He also stayed in Wangdicholing Palace in Bumthang and in Thimphu, the capital town, working for the government as a translator. In all these places, Michael found himself at home and he enjoyed sharing every facet of Bhutanese village life. It was in those days he learnt his fluent Bhutanese and delved into the history and culture of Bhutan of which he was later to become the West's foremost authority.

During his time in Bhutan, he also came across the great Tibetan masters such as the Karmapa, Kalu Rinpoche and Polu Khenpo from whom he could imbibe Buddhism and knowledge on Tibet. Above all, he got the opportunity to study with Dilgo Khyentse, one of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist masters of this century. Khyentse was to leave a great impact on the life of both Michael and Aung San Suu Kyi, and prove in years to come an unparalleled source of inspiration, hope and wisdom for them. The meeting with Khyentse and other outstanding lamas residing in Bhutan after the fateful invasion of Tibet, to his advantage, turned into a major asset in shaping his future as an eminent historian on Tibet.

Michael also worked with the King, and the senior officials giving them a hand in various development projects. He saw Bhutan reluctantly shed its historic isolation and enter modernity with education, roads and medical facilities reaching even remote parts of Bhutan. He also witnessed the development of Bhutan's national language into a proper written form, the local and village codes of conduct into a formal judiciary system, and the regeneration of traditional scholarship. In all these areas, Michael always gave unrelenting support to the Bhutanese and cherished a deep admiration of the virtue of the rich and unique spiritual and traditional heritage of Bhutan. Michael left Bhutan in 1977 to visit again only in 1989 but for the rest of his life, Michael lived a Bhutanese life, in the sense that Bhutan occupied much of his thoughts and deeds.

Michael had in a way known Bhutan better than most of the Bhutanese do. With his royal ties, he had all privileges, which an ordinary visitor can only dream of and thus had every access and support to carry out his researches as he wished. He also held a unique position in the Bhutanese world for blending traditional knowledge with modern scholarship. To the older Bhutanese scholars, he was a zealous student of the Bhutanese culture and history and a symbol of foreign interest and respect in their own wisdom. They admired the zest with which he worked and generously dispensed what they knew. For the younger

generations, most of who got a western education and unfortunately lacked interest and skill in their own language and culture, he was like a beacon of modern Bhutanese scholarship. He presented their own history and culture in English, the only language in which most of the Bhutanese youth can communicate best even today. Thus, he served like a bridge between the traditional and the modern, learning from the former and passing it to the latter. In the eyes of the Bhutanese, Michael became the only foreigner who knew their culture and history with adequate insight into religious, historical and ethnographic dimensions of the country.

From over forty books, monographs and articles he wrote, around thirty are on Bhutan. Of his six books, four are entirely on Bhutan, one half on Bhutan and the sixth on something related to Bhutan. Among them, it was his book *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives*, a critical presentation of Padma Lingpa, a major Bhutanese saint, and the sixth Dalai Lama, that provoked some controversy and perhaps also earned him most but mixed reputation. For some time, it made Michael a little infamous among the traditional rightists in Bhutan. However, for his unsurpassed academic contribution on the country and its history, the Bhutanese always acknowledge him as the foremost western savant on Bhutan.

Michael was a profound historian and capable of presenting his case with lucidity both verbally or in writing. He was not a philosopher *per se* and his knowledge of Buddhism, an indispensable factor in mastering Himalayan history and culture, was adequate but not superb. The only serious work he did on Buddhism is his translation of Jamyang Khyentse's short text entitled *Brief Discourse on the Essence of All the Ways*. He was also one of the very few western Tibetologists who attempted and did well in writing letters and poetry in Tibetan.

As a person, Michael was an extraordinary person with friends and connections in all sections of the society. He was very tactful and often ready to pull the strings for a good cause. Being good at heart, soft in words, refined in manners, and yet fighting with a stiff upper lip the frustrations of his long and indefinite separation from his wife, of the upbringing of the kids all by himself, and of the insidious ailment terminating his life, he proved, to many of us, an epitome of true English gentlemen.