

Chipön: Local Chieftains

The post of *chipön* (ལྷོ་དོན་) existed long before the 17th century unification of Bhutan. In fact, the local chieftains and rulers of Haa, Paro and Thimphu were recorded as *chipön* as early as the 13th and 14th centuries. Like *chila* (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) which referred to a common lama as opposed to a local lama, *chipön*, which literally means common ruler, perhaps referred to a leader who controlled many areas, in contrast to a local chieftain who only controlled a valley or a village. The term *lopön* (ལྷོ་དོན་) was also used to refer to the rulers of western Bhutan in the 13th and 14th centuries.

After the unification of Bhutan by Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel (1594-1651), new political offices appear to have been instituted on both the national and community level. We see the rise of *gup* as the heads of the villages. While it is not totally clear, the position of the *chipön* seems to have become secondary to the *gup* as a position to help the *gup* run village affairs. The *gup* may have looked after several villages while *chipön* looked after the affairs of only one village. By the 20th century, the post of the *chipön* had lost its former rank and was seen as an assistant of the *gup*, mainly in relaying and spreading the official communication. The *chipön* had to travel between the dzong and the villages to receive and submit messages. It was a cumbersome task requiring the post holder to travel sometimes in bad weather and great speed. The *chipön*'s responsibility was to work as an intermediary between the administration and the communities.

In the distant past, the post of *chipön* was taken up by distinguished and powerful families in the community, and were sometimes hereditary. However, in the 20th century, this changed and the *chipön* was often seen as little more than a government messenger. In most villages, the *chipön* assisted the *gup* and represented the village. The person would call meetings, supervise public activities, represent the villagers and be the channel of communication between the state administration and the people. With the introduction of democracy and new local governance systems in the 21st century, the post of the *chipön* is now replaced by *tsokpa* (ཚོགས་པ་) and *mangmi* (དམངས་མི) posts.

A very special case of *chipön* is the one in the Chendebji village in Trongsa. Unlike other *chipön*, the Chendebji *chipön* was considered

equal in rank to a *nyikem* or a red scarf official especially during the reign of His Majesty the King Jigme Wangchuck (1905-1952), the second King of Bhutan. Every year, he had to call on the king once, and submit reports of labor contributions, and the amounts of cereals and dairy products collected from his locality. The Chendebji *chipön* is changed every year on the fifth day of the third lunar month. Every household takes a turn serving as *chipön*. In the past, a sheep was sacrificed during the ceremony of appointing the new *chipön*. Instead, today every household contributes three eggs after the tradition of sheep-sacrifice was stopped. The out-going *chipön* hands over a *thram* land register to the new *chipön*.

The changes in the use of the *chipön* title and the powers exercised by a *chipön* reflect the changes Bhutan has seen in its political systems. From autocratic rural fiefdoms before the 17th century and a theocratic republic until the beginning of 20th century to a medieval monarchy until the beginning of the 21st century and a parliamentary democracy today, Bhutan's political landscape has evolved as has the office of *chipön*. From being a supreme overlord to community messenger, it also shows the changes in the use of language according to political vagaries.

Karma Phuntsho with some notes by Sonam Chophel. Karma Phuntsho is a social thinker and worker, the President of the Loden Foundation and the author of many books and articles including *The History of Bhutan*.