

Ngabiphu Monastery Ruins: The Socio-political Significance in Medieval Bhutan

Chencho Dorji & Sonam Tobgay¹

Abstract

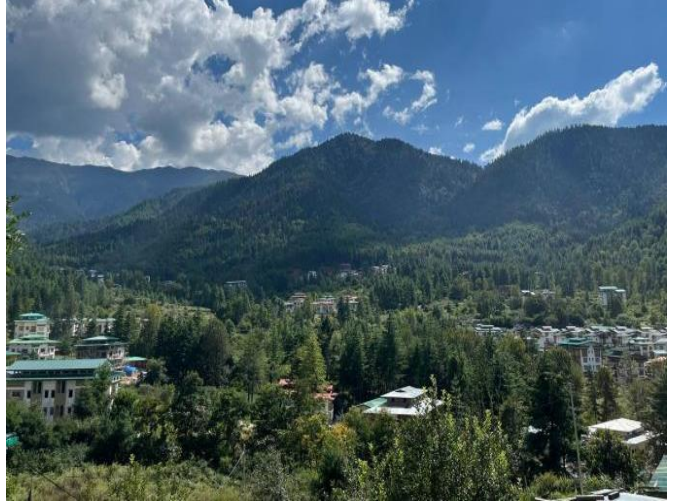
The Ngabiphu monastery has been instrumental in shaping Bhutan's socio-political landscape since the early 13th century. However, its significance has often been overlooked in historical narratives. Despite this neglect, understanding Ngabiphu is crucial for comprehending the complex socio-political framework of medieval Bhutan and its subsequent role in nation-building. This study seeks to examine Ngabiphu's contribution to Bhutan's consolidation as a nation. It evaluates the relevance of the Ngabiphu monastery in relation to the spread of the Drukpa Kagyud tradition during the 13th century, which significantly influenced unification efforts. Furthermore, the limited references to 'Ngabiphu' in literary sources have prompted discussions that underscore the need for in-depth analysis. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, this study aims to elucidate the intricate connections among socio-politics, culture and spirituality in the region. By analyzing historical records, conducting site assessments, and gathering oral testimonies, the research intends to clarify how the Ngabiphu monastery impacted local governance structures, customary practices, and spiritual landscapes in the region during medieval times.

Key Words: Ngabiphu, Nation building, Drukpa Kagyud, Socio-politics, Medieval Bhutan, Monastery

¹ Chencho Dorji is a faculty at Royal Thimphu College and can be reached at chenchodorji@rtc.bt. Sonam Tobgay is also a faculty at Royal Thimphu College and can be reached at: stob@rtc.bt

INTRODUCTION

Ngabiphu is a small village located 11 km north of Thimphu, adjacent to the Babesa area. It is distinguished by its rich diversity of flora and fauna, particularly dense population of pine trees. The village is also notable for housing the Royal Thimphu College (RTC), an international educational institution established in 2009 under the patronage of Her Majesty, Azhi



Kezang Wangmo. While RTC refers to both the college and its surrounding area, local residents commonly refer to their village as ‘Ngagpaiphug’ (Wylie: *snags pa’ phug*). Oral accounts typically attribute a pejorative meaning to the term “Ngabiphu,” implying associations with sorcery the adversaries of Zhabdrung during the 17th century. However, prevailing literature suggests that the term “Ngabiphu” has been subject to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Such misconceptions have not only distorted the original significance of the name but have also obscured the historical importance of the site. As a result, local interpretations of “Ngabiphu” remain a subject of considerable debate. From this standpoint, the study will examine four thematic areas: a historical analysis of the term ‘Ngabiphu’; socio-cultural role of deity propitiation text-*Thangkar Jinyingpai Selkha*; and the role of Ngabiphu monastery in shaping religious and socio-political landscape in the region, and the role of Ngabiphu monastery in Bhutan’s nation-building process.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE VILLAGE NAME ‘NGABIPHU’

མེང་དུ་གདགས་པར་མ་མཛད་ན།། འཛིག་རྟེན་ཐམས་ཅད་རྗོངས་པར་འགྱུར།།

དེ་བས་མགོན་པོ་ཐབས་མཁས་པས། ཚོས་རྣམས་མིང་དུ་གདགས་པར་མཛད།།

*If things were not given names,
The world would be bewildered.
So Lord Buddha, skilled in means,
Gives names to various phenomena. - Lankavatara Sutra*

The verse highlights how naming helps us understand the world. Without words, reality would seem confusing and unclear. Buddha uses language as a tool to help people make sense of their experiences. It suggests the importance of 'name' in understanding and interpreting the world. Even more intriguing is the meaning of a name, which is understood in relation to the individual or groups that chooses to use it.

The Buddhist philosopher Dharmakirti remarked:

'Name[s] are like sticks. A stick does not hit an object on its own. It follows the person who wields it. Names do not apply themselves to their referents. They only follow the wishes of the users.'²

Dharmakirti also observed a lack of inherent connection between a name and its referents. The nomenclature is assigned through two methods: *dengyel* (Wylie. *don 'gal*), where the name has no intrinsic connection to the object it represents, and *jerup* (Wylie. *rjes sgrub*), where the meaning of a name is based on the object it represents. Both Buddha and Dharmakirti have acknowledged the importance of names in understanding the world, recognizing that the interpretation of a name is influenced by individual perspectives. However, it is not tenable to argue that naming does not result in ambiguity. A single name can have multiple meanings, making it difficult to connect objects solely on the basis of their names. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the historical context of names.

Ngabiphu is the name used by local people and in official documents (*lag thram*/land ownership record & tax receipts) to identify the current RTC (Royal Thimphu

² Phuntsho, K. (2013). *The History of Bhutan*. P. 1

College) area. However, the historical connotation of 'Ngabiphu' is used in derogatory sense. Thus, this section will provide a brief analysis of the origin and usage of the nomenclature-Ngabiphu, drawing on biographies, written and oral sources.

Over the centuries, 'Ngabiphu' has been a name of the village with derogatory connotations attached to it and sources suggest a long perceived misconception about the site. It is generally claimed that Ngabiphu was a place (currently there are ruins located at the west of RTC campus) resided in by Lam Khag Nga, a rival of Zhabdrung in 17th century, who performed magical spells to obstruct the political influence of Zhabdrung in the western valleys.³ However, the biography of Zhabdrung suggests that during the construction of Semtokha dzong/Sangnag Zabdhen Phodrang⁴ (first dzong constructed by Zhabdrung in Bhutan) in 1629 AD, descendants of Lam Khag Nga were Zhangdrung's rival.⁵ While literatures strongly substantiate the claim that descendants of Lam Khag Nga were the contenders of Zhabdrung, the biography contests the current narrative of Ngabiphu (current RTC area) as a place inhabited by Lam Khag Nga. The Zhabdrung's biography by Sangay Dorji vividly mentions that the Lamaist factions built Jemai dzong above Simtokha dzong, and the place came to be known as Ngabiphu.⁶ Similarly, 'Zhabdrung's Biography' by Je Geden Rinchen highlights Jemai Dzong as the seat of Lama Neynyingpa (one of the Lam Khag Ngas),⁷ which clearly asserts that the successors of Lam Neynyingpa must have resided the place.

Other sources also corroborate the rise of conflict between Zhabdrung and Lamaist factions led by Lama Palden.⁸ Severe conflict arose when Zhabdrung constructed his first dzong at Simtokha to strengthen the defensive measures to consolidate the political power in Western Bhutan.⁹ During the construction, the dzong was

³ Interview with people currently residing in the region

⁴ In the 'Biographies of Zhabdrung' suggests Lopen Nado's 1986 book *Druk Karpo*, provides a range of names, including Sinmo Dokha, Sinmo Dokha, and Sinmo Tokha, with explanations provided for the choice of these appellations.

⁵ Dorji, S. (1999). Biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Pp.210-212

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Je Geden Rinchen, (2008). 'Zhabdrung's Biography'. 2008. P.154

⁸ Zhabdrung's rivals are the descendants of Lam Khag Nga as Lam Palden was the leader of Zhabdrung's adversaries.

⁹ Phuntsho, K. (2013). History of Bhutan. Pp. 227-229

strategically built within cane woven walls to shield it from potential destruction by the rivals. Despite the protective measures, the wind of magical spells of rivalries blew down the walls during construction, revealing the dzong's progress to the adversaries. In response, Zhabdrung executed magical divination against them, resulting in floods that eroded Jemai dzong. Following Zhabdrung's victory, rivals inhabited a foothill above Semtokha dzong (possibly Jemai Dzong) and performed magical spells in revenge to Zhabdrung.

Since then, the place was known as the *Ngagpaiphug*, the hill inhabited by sorcerers (*ngagpa/ Wylie. snags pa*).¹⁰ The remnants of Jemai Dzong were visible until recent years, resulting to the area's reputation as abandoned due to the presence of malevolent spirits.¹¹ The oral and written sources provides conflicting historical narratives regarding the nomenclature, 'Ngabiphu.' While unwritten accounts claim Ngabiphu (RTC area) was a place inhabited by sorcerers (enemies of Zhabdrung), biographies of Zhabdrung and other literatures suggest that the predecessors and successors of Zhabdrung inhabited the place. Nevertheless, an analysis of extant biographical accounts and local historical sources reveals a significant misattribution in the collective memory of inhabitants in Thimphu region regarding two distinct locations sharing the name Ngabiphu. The first, Jemai Dzong, also known as Ngabiphu, is historically associated with Zhabdrung's adversaries and their purported engagement in sorcery (*Ngag*) against Zhabdrung. The second is the contemporary site of the Royal Thimphu College (RTC), which housed a monastery of *Ngagpa* (tantric practitioners). This toponymic similarity has led to a conflation of historical narratives, wherein the cultural and historical significance of Jemai Dzong has been erroneously transposed onto the RTC area. This misunderstanding appears to stem from a lack of clear differentiation between the two sites in oral sources. Thus, the implications of this conflation are significant for our understanding of the region's cultural landscape and historical narrative. They also point towards the need for a more nuanced approach to local history, one that carefully distinguishes between sites with similar nomenclature but distinct historical roles.

While some of the historical sources suggest 1222 as the Phajo Drugom Zhipo's

¹⁰ Biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Pp.210-212

¹¹ Interviews with inhabitants in a region

arrival in Bhutan, the Biography of Phajo Drugom Zhipo, *Thuje Chujin* (Wylie. *thugs rje chu rgyun*) mentions 1218as a year of his first visit to Bhutan.¹² Informants also assert that the monastery was established in 1218 AD. From these incidents it can also be suggested that the latter date could likely be the year of Phajo’s arrival in Bhutan. While *Thangkar Jinying pai selkha* (The propitiation ritual text of local deity *Thangkar* of Ngabiphu) doesn’t provide a time of his visit, however, the text evidences the religious masters including Phajo Drugom Zhipo and Zhabdrung who have visited Ngabiphu. It describes vividly in the deity propitiation text of Ngabiphu:

*Dro gyen Pema Phajo drugom dang. Ngawang Namgyel Tenzin Rabgye dang; Sherab Gyeltsen Dorji Tenpa dang. Ngawang Lhendup Ngawang Theinley dang. Gyud zin lama namki chen nga ru. Gyel ten chi dang jedrag peldrukpai; Tenpa zin chong pelwar zhelzhey zhin. Kadang dam lay ma da thinley zey.*¹³

The aforementioned account is further validated by Phajo’s biography. It refers to Ngabiphu as Babechuphu prior to his visit. Subsequently, *Jinyingpai tsan* (the deity of Jinying, a mountain overlooking the Ngabiphu region) and nearby deities such as *Tsan Bumparipa*, along with other deities, pledged their support under Phajo to safeguard and promote all virtuous endeavors envisioned by Phajo in the territory of Babechuphu.¹⁴ Since then, under Phajo’s supervision, the meditation center for the *ngagpas* was founded, specifically emphasizing on *shegyud* (Wylie. *shad rgyud*) and since then the place came to be known as *Ngagpai phu*, the hill inhabited by tantric practitioners.¹⁵ Further, ‘*A brief historical analysis of Ngaiphu*’ proclaims the Zhabdrung to have taken refuge at Ngabiphu, the monastery built by his predecessors, while descendants of Lam Khag Nga posed a threat to Zhabdrung during the construction of Semtokha Dzong.¹⁶ The sources vividly assert that Ngabiphu (RTC area) is not associated with the inhabitation of adversaries of Zhabdrung. Likewise, there are almost four centuries of chronological discrepancy between the periods when the descendant of Lham Khag Nga, led by Lam Pelden (an opponent of Zhabdrung)

¹² DDC (1999). Biography of Phajo Drugom Zhipo, Thuje Chujin. P. Ca (ཅ)

¹³ Druk lug ki dencha. (n.d.). ‘*The propitiation Ritual Text of Thangkar*,’ P. 3

¹⁴ DDC (1999). Biography of Phajo Drugom Zhipo, Thuje Chujin. Pp-47.

¹⁵ Tobgay, S. (2017). ‘*Essential Guide to Sacred Sites*.’ P. 62

¹⁶ Ibid., P. 64

resided at Jemai Dzong and the founding of Ngabiphu (RTC area) monastery.

Several sources indicate historical discrepancies regarding the presence of Lam Khag Nga during the 14th to 16th centuries and the Zhabdrung in the 17th century in Bhutan. This evidence strongly suggests that the rivals of Zhabdrung during the construction of Semtokha Dzong were descendants of Lam Khag Nga.¹⁷ This indicates a significant temporal disparity regarding the presence of Lam Kha Nga and Zhabdrung in Bhutan. The resistance against Zhabdrung was led by Lam Pelden, who was a descendant, rather than by Lam Kha Nga. In this context, the narrative illustrates that Lam Pelden and his followers resided at a structure founded by Lam Ney Nyingpa which was known to be named as Jemai Dzong, located above Semtokha Dzong. Consequently, this site became widely acknowledged as *Ngagpai phug*, a location from which opponents directed magical incantations toward Zhabdrung during the period of Semtokha Dzong's construction in Bhutan. This evidence strongly suggests that the name 'Ngabiphu' is used in two different contexts. Eventually, an ambiguity surrounding the historical interpretation of the nomenclature (Ngabiphu) stems from a lack of comprehension of two distinct historical narratives, as discussed above. It becomes apparent that while Ngabiphu may refer to both Jemai Dzong and the RTC area, each context presents very opposing historical connotations.

SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLE OF DEITY PROPITIATION TEXT-*THANGKAR JINYINGPAI SELKHA*

The use of "*Thangkar Jinyingpai Selkha*" text exhibits a geographically concentrated usage pattern, primarily among the populations of the Ngabiphu area. Additionally, its use extends to select familial groups in Babesa (Thimphu region), Nahe (Wangdiphodrang region), Samdingkha and Dawakha (Punakha region).¹⁸ The use of this text across different regions evidences their origins in Ngabiphu. At present, there isn't a single household whose members are of direct descent from the original inhabitants of Ngabiphu. However, the claim of Angay Lelem from Samdingkha regarding her direct lineage from Ngabiphu lam suggests the later migration of

¹⁷ Phuntsho, K. (2013). PP. 176-184

¹⁸ Interview with Penjore, 2013, Sangay Tenzin, 2024; Ap Tshering, 2024; Kencho Tshering, Jamtsho & Angay Lelem, 2024

indigenous settlers from Ngabiphu. Angay recalls that her family initially resided in Ramtoto before relocating to Samdingkha, following one winter when the house caught fire. They still propitiate the Thangkhap using a propitiation text and use to visit the site to worship.

However, Gomchen Penjore, recounted that in earlier times, numerous *Khep* (Wylie. *khyalp*) households resided in the area. By the time of his youth, only three households remained, and eventually, only his family's household persisted. Subsequently, his family migrated to their winter residence in Nahe and Nabi, located in the Wangdi Phodrang district.¹⁹ Likewise, interestingly one of the families in Babesa claims ancestral roots to Ap Thangkhap. In an interview, Sangay Tenzin expressed, *'despite not currently residing in the Ngabiphu area, my family maintains close ties with the place through the propitiation to our ancestor Ap Thangkhap. My great grandfather Changlo Dorji²⁰ is the son of Ap Thangkhap (tsan gi bu).'*

According to Sangay, Ani Om (Sangay's great grandmother), belonging to one of the wealthiest families in Chang Yuekha (Thimphu region), meditated at Talangkha Goenpa. It was during that time, she became pregnant by Ap Thangkhap, as conceived in a dream, and subsequently gave birth to a son named Changlo Dorji. *'My grandfather Changlo is said to have high recognition for his physical prowess and was appointed as the Dronyer (protocol officer) in Trongsa Dzong by Desi Jigme Namgyel. He is also remembered for his assistance to Jigme Namgyel in defeating the opponents from Thimphu during the battle at Gurkarpang in Wangkha.'* Sangay Tenzin, who is the fourth generation of this lineage, continues to honor Ap Thangkhap as their ancestor. In this context, the propitiation text plays a critical role, particularly in 'appeasing the guardian deity of dharma' /*choesung sol* (Wylie. *chos srung sol*) alongside Ap Thangkhap, and is integral to various rituals aimed at fostering the health and prosperity of a family. This underscores the notion that family rituals are considered incomplete without the incorporation of the deity propitiation text-*Thangkar Jinying pai selkha*.

¹⁹ Interview with Gomechen Penjore (who served during the reigns of Bhutan's First, Second, and Third Kings)

²⁰ He is the son of Ap Thangkhap, who also served as a *Dronyer* under Jigme Namgyel in Trongsa Dzong.

Such an enduring connection between Ngabiphu and other communities is further evidenced by continued pilgrimages and ritual observances. Descendants of Ngabiphu inhabitants from Babesa, Nahi, and Dawakha regions regularly visit Ngabiphu to make offerings to local deities (also known as *kencho choed ni*; Wylie. *dkon mchog mchod ni*), with particular emphasis on the worship of Ngabi gyalp/gyem (one of the deities at Ngabiphu) and Thangkhap.²¹ The iconography of Ngabi gyelp can be found on the left side of a wall of the temple ruin, indicating it to be one of the important figures worshiped by locals for the protection. Similarly, marks of offerings such as grains/*druna* (Wylie. *'bru sna*), water offering/*chutor* (Wylie. *chu gtor*), alcohol/*chang* (Wylie. *chang*), butter lamps (*mar mey*), oroxylum indica/*tsampaka* (Wylie. *tsampaka*), five different colors of threads/*kip na nga* (Wylie. *skudp sna lnga*), etc., are still found in the surroundings of the temple ruin. This persistent cultural practice underscores the deep-rooted spiritual and social ties that bind these geographically dispersed communities to their ancestral homeland, Ngabiphu. Unfortunately, an absence of conservation efforts and maintenance of the site has led to the gradual decay of the intricate designs and symbolic imageries on the temple walls. This deterioration has obscured significant portions of the iconography, posing a challenge for researchers attempting to interpret the temple's art and cultural importance.

The propitiation text serves as a mediator, maintaining a strong relationship between migrant families and their place of origin and local deities. This phenomenon not only preserves traditional practices but also reinforces a sense of shared identity among communities separated by geographical distance. The case of the family in Babesa further exemplifies how these spiritual connections can persist across generations, even in urban settings far removed from the ancestral homeland. Additionally, the distribution and continued use of the *Thangkar Jinying pai selkha* text provide valuable insights into historical migration patterns, familial lineages, and the persistence of traditional spiritual practices in Bhutan. This cultural continuity, maintained through ritual and pilgrimage, offers a compelling example of how ancient traditions can remain relevant and vital in contemporary society, bridging geographical and generational gaps.

²¹ Penjore, 2013; Ap Tshering 2024; Penjore, 2013

While oral sources require further investigation through archaeological and scientific studies, the historical migration of people is attributed to unfavorable environmental conditions in the Ngabiphu region. *'The area's harsh climate and infertile soil rendered agricultural works untenable, thereby necessitating outward migration'* (Ap Tshering, 2024; Penjore, 2018). The migration of people from Ngabiphu to lower elevated areas such as Punakha and Wangdiphodrang regions can be seen as a gradual process rather than a sudden shift. Informants highlight seasonal migration practice as the only sustainable means for inhabitants in Ngabiphu due to harsh climatic conditions during winter in olden days. On the other hand, Tshering Yangzom, a granddaughter of Angay Lelem (interviewed, 2024) claims to be an original descendant of the Ngabiphu temple but use to reside in Ramtokto and made offering in the temple through daily visit rather than people having permanently resided around the temple. However, the ruins we can see now near the main temple area were associated with the residence of a *khep* (Wylie. *khyalp*/ tax payer/serfs). Unfortunately, a giant family house ruin of the *chup's* (Wylie. *phyugp*/wealthy family) equivalent to *Nagtsang* (Wylie. *nagtsang/snagtsang*) residence of feudal lords in medieval times) no longer exists due to ongoing construction in the area, which used to be there five decades ago (Sonam Tobgay, 2017; Penjore, 2018; Tshering, 2024). The *chup's* family worked in close collaboration with the Ngabiphu monastery (Tshering, 2024), suggesting an intricate interplay between secular and religious authority in the area's social fabric. According to Tshering Yangzom,²² her family belongs to one of the descendants of the Ngabiphu lam, who owned the temple. Interestingly, her claim contradicts the former informants, where they asserted the *chups* to be all powerful and took an important socio-economic role in the region, as her Angay Lelem recalls the last lam of Ngabiphu monastery to be her uncle who was from one of the *kheps* family. These accounts suggest that both *chup* and *kheps* were pivotal social actors within the regional power structure, ascribing to them significant influence in decision-making processes and central roles in the organization and execution of religious functions. On the other hand, the resettlement of people from Ngabiphu potentially suggests a significant shift in local socio-religious dynamics, shaping regional cultural heritage and genealogical narratives.

Equally, the historical reconstruction of the Ngabiphu monastery is impeded by a

²² Angay Lelem from Punakha, who claims to be the direct descendants of one of the Ngabiphu lam.

paucity of primary sources and demographic flux in the region. Informants, comprising non-original long-term residents and descendants of former inhabitants now geographically dispersed, offer fragmented accounts. The most senior informant, despite four decades of local residency, attests to the site's ruined state upon their arrival, though its continued veneration by pilgrims from Thimphu, Wangdi, and Punakha region suggests enduring cultural significance. The area's reported uninhabited status during the establishment of the Royal Thimphu College further obfuscates the historical narrative. The collective inability of current informants to provide definitive evidence of the structure's original form poses challenges towards constructing a comprehensive chronology. These factors elucidate the methodological intricacies inherent in documenting the evolution of religious sites within regions characterized by demographic transience, archival paucity, and the absence of extant original settlers, thus presenting significant challenges to comprehensive historiographical analyses.

THE ROLE OF NGABIPHU MONASTERY IN SHAPING RELIGIOUS AND SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN THE REGION

Temples, churches, and all kinds of religious monuments have played significant socio-economic and political roles across various medieval socio-cultural settings. Evidence from the various sources suggests that the temples and monasteries have evolved into prominent and influential socio-economic and religious institutions throughout medieval India.²³ The hermitages and castles in Tibetan communities reveal strong socio-political ties amongst different social classes since ancient times.²⁴ Correspondingly, the *dzongs* (fortresses) and monasteries built by Zhabdrung served both the secular and religious function shaping diverse socio-cultural and political landscapes in medieval Bhutan.²⁵ However, ancient built heritage study in Bhutan is at a very infant stage, hindered by limited material and a lack of documentation on historical ruins. The absence of a comprehensive list of such ruins impedes

²³ Shah, V. (2009). Study Of Temples Of Medieval Maharashtra (11th To 14th Centuries Ce) A Socio-Economic Approach. P. 5

²⁴ Cabezón, J. I. (2006). The Hermitages of Sera. P. 4

²⁵ Phuntsho, K. (2013). *History of Bhutan*. P.

understanding of the region's architectural heritage, despite their potential to provide a socio-political and cultural histories. Moreover, these sites remain largely overlooked in both archaeological and historical studies.²⁶ In consideration of these factors, this section discusses the influence of Ngabiphu monastery in shaping not only a religious but also the socio-political dynamics within the region.

Since the late medieval period, the political unity and cultural identity of Bhutan as a nation have been consolidated through the Drukpa religious hegemony. Eventually, religious activities, such as the institution of monastic communities, assisted in legitimizing the religious consolidation in Bhutan.²⁷ Amongst the numerous places in Paro, Lingzhi, Punakha, and Thimphu, Phajo Drugom Zhipo also settled in Dodena (a confluence north of Thimphu) with his consort of destiny, Sonam Peldren, and spread his influence in the region. According to oral accounts, Ngaiphu Monastery is one of the Drukpa religious centers in western Bhutan, founded by Phajo Drugom Zhipo in 1218 AD.²⁸ Ngabiphu is one of the earliest monasteries established as part of a religious mission to the southern land (Bhutan) to spread the Drukpa tradition by Phajo.²⁹ Phajo's connection to the place is substantiated by his appearance in the propitiation ritual text of the local deity Ap Thangkhap³⁰ and his biography mentioning the visit to Ngabiphu. These suggests the establishment of Phajo's reputation and influence among the Lhapa lamas³¹ in the Paro region, who until then had a significant influence in the western valleys of Bhutan.³² Undoubtedly, monastic establishment in Ngabiphu has contributed to the development of a saint-patron relationship, shaping the socio-political structure of the region.

The saints and patrons relationship was essential in solidifying authority and establishing dominance in medieval Bhutan. Amongst those social classes prevalent in medieval Bhutan, Ngabiphu notably had *chup*³³ and *Khep* closely associated with

²⁶ Yeshe, S. (2019). *Sumthrang Monastic Landscape: Ruins in Bhutan, their Socio-cultural Values and Sustaining their Significance in Modern Times*. P. 23

²⁷ Phuntsho, K. (2013). P.256

²⁸ Tobgay, S. (2017). P.62

²⁹ Interview with Ap Penjore (95 years old then). He claimed to be a descendant of one of the original inhabitants of Ngabiphu (*Chub*/wealthy family)

³⁰ Ngabiphu falls under the protection of deity Thangkhap.

³¹ Lhapa Kagyud school lineage holders

³² Phuntsho, K. (2013) P. 144

³³ *Phyups* are claimed to be a descendants of Ngagpa.

the monastery and religious figures. The *chups* (claimants to being the descendants of *Ngagpa*) were patrons of the monastery, while the *khep* served as taxpayers and serfs to both the religious masters and the *chup* family. Like many pastoral communities, the practice of seasonal migration was prevalent in the Wang (Thimphu) region. Inhabitants of Wang villages would migrate to the Wangdi and Punakha regions during winter. The informants accounts that, irrespective of power and wealth, migration could only occur with the consent of the Thimphu Dzongpon (Wylie. *dsongpon*/head of the district) a day before the migration. However, the Ngabiphu *Chups* exclusively received direct approval on the day they sought permission from the Dzongpon.³⁴ Similarly, one of the community rituals, *Tordhogi*(Wylie. *gtor bzlog*)³⁵ used to be performed on the 29th of the September month of the lunar calendar, required rotational patronage among the *Ngabi kheps*. During this event, *kheps* served meals not only to the *chups*, *ngagpai choegyud*/Wylie. *chos brgyud* (descendants of *Ngagpa*) but also respectfully to their domestic cats and dogs.³⁶ The religious masters enjoyed a strong patronage of *Kheps* of Ngabiphu, amongst whom the Drukpa Kagyud masters were influential in the region then. Equally, *Kheps* were also burdened with various taxes, including grain tax and labor tax.³⁷ This system highlights the power of the *chups* and their strong relationships with influential authorities and Drukpa Kagyud masters, which in turn shaped the socio-political structure of the region.

ROLE OF NGABIPHU IN THE NATION BUILDING PROCESS

Since the post-colonial era, Buddhist principles have also been utilized as a basis for political ideology and the construction of national narratives in South East Asian states (Weiberg-Salzman 2014).³⁸ Bhutan has emphasized the promotion and widespread adoption of Buddhism as a pivotal component for the establishment of

³⁴ Tobgay, S. (2017). P.65

³⁵ The ritual performed to avert misfortunes caused by evil spirits.

³⁶ Tobgay, S. (2017). P.65

³⁷ Interview with Ap Penjore

³⁸ Miyamoto, M. et al., (2021). Animal slaughter and religious nationalism in Bhutan. P. 122

the nation and the cultivation of conscientious civic engagement.³⁹ Similarly, the state established by Zhabdrung was fundamentally characterized by a religious mission, with the primary objective of safeguarding and advancing the Drukpa religious tradition. Consequently, the political and cultural initiatives undertaken by Zhabdrung were imbued with a profound religious ethos, permeating all aspects of his nation-building endeavors. The religious values served as the driving force behind both the content and style of civil laws, where the monks were administrators.⁴⁰ Therefore, the entire nation-building process was purely a religious mission. Undoubtedly, the legacies of Zhabdrung's predecessors of the Drukpa tradition, such as Phajo Drukgom Zhipo, played a significant role in garnering patrons and devotees from the western region. Phajo, an important figure in the establishment of the Drukpa Kagyu School in Bhutan, laid the foundation for the spread of the Drukpa teachings in the region. His dedication to the propagation of Buddhism and his establishment of numerous monasteries created a strong base of spiritual and social influence in Western Bhutan.

Phajo played a significant role in garnering a devoted group of followers and propagating Drukpa religious hegemony, resulting in the founding of monastic establishments and noble families. This network of patronage and veneration for Phajo and his forebears greatly facilitated the reception of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and the consolidation of Bhutan following his advent. For instance, the *Changangkha Zhelngo*⁴¹ family offered a bride for Zhabdrung after his arrival in Bhutan.⁴² Local accounts indicate that Zhabdrung sought refuge from adversaries during the construction of Simtokha Dzong at Ngabiphu, the establishment of Phajo. While Zhabdrung received strong support from the western region due to the enduring influence of his predecessors, the monastic establishment of Phajo greatly shielded him from opponents.⁴³ In consideration of these factors, Ngabiphu can be said to have played a significant role in protecting the founding father of Bhutan when he faced substantial threats, thereby contributing to the formation of a unified nation-state.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Phuntsho, K. (2013). P.259

⁴¹ One of the noble families established by Phajo's Son Nima.

⁴² Phuntsho, K. (2013). P. 145

⁴³ Interview with Ap Penjore

The monasteries and temples established by Phajo and his successors became centers of learning, spirituality, and community life. Ngabiphu was not only a place of worship but also a hub for education and cultural preservation, which endeared it to the local population. Out of two forms of teaching in Buddhism (*Dho/Wylie. mdo-sutra* & *Ngag/Wylie. sngags-Mantra*), Ngabiphu was established as a center for *Ngag* teachings, and known to be the *Ngag pai phu*.⁴⁴ The site features the ruins of a concrete monastery form surrounded by a several extended forms of ruined structures, presenting a comprehensive layout of a medieval Buddhist monastery. The sacred sanctum (*gyenkhang/Wylie. mgon khang*) is located to the right of the monastery's entrance, while other identifiable areas include the kitchen, dining hall, and studying or residential quarters for monks. This distribution of rooms and spaces resembles typical Buddhist monastery sites of the era, which were structured as properly planned educational monastic institutes. There is a stupa to the left side of a monastery, and family residencesⁱⁱ in ruin at the surrounding enhancing its spiritual significance and close association between the community and monastic institution. However, the structures are completely in ruins, with bushes and trees obscuring much of the site. Interlocutors claims that, overgrowth of trees and bushes, combined with the extensive ruin, makes it challenging for researchers to study and interpret the original layout. Thus, extensive archaeological investigations are necessary to fully understand the monastery's original design, scale, and historical importance within the region.

Such foundational work of Phajo and other early Drukpa leaders sets the stage for the consolidation of power and authority by Zhabdrung. It is evident that had the Zhabdrung not sought refuge in Ngabiphu, he may have encountered significant challenges from his rivals. The dual system of governance and development that exists in Bhutan today may not have been established. Nonetheless, Ngabiphu provided the necessary protection and security for the Zhabdrung to continue building his spiritual authority and cultural unity, which he used to bring together the western regions of Bhutan. Likewise, the narrative concerning the offspring of Ap Thangkhap, Changlo Dorji, who aided Desi Jigme Namgyal, in overcoming opponents to establish his legitimacy and authority, illustrates the considerable

⁴⁴ Tobgay, S. (2017). P. 63

political role held by the forebears of Ngabiphu *Tsan*.

Also Ngabiphu played a significant role in the renovation of Thimphu Tashichhodzong, which became the capital of Bhutan in 1954 during the reign of King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. Over the course of four centuries, Tashichhodzong played a significant role in process of formation of a state and the development of a nation state, eventually becoming a prominent administrative hub and the seat of the monarchy.⁴⁵ Originally named Tashichhodzong by Zhabdrung⁴⁶ and the old structure was reconstructed in 1771 by the 16th Druk Desi Sonam Lhendup (1769-1773) to make it an administrative center.⁴⁷ The dzong caught fire and was renovated by The Third King in 1962. *'The successful renovation of Tashichhodzong in 1962 is attributed to the abundant natural resources, specifically the timber sourced from the Ngabiphu area'* (Dorji, C. & Gyeltshen, D. 2017).⁴⁸ These oral testimonies are freshly recalled by the two senior citizens who served under the Third King and witnessed the renovation firsthand. It is asserted that timber extraction from Ngabiphu continued until the renovation was completed, and yet the area remained rich in timber.⁴⁹ For this reason, Ngabiphu is also regarded as *gter mzod* (a place of treasury) by the Third King.⁵⁰ In addition, Tshering, in an interview, stated that, *'the construction of Royal Thimphu College fully relied on the timber extracted from the Ngabiphu area.'* The Royal Thimphu College being one of the thriving international educational institutes in the country and the center administrative structure of a capital city remain the testament to the importance of Ngabiphu in nation building.

From this stand point, Ngabiphu played a crucial role in education, cultural preservation, and providing refuge to the political leaders and resources. In addition, it significantly contributed to the establishment and development of Bhutan's dual governance system. Moreover, Ngabiphu's involvement in the renovation of the Thimphu Tashichhodzong further emphasizes its importance in Bhutan's historical and administrative evolution. Equally, Ngabiphu played a dynamic role in shaping the religious and social landscape that ultimately facilitated the Zhabdrung's

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Nado, L. (1986). *Druk Karpo*. Bumthang.

⁴⁷ Penjore, D. (2021). *Zhidar Matters*. P.2

⁴⁸ Interview with Chang Dorji & Dorji Gyeltshen, 2017

⁴⁹ Tobgay, S. (2017). P.64

⁵⁰ Interview with Chang Dorji & Dorji Gyeltshen, 2017

successful unification of Bhutan, and the foundation of monarchical state in succeeding centuries.

CONCLUSION

This study on the village name 'Ngabiphu' reveals its multifaceted significance in Bhutan's historical, religious, and socio-political landscape. It resolves longstanding misconceptions by identifying two distinct locations sharing the name- Jemai Dzong and the current Royal Thimphu College area. Ngabiphu emerges as a crucial center for Drukpa Kagyud Buddhism, established in the early 13th century, which played a pivotal role in shaping regional socio-political dynamics and consolidating Drukpa religious hegemony in western Bhutan. Its contribution to Bhutan's nation-building process is evident in its role as a refuge for Zhabdrung and its resources' significance in renovating key administrative structure of the nation. The persistence of associated rituals and pilgrimages underscores Ngabiphu's enduring cultural importance. From this context, Ngabiphu stands as a testament to the intricate interplay between religion, politics, and culture in Bhutan's history, representing a crucial chapter in the nation's journey towards cultural identity and nationhood.

The absence of conservation efforts and maintenance of the site has led to the gradual decay of the intricate designs and symbolic imageries on the temple walls. This deterioration has obscured significant portions of the iconography, posing a challenge for researchers attempting to interpret the temple's art and cultural importance. The progressive loss of these visual elements emphasizes the critical need for conservation measures and highlights the necessity of archaeological research. Thus, we recommend future scholars to take up these valuable opportunities for archaeological investigation of a site, potentially offering deeper insights into medieval Buddhist monastic architecture and socio-cultural practices in Bhutan. Additionally, the efforts by relevant agencies to study and conserve the site would make a valuable contribution to the nation's tangible heritage conservation.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, J. R. (2002). *Religions in Practice: An Approach to the Anthropology of Religion* (p. 3). Library of Congress.
- Cabezón, J. I. (2006). The Hermitages of Sera. THDL ID #1270. Retrieved from the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library website: <https://www.thdl.org>.
- DDC (1999). *Biography of Phajo Drugom Zhipo, Thuje Chujin*.
- Dorji, S. (1999). *Biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel*. KMT Publication.
- Druk lug ki dencha. (n.d.). *The propitiation Ritual Text of Thangkar*.
- Je Geden Rinchen, (2008). 'Zhabdrung's Biography'. 2008. P.154
- Nado, L. (1986). Druk Karpo. Bumthang. KMT. (2019). *The life and Deeds of Padmasambhava: A Bhutanese chronicle*. Thimphu, Bhutan.
- Miyamoto, M., Magnusson, J., & Korom, F. J. (2021). Animal slaughter and religious nationalism in Bhutan. *Asian Ethnology*, 80(1), 121–146. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2703244140>
- Penjore, D. (2021). *Zhidar Matters. The Rise and Fall of a Controversial 18th Century Bhutanese Ruler*. Center for Bhutan Studies.
- Phuntsho, K. (2013). *History of Bhutan*. Random House India.
- Shah, V. (2009). Study Of Temples Of Medieval Maharashtra (11th To 14th Centuries Ce) A Socio-Economic Approach. *Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), New Delhi*.
- Tobgay, S. (2017). *Essential Guide to Sacred Sites*. Thimphu, KMT.
- Thimphu Thromde. (2022). *The evolution of the capital city*.
- Yeshi, S. (2019). Sumthrang Monastic Landscape: Ruins in Bhutan, Their Socio-cultural Values and Sustaining their Significance in Modern Times (Master's thesis). Central European University, Budapest.

Interviews

Angay Lelem & Tshering Yangzom, 2024.

Chang Dorji and Dorji Gyeltshen, 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ

Kencho Tshering & Jamtsho, 2024.

Gomchen Penjore, 2013.

Sangay Tenzin, 2024.

Tshering Penjore, 2024.^{iv}

ⁱ In an interview with Sonam Nyenda, president of the Druk Nyo Foundation and Lama of Sumthrang Choje, a hypothesis was proposed regarding the descendants of Ngabiphu refraining from visiting Changangkha temple. This information, originally from Angay Lelem and corroborated by her granddaughter Tshering Yangzom, suggests a potential conflict between the Ngabiphu lineages and Changangkha. The hypothesis is based on the practice of *tordhog* being performed in the direction of Changangkha and vice versa. Nyenda questioned this apparent conflict, given that Ngabiphu is considered the seat of Phajo, while Changangkha temple was founded by Phajo's son, Nima.

Further investigation, including an interview with Tshering Yangzom, confirmed the family's continued practice of not visiting Changangkha temple. However, she started visiting Changangkha later to make offerings. While this situation warrants in-depth historical analysis, it can be speculated that the conflict may not have existed during Phajo and his son Nima's time but potentially emerged later among succeeding lamas and descendants. This scenario illustrates the possibility of discord between two religious seats sharing a common origin. Such conflicts could arise from various factors, including disputes among patrons associated with lamas from different lineage holders. This phenomenon is not uncommon, as evidenced by multiple instances of disharmony in medieval Bhutan's religious landscape. Nevertheless, this requires a further investigation that future researchers can take up.

ⁱⁱ The ruins around the monastery are resided in by Khep families. Interview with Ap Tshering Penjore, 2023

ⁱⁱⁱ Chang Dorji & Dorji Gyeltshen were important figures who served under the Third King of Bhutan, and physically present during the renovation of Tashi Choedzong. Chang Dorji served as the assistant to Dasho Gyelden Thinley, who was the attendant of the Third King of Bhutan.

^{iv} Ap Tshering Penjore has been in Ngabiphu for more than four decades as one of the most senior staff members of Azhi Kelzang Wangmo. He has not only witnessed changes in terms of socio-economic development but also environmental shifts in the region.