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# Religion and Politics in Bhutan

## An Interview with Dagmar Schwerk

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Dagmar Schwerk's working paper "[Drawing Lines in a Mandala: A Sketch of Boundaries Between Religion and Politics in Bhutan](#)" was published in August 2019. I had an opportunity to chat with her about the research, the Kolleg-Forschergruppe "[Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities](#)" project, her upcoming monograph and more.

**Ngoc Le (NL):** Can you introduce yourself, your academic background, your research and current work?

**Dagmar Schwerk (DS):** My name is Dagmar Schwerk, and I completed my PhD in Tibetology at the University of Hamburg (Germany) in 2017. In 2012, I obtained my masters in Tibetology, Classical Indology, and Political Science—also at the University of Hamburg's Department of Indian and Tibetan Studies and the Department of Social Sciences. I came to Canada in 2018 when I was so fortunate to become the first Khyentse Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Tibetan Buddhist Studies at the University of British Columbia, Department of Asian Studies. In my research, I mainly focus on the intellectual, political and social history in Bhutan from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. However, my disserta-

tion research reached far back into the intellectual history of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism as it is concerned with the *mahāmudrā* doctrine and meditative practices. I am mainly trained as a historical-philological scholar, but I also integrate methods and theories from the fields of religious studies and social sciences in my work. Here at UBC, I am teaching courses about Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetan and Himalayan culture and society, and Tibetan literature, genres and book culture. I am also actively engaged as a steering committee member in the UBC Himalaya Program by planning and organizing various activities, such as a regular lecture series during the winter terms and intensive summer language courses for Tibetan and Nepali language in a community context. It is lovely to work in such a growing and thriving environment for Asian and Buddhist Studies here in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland.

**NL:** Can you talk a bit about the Kolleg-Forschergruppe “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities” project of which your new working paper is a part?

**DS:** The Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies (HCAS) [Kolleg-Forschergruppe “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”](#) is an international and interdisciplinary research group at the University of Leipzig headed by Professor Christoph Kleine and Professor Monika Wohlrab-Sahr. In this project, scholars from institutions all over the world have contributed to the field of secularity and modernity studies, mainly focusing on regions outside Europe and North America. Their research, thereby, often covers unstudied regions, for example, Asia, the Middle East and North-Africa, and their alternative non-Western pathways towards modernity and secularization. The regional focus of the project will be expanded towards America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Israel, (Eastern) Europe and Russia. The “multiple secularities” approach is constantly developed but at its core is a non-normative approach that uses

“secularity” as an analytical term—a modality of conceptual distinction and institutional differentiation between societal spheres, religion and others, such as politics. As research fellows, international scholars have the opportunity to work and publish on topics related to secularity and modernity in the different regions. This project also stresses the importance of analyzing emic terminologies related to secularity and used in the primary languages of the respective regions. This, in particular, made the project very appealing to me.

**NL:** What motivated you to conduct research into Bhutan’s “Joint Twofold System of Governance?” Why does the topic require attention at the moment?

**DS:** Bhutan constitutes a unique case in point, as it is the only one of three major Buddhist governments in the Tibetan cultural area that is still in existence. Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan’s governments were characterized by a twofold religious and political structure under a Buddhist ruler but the respective institutionalization in the 17th century differed quite a bit. Additionally, Bhutan is unique in so far as it still possesses a structural continuity in the form of this “Joint Twofold System of Governance.” It was renewed in the *Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan* from 2008, with the King of Bhutan as head of state. Aspects of the underlying Buddhist knowledge system of this form of governance are also found in the Buddhism-induced policies of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This raises interesting questions about the process of institutionalization of Buddhist ethics and boundaries between the societal spheres of religion and politics in a pre-modern context as well as today. In my research project “Bhutan in Transition: Metamorphosis and Institutionalization of Buddhist Concepts,” I, therefore, set out to contribute to knowledge about these questions in the Tibetan cultural area on the basis of the specific example of Bhutan.



Figure 1. Paintings on stones as public communication medium promoting environmentally responsible behaviour according to the policies of ‘Gross National Happiness’ (GNH) in a riverbed in Bhutan, 2015. Photo by Sangay Sherpa. Reprinted with permission.

Also, as a textual scholar, I was very curious in applying the “multiple secularity” approach on pre-modern Bhutanese textual sources. My paper emphasizes the importance of analyzing emic terminologies, here in Tibetan and partially in Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, and their mindful and careful translation into etic terminologies, such as “religion” and “politics,” and their interpretation as being merely functional equivalents. Modern etic terminologies are often applied on earlier periods of non-Western cultures in international academic discourses about modernity and secularity, which we can of course not avoid, but careful reflection and communication about what we exactly mean seems sensible.

Speaking in broader terms, I personally think, that in our present global environmental crisis, Bhutan deserves special attention and admiration with its policies of “Gross National Happiness” (GNH) and as being the only carbon-negative country in the world. Bhutan plays indeed a pioneering and unfortunately quite lonely role in persistently and globally raising awareness for the need of alternative sustainable economic models.

**NL:** How does the metaphor of a *maṇḍala* in your paper title allude to the research topic?

**DS:** I intentionally but creatively allude to a *maṇḍala* in the title and subsection of my article because some of its numerous meanings relate closely to my research on boundaries between the societal spheres of religion and politics in Bhutan and in the Tibetan cultural area as a whole: a *maṇḍala* can, for example, symbolically represent a cosmological, geo-political, and also societal scheme.

While the meaning of a *maṇḍala* transgresses duality ultimately, it nevertheless possesses distinctions and differentiations, which then define functions and rules when applied in our context, “secularities.”

Accordingly, to understand and describe distinction and differentiation processes within the cosmological order of Tantric Buddhism in Bhutan, the metaphor of a *maṇḍala* allows me to experimentally broaden our conceptual framework. Therefore, I proposed an additional analytical framework based on the cosmological order of Tantric Buddhism and Christoph Kleine’s “three-layered concept of immanence, relative transcendence and absolute transcendence.” This approach provided me with a more flexible avenue supplementing the usual Western analytical and etic categories and dichotomies such as “religion” and “politics.” I

hope this may prove fruitful for further studies on Bhutan and other regions and periods of the Tibetan cultural area.

**NL:** How can we understand secularity, particularly in Bhutan in a pre-modern context? How are the boundaries between religious and political spheres negotiated and institutionalized, semantically, in the *Bhutanese Legal Code from 1729*? And how does Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel embody the complex intertwine between the two spheres?

**DS:** We can understand “secularity” in Bhutan in a pre-modern context—here used as an analytical concept—mainly in two different ways. First, as a structural and functional differentiation of the societal spheres of religion and politics explicit in the institutionalization of the “Joint Twofold System of Governance” after the foundation of Bhutan in 1625/26. And, second, much more complicated, an enormous amount of Buddhist conceptions about just rule and kingship, legitimacy, political ethos, cosmology and social order that go far back to Tibetan, and even Indian ideas. They constitute, in many cases, conceptual distinctions between the societal spheres of religion and politics. Both aspects of “secularity” and what this meant in detail in Bhutan, at least in theory, can be traced in textual sources such as the different versions of the *Bhutanese Legal Code* and in other pre-modern elite discourses.

Based on my analysis of emic terminologies in the *Bhutanese Legal Code from 1729*, I pointed to some areas that indicate negotiations over, or formalization of, boundaries between the societal spheres of religion and politics in Bhutan. Examples would be the respective functions in society as religious, political, or administrative, and the actors executing them as being either lay or monastic—sometimes both. Also, the Buddhist ruler’s participation in politics, his status such as Cakravartin, a universal ruler, or Bodhisattva king, and competing forms of succession, such as



through incarnation, abbatial, hereditary or meritocratic, can tell us a lot about social differentiation processes. By an in-depth analysis of these areas of interest, we can begin to better understand why a government official who would fail to look after the “welfare and happiness” of the subjects would face the wrath of the Buddhist protector deities of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel’s Buddhist school, the Drukpa Kagyü. And, why would it also be the duty of the same government official, not only to enforce Buddhist religious and moral codes on the general populace, but also to regulate religious institutions and monastic rules, the Vinaya, in the public sphere?

When it comes to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–ca. 1651), the founder of Bhutan: As a charismatic Buddhist Tantric master and ruler, he embodied in theory and practice the union of the two spheres of religion and politics in Bhutan. As a Buddhist Tantric master and ruler, he was supposed to secure the material (immanent) and spiritual (transcendental) well-being and happiness of his subjects. This guaranteed harmony and peace within the country and protection against inner and outer enemies and other calamities. According to the cosmological order of Tantric Buddhism, the territories that Zhabdrung unified were perceived as the “spiritual field,” the *maṇḍala* of Zhabdrung’s protector deities.

Looking at Bhutan’s pathway towards modernity from a diachronic perspective, can also help to analyze, for example, what “modernized” or “secularized” Buddhist ethics and morality in the form of the Buddhism-induced policies of Gross National Happiness (GNH), mean—in particular, in terms of social differentiation and distinctions processes. How should we nowadays interpret social practices of Buddhist communal and state rituals in Bhutan, as cultural or religious practices?

Related to “secularity” in the broader pre-modern Tibetan cultural area, I contributed with my article [“Buddhism and Politics in the Tibetan Cultural Area”](#) to *The Companion to the Study of Secularity* of the Kolleg-Forschergruppe “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities.” It provides scholars from other fields of study who are interested in the concept of “multiple secularities” with a first overview about the formation of “secularity” in the Tibetan cultural area.

**NL:** Besides this research, what are you currently working on?

**DS:** Currently, I am working on my first monograph, *A Timely Message from the Cave: The Mahāmudrā Doctrine and Intellectual Agenda of dGe-bshes dGe-'dun-rin-chen (1926–1997), the Sixty-Ninth rJe-mkhan-po of Bhutan* resulting from my dissertation research and to be published in 2020 in the Indian and Tibetan Studies Series of the Department of Indian and Tibetan Studies at the University of Hamburg, Germany.

**NL:** What are the crucial topics your monograph will tackle?

**DS:** In my monograph, I will cover the thus-far unstudied reception history of the *mahāmudrā* doctrine and meditative system in the Bhutanese branch of the Drukpa Kagyü school between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Systematic criticism concerning specific features of *mahāmudrā* was first articulated by an eminent Tibetan scholar from the Sakya school, Sakya Paṇḍita in the thirteenth century. The debates that followed as a defense to his criticism triggered philosophical, doctrinal and often polemic debates among Tibetan Buddhist masters over many centuries. As *mahāmudrā* is the paramount doctrine in the Kagyü schools, we can figure easily how essential this topic for Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhist masters from the Kagyü schools in their writings has been.

In his *Timely Messenger*, an eminent master from the Drukpa Kagyü school in Bhutan, the sixty-ninth Chief Abbot of Bhutan, Geshe Chapu Gendün Rinchen (1926–1997), urgently calls for the correct understanding and practices of *mahāmudrā*. The monograph will include a critical edition from manuscripts and block prints, partially from the National Library of Bhutan in Thimphu, and a detailed annotated translation of this work. Geshe Chapu Gendün Rinchen's *Timely Messenger* is a prominent example of the relevance of the *mahāmudrā* controversy among traditional Buddhist masters up until the twentieth century—representing an ideal late moment of history in this debate. The *Timely Messenger* comprehensively addresses all topics of the debate and also makes the positions of the Drukpa Kagyü school's much earlier lineage masters visible, sometimes for the first time.

I was also fortunate to study the fascinating textual genesis of the *Timely Messenger* which actually is a commentary on earlier works of lineages masters of the Tibetan and Bhutanese branches of the Drukpa Kagyü schools. The textual genesis demonstrates how oral discourses and debates about *mahāmudrā* manifested into exegetical textual traditions that travelled between different schools and places in Tibet and Bhutan.

Following the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism after the 1950s, *mahāmudrā* became increasingly popular among Buddhist practitioners and academics in the West through charismatic Buddhist masters such as Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987), thereby bringing traditional Tibetan Buddhist masters into exchange with them. *Mahāmudrā* has been extensively taught until today in Buddhist centres and circles around the world. While popular and scholarly publications, as a result of this, prominently covered the Karma Kagyü schools, far fewer publications address the Drukpa Kagyü schools, and even fewer the Bhutanese branch of this school.

As the sixty-ninth Chief Abbot of Bhutan, Geshe Chapu Gendün Rinchen was the head of the religious branch of the “Joint Twofold System of Governance” which we talked about earlier—a highly revered position beside the Buddhist King of Bhutan. My publication also includes findings from my archival and field research in Bhutan in 2014. As a result, I make first accessible Geshe Chapu Gendün Rinchen’s hagiography and an analysis of his collected writings counting ten volumes and written in classical Tibetan to a broader Western audience. His hagiography was written by a close disciple and includes auto-biographical writings such as inspiring poems of spiritual realization, meditative experiences, and core instructions for disciples. He indeed greatly contributed with his writings and extensive activities to the religious institutions and the exegetical and doctrinal developments of the Drukpa Kagyü school in twentieth-century Bhutan, and is therefore considered one of the most outstanding Buddhist masters and scholars in Bhutan.

One of the reasons that Geshe Chapu Gendün Rinchen has not been very well known outside of Bhutan is that, contrary to contemporary masters such as Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910-91), he did not travel to the West nor had Western audiences. However, one of Geshe Chapu Gendün Rinchen’s works, *The Divine Madman: the sublime life and songs of Drukpa Kunley*, is probably known to anyone who is interested in Tibetan Buddhism in its English translation by Keith Dowman and Sonam Paljor. This exciting biography is about the scandalous Drukpa Kunley (1455–1529), one of the famous Tibetan “Nyönpas,” Buddhist Tantric practitioners that were best-known for their “crazy wisdom.” Besides that, his history of the Drukpa Kagyü school and his hagiography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel have received wide academic appreciation outside of Bhutan.

Ngoc, thank you very much for the opportunity to talk about my research and work today!

**Dagmar Schwerk** is the current Khyentse Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Tibetan Buddhist Studies at the University of British Columbia, Department of Asian Studies. She was the recipient of an MA and PhD scholarship from The German National Merit Foundation (Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes) and the Khyentse Foundation Award for Excellence in Buddhist Studies in 2012 as well as a 2016 Dissertation Fellow of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhist Studies.

You can read her biographical profile and publications in the links below:

[Dagmar Schwerk | The Department of Asian Studies, UBC](#)

[Dagmar Schwerk | Kolleg-Forscherguppe “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”](#)

Schwerk, Dagmar. [“Drawing Lines in a Mandala: A Sketch of Boundaries Between Religion and Politics in Bhutan.”](#) Working Paper Series of the HCAS “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities” 12. Leipzig University, 2019.

Schwerk, Dagmar. [“Buddhism and Politics in the Tibetan Cultural Area.”](#) In Companion to the Study of Secularity. Edited by HCAS “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities.” Leipzig University, 2019.

For more details on the theoretical and methodological framework of the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies (HCAS) Kolleg-Forscherguppe “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities,” please refer to the research program:

[https://www.multiple-secularities.de/media/multiple\\_secularities\\_research\\_programme.pdf](https://www.multiple-secularities.de/media/multiple_secularities_research_programme.pdf)

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