

THE GDUNG LINEAGES OF CENTRAL & EASTERN BHUTAN – A
REAPPRAISAL OF THEIR ORIGIN, BASED ON LITERARY SOURCES

JOHN ARDUSSE

The ethno history of early Bhutan is a complex subject that will require much effort to piece together.¹ The oldest population strata predate the spread of Buddhism and literature. By the time writing began, their origins were long forgotten. Many later immigrants also arrived without much recorded fanfare. Other than a few family histories, such as the *Hünral Dugrab*, Buddhist historians do not customarily go deeply into genealogy.

The late 17th century book called the *Gyalrig* is the single important exception.² It deals with the ethnic origins of leading families from central and eastern Bhutan who traced their pedigree to various Tibetan progenitors, both human and of the gods. The author's main purpose was to document and glorify the family ancestry of various petty ruling chiefs whose territories had been lately conquered and incorporated into the emerging nation state, centered in western Bhutan, by Zhabdrung Ngawang Nangyal. Michael Aris and Dasho Tenzin Dorje first introduced this work to modern western and Bhutanese readers (Aris 1979, 1986, Dorje 1985).³

Chapter three of the *Gyalrig* is devoted to the complex genealogical myths of an interesting group of families from Bumthang, Mongar, Zhemgang, and other parts of east-central Bhutan, called *Gdung* (pron. *Dung*). They formed a small though note-worthy local population stratum, including powerful lords of the 14th-16th centuries, who rose and faded into obscurity beneath the rising tide of Buddhist religious aristocracy, and were finally eliminated as a political force by the Zhabdrung Rinpoche. Legends about the strongmen *Gdung* Nag-po of Ura, Shingkar Gdung, and *Gdung* Dkar-po of Mongar are still told. Their ruined castles at Pangkhar, Zhongar Dzong, and elsewhere stand witness to an era of Bhutanese history that, unfortunately, was not well

¹ A useful introduction to this topic is found in Pommanet (1998). In the interest of readability, I have adopted a simplified spelling of common Tibetan / Choekey words.

² The full title of this work is *Rgyal rigs byung khungs gal ba'i sgron me*, "The Lamp which Illuminates the Origins of Royal Families." It has been extensively studied in Aris (1979): 60-146, and translated in Aris (1986).

³ See also John Ardusse, "Notes on the rGyal-rigs of Ngawang and the Clan History of Eastern Bhutan and Shar Mon" (in press). In this article, I have prepared a concordance to the four available editions, and argued that the work was written in 1668, rather than 1728 as proposed by Michael Aris.

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