A study on the historical foundations of Bhutan, with a critical edition and translation of certain Bhutanese texts in Tibetan

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Abstract

The small kingdom of Bhutan in the Eastern Himalayas is perhaps the least well known of all the independent countries of Asia. The purpose of this study is to examine the cultural and political evolution which led to its creation as a unified state in the 17th century. Research is based on certain documents copied by the author during his stay in Bhutan, augmented by Tibetan records. The work falls into two parts, preceded by an introduction which tries to explain the ethnic and linguistic backcloth, as well as the sources, aim and scope of the study. Part I is an analytical survey of 1) origin myths, 2) the evolution of Buddhist schools and 3) the creation of the Bhutanese theocracy in the 17th century. Later developments which led to the institution of the present monarchy in the early years of this century are briefly alluded to in the concluding section. In Part 2 are presented five original texts relating to the subjects discussed in Part 1. These include the critical edition and translation of two works dating from the 18th century which reveal the ancient non-monastic units of rule in central and eastern Bhutan and their absorption into the theocracy during the middle years of the 17th century. The third text is the Bhutanese legal code of 1729 and the fourth is the 1627 account by the Jesuit Cacella of his stay in Bhutaji and his close association with Zhabs-drung Ngag-dbang rNam-rgyal, founder of the Bhutanese theocracy. The final text is a ritual one, pregnant with historical associations, which continues to govern the conduct of a ceremonial militia during the official New Year, It is reproduced here in the form in which it was first presented by the author in BSOAS 39(3).