

Pro Bhutan e.V.

philanthropischer Verein zur aktiven Entwicklungshilfe
im Himalaja Königreich Bhutan



Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and the visit of the Portuguese Jesuit
Patres Father Estevão Cacella and Father João Cabral in 1627



The 17th century for Bhutan was the period of unification and the building as a nation state under Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of Bhutan.

The only available written Western account of this era during the time of the Shabdrung is the notes of Father Cacella S.J, one of the two Portuguese Jesuit Priests, who passed through Bhutan in 1627.

Father Cacella notes on Bhutan were recorded, “from the house of the King (Shabdrung), on 4th October 1627.” The notes bear the title “From the Kingdom of Cambirasi (Bhutan)”.

These notes, which remained buried in the archives of the Vatican for over three centuries before they were translated, provide an insight into the little known personal life of Shabdrung.

The notes also reveal the dedication of the Jesuit priests to introduce Christianity and in particular their quest to change the faith of Shabdrung.

Father Cacella and Father Cabral were the first Europeans to enter Bhutan, Sikkim, Central Tibet and Nepal.

Founded in 1540 by an injured Spaniard military officer, the philosophy of the Jesuit order stressed on values much the same as the Gross National Happiness. The Jesuits were known for their motivation to travel, learn and teach in Asia. It took the death of two priests to further inspire these two young Portuguese priests to venture into the heart of the Himalayas. Wessels in his book entitled “Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia”, records in detail their challenging journey including their north bound journey from Cochin on 30 April 1626. Some believe that the priests were despatched to the area in search of the lost Far East tribe or grouping of Christians referred to as ‘Cathai’.

The two Jesuits departed Cooch Behar for Bhutan on Sunday 21 February 1627. They journey through the mountains infested with robbers and the intrigue of the local leaders to reach Paro on March 25, 1627 where they were amazed at the sophistication of irrigation channels and architecture.

On April 5, 1627 the priests leave Paro to receive a warm traditional reception and their first audience with Shabdrung. “We found him in another tent, richly ornamented with silk. The King (Shabdrung) was sitting on a high seat, clothed in red silk embroidered with gold.”

This was probably the first time Shabdrung met a foreigner, “Never any foreigners had come in those mountains and nobody remembered having seen any.”

A monk from Tsaparang (in neighboring Arunacha Pradesh, India) who spoke some Hindustani was the interpreter for the long laborious conversations that were held every day. Shabdrung, impressed with the Jesuits, assigned the Tsaparang lama to them and “urged us to study the language so we could speak with him clearly.”

At that time of the Jesuit’s visit, Shabdrung was “33 years old” and called the “Dharma Raja”. He was both “the King and the Head Lama of this Kingdom of Cambirasi (Bhutan)”.

The notes carefully record Shabdrung’s personal life including his dietary habit, “he is not eating rice, meat, fish but only milk and fruits.” It seems that Shabdrung is worried about a relative who is kept in captivity due to repeated grave offence. Shabdrung says that, “he wants to give him his freedom, not having the heart to give him another punishment.”

The priests learn that Shabdrung had just completed his three-year retreat. “During this retreat he stayed in a small house built on the very steep side of a mountain, he did not see and was not seen by anyone. He was receiving his food by means of two ropes which were descending from his hut to the house lower below, without speaking to anybody.” Shabdrung’s description of the retreat in present day Cheri monastery has been recorded as, “he said that he was passing his time praying and when resting occupied himself by painting images, still preserved.” Shabdrung took particular pride in an image sculpted in white sandal wood. He took, “great pride in this gift of painting” and tried to copy the image of S. Raphael.

The priest travelled with Shabdrung and his retinue of 100 Gelongs (monks) for two months. During the travels they lived in tents and could visit many villages. Shabdrung’s Gelongs distinguished themselves from other lamas because they, “keep the celibacy, are eating only once, just after midday, are not taking rice, meat or fish, nor wine.” The priests observed that the monks spent major part of the day and night in prayers.

The travel ends in his place of retreat which is also his house and residence of his monks. Shabdrung's house has been described inhabitable by modern standards which was built for strategic reasons.

The notes further emphasize the political intrigue and differences Shabdrung had with his rival claimant. The spot for his abode was chosen, "in order to defend himself against another King, who is living at a distance of eight days journey. He is called Deb Tsangpo, he is the most powerful King of Potente (Tibet), Tsang and is making war to the King of Bhutan since a few years because he is refusing one of the bones of his deceased father, which he is asking very pressingly. The King himself is saying this and for this reason he had to renounce to inhabit one of his cities beautiful and big, named Ralung (in Tibet), a distance of 5 days journey from here."

After returning from the tour, in what may be modern day Cheri monastery, Shabdrung accepts and attends the invitation of the priests to attend the feast of St. Ignatius. He is accompanied by "an old lama, his teacher for whom he has strong veneration, and by other lamas."

Shabdrung's subject had great reverence for him who practiced the phowa rituals. "All have a great esteem for the King and the great lama and give the part of their goods in order to be sent by him to heaven after their death." Phowa is a simple Buddhist ceremony to transfer the consciousness after death.

The priest record this ceremony as follows: "When one is near to his last breath the King is called to come to assist him by his prayers and as soon as he dies, the King is pulling the hairs of his head, accomplishing for him this great work of mercy which is called sending the soul to heaven." The priests preached Shabdrung about the life of Jesus Christ which Shabdrung showed, "great pleasure in hearing it." However, "realizing that between himself and us, there was a great difference regarding the truth of faith", the priest's propose to exit the nation. Even with Shabdrung's support of 2 monks aged 12 and 19 and with a promise of an adult who would become Christians, the Jesuits fail in their mission and leave Bhutan.

Shabdrung's main revenue is the voluntary contribution of his people. As a Buddhist King he is, "especially preoccupied not to offend anyone" allowing many liberties and freedom.

“Many times, the King is speaking for his lamas said that though they are most submissive everyone is his own master to do what he likes.”

“The lamas do not carry weapons, cut their hair short, some, but few let their beard grow. The King has a beard, big, and reaching to the belt. Generally he has it enveloped in a piece of silk. He has long hair.... It seems that he is proud of them and carry them as a sign of nobility.”

It also appears that Shabdrung was obsessed with his heir when the priest says, “But he says that he will cut them as soon as he has a son to succeed him on the throne; then he would retire and forsake the world as he does not want that the death should surprise him with them, as it has happened to a King, his predecessor, causing a great scandal to everyone.”

The monks during that time were not much different from monks we know. “The lamas are clothed in a vest which cover their chest, letting their arms uncovered. All the rest of the body is covered with a great piece of cloth which they never take out.”

Source: Kunzel 26. July 2007 on “Beckoning Bold Bhutan” by
Tim Fischer and Tshering Tashi