

## **THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF BHUTAN: A WORK IN PROGRESS\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Bhutan's National Library was established in 1967 as part of a government program to preserve and promote the rich cultural and religious heritage of this small, newly modernising country. Its primary function was to collect and preserve the religious texts of Buddhism in their various forms (wood-blocks, wood-block prints and manuscript copies). By the time the Library finally moved into purpose-built premises in 1984, stock also included a small collection of foreign books, mainly written in English, with subject emphasis on Buddhist studies and the Himalayan region.

Over the past 10 years major changes have been made concerning collection development philosophy and policy, arrangement of library materials and reader access to the collections. Compilation of a database to the religious literature began in 1996, when the National Library entered into a long-term twinning project with the Royal Library, Denmark, funded by Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA). Further phases of the project involve classification of the literature and establishing a library network. As the primary focus of the DANIDA Project is the Choekey Collection (religious texts written in classical Tibetan), there has so far been only very modest input to enhance management of the Foreign Books Collection, which in recent years has become a much more important component of the stock than was originally envisaged.

The scope of collection development has further widened with the passing of the Legal Deposit Act, 1999, under which the National Library attained official depository status as the National Library and Archives. Donor funding was obtained for construction of a separate building within the National Library complex in which to house the National Archives, and funding was also made available to send a senior member of staff abroad for postgraduate study in Archives Management. Transfer of archival materials to the new building began in early 2006. Drafting of an Archives Act is now under way.

This paper summarises the library's evolution under each of its directors to date, presenting in more detail a general overview of progress since the mid-

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1990s, with focus primarily on implementation of the DANIDA Project, the setting up of the Archives, and management and future development of the collections.

### **The National Library of Bhutan: A work in progress**

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#### **Founding of the National Library**

The National Library was established in 1967 as part of a government program to preserve and promote the rich cultural and religious heritage of this small, newly modernising country. Lopen Geshe Tshewang,<sup>1</sup> a highly regarded scholar monk, was appointed as the Library's founding Director to oversee the collection and safekeeping of religious works acquired for the national collection. These works are written in classical Tibetan (known in Bhutan as Choekey, meaning Dharma language), the religious language of northern Buddhism which does not have a spoken form. When Geshe Tshewang retired in 1973, Pema Tshewang (a scholar monk known familiarly as Lopen Pemala) was appointed as the new Director.

#### **Second Director**

By the time Lopen Pemala took over the growing collection had been relocated several times, and from 1975 the collection was housed in quarters above the town. The National Library finally moved to purpose-built premises in 1984. The new building had been consecrated as a lhakhang (temple) to provide the appropriate spiritual environment for preservation of sacred books.<sup>2</sup>

In January, 1981 Yoshiro Imaeda, a Tibetologist working as a researcher with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris, was appointed Library Adviser. Dr. Imaeda spent nearly 10 years in Bhutan and during that time he set up systems to document and organise the library collections, and also translated a significant amount of work by Lopen Pemala. When the move to the new building took place in September, 1984, stock included 5, 500 volumes of Buddhist literature in Choekey, 4,000 carved wood-blocks for printing, a set of

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<sup>1</sup> Lopen, which may be translated as "Master" or "Professor", is a respectful form of address for anyone who has received a traditional education, and is used particularly for certain learned monks. Geshe is a form of address bestowed upon highly educated monks of the Kagyupa tradition, and is roughly equivalent to Doctor, for a lay scholar holding a Ph. D.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the setting up of the library and the materials which comprise the religious literature of Buddhism see Shaw, F. (1985), "The National Library of Bhutan: preserving the nation's heritage", *Journal of the Hong Kong Library Association*, no. 9, pp. 39-58.

4,400 metal printing blocks, around 300 volumes of foreign books (nearly all in English) and a few journals and newspapers.

The Library Adviser modelled stock arrangement on that used for the Tibetan collection in the CNRS library. Books were shelved in the Stack Building, essentially in the order in which they had been taken into stock. Reader services were conducted from the Administration Building, where card catalogues provided access to individual titles. Readers checked the catalogues and completed request slips, then library staff fetched the books. This rigidly controlled and labour-intensive system made no provision for browsing the shelves, but was proof against loss of or damage to items in the collection. Upkeep of the card catalogues was discontinued in the late 1980s due to various constraints (including staffing levels and breakdown of the card copier) and recognition of the worldwide trend towards computerisation of cataloguing procedures.

A microfilming project started in 1987, and in 1992 a fumigation chamber was installed, from a cultural grant by the Japanese government (which included airtight aluminium boxes for archival wood-blocks in the collection). During Lopen Pemala's tenure, a large collection of literary treasures was amassed, and the principal works in the collection were microfilmed. Lopen Pemala had been able to identify and then secure many privately held old and rare manuscript editions of religious works for the collection and to obtain microfilmed copies of other works held outside, primarily through his standing as a highly respected scholar monk. Lopen Pemala retired in May, 1993. A career librarian – had such a person been available – would not have had either the knowledge or the standing to achieve so much.

### **Third Director**

In September, 1993 Sangay Wangchug, formerly Under Secretary of the Central Monastic Body, was transferred to the National Library as Acting Director, suggesting that the appointment was intended as an interim measure to enable the release of Lopen Pemala who was already past retirement age.

By this time library holdings had grown to approximately 7,500 volumes of Buddhist literature in Chokey, over 8,500 wood-blocks and 2,500 foreign books. During his tenure, Sangay Wangchug introduced measures to encourage use of the collections. He widened the scope of the publications program to include English translations of important Chokey works, and also publication of original works on more general aspects of Bhutan's culture, in English or Dzongkha. He was also instrumental in obtaining funding for a long-term project – the DANIDA Project<sup>3</sup> – to create a comprehensive digital catalogue of the library collections.

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<sup>3</sup> DANIDA is an organisation inside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark which provides development assistance in developing countries.

**Organisation of the collections:** By the time Sangay Wangchug was appointed, the stock arrangement system originally introduced had serious shortcomings. As the card catalogues were no longer being kept up, now the only way to find titles and locations of new books was through searching the accessions registers.

The Acting Director was keen for readers to have subject access to the Foreign Books Collection, which he planned to open for browsing. It was decided to rearrange the stock by subject, following the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system, already in use at Thimphu's small public library. As the Foreign Books librarian had not been trained in subject classification, retrospective subject classification of the books (which began in December, 1995) was achieved largely through the voluntary assistance of a professional librarian, a frequent visitor to Bhutan over the years.

**Rearrangement of the Stack Building:** By September, 1995 all reader services had been transferred from the Administration Building to the Stack Building, which was now open to readers for browsing. Some new furniture had been provided. The library had become much more user-friendly and welcoming. Loans rose dramatically. Security became a worrying issue, as did recovery of increasing numbers of overdue library books. Considerable stock loss in both the Chokey and Foreign Books collections was revealed in a winter 1998 audit, and subsequently borrower services to individuals were suspended. Alterations were made to the entrance area to improve library security in mid-1999, and further renovation and refurbishing work was carried out that same year.

**DANIDA Project:** In 1996 an agreement was signed to launch a long-term twinning project between the National Library and the Royal Library, Denmark. The DANIDA-funded project, entitled *Institutional strengthening of the National Library of Bhutan*, would be carried out in three phases and was expected to take many years to complete. Under the first phase, a database of the Chokey literature would be compiled. Further phases would involve a nationwide scripture documentation survey, collaborative research and translation projects and the setting up of a library network for online searching of the database. The DANIDA Project would be implemented with the assistance of two Tibetologists as consultants, one of whom also had computer expertise.

The Project started in August 1996, when the consultants made their first visit. Staff meetings were held to draw up a work plan, computer hardware was purchased and set up and program software was installed (including custom-built TrueType fonts for Chokey and Dzongkha data entry which would be made under the Wylie transliteration scheme). WINISIS, the Windows version of CDS/ISIS, was adopted for data input.

An introductory course was held to introduce all staff to Windows 95, following which the four-man Choekey cataloguing team was given more intensive instruction on data entry under Wylie and creation of records in WINISIS. On further visits the consultants fine-tuned procedures, upgraded software, reviewed and tidied up records added to the database, and gave workshops and additional training as required.

**Cataloguing start-up:** Generally speaking, Tibetan books are not single works authored by one person, but collections of works by either one or a number of different authors. Individual volumes might comprise just the one title (or part of a title, if a multi-volume work) or a number of separate titles – sometimes as many as 60 to 70 – each written by a different person. When the Project first got under way, the consultants had envisaged that record entry would be much as for Tibetan collections in libraries abroad, in which a collected work is catalogued as a single entity. For large academic libraries elsewhere, with Tibetan collections generally comprising only a relatively minor component of total stock, this was the only practical way to go about things. In Bhutan the situation was completely different. The National Library had been established specifically to collect and preserve Choekey materials and it was considered essential that the contents of the volumes should be analysed as closely as possible for the database. After extensive preliminary discussion it was therefore agreed that each item would be minutely analysed, and a separate record created for each and every separate title discovered within a volume.

The consultants next visited in late February, 1997. They discovered new titles daily as they reviewed and tidied up the 2, 000 records which had been created by then. These were exciting times! By June, 1999 the database held nearly 21, 000 records. The cataloguers had soon become adept at data entry and their output was well beyond expectations. The team leader backed up the records on a tape streamer daily, weekly and monthly.

When the consultants visited in early 1998, at the Acting Director's request the computerisation project was extended to the Foreign Books Section, with hardware supplied from Project funds.

**Project rollover:** After the first phase concluded in April, 1999, a further three-year agreement to cover the second phase was signed that same month. A Legal Deposit Act would be presented to the National Assembly when it met mid-year, and plans for a separate but linked Archives Project were already well-advanced. Sangay Wangchug was soon to leave the National Library, and he would be leaving on a high note.

#### **Fourth Director**

In May, 1999 Mynak R. Trulku, Director of the National Museum in Paro for the past 25 years, was appointed Director of the National Library, formally taking

over on July 1, 1999. Under Mynak R. Trulku the DANIDA Project gathered momentum. Phase three of the Project began in April 2002 and was celebrated with the launching of the National Library website ([www.library.gov.bt](http://www.library.gov.bt)), introducing the library to the international community.

During the early part of the new Director's tenure, further refurbishment and renovation work was carried out in the Stack Building, and a computer room was constructed on the first floor for the Choekey cataloguers, who moved across from the Administration Building in July, 2001. In 2002 the Stack Building was repainted, and a two-storied building erected to house the fumigation chamber (till then in a wooden lean-to by the Administration Building).

In 2000 staff began rearrangement of the Choekey Collection, re-grouping the stock under the four main schools of northern Buddhism, with Canonical works and some rare books shelved separately. This major undertaking took two years to complete.

**Research and translation activities:** In phase two of the Project priority was given to joint research and translation activities, through which valuable mentoring would be provided to promising young research officers by project counterparts internationally recognised as leaders in their own research fields.

**Cataloguing:** In August, 2001, four computer-trained school leavers were recruited on contract basis for Choekey data entry. By July, 2002 there were over 70,400 records in the Choekey database and the original estimate of 70,000 records in all had now been revised up to 130,000 records. When data entry for the books was completed in mid-2003, the file of 103,402 records was converted to Microsoft Access and stored on a standalone computer in the reading room for public reference. This was a significant milestone for the Project. The contract staff now created records for works contained in the various editions of the Kanjur and Tanjur, finishing that in late 2004.

Retrospective subject classification of the Foreign Books Collection was finally completed in early 2004; by then computer records had been created for almost all stock, which now amounted to around 5,200 volumes.

**Scripture documentation survey:** Included in the DANIDA Project was a nation-wide survey to identify literary treasures held in the monasteries, lhakhangs and private houses of each district. After contract staff were taken on for Choekey data entry, the permanent staff could begin work on the survey. The team took a small digital camera and laptop computer on their visits (some of which were to lhakhangs four days' walk from the road). The Choekey Section librarians relied entirely on memory when identifying works to digitise which were not in the National Library. An illustrated catalogue of literary treasures in the western districts of Bhutan was published in 2006.

**Legal deposit and the Archives:** With the passing of the Legal Deposit Act (1999), the National Library attained official depository status as the National Library and Archives and became responsible for the collecting, conserving and managing of Bhutan's documentary heritage.<sup>4</sup> In July, 2000 a three-year DANIDA-funded Archives Project was launched, for construction of a two-storied Archives Building on the far side of the Stack Building, to which it would be linked by an enclosed passage. Training in Archives Management was also funded, and in September, 2004 Senior Librarian, Kunzang Delek went to Singapore to study for a Masters degree in Archival Informatics.

**Digital library:** In 2004, two important digital donations further raised the National Library's international profile as an emerging centre for research and study of northern Buddhist spiritual traditions.

In May, the library received as a gift from Gene Smith, executive director of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC)<sup>5</sup> in New York a hard disk containing about 4,000 volumes of treasured religious texts stored in PDF format. The data was later made available on a public access computer for both browsing and the making of page printouts.

In collaboration with the Bodhi Foundation<sup>6</sup> and the Palri Parkhang<sup>7</sup> initiative, TBRC also distributes eBooks formatted to print as traditional pecha, and in November, the President of the Bodhi Foundation and representatives from the Palri Parkhang project came to install the software and present the National Library with a digital archive of 4,500 volumes of Buddhist teachings stored on a hard drive, and also a duplex laser printer.

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<sup>4</sup> The Act was passed at the 77th meeting of Bhutan's National Assembly and came into force on July 20, 1999. The full text can be retrieved via the Archives section of the National Library website.

<sup>5</sup> The Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center ([www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org)) is a non-profit corporation established in 1998. Its digital library is an encyclopaedic database of Himalayan scriptures from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The present library comprises over 12,000 volumes, of which over 5,000 had been digitised by May, 2005. Books are distributed to users from the TBRC FTP site and through external hard drives. At the Centre's core is the personal library of Executive Director, Gene Smith.

<sup>6</sup> Incorporated in 1998, the Bodhi Foundation ([www.bodhi.org/](http://www.bodhi.org/)) assists a number of organisations and programs in support of beneficial activities. Amongst these is Palri Parkhang.

<sup>7</sup> Palri Parkhang-Glorious Mountain Printery was set up in 2002 as a heart project of TBRC and the Bodhi Foundation. Its goal is to restore and republish TBRC's collection of some 12,000 volumes, in the form of digital eBooks, printable image files and hardcopy texts to support research, study and practice of Tibetan culture and spiritual traditions. A short video describing what Palri Parkhang does can be downloaded from the Khyentse Foundation website.

The project to complete a digital library of the TBRC collection is a major cooperative effort of TBRC, Palri Parkhang and the Khyentse Foundation.<sup>8</sup> The formatting and print-on-demand centre in Austin which converts TBRC's massive PDF files into printer-ready documents is seen by the Khyentse Foundation as a model for future facilities in Bhutan and India, and efforts are being directed to secure funding from major foundations to make this dream come true.

### **Fifth Director**

The library's fifth director, Dorjee Tshering, took office in January, 2005, following the retirement of Mynak R. Trulku. An educationist by profession and most recently principal of Bhutan's premier degree college, Dorjee Tshering has had many years of experience in managerial positions in the education sector.

The new Director wants more people to know about the library and come to use it. Future plans include educational visits for school classes and other promotional activities targeting Bhutan's young people and their teachers. Sunday opening was introduced in July 2006. A full-colour library information leaflet has been published, also a catalogue to the Foreign Books Collection. Free internet access to students is to be provided in the Stack Building shortly, following upgrading of online connections to the Internet.

**National Library conference:** The National Library held its first international conference in mid-2005. Papers were presented by around 30 Bhutanese and foreign scholars. Presentations were of a uniformly high standard, and those of some young Bhutanese scholars were particularly impressive. Most sessions were attended by 40 to 50 people, and the question and answer sessions which followed the presentations were vigorous and stimulating. Publication of the three-volume Proceedings (title: *Written heritage of Bhutan: Mirror of the past – bridge to the future*) will take place in late 2007.

**Building works and renovation:** Within months of Dorjee Tshering taking office, funds were released by the Government of India for construction of a new, three-storied Administration Building. Completed in summer, 2007 the building will house offices for staff and private researchers, the National Library Book-store, the Microfilming Section and the non-archival component of the Wood-block Collection. Space permitting, the Foreign Books Collection will move into the central area of the ground floor. Conference facilities are also provided for.

**DANIDA Project:** Implementation of the fourth and final phase of the DANIDA Project is now under way. In general terms, phase four aims to

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<sup>8</sup> Khyentse Foundation ([www.khyentsefoundation.org/](http://www.khyentsefoundation.org/)) is a non-profit organisation founded in 2001. The TBRC project is supported through its Translations and Publications Fund.

consolidate the library's present position as a central resource for higher level research and to expand its functions so that it is closely linked with the Royal University of Bhutan as an academic library specialising in Bhutanese studies. Some library outreach services to selected centres in eastern Bhutan are also planned. In the academic sphere, cooperation in joint research and translation activities will continue.

This phase is very much IT-centred. Local and wide area networks will be set up to establish the National Library as an integral part of the research infrastructure of Bhutan, and the database will be launched on the Internet to be accessible for online searching worldwide. Archives activities will be strongly supported: the setting up of a local preservation laboratory is envisaged, and further paper preservation workshops and training sessions will be held. Scholarships will be offered so that National Library staff can receive additional work-related training outside the country.

**Archives:** The Archives Building was formally commissioned in June, 2005, but staff began transferring stock only in March, 2006 so as to allow ample time for the premises to reach the humidity and temperature levels recommended for archival storage. Eighteen months into the job, both the Archivist and the Assistant Conservator remain focused, highly motivated, and brimming over with enthusiasm for their work.

Almost all microfilms of literary treasures have now been relocated in the Archives. A review of the Choekey Collection is under way, and the oldest and most important works have already been transferred from the Stack Building to the Preservation Section of the Archives. All wood-blocks and paper media are sent for fumigation before transfer to the Archives. Over the past year a substantial body of new material has come into the Archives under the provisions of the Legal Deposit Act. The Legal Deposit librarian is now gradually transferring to the Archives the backlog of materials accumulated since the 1999 Act came into force.

Work has begun on the drafting of an Archives Act, which when it comes into force will heighten awareness of the importance of archival material and also alert individuals and organisations to their responsibilities under the Act. The Archivist sees the National Archive as the identity of the country, and is keen to make it as comprehensive as possible for the benefit of historians of future generations. Looking to the future, he is planning for a nationwide survey to identify and collect items of value for the Archives. He also wishes to maintain district archival centres throughout the country, as foci for material to be collected up for the Archives.

**Launching of the online catalogue:** Since 2006, library computers have been networked and linked to the Internet through a local ISP. VSAT equipment now being installed will enable direct hosting of the website (and hence database) from

the continuously running library server. Soon readers will be able to access the catalogues from online terminals in the Stack Building during office hours (and – remotely – round the clock).

Now that the database has been completed, its management has been taken over by National Library staff. DANIDA has hired a Canadian IT expert-cum-Tibetologist as resident IT adviser to the library for the initial stage of the fourth phase, in which the database will be launched on the Internet. All Choekey records were converted to Unicode in January 2007, in preparation for launching of the online catalogue. Sample entries have been loaded to the Royal Library server for testing under the ALEPH integrated library system. Other software options are also being considered.

A full scale review of the content of the library website began in May 2007. The new, expanded content will appear in both English and Dzongkha versions, and the redesigned web pages should be posted before the end of the year.

**In conclusion:** Geshe Tshewang and his small team established the nucleus of the National Library. Each Director thereafter has left his own mark, building on the achievements of his predecessors. During Lopen Pemala's tenure many old and rare works were added to the collection, and a very secure system was established for stock management and control. When Sangay Wangchug took over in 1993, he opened up the stacks to the readers and also launched the DANIDA Project, through which the immense scope and richness and sheer volume of works contained within the Choekey Collection would gradually be revealed. Under Mynak R. Trulku, who succeeded Sangay Wangchuk in 2000, the Archives Project was launched and the main thrust of the DANIDA Project was brought to a successful conclusion. Dorjee Tshering, who took over in 2005, is vigorously promoting the National Library's collections and services while shepherding it through the final phase of the DANIDA Project, under which the National Library will become much more connected in every way with the rest of Bhutan and also the wider world.

The National Library had little knowledge of the automated systems for information management and control which libraries in developed countries had been introducing since the 1980s, and the DANIDA Project provided the necessary funding, impetus and also a carefully structured program to shape development. Eleven years on, this ambitious project can certainly be viewed as a resounding success.

As the primary focus is the Choekey Collection, there has so far been only modest input to enhance management of the Foreign Books Collection, which has now become a much more significant component of stock than was originally envisaged. Under phase four of the Project, the National Library's position as a central research resource will be consolidated so that it functions as an academic library specialising in Bhutanese studies, closely linked with the Royal

University of Bhutan. In this situation, the Foreign Books Collection will assume much greater importance as an English language research resource.

There has for some years been a clear need to recruit to the Foreign Books Collection staff with the appropriate skill sets for subject classification, as present staff have received no training in this area and are in any case already fully occupied. For the Foreign Books Collection to adequately support the English language research needs of Bhutanese scholars and achieve its full potential as the English language research resource of the National Library of Bhutan, this management issue needs now to be addressed.

