

THE UNDERGROUND “FORTRESS” OF BANG TSHO RULER¹

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Kur stod forms one of the six *rDzong khags* in eastern Bhutan, the other five comprising of Mong sgar, bKra shis yang rtse, bKra shsi sngang, Pad ma dga’ tshal and bSam grub lJong mkhar. It shares borders with Bya dKar rDzong khag to its west, Mong sgar rDzong khag to its South, bKra shis yang rtse rDzong khag to its east and with Tibet to its north.

The rDzong khag comprises of five *dge ’ogs*³ with settlements situated in varying altitudes. While most of the residents are agriculturists, people also engage in other activities, notably small-scale business to supplement their income. Bang tsho village, the area of our study, forms a part of the bTsan mKhar *dge ’ogs*. It is situated at 2360 meters and can be approached from the villages of Dom mkhar, Gor gan and Ku pi nye sa. While it takes about six hours by foot to reach from Ku pi nye sa, it is shorter from Gor gan and or Dom mkhar village. The residents of Bang tsho comprising of five households interestingly are Tshang la’s⁴ while the rest of the *dge ’ogs* are made up of sKur stod pas⁵.

The Dates, Origins and Genealogy of the Bang tsho Ruler

One oral source claims that there were two brothers who belonged to the Bang tsho family in gDung bsam. gDung bsam was the ancient name for bDe ba thang and adjacent areas⁶. A row took place between the two brothers. From information given by Aris (1979) we know that the two brothers were bsTan na and Bang tsho. The elder one decided to share the family wealth and property with the younger brother but on

¹ The article is based on a field visit carried out in November 2002. While the main focus of our visit was on discerning the migration routes of the sKur smad speaking population of Lhun rtse rDzong khag to other rDzong khags¹ in particular bKra shsi gang and bKra shis yang rtse we could not avoid our visit to Bang tsho village and to the ruin having heard of it from many residents across sKur stod. This study is a result of our visit to the site.

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³ This is the smallest unit of administration made up of five to six villages and even more in other cases. It is headed by a village headman known as rGad po and a sPyi mi.

⁴ They form the largest ethnic group in Eastern Bhutan and are called so as they are believed to be the descendants of Lha Tshangs pa-Lord Brahma. It is interesting to note that these people had migrated in the beginning of the century from other parts of bKra shis sngang, Pad ma dga’ tshal and bSam grub lJong mkhar in search of better livelihood and settlement.

⁵ sKur stod pas is generally a term used to refer to inhabitants settled in the upper valley of Ku ri chu.

⁶ Known as Dung bsam mdo gsum, it comprised of the present day Pad ma dga’ tshal and bsam grub lJong mkhar rDzong khags.

condition that the later was exiled to aUm gling in Ku ri lung (archaic name for Lhun rtse rDzong khag). The village of aUm gling is in bTsan mkhar under Lhun brtse rDzong khag.

The younger brother of the Bang tsho family in gDung bsam settled in Bang tsho in aUm gling. It appears he was hailed as the ruler of Ku ri lung Bang tsho and probably also ruled the adjoining settlements in aUm gling and bTsan mkhar. This ruler stayed underground, hidden from the internal and external threats, which of course included perpetual enemies and vested interests from Tibet in the north.

Other historical sources have vague passing references made in standard history books written by slob dpon Pad ma la, 1994; and Aris, 1979. In slob dpon Pad ma la's account (1994), there were two brothers, bsTan na and Bang tsho who descended from rGya mtsho, the ruler of Kha gling mkhar, and their distant forefather named gNam sa'bangs and his great great grandson called IDan pa. IDan pa himself settled in gCan mkhar, but one of his descendants, rGya mtsho migrated to Kha gling and built Kha gling mkhar. One of rGya mtsho's descendants had two sons named bsTan na and Bang tsho. The two sons had a quarrel and Bang tsho had to leave Kha gling khar while bsTan na stayed back. Nothing is mentioned about where Bang tsho of Kha gling mkhar migrated, but his descendants settled in Gung gdung and gZhon sgar sTong phu.

In Aris's translation of Lha sras gTsang ma's genealogical table in English (1979) Bang tsho's ancestry is traced back to Lha sras gTsang ma's eldest son, Khri brtan dpal of the rJe clan. Khri brtan dpal's son was gNam bskos lde. gNam bskos lde had four sons, Gung ri gyal, lHa bzang dar, gNam sa 'bang and dPal mThong legs. dPal mThong legs, the youngest settled in gDung bsam. His son was Od bar, and Od bar's son was Tsha bo Chang po. bsTan na and Bang tsho were traced back to this lineage. Bang tsho's descendents had settled in Gung dung, gZhon sgar, sTongphu, gDung bsam areas and Mon yul sTong gsum. sTong phu is probably the present day Tomiyangtse village in bkra shis gyang rtse rDzong khag. Monyul sTong gsum is identified as the present day Ku pi nye sa in Lhun rtse rDzong khag. Further study is needed to establish whether our ancestors settled in Mon yul sTong gsum with the presence of a nine-storied house at mKhar gdung⁷ in Ku pi nye sa and Wam bur near Dom mkhar and the descendants of Bang tsho family were of the same pedigrees or the lineage. Bar ma, the owner of the erstwhile Barma

⁷ There is a remnant of a house in mkhar gdung in ku pi nye sa. However, we cannot ascertain whether this house was actually nine storied or not. But the popular belief amongst the residents is that it was nine storied.

Travel Agency claims descent from Bang tsho's lineage in gDung bsam Pad ma dga tshal. All these three variant sources referring to Bang tsho's origin seem to agree that the two brothers who lived in aUm gling and Dung bsam were of the same progenies. One tradition even claims the existence of a third brother in the personality of a Tibetan ruler. But this rather seems to be only a wild guess. We have also already cited that one oral tradition traces Bang tsho's origin to Dung bsam.

The precise date of Bang tsho's migration to aUm gling from Kha gling mkhar or Dung bsam cannot be ascertained. If we believe Bang tsho to be an historical figure descended from Lha sras gTsang ma and not the name of a place, one very obvious conclusion would be that this Bhutanese historical figure lived in the post- gLang dar ma period and probably before the rise of Sa skya rule in Tibet, between the 10th and the 13th centuries. At the moment we are not able to come to terms whether even the word Bang tsho itself signifies the name of a descendent of Lha rasy gTsang ma, a place or locality. There are two places in Eastern Bhutan with the place name associated with Bang tsho, Ku ri lung or Um gling Bang tsho and Dung bsam Bang tsho.

The hypothesis that emerges from Richardson's writings (1998, pp. 1219-233) relates to the usage of the term Bang so. Richardson has explained that Bang so in Tibet refers to a burial mound or a royal tomb where the tradition of burying Tibetan Kings goes back to the King Dri gum Btsan po. These burial mounds are found in 'Phyong ryas some sixty-five miles south-east of Lhasa but also in Kong po.

As for the underground structure in aUm gling *Bang tsho*, it contains several chambers, concrete roofs with flat stones laid one over the other, stone shelves projecting from the walls and a separate entrance from above which probably suggests that it was not built as a royal tomb and indications are that it was rather used as a defensive human shelter to avoid being detected and attacked by the enemies. The stone architecture itself represents a very unique masterpiece of Bhutan's extraordinary heritage. They seem certainly very different from the mounds as photographed by Hugh Richardson in 'Phyong rgyas. The exact date of the underground palace occupied by *Bang tsho* ruler in *Um gling* and its purpose can only be ascertained by archaeological investigation and methods.

A few artefacts from *Um gling Bang tsho* were unearthed in the early 1990s - a clay pot and two metallic troughs or vessels out of which one is called a *Phro (Thro)* but both said to be made of the alloy bronze. According to one local informant, one bronze vessel was discovered in the bamboo forests above the site where *Bang tsho* ruin is located. The matter was finally reported to the Government, following which an

excavation of the underground architectural ruin followed. A clay pot unearthed from the ruin at *Bang tsho* which dates back to the 11th century B.C. is presently kept on display in the National Museum at sPa go along with a stone pillar that measures about a meter and a stone vessel. Local people have carried small stone slabs that were unearthed during the excavations to the Um gling monastery about half an hours walk from the site. These were used in the temple during its renovation. However, the date of the artifacts like these cannot be used as a standard yardstick to pinpoint the date of the origin of the Bang tsho's underground architectural ruin, as the artifacts can be handed down as family property for many generations and centuries. We are not able to resolve whether the origin of the underground stone architecture can be attributed to the Bang tsho ruler, who descended from Lha sras gTsang ma or some local rulers who lived in the very remote and distant past predating Lha sras gTsang ma himself.

There are thus many questions unanswered about the Bang tsho families in general and Bang tsho rulers in aUm gling in particular. The following are some of the questions we would like to ask:

- a) How many historical Bhutanese figures associated with the name Bang tsho can be believed to have existed?
- b) Were the Bang tsho families at Dung bsam and aUm gling very closely related?
- c) Who actually built the underground stone architecture in aUm gling? Bang tsho ruler or somebody else who lived in the distant past. When was it built?
- d) What other reasons could be there for building this underground monument?
- e) How many generations of Bang tsho ruler in aUm gling had lived and during which epoch and historical period?
- f) What circumstances had put an end to Bang tsho ruler in aUm gling?

The End of the *Bang tsho* Ruler

The Bang tsho ruler had distinguished himself from other local ruling families in Eastern Bhutan by taking shelter in the underground citadel in aUm gling. The foremost and immediate circumstance, which attracted the attention of hostile rulers, was supposedly provided by immense wealth that he had accumulated. We shall perhaps never know what wealth this ruler actually possessed. We came across one local source that described the circumstances that led to a quarrel over the inheritance and consequent division of the wealth in between the two brothers of the Bang tsho family in gDung bsam Bang tsho. According to

the story, the younger brother of the Bang tsho family in gDung bsam parted with his share of the family wealth and took shelter in the underground fortress in aUm gling. India being very near, it was possible that through trade and the prevailing ancient tradition of exchange of gifts among the royal and noble families, that the immense family wealth accumulating in a place like Dung bsam could have been a real possibility. The other ruling families settled in the interior and remote Eastern Bhutan in the pre-Zhabs drung era would not have even remotely compared themselves with the Bang tsho brothers in terms of possession of wealth, say, like the bronze vessels.

Bang tsho's possession of immense wealth had obviously attracted the coveted attention of rulers nearby, as well as from far and wide. It is said that hearing about Bang tsho's wealth, the rulers in Tibet attempted several incursions. A Tibetan ruler sent reconnaissance parties, one after another, to aUm gling Bang tsho to appraise the military circumstances and might of its ruler and to discern whether or not it could be attacked and robbed of the fabulous wealth he allegedly possessed. The narratives given by the local populace include at least exchange of two rounds of intelligence tests between the Bang tsho ruler and the Tibetan king. One contest theme is humorously provided by the story of barley and amaranthus counts. The other humorous theme is provided by the story of Ku wa and sheep's or yak's horn. Ku wa is a wild gourd belonging to the pumpkin family and probably is endemic to the Bhutanese soil. It is said that in both the intelligence tests, Tibetans failed and were defeated.

Partly angered by shame with defeat in the contests of intelligence tests and partly impelled by the greed and desire to covet and possess Bang tsho's immense wealth, Tibetans approached the Bang tsho several times. Local people say that so long as the Bang tsho ruler stayed underground, the Tibetans could not defeat him. As ill-luck would have it, however, one of his own subject, a woman from aUm gling finally betrayed him by sharing secrets about the ruler's identity, work habits, time when he emerged from underground to feed his cattle, and how he could be captured and killed.

Thinking that the Tibetan enemy soldiers had retreated as usual, the Bang tsho ruler came out of his underground fortress and was feeding salt to his cattle on a flat slab of stone located outside it, not far away from his fortified residence. The Tibetans caught him there. He attempted escape but the enemy soldiers chased him. Some say he was killed in Dom mkhar, a village located below aUm gling. A few even say he escaped to Dung bsam Bang tsho, and then finally left for India. Apart from this, nothing further is known about the fate of the Bang tsho ruler and his families in Eastern Bhutan.

Ruin in *Bang tsho* and Later Visitors

After the defeat and fall of the *Bang tsho* ruler we can suppose that the Tibetans and local populace had looted *Bang tsho* and emptied the underground treasure house. The bronze vessel recovered by a local person from the bamboo forests above in the 1990s probably indicated that people had intended to collect it later. Local people say that the ruins of *Bang tsho* were later guarded by a huge snake. They believe *Bang tsho* himself to have been born as this snake to guard whatever treasures were left behind. After the snake had taken possession of the ruin, no people ever dared to enter it.

The story of this *Bang tsho* has been told and retold several times amongst the folks of Eastern Bhutan, and also probably got reshaped and twisted several times down the centuries and many generations. But it is true that the ruin is very much feared by the local communities. Even today, people ever superstitious hesitate to enter the underground site. However, the fame of *Bang tsho* and its ruin has been well remembered by later Eastern Bhutanese generations ever since its fall. The myths common to all tales locally told are: the *Bang tsho* ruler's fortress underground is nine-storied; a huge snake guards the inside of the ruin, and heedless people who ever dare to rob the ruin of its wealth remnants are fated to die.

It appears only the *bLa ma*'s dared to enter the underground ruin in *Bang tsho*. The first Lama who entered the underground fortress of *Bang tsho* ruler was one *A rgya bLa ma* named *Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin* (some say it was *A rgya bLa ma 'Jam dbyang Sang rgyas*, a contemporary of *Chos rje Mi 'gyur brTan pa* in the second half of the 17th century). This Lama was said to have recovered one golden butter light from the seventh floor of the underground ruin. The second *bLa ma* to have entered *Bang tsho*'s much feared and shunned underground ruin was *Bu li sPrul sku* from *Bum thang Bu li*. According to the present Venerable *Aja bLa ma rDo rje bsTan 'dzin Rin po che* (2003), at that time, *Bang tsho* as a place was deserted, and there was no resettlement. The present settlement in *Bang tsho* comprises of *Tshang la kha* speaking populace.

***Bang tsho*'s Underground Architecture: Findings, Assumptions and Conclusion**

The roof of the historical ruin of *Bang tsho* is located at an elevation of about 2360m on a small hillock in the middle of a mountain slope that stretches from the ridge of mountain above *Dam thang*. Its roof underground is merged with the top part of the mound and is hardly distinguishable from it. The mound nicely camouflages its roof. Vegetation and trees have inseparably blended with the natural

landscape covering the roof of the ruin. The underground architecture is not visible from outside or afar. The hillock faces Khe pa chu, the ridge of Wam bur on its right side that ascends and merges with Phu rnying la and on its left side is Tshen mkhar. Below is aUm ling village followed by Dom mkhar. Easier access route to Bang tsho is via Ku pi nye sa, Wam bur and Khe pa chu.

An excavation work done in the 1990s by the administration of Lhun rtse, employing village people, had destroyed about half of the stone and earth roof of Bang tsho's underground fortress. Three openings from the roof were created to study what lay inside. If these artificial openings of the ruins are not covered with CGI sheets and if the inner chambers are not protected from constant rainwater seepage from aboveground, the underground structures are soon fated to crumble and disintegrate. Archaeological value and charm of the site may thus be lost.

On the rooftop, there are only two openings. The opening at the center of the roof is called 'Du khang. To us 'Du khang appeared like a skylight locally known as *dKar khung* to let in sunlight, moonlight and fresh air from outside. It may have also served other life support functions such as chimney to let the smoke out. *Du khang* was kept covered with a flat stone slab until recently. Another opening faced Dam thang. It served as an entrance to the underground chambers. The entrance was destroyed during the recent excavation works. The two flat, rectangular stone slabs lay flat in the underground chambers but they are exposed to merciless down pour of rain from above. These may have been used to cover the *Du khang* or as doors for entry to the building inside the mound.

A section of the ruin as seen from above has undergrowth of trees. The roof was partly removed during the recent excavation. The roof is built of a mixture of earth works and stone slabs. It is almost cone shaped and very thickly built. The partition walls are built of stone and the stone beams support the walls. One compartment has at least one small stone shelf and hanger projecting from the walls. The masonry contains not a single piece of wood. The recent excavation works ended with the top floor of the underground structure if we assume that some more chambers lay beneath, more than what has already been discovered and made available for investigation.

People who managed recent excavation works there had no knowledge of archaeology and history. Instead of preserving the ruins, their works further damaged the edifice and left only ugly scars. If we believe in the myth that the Bang tsho ruler's underground house was nine storied, then our archaeological investigation has not ended with the first excavation. We will have to examine whether popular myth can be

turned into an historical fact, and whether or not the myth is baseless and lacks substance. To arrive at this conclusion, the future excavation works have to be planned scientifically so that the structures are not damaged and scarred. No archaeological reports on the first excavation works done in Bang tsho are also publicly available. Until further excavation works are done and findings reported, the myth of Bang tsho ruler's nine-storied house that supposedly lies underground in aUm gling Bang tsho would continue to assert a strong spell and excitement on the minds of both the educated and illiterate generations in Eastern Bhutan.

Perhaps the belief could have a strong and very valid historical basis. Until we are able to get facts and figures separated from myths through further field investigation and analysis, it is perhaps very risky and too early to reject and demystify the belief, and we are also sure that majority of Eastern Bhutanese folks will not be prepared to renounce it.

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