

Political reasons behind the ambiguity of the treaty of Punakha

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Abstract

The 1910 Treaty of Punakha between the British and Bhutanese remains a problem for scholars and diplomats because the agreement did not unambiguously clarify Bhutan's status in relation to the Empire. Starting from a 1906 letter from Ugyen Wangchuck to the Viceroy of India, the paper analyzes the position of the Government of India regarding the future of the Anglo-Bhutanese relationship. With that letter, the Bhutanese seemed to accept British supremacy. Sir Louis Dane suggested proceeding in this direction. Charles Lennox Somerville Russell, however, was more cautious and asked to listen to the opinion of John Claude White. The latter interpreted the letter as "a complimentary one." In this context, the paper takes into consideration a letter from Francis Younghusband with which Lord Minto himself agreed. According to Younghusband, keeping the friendship with Bhutan alive without intervening in national politics could positively impact the relationship with Tibet. Therefore, the paper attempts to elucidate the Treaty of Punakha by hypothesizing that the advice expressed by Younghusband motivated, at least in part, the ambiguous wording of the agreement.

Keywords: Bhutan, Ugyen Wangchuck, British empire, Tibet, treaty of Punakha

1. Introduction¹

The history of Anglo-Bhutanese relations can be traced back to the second half of the eighteenth century, with an early mission led by the Scotsman George Bogle (1746-1781) following an agreement between the Druk Desi of Bhutan and the East India Company (Singh, 1972, pp. 30-32; Deb, 1971). Other British missions followed until the humiliating experience of Ashley Eden. Indeed, in 1863, Eden was forced by the Bhutanese to sign a treaty written in Tibetan that he had not had the opportunity to negotiate.² That dishonor was then followed by the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1864-1865 which ended with the Treaty of Sinchula.³ Twenty years later, in 1885, the internal balance of the Himalayan country was upset by the victory of the Tongsa Penlop, Ugyen Wangchuck, in the Battle of Changlimithang against his enemies, the Thimphu and Punakha dzongpons, while the Paro Penlop and the Wangdi Phodrang Dzongpon had fought alongside him (Phuntsho, 2013, pp. 485-492; White, 1909, pp. 131-134 and 281). Ugyen Wangchuck played the role of mediator between the British and Tibetans during the Younghusband expedition of 1903-1904⁴ and he was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1905 (White, 1909, pp. 140-144). In 1907 he was crowned the first king (*Druk Gyalpo*) of the country and in 1910 relations between British India and Bhutan were redefined with the Treaty of Punakha. The document profoundly marked Bhutanese history in the 20th century and helped secure Bhutan's independence after the departure of the British from India. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the reasons behind the treaty and its formulation.

¹ The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments which contributed greatly to the improvement of the paper. In order to make reading easier, the APA referencing style was used only for secondary sources. The primary sources were indicated in the footnotes in a manner consistent with historical research.

² The English translation of the treaty signed by Eden with the Bhutanese is in D. H. E. Sunder, *Survey and Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri, 1889 – 1895*, Calcutta 1895, pp. 30-31. On the mission led by Eden and other British missions in Bhutan, see Eden, Pemberton, & Bose (1865).

³ The full text of the Treaty of Sinchula is in *East India (Bootan). Further papers relating to Bootan*, House of Commons Papers, 13, Vol. LII, London 1866, pp. 94-95.

⁴ To be precise, during the Younghusband Expedition, only the Tibetans formally recognized Ugyen Wangchuck as a mediator. The National Archives, London, Kew (further only TNA), FO 535/4, Inclosure 2 in No. 22, Mr. Walsh to Colonel Younghusband, June 12, 1904: (A.) Letter from the Dalai Lama to the Tongsa Penlop, sent by Lama Se-kong Tulku, dated April 28, 1904, pp. 45-46 [English translation]; TNA, FO 535/4, Inclosure 2 in No. 22, Mr. Walsh to Colonel Younghusband, June 12, 1904: (B.) Letter from the Thibetan Council ("Ka-sha"), to the Tongsa Penlop, dated January 19, 1904, pp. 46-47 [English translation]; TNA, FO 535/4, Inclosure 1 in No. 14, Mr. Walsh to Colonel Younghusband, June 3, 1904, p. 24; TNA, FO 535/3, Inclosure 9 in No. 94, Government of India to Mr. Walsh, May 26, 1904, p. 142.

2. Interpreting the treaty

The definition of the Anglo-Bhutanese relationship after the 1910 Treaty of Punakha is notoriously problematic. There are those who have simplified the issue by using the term ‘protectorate.’ This is, for example, the case of the chapter on Bhutan published in the *Columbia Chronologies of Asian History and Culture* (White, 2000, pp. 384-388). Indeed, according to Pamela White (2000, p. 386) “*January 8, 1910: By the Treaty of Punakha, Bhutan becomes a full British protectorate, placing its foreign policy under control of British government of India. Britain pledges not to interfere in Bhutan’s internal affairs.*” It would also be a protectorate for several other authors, including, just to name a few, Misra (1989, p. 72), Guyot-Réchard (2017, p. 65), Van Praagh (2003, p. 343), Bajpai (1964, p. 17) Alexandrowicz (2017, p. 207). Although widespread, this interpretation is essentially a perhaps excessive simplification. Sinha (2001, p. 103) even goes so far as to define the country as an “*Indian princely state.*” De Riencourt (1951, p. 102) had a different view. According to him “*The British [...] established a protectorate over Sikkim state and a semi-protectorate over Bhutan.*”⁵

The problem for scholars of political history or international law arises precisely from the interpretation of the Treaty of Punakha.⁶ The document amended and integrated the Treaty of Sinchula of 1865. First, the new treaty doubled the annual allowance that the British paid to the Bhutanese from 50,000 to 100,000 rupees. Then it guaranteed the full autonomy of the Bhutanese government in the internal affairs of the kingdom (“*The British Government undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan*”), but at the same time: “*On its part, the Bhutanese Government agrees to be guided by the advice of the British Government in regard to its external relations. In the event of disputes with or causes of complaint against the Maharajas of Sikkim and Cooch Behar, such matters will be referred for arbitration to the British Government which will settle them in such manner as justice may require, and insist upon the observance of its decision by the Maharajas named.*” Therefore, while recognizing British guidance, the Kingdom did not completely renounce its own foreign policy.

⁵ For a more careful and precise analysis of the issue, see Álvarez Ortega, 2024. Sincere thanks to my friend Prof. Miguel Álvarez Ortega for sending me the draft of his precious work.

⁶ Full text: Cd. 5240, *East India (Tibet). Further papers relating to Tibet*, London 1910, Treaty with Bhutan, signed 8th January 1910, No. 346, p. 214.

The problem, far from being a purely academic dispute, also moved to the diplomatic level. In August 1949, in fact, the terms of the Treaty of Punakha were transferred to the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Bhutan: “*The Government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations.*” (Article II).⁷ The same year, in October, Mao took power in Peking. Due to the threat – which later came to pass – of the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese communists, the question of Bhutan’s status thus emerged among Western diplomats.⁸ About twenty years later, the issue was revived when Bhutan was about to join the United Nations. In that period, the British documentation became of enormous interest to the Bhutanese.⁹ At the same time the British themselves searched their archives for the answer to the question. Entry into the United Nations and the possibility of entry into the Commonwealth revealed the need to better understand the country’s status. T.H.R. Cashmore (S. & S.E. Asia Section, RD) wrote on December 4, 1970: “*The status of Bhutan was and is sui generis. It is not an Indian Protectorate (contrast the 1950 Sikkim Treaty [...] and probably not even a Protected State since India has no defence obligations or rights under the existing treaty [...]. Nevertheless India appears to regard it as a Protectorate.*”¹⁰

This paper will not propose a further interpretation of the Treaty, but instead will investigate the reasons for such an ambiguous formula. In particular, this paper proposes a discussion that took place in 1906, the year before the coronation of Ugyen Wangchuck, relating to a declaration made by the latter. As will be seen, that declaration had initially been read

⁷ Full text of the treaty in A. J. Peaslee, *Constitutions of Nations*, Volume I: Afghanistan to Finland, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1956, pp. 172-174.

⁸ “*I might mention that the United States Ambassador last month in the course of a talk with Roberts on Tibet said that he thought that it was necessary to have a clear idea of the exact constitutional position of Bhutan ad this might assume importance in the event of Chinese Communists taking over Tibet and then bringing pressure to bear on Bhutan.*” TNA, FO/371/84250, J. G. Taylor (Office of the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom, New Delhi) to Miss E. J. Emery (Commonwealth Relations Office), January 14, 1950.

⁹ “*You may recall that in August 1970 you sent me a minute about the Bhutan Government’s interest in obtaining copies of archive materials in the India Office Library and Records relating to the history of Bhutan. Since then Bhutan has shown spasmodic interest in our records, firstly in asking for copies of certain maps and more recently in enquiring generally about the possibility of tracing and microfilming virtually all documents in the India Office Records relating to the history of Bhutan from the late 18th century down to Indian Independence.*” TNA, FCO/37/751, The India Office Library and Records (Minute by M.I. Moir, India Office Records) to Mr Birch (Foreign Office), November 2, 1971, fol. 44.

¹⁰ TNA, FCO/37/751, T.H.R. Cashmore to Mr. Lyne (Commonwealth Co-ordination Dept.), December 4, 1970, fol. 30.

as a clear recognition of Bhutanese submission to the British. Later, thanks to the interpretation given by John Claude White followed by wise advice expressed by Francis Younghusband regarding relations with Bhutan and Ugyen Wangchuck, the Government of India reconsidered the text of the letter and above all the possible political and diplomatic consequences. 1906 is also the year of the Convention between Great Britain and China respecting Tibet. The agreement was signed in Peking and partially reiterated some of the points defined in the agreement signed in Lhasa in 1904.¹¹ With the 1906 Convention the British agreed “*not to annex Tibetan territory or to interfere in the administration of Tibet.*” On the other hand, the Chinese government “*undertakes not to permit any other foreign State to interfere with the territory or internal administration of Tibet.*” In this context, in which Anglo-Tibetan relations remained fragile and unpredictable, Younghusband’s words became a guide for Lord Minto himself.

3. Ugyen Wangchuck’s letter

On January 5, 1906, Ugyen Wangchuck wrote a letter (*kharita*) to the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, Lord Minto:¹²

“To

*The foot of the most high and noble golden throne of the world
Commanding Ruler, His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor-General of India.*

*With most sincere wishes for the welfare and prosperity from
the Tongsa Penlop of Bhutan, K.C.I.E.*

Henceforth His Most Gracious Majesty the King-Emperor and His Excellency the Viceroy are as the sun and moon, and we the minor Chiefs under the Supreme Government as the stars. As the stars and constellations never fail in loyally attending on the sun and moon, so do we the entire Bhutanese Nation resolve to do likewise to the Supreme Government hoping that as the sun and moon are like the parents of the whole world, we also will enjoy the blessings of their beneficent rays for ever and ever till the cessation of worldly existence.

¹¹ Cd. 3088, Convention between Great Britain and China respecting Tibet. Signed at Peking, April 27, 1906, London 1906. Chinese text: Treaties, Conventions, etc., between China and Foreign States 1917, pp. 652-654

¹² National Archives of India, New Delhi (further only NAI), Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), Kharita from the Tongsa Penlop to His Excellency, January 5, 1906, pp. 13-14.

I, on behalf of the whole Bhutan Durbar comprising Raja and ministers, beg to offer this with our most sincere and earnest prayers on this the 10th day of the 11th month of the Bhutia Shingdul year (5th January 1906)."

The kharita thrilled Sir Louis Dane, Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department who interpreted the text as "*a very important admission of subordination by Bhutan.*"¹³ The letter had been delivered to the Prince of Wales – the future George V – during his visit to India by Ugyen Wangchuck himself.¹⁴ The political weight of that document was fundamental for Dane because "*The Tongsa Penlop was specially deputed by the Deb Dharma Raja to represent him and he was accompanied by the Deb Zimpon and another member of the Bhutan Council, so that he is fully qualified to speak as he does on behalf of Bhutan.*"¹⁵ Indeed, according to Dane, "*The letter should appear in Aitchison,*" as if it were a new treaty between Bhutan and the United Kingdom that "*settles the question of the status of Bhutan once for all.*"¹⁶ He suggested "*to send it home with a despatch detailing the circumstances of the visit and the nature of the treatment accorded to the Tonga Penlop here, as marking the formal inclusion of Bhutan amongst the feudatories of the Empire.*"¹⁷ Even Robert E. Holland, at the time officiating assistant secretary of the foreign department to the Government of India,¹⁸ was aware of the importance of the document. However, he suggested caution regarding the immediate use of that document as a source for revising the Treaty of Sinchula of 1865. He wrote on January 26:

"The profession of loyalty made in the Tongsa Penlop's letter amounts to the expression of a desire that Bhutan should, for the future, be included among the feudatory States of the Indian Empire. If, however, any formal steps were taken by the Government of India in compliance with the Tongsa

¹³ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), L. W. Dane, January 8, 1906, p. 4.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), L. W. Dane, January 21, 1906, p. 4.

¹⁸ The India Office List for 1920, p. 595.

Penlop's desire, it would mean an alteration in the Treaty relations which have hitherto existed between the Government of India and the Bhutan State. [...] Having regard to the fact that all Treaties with the Bhutan State in the past were made with the Deb and Dharma Rajas, and that the present Deb and Dharma Raja is still the de jure Ruler of the State, I venture to think that, even though the Tongsa Penlop has been deputed to Calcutta on this occasion as the representative of the Raja, yet this fact should not be regarded as conferring upon him power to make any formal declaration as to the policy of his State, which may be inconsistent with the provisions of existing Treaties. But, on the other hand, it does not appear necessary that the document should be made the basis of any formal claim by the Government of India at the present moment, and, even if it is regarded merely as an informal assurance, its importance is hardly lessened on this account. It will be possible, in consequence of its existence, gradually to place our relations with the Bhutan State on the same footing as those with other States in India and, so long as the Tongsa Penlop is in power.”¹⁹

Finally, the position of Charles Lennox Somerville Russell was perhaps the most cautious. Charles Lennox Somerville Russell was the deputy secretary of the foreign department to the government of India.²⁰ Russell chimed in on January 29, defining Ugyen Wangchuck's letter “primarily a complimentary communication presented on a ceremonial occasion” and invited to ask for John Claude White's opinion, to be able to specify the nature of the response as well as the subjects to whom it should be sent: “If the Tongsa Penlop be regarded as the real Chief, as in fact he appears to be, it is to be borne in mind that his honourable reception in Calcutta has constituted in a manner a reply to his address. If on the other hand the Deb Raja be looked to as the true Chief of Bhutan, it will

¹⁹ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), R. E. Holland, January 26, 1906, p. 5.

²⁰ The India Office List for 1916, p. 664.

be necessary to avoid offence to the Tongsa Penlop's susceptibilities. In any case the terms of the reply would presumably be mainly of a formal and complimentary character.”²¹

John Claude White's response to the Government of India's query arrived on February 22. The text had to extinguish the enthusiasm of the first days. The British political officer in Sikkim wrote at the end of his short communication: “*the letter was only a complimentary one and that no reply is necessary.*”²² The next day, Russell intervened again on the matter and therefore advised against proceeding further.²³ However, White's letter had not yet changed Dane's mind. Indeed, Dane wrote on February 24: “*Have we ever received such a letter from Bhutan before? I must confess that the wording of it looks as if it was intended to mark a new departure and the Tongsa Penlop's action in presenting it himself on behalf of the whole Bhutan Durbar comprising Raja and Ministers was significant. Why should the word “Henceforth” be used, also what is the meaning of the expression “we the minor Chiefs under the Supreme Government”. To the best of my belief we have never had any such admissions of subordination from Bhutan before, but the point should be examined.*”²⁴ According to Dane, that letter from Ugyen Wangchuck was different from previous communications that the Bhutanese had written in 1886 – and which also could be interpreted as an admission of submission of the Bhutanese to the British Empire²⁵ – and the letter from Ugyen Wangchuck of 1906.²⁶ There were also other letters sent in 1905 by Ugyen Wangchuck to Lord Curzon and the Foreign Secretary, as well as a letter of the same year “*from the*

²¹ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), L. Russell, January 29, 1906, pp. 5-6.

²² NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), From the Political Agent in Sikkim to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department, February 17, 1906 (received February 22, 1906), p. 15.

²³ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), C. L. S. Russell, February 23, 1906, p. 7.

²⁴ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), L. W. Dane, February 24, 1906, p. 7.

²⁵ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), K. F., March 2, 1906, R. W. S., March 2, 1906, p. 7.

²⁶ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), L. W. Dane, March 5, 1906, p. 7.

Lamas and Ministers of Bhutan in Council to the Political Officer in Sikkim.”²⁷ According to Dane, the British Mission to Tibet of 1903-1904 led by Francis Younghusband had also changed the attitude of the Bhutanese. In fact, Dane wrote on March 5:

“Just as I thought there is the widest possible difference in tone between the two letters of 1886 and the letters written since the Tibet Mission, after which the de facto Government of Bhutan evidently fully decided to come under the ægis of the British Government. It is therefore important to show that we have taken note of the change and a short despatch to Secretary of State should be prepared explaining the doubtful attitude of Bhutan in 1903, the change after the arrival of the Tibet Mission in Chumbi, the reasons why it was thought desirable to invite the Bhutan Deb Dharma Raja to Calcutta, his reply to the invitation, the coming of the Tongsa Penlop as the representative of the Bhutan Government, and his proceedings as such including the formal tendering of this letter at the return visit of His Royal Highness and the sending of a similar letter to the Viceroy. The despatch might conclude with an expression of satisfaction at the very friendly and intimate relations which have been opened up with Bhutan in which our officers have now freely travelled, and attention can be drawn to the wording of the letter, which as a formal summing up of the attitude of the Bhutan Durbar as expressed in several similar letters received since April 1905, is very significant and is in happy contrast to the few communications that were received from the Durbar before the Tibet Mission.”²⁸

4. Francis Younghusband’s advice

To better understand subsequent British actions, alongside the discussion relating to the kharita, reference should be made at this point to a note by Francis Younghusband

²⁷ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), K. F., March 2, 1906, R. W. S., March 2, 1906, p. 7.

²⁸ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), L. W. Dane, April 21, 1906, p. 8.

regarding Bhutan and Ugyen Wangchuck.²⁹ The note is dated April 23, 1906. Two days earlier, Dane had suggested hearing his opinion after the Viceroy had reported to him that “*His Majesty’s Government is very nervous about our proceedings in Tibet.*”³⁰ Lord Minto suggested “*to suspend any action drawing attention to the result of the Mission as affecting Bhutan.*”³¹ Younghusband did not intervene directly on the question of the kharita, but presented his opinion on relations with Bhutan which had to definitely circumscribe the enthusiasm of Dane and those who were inclined towards a full submission of the Himalayan country to the Raj. Younghusband’s letter thus appears central in the attempt to define the objectives and boundaries of British political action in the region. In the text, Younghusband explained how, after the occupation of the Chumbi Valley by the British, the Bhutanese “*decided to throw in their lot with us and having once made the decision they stuck to it thoroughly.*”³² Younghusband recalls Ugyen Wangchuck’s commitment to accompanying him to the Tibetan capital and that the future king “*was of great use as an intermediary with the Tibetans.*”³³ According to Younghusband, that experience had allowed Ugyen Wangchuck to better understand British power, but also the possibility of a better and benevolent relationship.³⁴ However, Younghusband wrote: “*But we can hardly expect Bhutanese enthusiasm to always remain at its present temperature.*”³⁵ According to him, after the British withdrawal from the Chumbi Valley, things would change, although he hoped “*however that we shall always keep*

²⁹ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), F. Younghusband, April 23, 1906, pp. 8-9.

³⁰ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), L. W. Dane, March 5, 1906, p. 7.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem, p. 9.

³³ Ibidem. Younghusband recognized in this letter the importance of the help given by Ugyen Wangchuck during the Expedition. It should be remembered, however, that the English had refused to officially recognize Ugyen Wangchuck’s role as mediator, unlike the Tibetans. TNA, FO 535/4, Inclosure 2 in No. 22, Mr. Walsh to Colonel Younghusband, June 12, 1904: (A.) Letter from the Dalai Lama to the Tongsa Penlop, sent by Lama Se-kong Tulku, dated April 28, 1904, pp. 45-46 [English translation]; TNA, FO 535/4, Inclosure 2 in No. 22, Mr. Walsh to Colonel Younghusband, June 12, 1904: (B.) Letter from the Thibetan Council (“ Ka-sha ”), to the Tongsa Penlop, dated January 19, 1904, pp. 46-47 [English translation]; TNA, FO 535/4, Inclosure 1 in No. 14, Mr. Walsh to Colonel Younghusband, June 3, 1904, p. 24; TNA, FO 535/3, Inclosure 9 in No. 94, Government of India to Mr. Walsh, May 26, 1904, p. 142.

³⁴ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), F. Younghusband, April 23, 1906, p. 9.

³⁵ Ibidem.

*up a light and delicate touch with the Bhutanese and not let go of them entirely.”³⁶ It was necessary to avoid in any way interfering in the internal balance of the small Himalayan state and to ensure that the Bhutanese became aware of this choice: “*The last thing in the world that we can desire is to get entangled in their internal affairs, and we should be very careful indeed to avoid anything which would lead up to an entanglement and to make it absolutely clear that we have no time or inclination to meddle with matters which concern themselves alone.*”³⁷ This position, however, should not jeopardize the good relations that had now been established:*

“I think there is advantage in making it equally clear that we do regard the preservation of general friendly relations with them as a matter of importance – that we are not wholly indifferent to them or forgetful of the friendly attitude they preserved during the time the Mission was in Tibet[.]

The conferring of the K.C.I.E upon the Tongsa Penlop and the invitation to the Deb or Dharm Raja to visit Calcutta have sufficiently shown this regard for the present. From year to year in the future an occasion may arise I hope that similar token of regard for the rulers of Bhutan may be shown. As long as Mr White is in Sikkim, I am sure that the personal relations with the Bhutanese will be friendly, and if local officers can interchange letters and small presents now and then with the leading Bhutanese and the Government of India send an occasional complimentary letter or invitation, we shall, I hope, be able to prevent the Bhutanese drifting back into the sulky mood they used to preserve.”³⁸

At this point Younghusband suggested a broader reading of the Anglo-Bhutanese relationship, highlighting the effects of this on the relationship with Lhasa:

“And if we can thus keep the Bhutanese cheerful and well-disposed towards us the effect upon the Tibetans may not be small. They will be able to report in Tibet from year to year that as far as their experience goes the English are a pleasant enough people to deal with as long as they are not rubbed up

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Ibidem.

the wrong way, and this will go some little way towards producing in the Tibetans that generally favourable temper towards us which was my chief aim in Tibet and which we might have produced if we had not been compelled to scurry back from Lhasa so quickly. My advice then, as regards Bhutan, would be to avoid, as we would avoid putting our hand into a wasp's nest, making any move which might lead insensibly on to entanglement in the internal affairs of the country but to avoid likewise running into the opposite extreme of preserving a frigid aloofness and taking not the slightest interest whatever in the welfare of men who stood by us well when their aid was most needed. I would therefore recommend that local officers should be encouraged to keep up good personal relations with the Tongsa Penlop, the Trimpuk Jongpen, and other leading men in Bhutan who have already been brought in contact with British officials and that the Government of India should by an occasional complimentary letter or invitation show their continued regard for Bhutan.”³⁹

This last section of the letter seems perhaps the most interesting part from the perspective of our research. If, as is evident, there was a British interest in staying away from that “wasp's nest” in Bhutan, at the same time Younghusband suggested a beneficial effect on the image of the British in Tibet. Bhutanese autonomy therefore had to be preserved both to avoid political problems, but at the same time to redefine the British image in the eyes of the Tibetans.

On April 28, Lord Minto intervened in the matter with a very short note in which he agreed with Younghusband: “Sir F. Younghusband's note is of great value as coming from him. I need not say how thoroughly I agree with it.”⁴⁰

5. Conclusion

This work attempted to analyze the different positions within the Government of India through the discussion that followed a 1906 letter from Ugyen Wangchuck to the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, Lord Minto. As seen, the letter was interpreted by Sir Louis Dane

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ NAI, Government of India, Foreign Department, External A, Proceedings, May 1906, Nos. 84-86 (Simla Records), M[into], April 28, 1906, p. 9.

as the definitive Bhutanese full acceptance of British supremacy, while others had read the text in a more nuanced sense until John Claude White's clarification. Subsequently, the paper analyzed Francis Younghusband's letter which suggested a more far-sighted political line. Younghusband understood the importance of strengthening the relationship of mutual trust that had been built over the years with the Bhutanese, also as proof to propose to the Tibetans of British good faith towards the Tibetans. Younghusband did not specifically mention it in the letter, but it is easy for us to think of the mistakes, the imprudent actions, but also the objective difficulties in managing the relationship with Sikkim⁴¹ and imagine the tension generated in the Tibetan Government. The Tibetans had crossed the borders of Sikkim in 1886 to prevent a mission to Lhasa that the English had agreed with Peking.⁴² Then in 1888 the British intervened to expel the Tibetans and that expedition was followed in 1890 by the *Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet* in which Peking officially recognized Sikkim as a British protectorate.⁴³ In December 1894, the convention was then integrated by the *Regulations regarding Trade, Communication, and Pasturage*.⁴⁴ Just under ten years later the English were forced to invade Tibet. On the other hand, relations with Bhutan were based on a different path that had matured over time and taken on a new form. The times of the humiliating treatment suffered by Ashley Eden seemed far away.

⁴¹ The English had defeated the Sikkimese in the short war of 1861 and had then signed the Treaty of Tumlong which severely limited the external and internal autonomy of the small country. Text of the Treaty of Tumlong: British Library, London (further only BL), IOR/L/PS/20/CA1, The Secretary to the Government of India to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, April 16th, 1861, fol. 156, p. 6. On the Anglo-Sikkim War of 1861 see A. MCKAY, "A Difficult Country, a Hostile Chief, and a still more Hostile Minister": the Anglo-Sikkim War of 1861, in: Bulletin of Tibetology, 45, 2, 2009 and 46, 1, 2010, pp. 31-48.

⁴² BL, IOR/L/MIL/17/12/60, *Report on the Sikkim Expedition: From January 1888 to January 1890*, prepared (under the orders of the Quarter Master General in India) by Lieutenant C. J. Markham, in the Intelligence Branch, Calcutta 1890, pp. 1-2; *Frontier and overseas expeditions from India*, compiled in the Intelligence Branch Division of the Chief of the Staff Army Head Quarters, India, Vol. IV, North and North-Eastern Frontier Tribes, Simla 1907, p. 50; TNA, Foreign Office 17/1108, The Viceroy of India to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, 7th February 1888, Enclosure of a letter to Her Majesty's Secretary of State for India, No. 24, f. 21.

⁴³ C. 7312, *Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet. Signed at Calcutta, March 17, 1890. With Regulations appended thereto, signed at Darjeeling, December 5, 1893*, London 1894, Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet, pp. 1-3. The Chinese text is in *Treaties, Conventions, etc., between China and Foreign States*, Vol. I, Second Edition, published by Order of the Inspector General of Customs, Shanghai 1917, pp. 513-515.

⁴⁴ C. 7312, *Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet. Signed at Calcutta, March 17, 1890. With Regulations appended thereto, signed at Darjeeling, December 5, 1893, London 1894*, Regulations regarding Trade, Communication, and Pasturage, to be appended to the Sikkim-Tibet Convention of 1890, pp. 3-5. The Chinese text is in: *Treaties, Conventions, etc., between China and Foreign States* 1917, pp. 516-519

Bhutan was now different and approaching the moment of the greatest institutional change since it was founded in the 17th century. Yet as Younghusband's words demonstrate, caution was more than necessary. The discussion analyzed so far provides us with precious elements to understand the reason for that very cautious formula inserted in the Treaty of Punakha. Knowing the subsequent history, we understand that those full guarantees on internal autonomy as well as that ambiguous formula with respect to foreign policy, then reproduced in 1949 in the treaty with independent India, allowed Bhutan to remain independent and then to be admitted to the United Nations in 1971. On the contrary, continuing the parallel mentioned above, Sikkim not only failed to join the UN, but in 1975 it was annexed by India.

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