

Bhutan's Raven Crown

As the largest black bird in the world, with its lustrous black plumage and a raucous voice, the raven is seen as a symbol of power, mischief, mystery, wisdom and intelligence. Yet, it is in Bhutan where the raven is given its highest place both on the royal crown and as the national bird. The hallowed status of the raven in Bhutan stems from its association with the raven-faced deity, Legön Jarok Dongchen. This deity along with Yeshé Gönpö and Palden Lhamo make up the trio of tutelary protectors of Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel (1594-1651) - the statesman-monk who unified Bhutan in the 17th century- and thence the Bhutanese state. A wrathful deity with a large raven beak, Legön (or the Lord of Action) is one of the many forms of the chief dharma protector Mahakala and, as his name suggests, is known for effectiveness and speedy activity.

Years before he made his journey into exile to Bhutan, Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel is said to have had a visionary experience in which he flew to Pangrizampa in Thimphu following a raven. The followers of Zhapdrung later understood this experience as the instance of Legön leading Zhapdrung to Bhutan, leaving behind the turmoil in Tibet to found the new country. Many other accounts describe how Legön supported Zhapdrung and his followers after their arrival in Bhutan to vanquish Tibetan enemies who pursued them, to establish their religious tradition in the southern valleys and to unify the region into one country. The raven-faced Mahākāla has since been considered as a national protector of the land that is today Bhutan.

It was, however, in the days of Jigme Namgyel (1825-81), the father of the first king of Bhutan, that the raven-faced deity found its place as the apex of the crown. Bhutanese historians trace the origin of the raven crown to Jigme Namgyal's Tibetan master Jangchub Tsundru (1817-56), a Gelukpa lama who was renowned for his strong ecumenism. In 1856 before his death, Jangchub Tsundru performed an elaborate Buddhist ceremony for Jigme Namgyel and offered him *zhabten* prayers for long life, which traditionally only disciples offer a lama. According to historians Pema Tshewang and Michael Aris, it was on this occasion Jangchub Tsundru also designed the raven crown for Jigme Namgyel after propitiating the deity Jangdü. Jangchub Tsundru's biography, however, does not mention this.

The raven crown said to have been used by Jigme Namgyel resembles a tantric hat used during rituals for subjugation of evil forces. It is an appliqué with a blue base, five upturned yellow flaps ending in tassels of hair, three embroidered eyes, a silver *dorjé* (thunderbolt) on the top, a metal sun disc and crescent moon and a metal plate decorated with mantras as the frontal decoration. Although they do not cite any textual source, historians also claim that Jigme Namgyel wore the raven crown when he led the Bhutanese warriors to fight the British in 1865.

Oral stories are commonly told in Bhutan about how Jigme Namgyel invoked Legön and other Bhutanese deities in the temples on his way to the war in Dewangiri in southeastern Bhutan. "When Jigme Namgyel called upon Legön before he marched out of Trongsa, the altar shook and a raven accompanied him all the way to the battlefield. His shots hit the British officers at the forehead", says Dorji Löpön Karma Wangyal of Gangté monastery. The victory, albeit temporary, is attributed to the superhuman support rendered by Legön and other Bhutanese deities.

The first Druk Gyalpo (King of Bhutan), Ugyen Wangchuck (1862-1926), appears

wearing a different raven crown in the photos taken during his trip to Tibet in 1904 and later. Following on the symbolism of skulls as fierce and superhuman objects in tantric Buddhism, the crown has an upturned circular rim on which are embroidered fearsome skeletal heads with motifs of slender flames or tender branches. The raven head with sharp beak distinctly protrudes on the top with tassels of red threads flowing from its base. The head has on it a crescent moon and sun disc. This crown was also worn by Second King Jigme Wangchuck (1903-52) in 1927 during his coronation and the days after, as can be seen from the pictures taken by British officers, Bailey and Sherriff in 1928 and 1933.

At least three other raven crowns with the skeletal heads on the rim also exist although there are no records of them being used by Bhutan's kings. One of these has a straight vertical rim like a Russian *ushanka* but unlike other raven crowns with outward slanting rims. The embroidered skeletal head and motifs closely resemble those on the crown worn by the first and second kings of Bhutan. Another raven crown, slightly new in its look, has bright white skulls, motifs of flames with sharp edges and a small turquoise on the sun disc. Tsering Penjor, the Paro Pönlop who may have nurtured the wish of succeeding to the throne, is also seen wearing a raven crown in a picture taken in 1931. This crown, though raven headed and decorated with the motifs of curly flames, has slightly different designs from the previous crowns.

Despite the significance of the raven crown, the second king Jigme Wangchuck often wore a crown without the raven head. This one has an upturned rim on which is embroidered a stack of jewels flanked by two thunder dragons. During his reign, another variation of the raven crown was made. With changes in people's sensitivities and Bhutan's international exposure, the esoteric images of skeletal heads were replaced by the mythical bird, *garuda*. This mystical bird associated with tantric deities is generally considered a positive force and a symbol of subjugation.

The *garuda* bird, according to Late Dasho Shingkar Lam, the retired secretary of the third Druk Gyalpo, was used because the skeletal heads on the crown reminded people of the modern safety sign indicating danger. The Third Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1929-72) seems to have never worn any raven crown. The Fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck (1955-) on a very few occasions wore the last raven crown with the *garuda*.

When the coronation of the Fifth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was imminent, state artists created another raven crown. The materials of the crown were blessed in the presence of the Zhabdrung's remains in Punakha dzong to imbue the crown with the power the raven crown is traditionally believed to possess. Unlike previous ones, this crown is designed with two layers in the rim. To retain its tantric significance, the internal rim is designed with embroidered skeletal heads while the external rim had in the front a stack of three gems on a *garuda* flanked by two thunder dragons and a wish-giving vase at the back. The raven head was designed with a diamond crest, its beak made out of a rhino horn and eyes of *zi* stone. The three wisdom eyes will be embroidered as in the previous crowns. This crown was decorated with precious stones, each of them representing Buddhist deities and values. However, this crown was not used during the coronation ceremony.

The raven crown is not only widely regarded as the symbol of Legön Jarog Dongchen and his protection. It is now also to represent the entire Bhutanese spiritual and secular virtues, which the monarchs of Bhutan, as custodians, are to safeguard and advance.

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