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Reflections on the Role of University Research (འབྲུག་ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་) in the Bhutanese Context

FRANÇOISE POMMARET

Abstract

This article presents an overview of the history and concept of university and research that will be linked to issues, such as methodology, validation, ethics and religion. It also explores the similarities between modern methodology and ancient Buddhist and Socratic methods. It finally argues that academic institutions which provide a space for academic freedom and tolerance have a crucial role to play in contemporary Bhutan.

Introduction

The universities were founded in the early Middle Ages in Europe when urbanisation and the bourgeoisie grew significantly in size and wealth. A university was an "association of students and teachers with collective legal rights usually guaranteed by charters issued by princes, prelates, or the towns in which they were located." Universities were at that time what we call today civil societies.

Prior to their formal establishment, many medieval universities were run for hundreds of years as Christian cathedral schools or monastic schools (*Scholae monasticae*), in which monks and nuns taught classes; evidence of these immediate forerunners of the later university at many places dates back to the 6th century AD (Riché, 1978). The earliest universities were developed under the aegis of the western church, usually from cathedral schools or by papal bull as *studia generalia*. Later they were also founded by Kings or municipalities. In the early medieval period, most universities were founded from pre-existing schools, usually when these schools were deemed to have become primarily sites of higher education. (Wikipedia, Medieval Universities section, para. 1)

Universities became popular all over Europe, as rulers and city governments created them to satisfy the thirst for knowledge, and the belief that society would benefit from the scholarly expertise generated from these institutions. Princes and leaders perceived the potential benefit of having a scholarly expertise develop with the ability to address difficult problems and achieve desired ends. By the 18th century, universities published their own research journals and by the 19th century, the German and the French university models had arisen. The German, or Humboldtian model, was conceived by Wilhelm von Humboldt stressing on the importance of freedom, seminars, and laboratories in universities. The French university model involved strict discipline and control over every aspect of the university.

Religion played a significant role in university curriculum (logic, medicine, theology, mathematics, astronomy (and astrology), law, grammar and rhetoric) but the role of religion

decreased from the 19th century when universities started to teach science subjects detached from religion.

This very brief history is relevant to Bhutan today because several centuries later, the Bhutan university establishment was born the same way as the Western universities:

- in Bhutan, the religious schools and scholars played a prominent role in the education system,
- the university was born out of the need for specialised human resources in an urbanised environment,
- the university was established with a commitment to academic freedom and,
- it was created by Royal Charter in 2003.

Besides teaching, research is one of the two key activities of any university.

Bhutanese scholars, mostly clerics, had in the past their traditional way of doing research, even if the modern concept was not known to them (Mynak Tulku, 2002; Pommaret, 2000). Their work was to keep religious tradition and great deeds of their masters alive for the next generations. Without conceptualising their activities, they were fulfilling two goals of research: documenting and passing on a heritage and they were carrying out the duty that they knew: to promote and pass on religious values that kept a society together.

Research and publications

Nowadays researchers tend to be focused on their findings, data and figures in an increasingly globalised and secular world. However even if the contemporary research setting does not call for religious values, researchers still have the duty to hold moral values and strong ethics which should be taught at the university. A researcher has a civil duty towards the society, and the pursuit of knowledge for intellectual satisfaction, fame or material gains is a selfish end.

Therefore the researcher has to be engaged in the society. The mainstream avenue for this engagement is the university, an integral part of the civil society. Research topics become part of the curriculum and enrich the lecturers as well as their students, and publications benefit the society as well as enhance the prestige of the university. However research at the university level faces a big challenge in today's world as Will Hutton from Hertford college in the UK underlines: "A culture of scholarship, the role of the teacher as teacher and the quest to know for the sake of knowing are to be replaced by a culture of consumer utility in which student choice and business need are kings. This is to be forced on universities by creating a new artificial market for student places and by research funding to be allocated less by what is intellectually compelling than what is commercially, and quickly, exploitable." ¹ Jules

¹ "The quest for knowledge is good in itself and helps the country thrive", *The Observer*, Sunday 25 September 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/25/tuition-fees-universities-coalition?commentpage=4#comment-12557936>

Hoffmann from the CNRS and 2011 Medicine Nobel Prize co-winner, mused after the announcement that he never thought that his lifelong obscure study on the immune system of mice would have such important consequences for the humankind and bring him such an award (*Le Monde*, 5 October 2011).²

Research is first a passion, a vocation. If a person is compelled to do research while not feeling a calling, it will be a waste of time and human resource. Second, it is a pursuit for the discovery of new elements in order to quench the universal quest of knowledge. Lastly it is also about transmitting this knowledge to the young generations through classes, lectures, seminars and publications.

A researcher without publications is not a researcher as he/she makes no tangible contribution to the society, and the institution where he/she is employed has no means to validate the findings.

Here lies the difference between researching as a private hobby or as an academic pursuit. Anybody can do research for any reason or purpose out of intellectual interest and keep it for oneself or decide to publish it as a personal work.

The difference between the research at an individual level and academic research is the importance given to methodology, strategies and validation procedures (Verification and Legitimacy, རིམས་མཐུན, and credibility ལྷོ་གཏད). A study has to be reviewed by peers to be valid, which does not mean it is, to use Buddhist concepts propagated by Nagarjuna, the absolute truth (དོན་དམ་བདེན་པ). It is a relative conventional truth (ཀླན་ཚོབ་བདེན་པ) by being the state of the topic at a defined time which will evolve with further research. Research is thus an excellent example of impermanence.

Methods in research

Methodology is the pillar of research. Although there is a standard methodology across the fields involving data collection and archiving, the research strategies can be quite different according to the subject (Creswell, 2008)

The quantitative strategy which place a lot of emphasis on sampling, figures, tables and structured questionnaires is extensively used in sciences, economics and sociology while the qualitative strategy which implies historical references, oral history, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, is most often associated with human sciences such as anthropology and history.

² http://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2011/10/04/jules-hoffmann-redevenons-enthousiastes-pour-la-science_1581830_3244.html

In fact today, as the delimitation between fields tend to blur, the Mixed Methods strategy is more and more prevalent. In Bhutan, an example of a remarkable historical research using mixed methods is *Population and governance in the mid 18th century Bhutan as revealed in the enthronement record of Thugs sprul 'Jigs med grags pa (1725-1761)* by John Ardussi and Karma Ura.

The basic questions in social and human sciences can be dubbed the WWWWH What, When, Where, Who, Why and How and can be summarised by the question "Who are the others?", a quest for knowledge on human societies.

This is the primary purpose of research in social and human sciences but the origin of anthropology as a field is known to have started with colonialism. In spite of its controversial origin and purpose, the field flourished, and supplementing history, archeology and now genetics and linguistic studies, remains pivotal to understand "the others".

Research in Bhutan and elsewhere today is often understood as applied research with immediate effect for planning, health and economic benefits. Social and Anthropological Research has applications in contemporary issues as it allows the planners and policies makers to have a base (ཞིབ་) on which to rely in order to take the appropriate decisions which will impact the nation's future. Exemples of such applied researches are common in Bhutan, notably in the fields of GNH studies, education, health and environment to mention a few.

However, whatever topic and field the researcher is focusing on, methodological and validation procedures have to be in place, and originality and absence of plagiarism are fundamental criteria for an authentic research. Plagiarism is one of the major issues that universities today have to face all over the world as information can be extracted from digital sources and checking procedures are becoming more complex. A slight oversight from the university can harm its reputation, much beyond the researcher at fault.

If contemporary international methods and tools are today the norm, Bhutanese could explore their own heritage to find that methods and validation were concepts that existed for centuries amongst the Buddhist scholars.

The Buddha devised a methodology to solve human sufferings, with identification of the problem, causes and treatment. Today it might be called identification, causes, and expected outcomes but it is the same logical mechanism. Like a contemporary researcher, the Buddha rationally debated with others but always avoided theological speculation. The concept of "discriminating knowledge"(ཤེས་རབ་) is central and made of three components Study (Sanskrit: *śruta*, Tibetan: མོས་པ་), Reflection (Sanskrit: *cintā*, Tibetan: བསམ་པ་) and Meditation (Sanskrit: *bhāvanā*, Tibetan: ལྷོམ་པ་). If we apply these three components to a contemporary research work,

the first two would be the same and meditation could be replaced by conclusion. Even today in the Himalayas, logic is one of the subjects of the monastic curriculum; logic (ཚད་མེད་) was often complemented by མྱོད་པ་, the energetic debate, which is an exercise of reasoning analysis and validation exercise.

Several masters wrote on this subject but one of the best known because his work has been translated into English, is Purbu Jok Jamba Gyatso (Phur bu lcog blo bzang tshul khriims byams pa rgya mtsho 1825-1901) who was the 12th and 13th Dalai-Lama philosophy tutor. He wrote a manual introducing beginners to the principles, vocabulary, and concepts of the system of logic. His purpose was to lay a foundation for understanding how valid cognition is acquired. What is validity? How is valid knowledge acquired? (Rogers, 2009; Perdue, 1992)

In our digital and social media age, several blogs in Tibetan uphold the tradition of robust debate (www.khabdha.org འཇམ་ལྷན་པོ་ *amongst others, presents all kinds of views on culture and religion*). These remarks do not imply in any way that one needs to be a Buddhist to do research but simply that Buddhist concepts, which have been part of the heritage of Bhutan, can be used as tools for research work even in our contemporary age and should not be relegated to the rank of antiquities or be the exclusive domain of the monks.

Interestingly, the Buddha was not the only master to have initiated such logic and analytic methods. Almost at the same time as the Buddha, the Greek philosopher, Socrates (469 BC-399 BC) gave his name to

a form of inquiry and debate between individuals with opposing viewpoints based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to illuminate ideas. It is a dialectical method, often involving an oppositional discussion in which the defense of one point of view is pitted against the defense of another; one participant may lead another to contradict him in some way, strengthening the inquirer's own point. The Socratic method searches for general, commonly held truths that shape opinion, and scrutinizes them to determine their consistency with other beliefs. Aristotle attributed to Socrates the discovery of the method of definition and induction, which he regarded as the essence of the scientific method. (Wikipedia, Socratic method section, para. 1&2)

The similarities between the two masters who elaborated methods to control the mind and devoted their life to teachings for the betterment of human condition have been discussed for centuries. Today more than 2 million internet pages are devoted to the subject. Some even suggested that there had been a meeting between the two, but this will remain a pure hypothesis. What makes both the Buddha and Socrates so relevant to research is that they hold no theological views, that is a belief in a higher being, and do not elaborate on life after death. Research and religion were often deemed incompatible and the discussion has been ongoing in

all the faiths for centuries, but the real issues are tolerance and respect of others' opinions and beliefs. Scientists often took a despising view of religious beliefs, in the name of "scientific truth" and religious hierarchies and clerics took a defiant stand in the name of "religious truth".

However the study of religion exists as a science. Theology is "the study of religious faith, practice, and experience; *especially*: the study of God and of God's relation to the world." (Merriam-Webster dictionary). It is therefore a term usually reserved for monotheist religions and Buddhism or Hinduism prefer to use the term philosophy.

In an academic context, the study of theology in institutions of higher education was linked with the founding of the institutions. For example, Taxila, now in Pakistan, was a centre of Vedic learning, possible from the 6th century BC or earlier; the Platonic Academy founded in Athens in the 4th century BC included theological themes in its subjects; the Chinese Taixue delivered Confucian teaching from the 2nd century BC; the School of Nisibis was a centre of Christian learning from the 4th century AD. Nalanda, Odantapuri and Vikramashila in India were sites of Buddhist higher learning from at least the 5th or 6th century AD; and the University of Al-Kraouine in Morocco or Al-Azhar University in Cairo were centres of Islamic learning from the 10th century.

However gradually theology being taught by religious orders and in religious institutions, became sterile as they were just repeating a curriculum without innovation and held it as the only valid one.

These religious institutions, whatever their denominations, were considered too sectarian and rigid for the 19th century growing scientific community. Moreover in many instances, theological dogma became a justification for religious zealots. Hence the birth, in the 19th century Germany, of a science called History of Religions, today also called Religious Studies, a recognised academic field which studies religions as socio-cultural phenomenon. The academic setting, far from dogma and emotional faith, allows scientific fruitful interfaith dialogue and comparative studies of religious phenomena in respect of others' sensitivities.

Bhutan is a country whose cultural heritage is strongly embedded into a distinctive religion. It has been objected by positivist thinkers that a researcher will not be able to contribute meaningfully because of the strong cultural background or *habitus*, to use a concept of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; or worst he/she might even contribute to the decay of religious beliefs by his/her findings. In short, that it might be difficult to be religious and do research.

In fact, it all depends the definition given to religion and the way the mind looks at it. The irony is that the etymology of the word "religion" is not even established and therefore its meaning can be interpreted in different ways. It comes from the Latin *religio*, the ultimate origins of which are obscure. One possibility is the interpretation traced to Cicero connecting *lego* "read", i.e. *re* (again) + *lego* in the sense of "choose", "go over again" or "consider

carefully". Another interpretation made prominent in the 5th century AD by the Christian theologian St. Augustine, who reshaped Christian thought, is from *ligare* "bind, connect", probably from a prefixed *re-ligare*, i.e. *re* (again) + *ligare* or "to reconnect"(Wikipedia). Research is generally defined as the search for knowledge, or as any systematic investigation, with an open mind, to establish novel facts, usually using a scientific method. The primary purpose for research, which is discovering, interpreting, and the development of methods and systems for the advancement of human knowledge on a wide variety of scientific matters of our world and the universe, does not therefore seem to be incompatible with religion which also looks for the betterment of human beings.

In the past centuries, researchers were embedded in their own cultural religious context, and still they did not see any problem in doing their research because they separated their personal/private sphere from their academic life and they had open-mindedness the indispensable quality of a researcher.

Research and religion

However, tensions arise between religious establishments and researchers when religious views are held as dogmas by theologians who are convinced they have the truth and that their beliefs are the only valid ones. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) the Italian revolutionary astronomer and philosopher was persecuted by the Catholic Church because of his findings about the universe, which according to the Church, were blasphemous. He was denounced to the Roman inquisition in 1615. In 1616, although he had been cleared of any offence, the Catholic Church still condemned his theory as the sun as the centre of the universe as "false and contrary to Scripture", and the ban was only lifted in 1992. In the USA today many Christian fundamentalists do not want the Darwinian concept of evolutionism taught in the schools because it opposes their belief in creationism. The debate has been raging for years and an encyclopedia online called "conservapedia" has been created to oppose any views which are not in the Bible. In 2008 16% of the science teachers in the USA did not accept the theory of evolutionism and one in eight are teaching creationism as a valid science (Holmes, 2008). Paul Krugman published an article *New York Times* on August 28, 2011 titled *Republicans against Science* in which he explains that "Mr. Perry, the governor of Texas [and contender for the Republican nomination], recently made headlines by dismissing evolution as 'just a theory,' one that has 'got some gaps in it' — an observation that will come as news to the vast majority of biologists. But what really got people's attention was what he said about climate change: 'I think there are a substantial number of scientists who have manipulated data so that they will have dollars rolling into their projects. And I think we are seeing almost weekly, or even daily, scientists are coming forward and questioning the original idea that man-made global warming is what is causing the climate to change.'"

These tensions arise between researchers and clerics in general but their arrival in the political arena are a new phenomenon. Research questions and redefines accepted knowledge or traditions. The 20th century discovery of important Buddhist ruins in Uzbekistan was unsettling for a hugely Muslim nation which had to reconsider its history (Yusupova, 2011). In fact Buddhism was brought to what was then Sogdiana from India at the beginning of the 1st century A.D. but the history textbooks of Uzbekistan never acknowledged it. Religions, countries, and traditions are fluid, permanent only in a given temporal space. Research which contributes to the advancement of knowledge, unearth inconvenient facts for many theologians who, irrespective of their denomination are set in their ways and convinced they have the ultimate truth. The Inquisition of the Christian church or the destruction of the Buddhas in Bamyán by the Talibans in 2001 are just two of the many examples of destruction in name of one's faith.

These cases are not about the incompatibility of research and religion but about research and intolerance. They bring to us the subject of tolerance and accepting new ideas which, even if they are not in harmony with ancient and personal beliefs, is one of the founding precepts of any university.

In the Himalayan world, for centuries it was believed that the earth was flat according to the Indian cosmogony as per the *Chos Mngon pa'i mdzod (Abidharmakosa)*, which is an important text in the monastic curriculum. However today, young monks have accepted as a fact that the earth is round.

An important idea in the definition of a university is the notion of academic freedom. The first documentary evidence of this comes from early in the life of the first university. People had the right to travel anywhere in quest of academic pursuits.

Conclusion

The Royal University of Bhutan is a space where tolerance and academic freedom, core values of an academic institution, must prevail for research to bloom, and researchers, regardless of their personal religious beliefs, which are protected by the constitution of Bhutan, can engage in a meaningful debate for the society they live in. This can be achieved by promoting a culture of tolerance, debate and discourse which has been the hallmark of the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha was a spiritual researcher and had the courage to break all social norms of his time in pursuit of solutions for alleviating suffering of the mankind. Today some of his teachings could be a template for the research quest leading to fruitful exchange.

The Buddha said, as translated by the universally acclaimed Ven. Walpola Rahula:

Believe nothing on the faith of traditions,
even though they have been held in honor for many generations and in diverse places.
Do not believe a thing because many people speak of it.

Do not believe on the faith of the sages of the past.
Do not believe what you have imagined, persuading yourself that a God inspires you.
Believe nothing on the sole authority of your masters and priests.
After examination, believe what you yourself have tested
and found to be reasonable, and conform your conduct thereto.
Believe nothing merely because you have been told it.
Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher.
But whatever, after due examination and analysis,
you find to be kind, conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings -that
doctrine believe, cling to and take it as your guide".³

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