CONCLUSION
THE MANDALA AS A UNIFYING CONCEPTUAL CONSTRUCT

This research has been an attempt at studying the “aesthetic expression” and “symbolism” of the Gangtey Goenpa/ Gangtey Monastery within the Mahayana- Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism. It has been attempted to shed light on areas of the tradition that have hitherto not been studied or dealt with especially in the context of the Gangtey Goenpa/ Gangtey Monastery in Bhutan. This study also hopes to open up possibilities for the interpretation of similar other religions motifs as well as offer an approach to the study of these motifs that are by nature esoteric and thereby elusive. This study started with the difficult task of defining a mandala/ khilkhor, how it is drawn, what it signifies, and what the mandala/ khilkhor means. Thus, the research has been an attempt at examining the principles and methodology of the Buddhist mandala/ khilkhor.

It has, in doing so, also tried to look at the mandala/khilkhor as a ‘sacred place,’ that has the potential of ‘transforming’ as Robert A F Thurman puts it, the universe from a mere realm of suffering to a realm of happiness. Mandalas/ Khilkhors, says Thurman, were believed to be “given as a fixed world-model by the all-powerful gods or god, as world creation was considered their privilege and responsibility.” But religious thinkers such as the historical Buddha and Mahavira, began questioning the “omnipotence of the gods, and hence the fixity of the world-model.” Their followers down the ages could actually then, “discover the underlying mandala-principle, experiment with alternative world-models, and begin the “tantric” or artistic process of creating a profusion of mandalas” which are now considered to be the blue prints of “ideal worlds.” ¹ What this study has therefore, tried to do, is examine mandalas/ khilkhors as aids to meditation and self-realisation, as architectures of enlightenment, providing alternate world-models. This study is also an attempt at exploring the relationship between the mandala/ khilkhor or the two-dimensional form and the monastery as a three-dimensional form, and the manner in which the mandala/ khilkhor serves as a blue print for the monastery
and how the two forms collectively or individually can provide the necessary impetus for enlightenment.

The five foregoing chapters have tried to examine the *Lama Norbu Gyanmtsho Mandala/Khilkhor* and analyse what it symbolises for the people of *Gangtey Goenpa/Gangtey Monastery* in Bhutan. The chapters also study the socio-economic functioning of the *Gangtey Goenpa* and the *Rites of Passage* or the Semiotics of Birth, Marriage and Death Ceremonies as observed in Bhutan in general and at *Gangtey Goenpa* in particular.

Different cultures assign different meanings to symbols and interpret them differently according to their cultural significance and specificity. For semiotics to be really effective as an episteme it has to use various models of signification – models that can be described, and explained in such a manner that the chaos of heterogeneous signs can be interpreted in such a way that a homogeneous meaning can be generated from this chaos. Semiotics as an episteme is of great importance particularly to students of history, art, literature, culture, theatre and films. Semiotics focuses on certain aspects of signs, on different layers of complexity and differentiates between these signs and other primitive signs that could or may have existed in an effort to compose a comprehensive message out of the chaos.

This study has tried to put in place a methodology for extending and assessing the potential of structuralism to other domains such as culture studies and it has also tried to point out the philosophical implications of this methodology. It has attempted to study the various cultural symbols of the Bhutanese people in general and the people of *Gangtey Goenpa* in particular while also looking at the underlying ideology of the cultural practices of Bhutan. This study has followed Levi – Strauss’s general application in that it has tried to illustrate how the *mandala/khilkhor*, the monastery and the rites of passage constitute just a glimpse of the total cultural fabric that then, needs to be conceived, understood and analysed as a whole. It has also attempted to link the understanding of the separate facts of ‘nature’ in the larger structure/‘culture’ that “human minds superimpose on it.”

It has also tried to study the society within which
the *mandala/khilkhor* emerges ethnographically and has also attempted to show how phenomena both natural and social lend to mental exercises and ‘intellectual elaboration’, and the examined the kind of ‘mental associations’ that can be formed as a result of such a study. In short, what this study has tried to do is to analyse and study the *mandala/khilkhor* with the aid of semiotics as just not a science of signs but as a science of communication that weaves different strands such as the study of language, culture and society together with that of the human mind and the intellection it generates or is capable of generating. Here, Roland Barthes’s general stance is helpful:

> [Semiology] aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects and the complete associations of all these, which form the content, ritual, convention or public entertainment: those constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification.

*(Barthes, 1967, 7)*

This study also tries to follow contemporary semiotic strands in that it considers signs not as being isolated and standing alone, but as part of a larger picture of ‘sign systems’ and has also tried to study the manner in which meanings are generated. This study has tried to analyse how meanings are created and generated. It is concerned with the construction of meanings and of reality as well as communicating that reality. It serves a dual function as it not only tries to construct meaning and communicate it but also tries to hold in place that constructed reality. In other words what this study has tried to do is to offer a “semiotic world view”/cosmology of the Buddhist *mandala/khilkhor*. A *mandala/khilkhor* in this context serves as a ‘text’ or an ensemble of signs similar to words, images, sounds or even gestures, that are constructed and re-interpreted with particular reference to the conventions and traditions of *Vajrayana* Buddhism in general and the *Peling* tradition in particular. This study has also tried to emphasise the significance that is attached to the symbols and signs within the *mandala/khilkhor* by lay worshippers/initiates of this tradition. In a broad way, this study is also representative of the wide sweeping and all-encompassing range of the domains that semiotics could take in, such as the fields of art, literature, religion, anthropology,
ethnography and even mass media. In short what this study has tried to do is examine the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/Khilkhor within the broad area of structural ethnography and has looked at the relationships between Buddhist philosophy, Hinayana and Mahayana as well as Vajrayana Buddhism and at the mandala/khilkhor, and its role in Vajrayana Buddhism. This study has tried to analyse the structure of the mandala/khilkhor as an illustration of Buddhist cosmology and has also tried to examine the place of human beings in the larger scheme of things and in the Universe, while also providing ethnographical insight to a relatively unknown society that in a sense lacks writing and is therefore, of immense psychological relevance to any ethnographic study.

Stemming from this point of view, Chapter One, titled Bhutan: Society and Religion attempts to examine the nature of the society in which such religious practices are inherent (for instance, the entire Buddhist Himalayan region). Through the course of this chapter, Bhutan emerges as a land steeped in religiosity, myths, and history. The people too, as the narrative suggests, are steeped in cultural myths and religious history. The land of Bhutan therefore emerges as a very fertile ground for the germination and practise of the mandala/khilkhor. The chapter paints a synoptic picture of the culture, society, history and religious practices of Bhutan, from an anthropological point of view; it defines religion and examines the function that religion serves in society. It traces the religious history of Bhutan and focuses briefly on the biography of Terton Pema Lingpa, the history of Gangtey Goenpa and places the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/Khilkhor in its context.

Chapter Two, Mandala as a Reduced Model of Cosmology attempts to locate the theoretical framework of the mandala/khilkhor within the Buddhist world-view. It examines the three main traditions of Buddhism - Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana. This chapter goes into the theoretical background of the mandala principle and has examined Giuseppe Tucci's, The Theory and Practice of the Mandala, with special reference to the modern psychology of the subconscious, as it provides the basic outline, the guideline to the drawing of a mandala/khilkhor and to the belief system that is
attached to it. The chapter also sheds light on the spread of Buddhism in Tibet and Bhutan and then attempts to define and explain the mandala/khilkhor.

The mandala may be considered as an archetypal symbol that is comprised of various other archetypal symbols that have been in existence since time began. The mandala has made even the great philosopher C G Jung, take note of its existence and write about it. Jung noticed that his patients drew circles very often (he calls these circles mandalas) whenever they were faced with a crisis or even a change and that they also used the same graphic themes. Jung however, did not try and put the symbols in order, this organising of symbols into a particular order was to be done much later by an art therapist Joan Kellogg who was to take (what she considered to be archetypal symbols) twelve archetypal symbols of the mandala circle and place them in a specific order around a circle according to their order in what she referred to as “a spiralling path of psychological development.” The circle or “Great Round,” representing wholeness, is seen as a container allowing one to look into their inner and often unconscious thoughts and feelings as they travel on their own personal journey towards the self. The symbols, colours and lines used in making a mandala/khilkhor, provide important clues that can lead the seeker to greater insight.

The mandalas/khilkhors that are to be found on the walls of Monasteries in the form of frescoes or to be found in books on Buddhism and Buddhist Art are as we all might have noted, quite colourful. The noticeable and distinguishing feature of a mandala/khilkhor is its circular patterning. This circular pattern begins with the main outer circle to the mandala/khilkhor that divides the circle into equal quadrants by intersecting the circle with lines. Mandalas/khilkhors may be executed in oil paint, water - colours or even oil pastels or coloured sands. There are however, triangular mandalas/khilkhors as well, thought these are rare as they are dedicated to the invoking and study of black magic.

Chapter Three, The Symbology of the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/khilkhor and its Various Parts, looks at the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/Khilkhor from three points of view: one, as a two dimensional drawing with the placement of the deities etc, two, as a
loilang khilkhor/ three dimensional mandala, and three, as a mnemonic aid. The great detailing and the lengthy descriptions proving that the mandala/ khilkhor is invested with symbology and that nothing in the mandala/ khilkhor is superfluous or unnecessary. Each and every element that goes into the composition of the mandala/ khilkhor, in this case the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/ khilkhor indicates that these are not mere drawings of a hidden paradise/ shangrila, but a re-looking and a re-discovery of ourselves, our inner beings and a re-looking at the world around us/ the tangible world and our own place within the larger scheme of things. The purpose of the mandala/ khilkhor is clear as we go through the chapter. The purpose being to help us realise what is called in Buddhist philosophical terms 'the unity of appearances' and to enable us to understand the concept of 'emptiness'. It is also meant to remind us that there is an innate Buddha nature/ Bodhicitta in each of us and that it is our duty to help those sentient lost in the sea of samsara to re-awaken that innate Buddha nature/ Bodhicitta.

Chapter Four, The Conceptual Relationship between the Mandala and the Monastery, deals with the mandala/ khilkhor as a two dimensional representation of a highly crafted meditation technique and the monastery as built along the lines of a mandala/ khilkhor thereby implying, that while a mandala/ khilkhor is a blue print of a monastery, the monastery in turn is a three-dimensional form of the same hallowed, design. Then again, there are also miniature three-dimensional models of the mandala/ khilkhor found inside many monasteries in Bhutan and other parts of the Pan Buddhist world. In this chapter, we have talked about the nature of worship in the individual space as well as in the collective space. It is important to talk of spaces here as the mandala/ khilkhor is all about space and the organising of space. At the individual level, the worshippers of the Buddha Dhamma have their personal altars installed in their homes where they worship and pray to the protective deities of the family and the country twice a day. They begin the day by offering water in seven bowls, fruits, flowers, and incense at the altar some even go to a nearby monastery and offer prayers, while offering circumambulations there at the monastery. Then again some others go into the monasteries and offer prayers and light incense sticks and light butter lamps. This is
where the interaction between the private/individual space of religion and the public/collective practice takes place.

Apart from offering prayers at the family altar and the monastery there is also an intrinsic relationship between the monastery or religion as is symbolised by the edifice and the common man/woman on the streets. Various religious symbols either in the form of wall hangings of the *Thangkhas* or of the Eight Good Luck signs adorn the walls of houses and offices in Bhutan. Not only this *chortens* and monasteries/ * lhakhangs* are to be found dotting the entire countryside along with prayer flags that flutter in the winds carrying the *mernlam* prayers of the lesser mortals to the Gods above.

The monastery is once again deeply intertwined with the lives of all practising Buddhists. Many devout Buddhists offer regular prayers in their houses and take the help of the monks in the monasteries close to their houses for this purpose. Several of the regular users of the monasteries services are recognised by the monasteries as their respective patrons/ *Jhindas*. These patrons conduct regular offering of prayers in their houses several times a month. Then again the services of the monasteries and the monks are required for special functions such as the birth of children, the death, the promotion of officials, annual ritual poojas that are offered by all householders. The monks have a very crucial role to play on all these occasions however, joyful or sorrowful. The monastery has its own organisational framework and its own hierarchical structure. In Bhutan most of the monasteries belong to the *Drukpa Kagyupa* tradition, as it is the state religion. However, there are several *Nyingmapa* monasteries there as well as the *Nyingmapa* school of Buddhism is the oldest tradition and its founder teacher/propagator *Guru Rinpoche* is a revered figure in Bhutan and has many followers. There are many monasteries dedicated entirely to *Guru Rinpoche* in Bhutan and despite the official state religion being *Drukpa – Kagyugpa*, *Guru Rinpoche* has a large body of followers all over not only Bhutan but the Pan- Himalayan Buddhist world. We need to remember that each area/village/district also has their own respective guardian deities and every monastery located in that region has at least a small shrine.
dedicated to the local protective deities without whose good will and blessings the residents of that area would not be satisfied.

Monasteries also play a significant role in bringing people together as they are the meeting points for people across regions, age groups and genders. The goenpa or the monastery is the centre of all religious activity and all learning, teaching and training of young monks take place here. As mentioned in one of the earlier chapters, monasteries are usually built on solitary hilltops away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. They are built along the long axis of the hill, with a lake in front even though the lake may be miles away from the location of the monastery. The door to the main assembly hall/prayer hall and temple is built to face eastwards. The entire monastic complex is built around this central hall, or the du-khang, meaning meeting place, also corresponding to the Viharas of ancient Buddhism. Most of the outhouses built along the external periphery of the du-khang house the monks and are long rows of individual rooms made for the monks in residence. The main du-khang of Gangtey Goenpa is to be located inside the central tower/utse and around the large quadrangle are the rooms of the monks. While some monks prepare their own food in their own rooms in some monasteries in Sikkim and Bhutan, the monks in Gangtey Goenpa all eat together as the food is prepared in the common kitchen and served in the common refectory. The dances are performed in the main courtyard outside the central utse/main tower of the monastery/Goenpa in Gangtey. The Goenpa monastery is built along the lines of a mandala that is also considered to be its two-dimensional blueprint.

Chapter Five, titled Rites of Passage deals with the three important stages of our lives that we all go through and the various social mores and religious significance and practises linked with these rites. These three Rites of Passage are: Birth, Marriage and Death. Why are these important aspects of our lives? These three rites of passage are important as they signify certain aspects of our lives and are essentially the coming to terms with life and death. The rites of passage discussed in this study are largely related to Buddhist philosophy and are pertinent to the followers of the Bhutanese Buddhist tradition. For instance, birth may be looked upon as a freedom from the lower realms
and a sign that should we acquire good Karma we will be free from the cycle of birth-death and re-birth. Hence, all births are celebrated with gifts and well wishes for the mother and her baby and a party for family, friends and neighbours.

Death ceremonies are extremely sacred affairs and largely dictated by the doctrine of the *Bardo Thodrol* or what has been translated by Kazi Dawa Samdup as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and later by Robert A F Thurman as *The Tibetan Book of Dying*. This book is important for us as it tells us what to expect when a person is dying or is dead. It states that a person will at some point of time know inherently that death is a certain reality and will be approached very shortly. Death ceremonies reflect the entire structure of the society trying to grapple with death and it reflects the entire discourse of death. This also happens in the case of birth ceremonies. The entire gamut of ceremonies related to the birth of a child, form the time the baby is conceived, to the time the baby is born, reflects the language of communication between the unborn and the adult world and the physical society that is trying to come to terms with the process of miracle.

Being able to understand the phenomenon of death and comprehending the stages one has to follow once one is dead is so crucial in a Bhutanese Buddhist’s life that a particular Tibetan text (scripture) that deals with death and the intermediary world – the *Bardo Thodrol* has been translated by four different scholars through the ages. The first translation however, was by an eccentric yet erudite scholar of Tibetan, who was also a Professor of Tibetan at Calcutta University Kazi Dawa Samdup. Thereafter, the same work has been translated by Chyogyem Trungpa Rinpoche and Francesca Freemantle and more recently by another scholar Robert A F Thurman of Columbia University. It may therefore be concluded that the Bhutanese Buddhist has a very philosophical attitude towards death. Death as dying is not a concept they believe in; for them death or the physical passing away of the life force is a “passing away into a better realm.” The much talked about book the *Bardo Thodol* translated by Kazi Dawa Samdup as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a series of “exhortations which the monks recite into the
ears of a dying person over a period of many days, while he or she is supposed to be waiting in a kind of limbo – called the Bardo before moving on to the next incarnation.

What this chapter attempts to do is to examine the mandala as a unifying construct. The neuter noun mandala is comprehended differently by different schools of thought, but essentially signifies a circle as any discordant object like the sun or the moon. In keeping with the Vajrayana tradition it signifies a world diagram or a map of the world used as an aid to religious practice. A mandala/khilkhor is also a graphic, geometric representation of the cosmos. This cosmos revolves around the axis of the world/ Mount Meru. They are the symbols of cosmic involution and evolution. Mankind by nature being curious and eager to explore the latent potentials of the inner self/ inner consciousness desires to seek the unity of the in-diverted consciousness and to be able to disintegrate and re-integrate from the microcosm (human beings themselves) into the macrocosm (universe), studies and meditates on the mandala/khilkhor for this purpose. A mandala/khilkhor therefore, is a reduced model of cosmology born of an initiate’s impulse and a visual aid to meditation. It however, soon turns into a map of the cosmos when the initiate starts meditating upon it. Since it is born of an initiate’s impulse it is a creative process that takes into account the dialectics of the “cosmology” and “anthropology” as well. It is also a “psychocosmogram” that symbolises the extremely high level of order and harmony attained by an enlightened mind.

Indian religions whether Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism have always been striving for self-awareness. Whereas the west is largely predominated by the aspects of destruction and disintegration no such divides occur or even exist in the East. The basic grounding that Indian religions focus on is the fact that the subconscious exists and is not to be denied. In fact it is to be accepted and transfigured to such an extent that it manages to re-establish the self-consciousness of the individual. In this sense what religions of the east and particularly India is try to do is not look at the ego as individual but as a part of the larger cosmic whole from which everything emerges and to which everything must eventually return. Taking this at the point of departure what Buddhism does is as follows: Hinayana Buddhism strives for individual self-awareness whereas Mahayana
Buddhism is governed by the concept of compassion. This does not imply that Hinayana Buddhism forgoes compassion what it does mean is that in Mahayana Buddhism the attainment of self-awareness/wisdom/enlightenment is chiefly for the practising of compassion. Mahayana Buddhism chief distinguishing factor from Hinayan Buddhism is the stress it lays on compassion or Mahakaruna and universal enlightenment. In Mahayana Buddhism, the notion of Buddhalogy (the belief that a human being is actually capable of getting in touch with his/her own bodhicitta) has a very important role to play. Buddhalogy also refers to the notion that all practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism can apply the Buddha’s teachings to their daily lives in a better manner in order to awaken/generate awareness in their own bodhicittas. The believers of this tradition are firm in their conviction that though they can never hope to be like the Buddha, they can at least see the direction of Buddhahood and thereby gain spiritually from this insight. Mahayana Buddhists consider the Buddha to be an enlightened being. They also believe that he was able to achieve enlightenment after many years of practicing a higher moral life/paramita and while he was in the process of perfecting himself he was already a Bodhisattva or one on the way to enlightenment. Every Buddhist should therefore strive to be a Bodhisattva and should work towards the attainment of Bodhisattvahood that would in turn be instrumental in leading one on to Buddhahood or enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhists also believe that once the notions of Bodhi, Bodhicitta, Bodhisattva, Paramita are firmly established then pranidhara/vow would follow suit after which the Buddha would become eternal after having ceased to exist as the historical Buddha. Once this happens Mahayana Buddhists are of the view that human beings will then no longer be governed by the notions and realms of relativity but will be transfigured and will transcend to another mysterious world governed by the transcendental beings”. Beatrice Suzuki says that this supernaturalness is identified as an “expression of Mahakaruna in the mind of the Bodhisattva. Mahakaruna is not mere compassion,... it is a greater love not to be experienced by those possessed by the idea of the self.” This greatness according to Suzuki may be translated as transcendental/the absolute or as the ‘love which is the basis of all other forms of love.’ “The love that made the Buddha move out of his meditation to bring salvation to the world.” Mahayana Buddhism believes the Buddha
to be the absolute and that he can save all sentient beings through the use of his three bodies/the Trikaya. Hence, in Mahayana Buddhism there are many Bodhisattvas who have vowed to attain perfect knowledge in order to save all sentient beings. Related to the notions of Buddhalogy is Buddhahood that means different things to the practitioners of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. To the Hinayana Buddhist Buddhahood is both historical and ethical (in the sense that it is related to a way of life, to ethics). To the Mahayana Buddhist Buddhahood is a metaphysical concept that is also religious simultaneously. Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism also differ in the understanding of the non-ego. For the former it is at once an analytical and a scholarly question, whereas for the latter it is experiential and thereby intuitive. From all that has been said so far we may discern the various binaries that exist between Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. Even as far as self-awareness/enlightenment is concerned the two traditions offer different points of view. While Mahayana Buddhism seeks to gain self-awareness for an altruistic purpose, Hinayana Buddhists seek self-awareness for the individual self. Other points of distinction between the two traditions are as follows: In Hinayana Buddhism there is a vast schism between the monk body and the lay person, whereas in Mahayana Buddhism the divide has been narrowed considerably and in fact in Bhutan where the gomchens exist the divide between these two classes seems to collapse altogether (but that is largely due to the fact that gomchens are peculiar to the Nyingmapa tradition who are in essence practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism), the way the Hinayana Buddhist looks at and understands nirvana too differs from the Mahayanist approach. In the Mahayana tradition every individual can strive to attain Buddhahood for Mahayana Buddhism believes that Bodhicitta is innate in all human beings.

In Bhutan where there are two major strands of Mahayana Buddhism in practice - the Nyingmapa and the Drukpa Karguyapa the monastic followers of the former strand may lead married lives while those practitioners of the second strand cannot do so. They have to remain celibate. Even in Buddhist practices around the globe, be they in Japan or China, some of the priests who look after the monasteries do not marry whereas others may do so. Zen Buddhist caretakers of monasteries are celibate, whereas those of
the Shin are married men. In Tendai Shingon and Zen Buddhism those who are the abbots of monasteries/temples or those who are Zen masters do not marry whereas ordinary temple masters can get married. Suzuki has made these observations in her book Mahayana Buddhism and says, “The Zen Master/monk has a very special training. He first serves as acolyte in some temple and later enters a Zendo, where he remains at least three years leading a life of discipline consisting of meditation and manual work. Later he becomes a Zendo, and becomes a priest”8.

In the world of Samsara or the real world a human being is bound by time and space and anchored in the anthropological world, or the world into which we are born, must marry and then vacate when we die. However, the mandala/ khilkhor enables the same human being to strive for liberation/enlightenment while anchored in this samsaric world. This samsaric world is the medium that links the form and the content of the mandala/ khilkhor with the ordinary initiate’s impulse for enlightenment and with the cosmos. The mandala/ khilkhor therefore, serves as a chain between these two planes of existence- the samsaric world and the world of nirvana.

While the visible world is that of samsara, the other extreme is nirvana. The world of samsara and nirvana or these two planes of reality are not separate entities but one and the same thing. It is very important that we accept this fact at the very outset as both of them eventually lead to the concept of Sunyata or Nothingness. Samsara lies within the grasp of delusion symbolised by the cockerel in the Serpa Khorlo or the Wheel of Life and it is only by breaking free of the bonds of samsara through the practise of various Tantric methods of imparting such esoteric knowledge that one can strive for Nirvana. It is believed that if one can achieve through meditation and reflection the inner peace that will enable him/her to realise within his/her physical self the Buddha nature/ Bodhicitta of the Tathagatha/ the Buddha who has come and thus gone, then only will the three planes of body, speech and mind be purified of all obstruction and the path to salvation will be paved. It should also be noted that the acceptance of knowledge of the Void as opposed to the world of samsara is the achievement of the supreme knowledge or ‘Prajna’.
The mandala/khilkhor may therefore be seen as a drawing of the cosmos often enclosed within a square and surrounded by several circles. The mandala/khilkhor under reference is a palace mandala/khilkhor or a square mandala/khilkhor enclosed by the three circles of fire/Mei-rei, lotus/Pema, and dorjee/thunder bolts/vajras. The palace within these three circles is the abode of the celestial being Ugen Guru Rinpoche/Guru Padmasambhava/Guru Norbu Gyatsho and is a very complex mandala/khilkhor. It is sacred to the Nyingmapa sect of Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan but more so to the followers of the Peling Tradition/the followers of Terton Pema Lingpa.

What makes this mandala/khilkhor so special is the fact that while Drukpa Kagyupa is the official form of Buddhism practiced in Bhutan, Nyingmapa or the oldest form still has very strong practitioners of the faith among Buddhists all over the world. Combined with the fact that this mandala/khilkhor belongs to the Nyingmapa tradition, it is of sacred importance to the people of Bhutan as it was discovered by Terton Pema Lingpa one of the greatest Tertons of Buddhism to be born in Bhutan. Moreover, this Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/Khilkhor has never been studied before, unlike the Kala Chakra Mandala/Khilkhor that has not only been studied but mass initiation is also given nearly every other year. The Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/Khilkhor belongs to the Peling tradition of Terton Pema Lingpa and he (Terton Pema Lingpa) is a very revered religious head in Bhutan. Moreover, not much work has been done on the Peling tradition and the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala or the Gangtey Goenpa have not been exposed to any serious study or analysis and definitely not a semiotic analysis which makes this research a first of its kind in this area.

Guru Rinpoche/Guru Padma Sambhava is one of the most revered gods of Bhutan. So popular is he that, on the occasion of his birthday that falls on the tenth day of the tenth month of the Bhutanese (lunar) calendar, every district in Bhutan holds a religious festival. In fact every tenth day of the month in a Bhutanese calendar is sacred to Guru Rinpoche/Guru Padma Sambhava and it would be definitely more pertinent to say that each district celebrates its tshetshu at a different month. This was probably because in
days of old there were fewer members in the monastic community and they probably had to traverse the length and breadth of the country during these festive occasions.

The term Tshetshu can be explained as follows: tshe meaning day and tshu meaning tenth. These festivals usually last a few days and are a major source of tourist attraction as well. In fact foreigners visit Bhutan in order to attend these tshetshus. The more famous of the tshetshus are the Paro tshetshu, the Gangtey tshetshu and the Bumthang tshetshu. Thus we find in Bhutan a unique blend of the two schools of thought – the Drukypa Kagyugpa and the Nyingmapa that makes this study conclude that the official religion of Bhutan should be referred to as a harmonious blend of the Kaynying tradition. Then from this synchronised blend of the Kaynying tradition in this particular study is also included the Peling tradition or the tradition propagated by the followers and re-incarnations of Terton Pema Lingpa from where the tradition gets its name. The Peling tradition is a derivation from the old Nyingmapa tradition.

Buddhism though born in India has become very wide spread across the globe and is now what may be called a global phenomenon. Buddhism these days has several schools of thought and each school has its own way of functioning, its own system of beliefs and rituals to go with its founding fathers line of thought. But all Buddhists would agree that the ideal of Buddhism is the same that of selflessness. However, there are different ways of arriving at that goal and each school would have its own dedicated method or path or way or yana of achieving the goal. If we were to simplify the pan-Buddhist tradition very greatly, we may be able to discern between two main paths or yanras: the Sutrayana/ Paramitayana/ Way of Perfections and the Tantrayana/ Mantrayana/ Way of Sacred Formulas. The Sutrayana tradition would lay great emphasis on texts and detailed studies of the texts and meditation and reflection on oneself and one’s surrounding while, the Tantrayana would focus on something very different. It would focus on texts that would explain the demanding esoteric and ritualistic nature of the Tantrayana school of thought that could guide one to a faster realisation of the ultimate goal of Sunyata/ Emptiness/ Selflessness. This method of course is far more dangerous and riskier and one would also need a personal yoga deity.
for one's meditation and reflection to be successful but this is what this thesis is about. What is extremely important in this school of thought is the guru. The relationship between the disciple and his or her guru or lama is extremely important as well as crucial. The disciple should have supreme faith and trust in his/her guru for it is the guru who will protect the disciple from the dangers of coming into contact with such knowledge that the disciple may not be ready to accept. Hence, the guru needs to lead his/her disciple individually. Then again since the teachings of the Tantrayana are essentially esoteric, they may be passed on only from the guru to the disciple by word of mouth and the disciple is totally dependent on his/her teacher for the dissemination of this knowledge orally. The guru is an evolved being who has at his disposal both the inner and the outer qualities required of him/her to initiate the disciple, to be able to draw mandalas/ khilkhors and to be able to meditate on them. The guru is also seasoned in the practice of the mudras/ symbolic hand gestures, on the techniques of concentration, the ritual dances and in the three lower classes of the tantra (i.e., kriya, carya and the yoga tantra). S/he is also capable of making burnt offerings and conducting several other ritualistic practices and a guru is believed to surpass even the disciple's personal protective deity for very often when an initiate meditates s/he visualises his/her own spiritual teacher.

Before concluding this study, it needs to be reiterated once again that all such knowledge and praxis that this study has been talking about so far is related to the Tantrayana/ Vajrayana School of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. These traditions – the Tantrayana and the Vajrayana are esoteric traditions the teachings of which may not be revealed to one and all. These teachings are handed down from guru to student by word of mouth and are a highly guarded religious secret. It may not be revealed to the non-initiate. This tradition is also extremely rich in symbolism that is incomprehensible to the non-initiate. In the Buddhist world Tantrayana developed in the Mahayana tradition and it meant the use of "ritual magic and yoga, or meditative techniques, in an antinomian spirit, to gain secular and religious goals." This Tantrayana tradition was to later give impetus to the Vajrayana tradition. The Vajrayana tradition works "within the framework of the Mahayana Bodhisattva ideal,
striving for Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings”. Vajrayana Buddhism is the path of the Adamantine/the Diamond Path or the Path of the Vajra or Dorje. And the Vajrayana tradition lays great stress on the use of magical rites and rituals and this is its main distinguishing feature from other schools of Buddhism. In the practice of this tradition, the initiate sees himself as already enlightened as he has been reflecting on the “Tathagatagarbha doctrine and the Mahayana identification of Samsara and Nirvana”. The initiate is also already in a highly developed state of awareness particularly “of the Yogacara doctrine of mind-only” as it has a very important role to play in the visualisation process as it helps enhance the practice of meditation within the tantric tradition and enables the initiate to cultivate an attitude that makes him visualise each and every aspect of the illusory mundane world as a manifestation of Enlightened awareness.\textsuperscript{12}

The narrative in this study is the Norbu Gyatsho Mandala/ Khilkhor wherein there is a human condition that the practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism tries to perceive and it also shows a certain path of further movement if not a direction. This movement lies in the interpretation of the mandala/ khilkhor. The secret of the narrative lies in the way in which the mandala/ khilkhor is interpreted. What is crucial to our understanding is the fact that any narrative is first and foremost a human narrative. The hypothesis here is very basic, all human beings are born in a certain condition which they want to get out of and the whole process of being different or trying to get out of that situation or the assertion to become/be different is innate among all human beings. All human situations, societies, communities and nations are largely governed by this need to Be or to Become. Hence, all existential gestures lie hidden, deeply embedded in the smallest human gestures. If these small traits can be identified then the narrative of the text can be re-constituted, via the help of the re-constituting factors/process. So, an ordinary person, can become an initiate, graduate into one who has attained enlightenment and gain freedom from the cycle of birth - death and re-birth in the Vajrayana tradition through the process of Being and Becoming.
The mandala/ khilkhor is a signifier and what it signifies is the discourse or the signified, or the enlightenment process. It has to be remembered as well that in semiotics everything is suggested, there is no certainty or absoluteness. The philosopher constructs a concept very vaguely in his/her imaginaire, while a signifier is a big void waiting to be filled and is constantly in search of being filled. The interpreter/initiate meditating on the mandala/ khilkhor in his/her place tries to grapple with the problem s/he has realised. And s/he may do this by meditating on the mandala/ khilkhor and transferring his/her consciousness on the object of meditation and then transferring his/her gaze on him/herself as the object of meditation and thereby re-creating something that may already exist. Herein, lies the role of the process of creativity. Human beings are therefore, conditioned by circumstances but these conditions do not determine him/her. Similarly human beings are condemned where they are, but then they are also condemned to choose. But through the very process of reflection, human beings can transcend the situation they are born into and constitute a discourse that has never been conceptualised before. Hence, one would have to proceed from the level of seeing to the level of perceiving and then eventually verbalise the perceptions by plugging into the level of discourse. When we reflect on a mandala/ khilkhor, we are actually entering into the discourse of the mandala/ khilkhor. Then what is important is not who the subject and who the object is. To elucidate, if one is meditating on a mandala/ khilkhor then what one is really doing is focussing all one's attention on it, so the mandala/ khilkhor is the object of focus/meditation and the initiate meditating on it is the subject. But after a while, when the initiate has succeeded in transferring his/her consciousness on the deity s/he is meditating on, then s/he has to meditate by looking at him/herself as the object thereby transferring his/her consciousness once again. So what is really happening is a reversal that goes on to show that the subject - object relationship is actually not static and not fixed, it is a variable.

Going back to how to analyse a text be it literary or non-literary or fashion or the performing arts or the mandala/ khilkhor or even the visual media, what we need to do is to be able to discern the structure of the text (in this case the mandala drawing/ khilkhor) and to be able to look at its architectonics. Having established the formal
structure of the physical drawing of the mandala/ khilkhor then we need to be able to create a conceptual structure of the two dimensional drawing which in this case is what the initiate has to do when s/he begins meditating on the mandala/ khilkhor. The signifier in this case is a structured whole that is also extremely mobile and has a lot of mobile structures around it like the sub-structure, the text and the context. At the same time what also needs to be kept in mind is the fact that within the linearity of the text also exists, a non-linearity. So what needs to be done is really dividing the whole drawing into units of signification that generate continuous images some concrete, some abstract but all that adds up to signification. The mandala drawing/ khilkhor is the signifier with the help of which we can signify something which may be translated as the discourse or the signified. While this particular study makes a case study of the Norbu Gyatsho Mandala/ Khilkhor it is also symbolic/representative of the general point of views of all meditational mandalas/ khilkhors and hence serves, as transcending and thereby being applicable to practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism. Through the discussion in the four preceding chapters a sort of linearity has been maintained for the sake of convenience and comprehensibility but it needs to be re-iterated that apart from what appears to be a purely syntagmatic order there are several layers of paradigmatic relationships embedded in the whole study. Even when examining the various elements that compose the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/ Khilkhor, we have tried to maintain linearity when describing the placement of the deities and the various elements. However, when we read through the chapter we, are bound to realise that there is a paradigmatic discourse through the length of the discussion. Moreover, when we try and look at the rites of passage or even at the chapter on the relationship between the mandala/ khilkhor and the monastery we will once again realise that the discussions and descriptions are in fact in a non-linear relationship with the other discourses present through the research. Though the study follows a syntagmatic order that is manifest at the level of language, at the level of concepts these co-relations are across the syntagmatic order. It is this that leads us to conclude that a mandala/ khilkhor, and the monastery by extension are but reduced models of cosmology and even this research in a sense is representative of a particular world-view a particular cosmology. The mandala drawing/ khilkhor for example requires an initiate who is
meditating upon it to be continuously involved in the process of signification. Once the initiate is totally immersed within the process of signification, s/he has to be able to examine the structure of the signs and also examine the juxtapositions of the signs while constantly studying the binary positions of and the relationship between the being and the other.
2 Hawkes, Terence, Structuralism and Semiotics, (London: Routledge), 1997, p. 34
3 Locke-Chezar, Alice, July 1, 2003, Internet, Mandala's and the Mari Circle
4 Rawson, Philip, Sacred Tibet, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.), 1991, p. 25
6 Ibid., p 77- 82
11 Skilton, Andrew, A Concise History of Buddhism, (Birmingham: Windhorse Publication), 1994, p. 135
12 Ibid., p. 136