



# REINCARNATION

## A SURVEY OF BHUTAN

### ABSTRACT

Bhutan enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a unique inheritance and an inherent fragility. The ongoing relationship with a deep-rooted and secluded past is such that it appears as an ancient fairytale land divorced from current circumstances. However, the country is now firmly embedded within an integrating regional and global context, which has engulfed all of its neighbors and poses significant threats to the future sovereignty and state of the nation. It is struggling to preserve its unique character as it becomes inextricably attached to a modern situation that has the tendency to consign the exotic and ethereal to legend. The following survey aims at providing a very basic account of Bhutan's contemporary condition. Sections on history, religion, environment, culture, politics, society and economy briefly describe respective aspects of the country. By no means comprehensive, these are loosely composed around three interrelated themes: the expression of the nation as an essentially traditional, coherent and autonomous realm; the identification of the present period as one of fundamental unprecedented change; and the explanation of a national mission "*to embrace the many benefits of modernization without being overwhelmed by its many negative and disruptive forces ... to maintain a distinct identity that is not only recognized but also respected and valued by others ... to be the same while being distinctly different*" (Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness (1999:92)).



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## 1. INTRODUCTION – PRESENT PRESENCE

Although the bird is flying in the air, its landing place is on the earth.

Bhutanese Proverb

Bhutan appears somewhat detached from contemporary realities. The diminutive Buddhist Kingdom in the eastern Himalayas was almost entirely separated from the outside world until the early 1960s. Thereafter gradual and controlled internal change means that the overall situation in the country still closely resembles its traditional past. Bhutan remains an independent nation with a clear and cohesive indigenous culture, an untarnished natural environment and an undistracted spirituality.

A rich heritage is revealed at a centralized level in a formalized approach to Mahayana Buddhism and monarchic rule. However of greater significance is the uniform manner in which traditional practices circulate throughout society. The country essentially remains a microcosm of long-established, interrelated and mutually sustaining systems. Thus individual approaches seem to merge seamlessly with community customs and national institutions to form an internally consistent and idiosyncratic whole.

The present period is one of relentless emergence, the coalescence of new irreversible linkages and interrelationships between local, national, regional and global spheres. It presents the difficult challenge of accommodating the myriad of powerful, potentially disorienting and destabilizing modern developments within a tradition of relatively harmonious evolution. As a small, peripheral landlocked country, the reality of vulnerability has never been far from the surface. The nation has entered a new era, stepping out from its comfort zone into a slightly intimidating new world of opportunity.

### THE TRADITIONAL & THE MODERN

Bhutan is just small enough to catch a glimpse of the whole without becoming submerged by a chaotic mass of parts, yet large enough to form a robust self-contained system, the survival of which is not overly reliant on just a couple of delicate extenuating strands. Historical circumstance has bequeathed an unusual degree of both spatial and temporal detachment, and a cautious and pragmatic approach towards modernization has meant that the nation enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century possessing a distinctly Bhutanese character. There appears an unusual synergy in the manner in which modern developments have gradually been accommodated within well-functioning traditional structures.

The country retains many of its former characteristics. It is a deeply religious place, where Buddhism informs a particular holistic outlook on life. A rich and diverse natural environment is relatively uncompromised. A paternalistic leadership rules over a sparsely populated land of dispersed self-reliant agrarian communities. Although for many life remains tough, the present conditions enable the great majority the opportunity to earn an acceptable livelihood, and cases of absolute poverty are rare. A vibrant living



culture perpetuates, providing the country a particular consistency and sense of balance. Bhutan could be compared to an old cypress: never having been severed from its roots, it has been allowed to grow to form a shielding canopy.

Shaped by state led development initiatives - informed by regional political imperatives and the recognition that the Bhutanese now have more to gain from the modern world - the situation in the country is now changing fundamentally. Rudimentary communications systems have gradually been extended and upgraded to include an airport, telecommunications services and a basic road network, loosely connecting the country internally and externally. Improved communication has facilitated the diffusion of new ideas and authorities, linking sheltered national centers with modern economic and cultural systems, and gradually dislocating diverse and distanced communities from essentially stable states.

The roles, capacities and capabilities of government have greatly expanded, and there now exists a more intimate and devolved relationship between state and society. A basic health infrastructure and a modern education system have been established, providing the great majority of the population with new advantages and opportunities. Towns, a new phenomenon, have begun sprouting up across the country. A far-reaching system of development services has made possible increases in yields and diversification of production. Modern industries are evolving, namely in hydroelectricity, construction and tourism. Although still in its infancy, the economy has to date achieved steady growth rates.

## EMERGENCE

Bhutan's current conditions are the product of a certain people, occupying a particular place, as part of local, regional and now global historical processes. Following regional and global integration the country has never been so exposed. Open borders and an improved communications network combine to facilitate outside intrusion, more closely linking the nation to regional instabilities. Ongoing internal changes, stimulated by the introduction of modern ideas and technologies, are inherently transforming and ambiguous as to their outcomes. Furthermore, given its size and strategic importance as a buffer zone, the maintenance of internal cohesion and stability becomes imperative for continued independence.

No longer existing in a stable state of pre-modern isolation, Bhutan is a nation undergoing a difficult transition. Poignant comparisons can be drawn with neighboring Himalayan societies. Sharing similar historical and cultural legacies - most notably separation, domestic political evolution and the profound influence of Buddhism - they began the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a group of independent and loosely linked units on the extreme periphery of expanding world systems. Now swallowed up by bigger powers and overrun by a multitude of uneven and uncontrolled processes, they are pale shadows of their former selves. Bhutan is the only one of the Himalayan Buddhist Kingdoms to have retained its overall coherence.



Fresh developments are surfacing which have the potential to compromise successful evolution. National security is threatened by economic and political unrest in neighboring areas. Furthermore, disproportionate trends are emerging within the country. A generation gap has appeared in Bhutanese culture, associated with altering life-worlds and worldviews. A partially developed modern institutional infrastructure is undermining some effective traditional arrangements without immediately substituting necessary alternatives. Social changes have led to increasing expectations, rapid population growth and urbanization, and widening inequalities. The achievement of simultaneous and concomitant transformations across the economy remains problematic. Localized cases of environmental degradation are occurring, which, if their causes are not effectively addressed, could become chronic.

Two interrelated preoccupations dominate national affairs: the achievement of constant, balanced and sustainable development, and the on-going preservation and strengthening of the nation as a separate united independent entity. The leadership has determined that if the country is to successfully adjust to shifting realities it must do so on its own terms and at its own pace. This belief is reflected in the government's approach to development, embodied in the distinctly Bhutanese notion of Maximizing Gross National Happiness. Specifically this implies that development has many more dimensions than those associated with Gross National Product, and places an emphasis on the maintenance of balance and equity within and between contained supporting systems. At a more general level it is an ongoing assertion of independence and cultural particularity.



## 2. HISTORY – LOCAL LEGACIES

Making any sense of the fears Bhutanese hold for the future of their country requires a little knowledge of where Bhutan came from. Not so easy. Right away, we spin down the rabbit-hole of fantasy. The history of Bhutan begins in mythology and will probably end someday with more questions than answers, more legends than facts. Here is a land where children's schoolbooks open not with accounts of explorers or emperors, but with tales of spirits, demons, and saints. This is a country where a founder of the faith traveled on the back of a marvelous flying tiger, temples were erected to pin down the extremities of a malevolent she-demon, and the unifier of the nation was believed to possess the power to scare away hostile armies with a show of terrifying magic. Through this history flow most of the shared legends and legendary characters of Himalayan Buddhism, but here no modern political superstructure has yet tinkered with this cosmos.

Barbara Crossette *So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas*

Mountains remain the abode of the gods. Guru Rinpoche's spirit is as alive today as when he himself left his indelible imprints across the Himalayas. The Shabdrung's legacy is in clear evidence. To review Bhutan's history is to appreciate the continuing importance of the country's heritage and the ongoing interplay between the past and the present. The contemporary situation essentially remains the accumulated product of a long and isolated past. It represents the manifestation of the relatively constant evolution of three processes: religious diffusion, political unification and regional integration. Significantly, until the modern era there had occurred no major watersheds, dislocating the country from its previous traditions and placing it on an alternative trajectory. This design tends to both reinforce a continuing intimacy and bestow an unusual degree of continuity.

From this legacy emerge certain defining characteristics: the centrality of religion, gradual domestic succession, a minimal degree of external interaction, and culturally conditioned historical accounts. Remarkable is the manner in which the country has effectively developed from the inside out. Bhutan was traditionally a part of the loosely linked Himalayan Diaspora. However, although fundamental religious and cultural influences arrived from neighboring Tibet, the territory has always retained its independence. Internal political developments have therefore been allowed to play themselves out. Furthermore, collective detachment from the outside world until the 1960s has limited exposure to the powerful forces of modernity, thereby aiding the perpetuation of a traditional coherence.

To approach Bhutan's history is like peering down the hole of a devoutly Buddhist rabbit. As one proceeds deeper one becomes ever more reliant on internal sources, predominantly monastic texts and a rich oral tradition. Popular Buddhist lore, as with many religions, has a tendency to add a fantastic overlay to a basic underlying essence. In keeping with a multi-layered perception of the universe, stories about auspicious events and the exploits of religious luminaries move interchangeably between alternative realms. This history, rather than documenting the country's tangible associations with itself and the surrounding regions, focuses instead on its spiritual relations. Magnificent



saints subdue local deities and evil spirits, ancient religious “treasures” are retrieved from forbidding gorges and divinely inspired leaders bring peace and stability.

## SUCCESSION

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the land was inhabited by around 2000BC. Not much is known about these pre-historic peoples and their cultures or their relationship with the surrounding regions. The country’s demographic history is however one of ongoing migration, reflected in the chronology of the three broad ethnic groupings: first the Sharchops of Indo-Mongoloid origin; then the Ngalops of Tibetan origin; and more recently the Lhotsams of Nepali origin. Prevailing community structures - dispersed, localized, agrarian and self-sufficient - indicate a relative stability in underlying social and economic conditions. Upon this essentially constant background is placed an overwhelming and deeply interrelated religious and political veneer.

The name Bhutan derives from the ancient Indian term Bhotana, meaning the end of the land of the Bhots (Tibet). Earlier Tibetan texts refer to the country by various other names such as Lho Jong, “The Valleys of the South”, and Lho Mon Kha Shi, “The Southern Mon Country of Four Approaches”. “Mon” was a general term used by the Tibetans for the Mongoloid non-Buddhist peoples living on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. In the Dzongkha language Bhutan is called Drukyul, after the dominant Tibetan Buddhist school – the Drukpa Kagyupa – which prevailed as the unifying political and religious force in the seventeenth century. Poetic translations are based on the Tibetan druk, meaning thunder/dragon. Such titles allude to the land’s independence, its linkages with the Tibetan Buddhist world and its exclusive adherence to a particular religious school.

Bhutan’s most profound historical influences came from the religious and cultural center of Tibet. Prior to the arrival of Buddhism, communities subscribed to the Bon religion, characterized by the worship of spirits associated with elements from the natural environment. The Buddhist religion merged these beliefs within its broader framework, and through its diffusion became the first collective authority and cohesive force. Many influential religious figures either traveled through or made Bhutan their home. The nation first achieved a degree of political unity in the Seventeenth Century under the extraordinary leadership of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the hierarch of the Drukpa Kagyupa religious order. He established a centralized theocracy of intertwined religious and secular rule, simultaneous and somewhat akin to the Tibetan Gelugpa system under successive Dalai Lamas.

Until the seventeenth century the country consisted of a dislocated collection of local fiefdoms ruled by families of noble descent. The political hierarchy implied by nobility highlights the intimate relationship between spiritual and temporal legitimacy. This was further underlined by the Drukpa theocracy, which provided an initial sense of nationhood even though it did not achieve continuing secular stability. The process of internal political unification finally reached a logical conclusion in the early Twentieth Century with the introduction of a hereditary monarchy. Having spent most of its history



isolated from significant external influence, Bhutan became more intimately linked with the modern world in the early 1960s. This signifies the most far-reaching political development in the nation's history, as it becomes connected to the subtle multidimensional powers implied by the modernization process.

The combination of continuing independence and enduring insulation has meant that Bhutan's history remains dominated by internal developments. However, given the country's small size and loosely connected nature, external events have played an important role in internal evolution. The conditions in Tibet certainly influenced the nature and scope of Buddhism's diffusion, from the missionary activities of a rich religious heartland to the marginalisation of certain schools within Tibet and their flight to and increasing authority in Bhutan. Furthermore, respective political threats from north and south shaped internal political evolution, as first Tibetan invasions needed to be repelled, then the emerging power of the British required mitigation, and finally the tense regional politics between India and China required negotiation and more intimate southern alliance. A steady and consistent process of internal succession is punctuated by four defining moments: the arrival of Buddhism closely followed by the profound presence of Guru Rinpoche; the birth of the nation upon unification by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal; the establishment of a monarchy under the First King Ugyen Wangchuck; and collective integration within regional and global systems and the beginning of modernization.

### THE THREE JEWELS

Kyichu Lhakhang in Paro and Jampe Lhakhang in Bumthang are two of Bhutan's most important religious sites, symbols of Buddhism's arrival. Tradition records that these temples were part of a greater scheme chosen by the seventh century Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo to tame a huge demoness extending over the whole land, creating numerous obstacles to the spread of Buddhism. He is said to have magically multiplied himself, sending his emanations to build 108 temples in one day on each of her joints, thus pinning her down and immobilizing her. Of these, 13 were the most important: the Lhasa Jokhang was constructed on the heart of the demoness; four temples, "the four great horn suppressors", were built in central Tibet; four temples, "the temples to tame the border", were built farther away, of which Jampe Lhakhang is on the left knee of the demoness; finally four more temples, "the temples to tame the area beyond the border", were built on the extremities of the Tibetan sphere of influence, of which Kyichu Lhakhang is on the left sole of the demoness.

The founding father and preeminent figure in Bhutanese Buddhism was Padmasambhava - Guru Rinpoche, "the precious master". The major growth of Buddhism in Bhutan began with his arrival in the eighth century. Born in the Swat province of what is now Pakistan, he became a Buddhist tantric master and brought numerous teachings to Tibet and throughout the Himalayan Buddhist world. His wisdom laid the firm foundation for Buddhism's spread in Bhutan, where he traveled fairly extensively, left countless stories about his subduing of local demons and deities, and was the founding inspiration for many sacred sites, notably Taktsang Lhakhang in Paro and Kurje Lhakhang in Bumthang.



Guru Rinpoche is widely revered as the second Buddha, and his followers, later known as Nyingmapas, “the ancients”, constituted the first Buddhist school in Tibet.

Following this initial impetus, Buddhist belief steadily spread throughout the land achieving a degree of hegemony. The ninth and tenth centuries were a period of political turmoil in Tibet, and marked the almost total disappearance of Buddhism in the region. It was only in the eleventh century that there was a renaissance, and what is called “the period of the second diffusion of Buddhism” commenced. Numerous competing schools arrived in Bhutan, founding monasteries, gathering followers and gaining both spiritual and temporal authority in respective parts of the country. Of these, the Drukpa Kapyupas and the Nyingmapas were to achieve some ascendancy. The Drukpa Kagyupa School was introduced to Bhutan by Phajo Drukgom Shingpo (1184-1251), who was instrumental in achieving initial dominance in the west, and whose descendants solidified both spiritual and temporal power. The Nyingmapa School had been present in Bhutan since the time of Guru Rinpoche, and gradually widened their sphere of influence in the central and eastern regions through a series of significant figures and an emerging religious nobility descended from the families of important saints.

The period up to the seventeenth century was a time of Buddhist dissemination, as Bhutan became a sanctuary for the “three jewels” – the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings) and the Sangha (his followers). This was epitomized by the presence of figures possessing the power to inspire both local leaders and the popular masses. Longchen Rabjampa (1308-1363), the greatest Nyingmapa philosopher, chose exile in central Bhutan following a dispute with his Tibetan master. Dorje Lingpa (1346-1405), one of the foremost Tibetan tertons or treasure revealers, settled in Bumthang. However, the figures that are most recalled are probably Drukpa Kunle (1455-1529) and Pema Lingpa (1450-1521). Drukpa Kunle, the “divine madman”, is a Bhutanese folk hero, famous for the unorthodox and often outrageous ways in which he taught religion. Wandering through Tibet and Bhutan as a yogi, his style of teaching, particularly accessible to the common man, was a reaction against the dogmatism of the clergy and rigid social conventions, which he saw as being impediments to the grasping of the true meaning of the religion. He remains the subject of a host of anecdotes in which sex plays a defining role. Pema Lingpa, born in Bumthang of noble Nyingmapa birth, was the first Bhutanese-born religious figure to gain significant fame throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world. In a vision of Guru Rinpoche he attained prophecies for the discovery of a number of hidden teachings, thus becoming a great terton.

## THE SHABDRUNG

By the Seventeenth Century Buddhism was consolidated as the dominant religion for the region, applying some degree of coherence to an otherwise disjointed setting. Political organization remained localized, an assortment of respective nobilities, clans and territories. The abilities for conquests, expansions and incorporations were significantly constrained by geographic inaccessibility and firm resident allegiances. In the west, five Drukpa families were firmly established, maintaining religious and matrimonial links with the Drukpa hub at Ralung in central Tibet. These were from the respective lineages



of Phajo, the Kyura, the Obtsho Choje, the Zarchen Choje and Drukpa Kunle. The central areas were less standardized, controlled by a collection of older Shelngo and Dung ruling families and more recent Nyingmapa nobilities. Power in the east remained the most dislocated, a myriad of small independent units ruled by their respective clan representatives. The majority traced their descent to Prince Tsangma of the Tibetan royal family, who is said to have come to eastern Bhutan in the ninth century. The political scenario within the country was one of multiplicity; of numerous separate noble and religious leaderships all gaining their legitimacy to rule from direct or indirect associations with some divine authority.

The major turning point occurred in the seventeenth century under the extraordinary leadership of the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Born in Tibet in 1594, he hailed from the princely family of Gya, which was then head of the Drukpa Kagyupa order. He was recognized as the reincarnation of the great Drukpa scholar Pema Karpo (1527-1592) – himself the incarnation of Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (1161-1211), the founder of the Drukpa Kagyupa branch - and was groomed as a potential successor to the Drukpa throne. In 1606 he succeeded his late grandfather as the 18<sup>th</sup> prince-abbot of the Drukpas. However, he became embroiled in a dispute over his status as Pema Karpo's reincarnation, most notably with the powerful provincial ruler, the Tsang Desi. Under considerable danger at Ralung and having received an invitation from the Obtsho Lama of Gasa in northwestern Bhutan, in 1616, at the age of twenty-three, he left with his entourage carrying important relics of the Drukpa school. The most significant and sacred of these was known as the Rang-jung Karsapani, an image of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, which had appeared in one of Tsangpa Gyare's vertebrae following his cremation.

Upon arrival the controlling Drukpa families of the west, who revered him as the true Drukpa hierarch, welcomed the future Shabdrung. Thus began the long and complex process of western and subsequently national unification. He united the Drukpa families under his authority, traveled extensively in western Bhutan, and through his ongoing exploits propagated increasing prestige and political influence. The principal threats to his increasing authority came externally from Tibet, initially from the Tsang Desi and later from the controlling Gelugpa School, and internally from a coalition of the other religious schools in the region called the "five groups of lamas". The first half of the century was a period of political consolidation as allies were courted and enemies repelled. Tibetan invasions were resisted shortly after his arrival, and again in 1634 and 1639 supported by the five groups of lamas. Two further Tibetan offensives were overcome in 1644 and 1648/9. By the time of his death in 1651 the Shabdrung, an honorific title meaning "at whose feet one submits", had unified western Bhutan, vanquished competing religious schools and fought off five Tibetan invasions.

In 1651 the Shabdrung entered strict seclusion in the Punakha Dzong, never to reappear. His death remained concealed for another fifty years, thereby aiding in the further consolidation of his legacy. By 1656 central and eastern Bhutan had been brought under Drukpa political rule, thus concluding the process of internal integration and heralding the birth of the nation. The Shabdrung left a major legacy to Drukpa, the land that bears



the name of his religious school. Aside from being the dominant force behind unification, he was to pass on another fundamental bequest: a legal, political, administrative and physical infrastructure. One of his notable achievements was the creation of a formal code of laws for the country, called the Katrim. The Katrim defined the spiritual, economic and judicial relationships between state and society. In return for the teachings, initiations and rituals performed by the monastic community for the benefit of individual, society and nation, subjects were responsible for material and financial support, which took the form of various taxes. Written along Buddhist lines, the code further regulated all aspects of social life, from the nature of crime and punishment, to the behavior of monks and officials and the use of tobacco.

Prior to entering retreat, the Shabdrung sought to establish a strong government to administer after his death. The Shabdrung (and his subsequent incarnations) was recognized as the head of a theocratic Drukpa Kagyupa state. Under him was founded a dual system of government, known as chosi, where the monk body and associated religious matters were controlled by a chief abbot, the Je Khenpo, and political affairs were directed by a temporal head, the desi. The country was divided into three regions, each under the authority of a governor or ponlop. Other important posts were the chief of the dzong (dzongpon) and the elders (gups), who looked after several villages and mediated between state and society. Dzongs, monastic fortresses, formed the physical core for political, religious, administrative and legal systems. During his life the Shabdrung built a dzong in each valley in western Bhutan, thereby cementing his authority over the land, a process that was continued into the central and eastern regions. These dzongs, which were the seat for both religious and administrative power, are unique to Bhutan, and remain perhaps the most overt and enduring symbols of the Drukpa theocracy and the Shabdrung himself.

### **DYNASTIC CONVENTIONS**

The half-century following the death of the Shabdrung was one of relative stability and the consolidation and expansion of Drukpa power. The first three Desis, who ruled from 1651 to 1680, all emerged from within the Shabdrung's own close entourage, and their reigns were each characterized by a lack of personal ambition and the dutiful following of his instructions. Internal unification was completed and Drukpa rule solidified, further Tibetan invasions were repelled, the administration was strengthened, and dzongs and temples were constructed and enlarged. This was essentially an interim period, bridging the gap until a logical heir was ready to accede. With his own son weakened by illness, the Shabdrung recognized Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1696), a distant relative, indirect descendant of the eleventh and twelfth Drukpa hierarchs and great-grandson of Drukpa Kunle, as his successor. Meticulously groomed as gyeltshab (successor), from 1672 he presided over all the ceremonies of the central monk body and in 1680 assumed temporal control, officiating as the 4<sup>th</sup> Desi.

Perhaps Tenzin Rabgye's greatest achievements were his tolerance towards the Nyingmapas, who retained an overwhelming following in the central and eastern regions, and the establishment of a Monk Tax, whereby every family with more than three sons



was obliged to enroll one within the monk body. In this way he contributed to both the political acceptance and the numerical strength of the Drukpa theocracy. However, he failed to produce an heir, and upon his death the country entered almost two centuries of political turmoil and internal instability. Although the system established by the Shabdrung proved efficacious in many ways, maintained an ongoing importance and forms the bedrock for numerous contemporary institutional arrangements, it was critically weakened by its over-reliance on an ambiguous leadership. Problems emerged in finding subsequent reincarnations of the Shabdrung, and those who ascended the throne proved more inclined towards religious rather than political activities, thereby becoming little more than figureheads in the temporal realm.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of almost continual internal political disruption as countless Desis, ponlops and dzongpons vied for control. However, although temporal power became more devolved, reverting back to a more regional character, the Shabdrung remained a greatly revered figure, the Drukpa Kagyupas retained spiritual ascendancy and struggles were essentially conducted within the parameters implied by the established political infrastructure. A vision of national unity had been introduced and acknowledged, and ambitious local leaders now aspired to this scope of control. The emergence of Jigme Namgyal, the Tongsa Ponlop, as a new dominant authority in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent establishment of a monarchy, may therefore be interpreted as an inevitable continuity rather than particularly revolutionary. Born in 1825 a descendant of the important religious saint Pema Lingpa and distant relative of Shabdrung Jigme Dragpa II (1791-1831), at a young age Jigme Namgyal joined the retinue of the then Tongsa Ponlop and quickly ascended the ranks.

At this time the central government was becoming increasingly weak, and the two principal Ponlops of Paro and Tongsa largely controlled western and central and eastern regions respectively. A key actor in the consolidation of regional authority and increasingly in central government matters, Jigme Namgyal was appointed the Tongsa Ponlop in 1853, gaining a reputation for political genius as both a strongman and talented mediator. Having consolidated and expanded his sphere of influence, by the time of the British mission of 1864 under Ashley Eden he conducted all negotiations for the Bhutanese, thus proving him the preeminent political figure and overall ruler of the country in all but name. He retired as Tongsa Ponlop in 1866, had a short reign as the 50<sup>th</sup> Desi from 1870-1873, and in the same year suppressed a general rebellion in the west. By the time of his death in 1881 a degree of political cohesion had been restored to the country, with his family and close allies occupying the major ruling positions. It was however left to his second son and heir apparent, Ugyen Wangchuck, to further consolidate his father's initiatives.

Born in 1862 and groomed by his father from a young age as a successor, Ugyen Wangchuck was appointed Paro Ponlop when seventeen. Although his political stature had been established, his dominance was yet to be fully confirmed and the personal ambitions of others remained unfulfilled. In 1882 he had to intervene following intrigues over the position of Tongsa Ponlop, and, relinquishing his existing title to his brother, he



assumed the post himself. The move away from the west created an opportunity for an opposition to surface, and his former friends the Thimphu and Punakha dzongpons duly began to hatch a plot against him. Responding to a series of subversive actions, he assembled an army and in 1885 following consecutive victories and a failed arbitration the rebellion was crushed. This triumph marks a turning point in Bhutanese history, as almost two hundred years of internal instability were brought to an end. With the reemergence of a hegemonic power, Bhutan entered the twentieth century as a united and essentially peaceful nation.

Ugyen Wangchuck was now the undisputed leader within the system of government initiated by the Shabdrung. In 1886 he appointed Lupon Sangye Dorje as the 55<sup>th</sup> Desi and assumed the position of gongzim (Chief Chamberlain) in addition to being Tongsa Ponlop, the post closest to the head of state, the incarnate of the Shabdrung. However, with the nature and scope of his authority as yet not institutionalized, there remained the risk that upon his passing instability may return. The opportunity for a systemic shift occurred following the death of the Shabdrung Jigme Chogyel in 1904 and the retirement of the 55<sup>th</sup> Desi in 1905. With a reincarnation yet to be recognized and the possibility of a political vacuum, a petition was presented to the State Council asking them to consider making Ugyen Wangchuck the King of Bhutan. This suggestion was unanimously accepted and on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1907 Ugyen Wangchuck was crowned the First King of Bhutan, and the position was made hereditary. In 1908 the King appointed his close friend and principal advisor Kazi Ugyen Dorje as gongzim and made this post hereditary. A twentieth century monarchy was thus established and has remained a fundamental ongoing presence, proving the critical factor in the maintenance of national stability and sovereignty and a guiding light as Bhutan gradually emerges into the modern world.

## **MOUNTING MODERNISMS**

The nature of Bhutan's foreign relations, most notably with the more modern world, was to have an immense influence on the nation's historical evolution. By the end of the eighteenth century the East India Company's control of India was near complete, a situation that was to have a major effect on regional politics. Traditional ongoing political, cultural and commercial contacts with the neighboring territories of Tibet, Ladakh, Cooch Bihar, Sikkim and Nepal were sometimes problematic, with regular disagreements and sporadic skirmishes. However, the balance of power remained relatively stable, and conflict was for the most part limited to muscle flexing and border incursions. The presence of a powerful organized southern neighbor, possessing an overwhelming expansion oriented trading agenda, was certain to introduce an important new factor to external affairs and could be interpreted as Bhutan's initial acquaintance with modernity. Relations commenced in 1772, when Cooch Bihar became a British protectorate, and were followed in 1774 with a first mission to Bhutan.

Initial exchanges were good-natured and conciliatory, however the Bhutanese proved far from accommodating, submissive or malleable. Follow-up missions consolidated associations without ever fully achieving the desired objectives of the British. By the beginning of the nineteenth century relations had begun to deteriorate over territorial



disputes in the southern border areas of Cooch Bihar, Bengal and Assam. Ongoing tensions began to escalate on the matter of the Bengal and Assam Duars (southern approaches), leading to the Ashley Eden mission in 1864 and on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1864 a British declaration of war annexing the Duars. During the one year Duar War the Bhutanese proved worthy opponents, gaining a reputation for their military skills, personified in a successful counteroffensive led by Jigme Namgyal. Although the British achieved final victory, the nature of resistance certainly influenced the decision that an invasion of the inhospitable mountainous terrain of Bhutan itself was untenable. The Treaty of Sinchula, signed on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1865, was to prove a defining moment in Indo-Bhutan relations. The Bhutanese surrendered all the Bengal and Assam Duars, imports from either country were to be recognized as duty-free and the British consulted concerning Bhutan's external relations. However, Bhutan's territory was roughly defined and internal affairs were to be independently determined. Moreover, the British agreed to pay an annual compensation for the lost territory.

1865 marks the Bhutanese retreat to the hills and focus on domestic preoccupations. Under the leadership of Ugyen Wangchuck the country was to achieve internal unity and external recognition. Relations between Bhutan and the British improved, as traditional territorial matters gave way to the more subtle issues of regional diplomacy. Ugyen Wangchuck recognized that Bhutanese interests would be better served through a policy of alliance and limited appeasement, reflected in the neutral stand taken in the 1888 dispute between India and Tibet and assistance provided to the 1904 Younghusband expedition to Lhasa, for which he was conferred with the insignia of Knight Commander of the Indian Empire. Continued good relations were reflected in the strong friendship between Ugyen Wangchuck and John Claude White, the then political officer in Sikkim, a meeting in India with the Prince of Wales, the future George V, a high level British presence at the coronation of Ugyen Wangchuck and the 1910 Treaty of Punakha. This treaty clarified the position whereby the British would guide foreign policy but exercise no influence in internal administration. Thus a relationship was established that was both affable yet reserved.

The product of Bhutan's initial encounters with modernity both demarcated the country's territorial boundaries and maintained a clear division between internal and external realms. The Bhutanese, conscious that an intimate relationship at this time with the more profound aspects of modernity might compromise the country's independence, chose to remain a stable and secluded ally. Ugyen Wangchuck had however been exposed to the more modern world and the notion of development. Particularly appreciating the importance of modern education, he decided to start schools to prepare the country for an inevitable modern epoch. Upon his death in 1926 Ugyen Wangchuck was succeeded by his son the second King Jigme Wangchuck (1905-1952), who was to further his father's initiatives. Consolidating internal stability and the position of the monarchy, he reformed and centralized the administrative system. Furthermore, conscious of the inherent threats to the sovereignty of the nation, which remained somewhat ambiguous under the British, he entered into relations with the newly independent India. On the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1949 a treaty of friendship was signed, which recognized Bhutan's independence and ushered in



the continuing close and mutually beneficial relationship between the small Kingdom and its powerful neighbor.

By the middle of the Twentieth Century Bhutan stood as a remote, inward-looking and to a large extent isolated land on the threshold of modernity. The situation was however soon to change, a reorientation of perspective influenced by an inevitable modernizing momentum, alterations in the regional political scenario and the progressive outlook of the third King Jigme Dorje Wangchuck (1928-1972). Generally regarded as the father of modern Bhutan, Jigme Dorje Wangchuck acceded the throne upon the death of his father in 1952. The country he inherited was now from a traditional standpoint fairly matured, recognized both internally and externally as an independent, stable and relatively unified nation under the strong and legitimate leadership of a hereditary monarchy. It however remained almost completely untouched by modernizing processes, with their implied transformations in economic, political, social and cultural environments. Keenly aware of both the inevitability of eventual integration with and the potential benefits to be derived from the modern world, Jigme Dorje Wangchuck personally undertook preemptory initiatives aimed at preparing the country for a more intimate relationship with the outside world. In 1953 he established a National Assembly as the first fully representative national forum, in 1956 serfdom was abolished, soon followed by an extensive series of land reforms, bringing to an end traditional feudal relations. The King further understood that the future sovereignty and independence of his tiny Kingdom would be dependent on its ability to successfully adapt to modern realities.

By the late 1950s the third King's vision of a modernizing Bhutan was to strongly correspond with the Indian priority of promoting closer connections. China's invasion of Tibet had highlighted new issues in Sino-Indian border security, with India anxious to establish a direct counterbalancing presence on the southern side of the Himalayas. When Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, accompanied by his daughter Indira Gandhi, visited Bhutan in 1958, the terms of such integration would have dominated the agenda. India was to provide assistance in the establishment a basic communications network, linking the Kingdom both internally and externally, and to help Bhutan undertake associated modernizations. In 1961, closely preceded by the construction of the first motor road linking the two countries, Bhutan's first five-year development plan was put into operation, ushering in a new era in the country's historical evolution. Significantly, the integration process was coordinated at the centralized level, which allowed a degree of order to be maintained in transition. Bhutan joined the Colombo Plan in 1962, the International Postal Union in 1969 and finally, in 1971, became a member of the United Nations. Successive development plans were implemented, supported by evolutions in government and civil administration. Upon his death in 1972 Jigme Dorje Wangchuck was to bequeath the present King Jigme Singye Wangchuck a nation that had in a few years undergone a transformation in orientation, and was now negotiating the tricky path towards modernization.



### 3. RELIGION – SPIRITUAL SANCTUARY

And then, after the last prayer wheel on the last wall is spun, the low, dull cacophony of monkish chants – old men and novices reciting or reading from the sacred books – takes over the senses. We lean forward to enter another small wooden door and plunge into darkness, an eerie void filled with a hundred voices and a hundred simultaneous but unorchestrated recitations. There is no other sound quite like this hum of a Himalayan Buddhist monastery as its inhabitants do their daily chores. The chanting of monks has both an unearthly pitch and intonation and a breathtaking hypnotic cadence. A lama told me that while the basic beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism were the same across the Himalayas, the Bhutanese had “different ways of playing the instruments and different tunes to chant the mantras.” To an untutored ear, however, the effect of chanting monks can be the same in a monastery in the Nepal hills, Sikkim, or Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama’s exile headquarters in northern India. Whether in the orderly recitations of an organized prayer service or the disorder of ritual or educative readings, the droning produces an unlikely clarity that seems to empty the atmosphere of distractions and expose the soul.

Barbara Crossette *So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas*

Tantric (Tibetan) Buddhism has more recently generated widespread interest and gained a global following. Mahayana Buddhism in its Vajrayana (tantric) derivation is commonly associated with the lively personality of the Dalai Lama and meditation practices. At a more theoretical level, its sympathetic holistic values appear to closely correspond with those of a “postmodern” world. It attained its philosophical and artistic peaks within Tibet, where it was firmly settled by the Eighth Century. The beliefs were disseminated by wandering monks throughout the mountainous areas of inner Asia, and attained a strong adherence within the Himalayan Kingdoms of Ladakh, Mustang, Sikkim and Bhutan and in smaller pockets throughout the region.

For most of its history the Tibetan Buddhist Diaspora remained essentially detached from the outside world and Buddhism flowered as a civilization. Indeed, Tantric Buddhism is not so much a religion as a holistic approach to life. However, in the previous half-century these communities have experienced major displacements. More powerful neighbors have swallowed them up, and they have become overrun by new aspirations and authorities. Although religious belief remains strong, underlying contexts have changed. Bhutan continues as the only place where the faith remains observed within something resembling its traditional political, cultural, social and natural environments.

Immediately apparent are the ubiquity of the religion and the overall intensity of faith. To relate to Bhutan’s present situation is to appreciate the overwhelming role that Buddhism continues to play. Values and belief systems circulate throughout Bhutanese life and form the bedrock upon which other structures have evolved. They are evident in all spheres, from individual outlooks, through social customs and institutions, to the functioning of the state. Perhaps they are at their most evocative when interpreted within small, distant, self-reliant communities. It is in these settings that the full spectrum of Tantric Buddhist teaching is most conspicuous – the interconnectedness of all living things, the solidarity bred from compassion, the arcane and somewhat ethereal character – where “*a rich stew of theology [is] spiced by legend, superstition, astrological interpretation, and the worship of natural phenomena*” (Crossette (1995:18)).



## PERSPECTIVES

The basic philosophy that informs a Buddhist perspective can be summarized by the Four Noble Truths - anguish, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to cessation - as expounded by the Lord Buddha shortly after achieving enlightenment. The 'First Truth' explains that our conditioned existence is never free from a state of suffering. Any happiness we enjoy is only temporary and in due course gives way to anguish. The reason for this - as described by the 'Second Truth' - is that any action one may do, say or think gives rise to a result which has to be experienced either later in one's life or in a future life. Rebirth is a result of one's actions, and the conditions into which one is born in one life are directly dependent on one's actions in previous lives, and more particularly the motives and attitudes involved.

The 'Second Truth', the principle of cause and effect or Karma, implies a degree of fatalism regarding material conditions. These are interpreted as possessing only a phenomenological existence and no true reality except on the plane of relative truth. It goes on to explain that the motivations behind our actions are negative emotions such as hatred, attachment, pride, jealousy and especially ignorance, which is the root of all the others. This ignorance concerns not only a lack of wisdom in how we act, but the basic ignorance behind how we perceive the whole of existence and constantly become caught by our clinging to the idea of our own egos and of the outer world as solid and lasting. We are therefore caught in Samsara, the cycle of existence in which one is endlessly propelled by negative emotions and the karmic force of one's actions from one state of rebirth to another.

The 'Third Truth' introduces the notion that it is possible to bring an end to our state of anguish. The principle insight is that our perceived reality, in both life and death, is only a state of mind, and can therefore be changed. The cessation of suffering and freedom from conditioned existence can be broken if and when we cease to act through ignorance. The 'Fourth Truth' explains the path through which this can be achieved. This essentially embodies two methods: the accumulation of positive actions, such as charity, forgiveness and reverence and support of the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), and the Sangha (the community of practitioners)); and the practice of meditation, which can directly dispel the root ignorance which is the cause of anguish.

The core aspiration behind the 'Fourth Truth' is the break from Samsara and the attainment of Nirvana, the state beyond suffering, an absolute emptiness in which there is no distinction between a subject and the object of its thoughts. This is possible through the complete realization of our Buddha nature, thereby achieving enlightenment. Each one of us possesses the innate potential to become a Buddha, one who has completely awakened from ignorance and become opened to one's vast potential of wisdom. A practitioner who follows the path with only his own liberation in mind can attain a high degree of understanding and overcome the negative emotions. However, only those who have as their motivation the good and ultimate enlightenment of all other beings can accomplish final Buddhahood.



## INTERPRETATIONS

Entering the Buddhist world one is immediately aware of, and easily confused by, its inherent complexity. Indeed, “it is said that the religious philosophy of Buddhism is as vast and deep as the ocean” (Mynak Tulku (1997:137)). The essential essence of the Lord Buddha’s teachings has been developed in a number of different directions to generate a multitude of alternative categorizations, symbolisms and practices. Born over 2,500 years ago in northern India, Buddhism divided into two great traditions: the Hinayana or ‘Lesser Vehicle’ – more commonly known as Theravada – now the dominant form in Southeast Asia, Burma and Sri Lanka; and the Mahayana or ‘Greater Vehicle’, as practiced in China, Vietnam and East Asia. The Tantrayana (Vajrayana) or ‘Diamond Vehicle’ evolved from within the Mahayana school, and was adopted across the Himalayas.

*“The Hinayana should be taken as knowledge. The Mahayana should be taken as attitude. Tantra means practice. Tantrayana is the quickest way to become Buddha – like a rocket going to the moon.”* (Dasho Rigzin Dorji in Crossette (1995:x)) Tantric Buddhism offers a fast track to enlightenment. It is understood that the Buddha’s instructions are contained not only in the Tripitaka - the Sutra (scriptures), the Vinaya (monastic discipline and ethics) and the Abhidharma (underlying psychology and logic) – but also in the Vajrayana (the Tantras). These constitute powerful ‘hidden teachings’, whose meaning can only be understood through the explanations of a religious master (or lama), and the practice of which imparts great merits.

Mahayana Buddhism recognizes a pantheon of symbolic deities and bodhisattvas (Buddhas-to-be), who have attained enlightenment and the option of Nirvana, but have chosen to reincarnate in the world of humans to help others. This is the idea behind the Rinpoche (or Tulku), the auspicious reincarnation of a previous enlightened personality. Furthermore, six realms of conditioned existence (or Samsara) are identified, each associated with a particular mental poison: hells (anger), hungry ghosts (greed), animals (ignorance), humans (desire), demigods (jealousy) and gods (pride). The actions of great saints can be interpreted (and are often depicted) on each of these levels. Throughout the Tibetan Buddhist Diaspora, Tantric Buddhism evolved in a particular way associated with the pre-Buddhist context. Certain elements of the earlier shamanic Bon religion have been assimilated, including the worship of mountains and local deities.

Tibetan Buddhism has over time developed into different schools and a number of sub-schools. The four major schools that predominate are the Nyingmapa (the ‘ancients’ directly linked to Guru Rinpoche), the Sakyapa, the Kagyupa (associated with the Karmapa) and the Gelugpa (the ‘new’ tradition allied to the Dalai Lama). The Drukpa Kagyupa sect followed in Bhutan is one of twelve Kagyu sub-schools, differentiated by the variations in method introduced by their respective founders. Each school uses two basic kinds of texts - Tibetan translations of original Sanskrit works accompanied by commentaries, and the philosophical treatises written by the masters of each school, often also supplemented by commentaries. Although practiced, taught and studied in different



ways, the various schools are not radically different, and all subscribe to the essential essence of the Buddha's teachings.

## MANIFESTATIONS

In Bhutan one is surrounded by religion. Chortens, monasteries and temples dot the landscape, prayer flags flutter from hilltops, red-robed monks are in abundance, somber ceremonial sounds drift in the air. The country is full of holy sites, accorded significance through Buddhist luminaries and stories about their fantastic achievements. There are some magnificent examples of religious texts, art and architecture. Most private houses have a prayer room, and most families organize ritual observances (pujas) at least once every year. Many prefer to treat illness through traditional techniques that address both physical and spiritual sources. Whether at an organized festival or ceremony, within a monastery or in quiet personal prayers, evidence of Buddhist practice abounds.

Such ubiquity points to an unusual strength of belief. Religion plays a major part in most people's lives, whether in a ritualistic mode or through more subtle teachings. The country maintains a state sponsored monk body of around 5000, which is called upon to perform a variety of public and private functions. Aside from its spiritual role the monastic community also carries out social welfare activities, both in traditional integrated forms and in the more formal development process. Wealthy patrons build temples and support monastic foundations. Rinpoches are treated with great reverence. The elected Chief Abbot (the Je Khenpo) holds an equal ceremonial rank to the King, and religion continues to play a major role in national affairs. Power is formalized within a centralized institution, the Dratshang Lhentshog, and representatives from the clergy sit on major decision-making bodies, such as the Royal Advisory Council and the National Assembly.

As indicated by the Noble Eightfold Path – correct understanding, correct thought, correct speech, correct action, correct livelihood, correct effort, correct mindfulness and correct meditation – Buddhism is not so much a religion as a holistic approach to life. Tantric Buddhism, with its emphasis on practice, implies a still more intimate relationship. Although for most the stated guidelines will remain aspirations, following the path is undoubtedly facilitated if one lives within structures that encourage or at the very least do not obstruct such values. Buddhist societies – almost by definition – appear the most suitable locations for the promotion of the broad faith. The prevailing conditions within Bhutan certainly afford suitable opportunities for those who either wish to live a relatively virtuous existence or undertake more serious explorations.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Buddhism in Bhutan is the broader context within which the religion remains so fundamental and merges so seamlessly. The country possesses a special sense of spirituality, where specifically religious features are combined with more broad ranging human practices. This is reflected in the fundamental role Buddhism has played in the evolution of social and cultural systems. To appreciate the religion within a traditional village environment affords one a particular insight. Distant self-reliant agrarian communities subsisting in inhospitable conditions promote a



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sense of collective solidarity and serve to highlight the interconnectedness of all living things. Within such isolated settings it is not all that remarkable that individual perspectives attribute greater significance and intimacy to relationships with other realms. Traditional outlooks perpetuate that combine the natural and the supernatural, legend and superstition, perception and practice, in an unusually integrated manner. With the onset of modernity it is unlikely that such assimilated landscapes will remain.



## 4. ENVIRONMENT – ECOLOGICAL ENCLAVE

Reports about Bhutan invariably mention that it is a country with the most varied habitats and a rich array of animal and plant species, and that it is almost unbelievably unspoiled. Authors also acknowledge that there has been little research on the subject. Indeed, Bhutan can be compared with those large empty spaces on old maps indicating unexplored territory; it is a veritable terra incognita. It presents a great ecological treasure house whose significance for scholarly research, and for our world heritage, is only slowly being recognized and is, as yet, little appreciated. The small Kingdom in the eastern Himalayas was closed for a long time, which has also spared it until now from the ravages of untrammelled development encountered in comparable regions.

Gerald Navara *The Lay of the Land in  
Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods*

Bhutan is an ecological wonder. Within an area roughly the size of Switzerland, rising from the Indian plains to the Tibetan plateau, is a natural landscape of immense beauty and diversity. Folds of forested hills, rugged cliffs, fast rivers and young valleys fall from high snow-covered peaks. Austere barren expanses stretch between colossal luminous veined mountains. Patchwork fields of subtly contrasting hues nestle within spontaneous kaleidoscopic vegetation. There are a great variety of individual locales, differentiated by their particular combination of altitudinal, climatic and topographical conditions. These harbor a wealth of flora and fauna, the sheer mass and variety of which is almost unparalleled within such a limited space: giant rhododendron and rare orchid, majestic tiger and quirky takin, colorful pheasant and graceful black-necked crane.

More remarkable still is the manner in which entire ecosystems remain relatively uncompromised by human activity. There is little evidence in Bhutan of teeming masses uncontrollably jostling for tenuous positions or the commanding technological innovations with which man has rested control of his environment from Mother Nature. Most inhabitants still realize a simple sustainable existence within their dominant natural settings. The inhospitable mountainous backdrop serves to both inhibit whole scale human encroachment and accentuate the primacy of the natural world. Ecology thus survives in all its immense complex multidimensional totality, perpetually interacting within understated natural habitats and relatively stable hierarchies.

Such is its global significance that the natural environment has become a central pillar of Bhutan's national identity. Ongoing government commitments to conservation are uncommonly strong - going well beyond the usual rhetoric - and have achieved some notable successes. However, that current conditions remain so preserved is in no small part a product of the country's underdevelopment. A host of new pressures are emerging that have the potential to seriously compromise environmental integrity. A National Environment Strategy has been articulated which aims at following a 'Middle Path', maintaining a suitable balance between the respective and often contradictory priorities of development and conservation. Achieving this goal amidst the plethora of chaotic, uneven and inherently destabilizing modernizing processes remains exceptionally problematic.



## SURVEYING

The Kingdom of Bhutan covers a narrow strip of land in the eastern Himalayas between the Indian and Chinese sub-continent. Total land area is approximately 46,500 square kilometers, at their widest points length and breadth measure about 300 and 150 kilometers respectively. The rolling landscape forms a staircase, rising sharply from a low of 100 to a high of 7750 meters above sea level, which may be divided into three distinct relief and climatic zones: the thin sub-tropical lowlands of the south, the broad temperate central valleys and the mountainous alpine north. Rainfall is concentrated in the monsoon season, mid-June to September, and can differ significantly within short distances due to rain shadow effects. Inside this territory are interspersed an array of particular ecosystems, possessing specific blends of altitude, climate and terrain.

The country possesses a wealth of natural resources. Water is abundant, with the altitudinal differences providing a great potential for hydropower generation. While the exact magnitude of mineral resources is unknown, geological mapping has indicated coal, limestone, dolomite, talc, marble, gypsum, slate, zinc, lead, copper, tungsten and quartzite deposits. The essentially mountainous landscape harbors immense ecological riches. Indeed, situated at the interface of several floral and faunal regions, Bhutan is much better endowed in plant and animal varieties than any of its neighbors. 72% of land area is under forest cover and over 60% of the endemic species of the Eastern Himalayan region can be found within its borders, including over 165 species of mammals, 770 species of birds, 600 species of orchid, 50 species of rhododendron and 300 species of medicinal plants. In this light, Bhutan has been declared as one of ten global “hot-spots” for the conservation of biodiversity, potentially the last best chance for conservation in the Eastern Himalayas.

Any attempt to summarize such multiplicity is likely to become fragmented, due to both a lack of space and the limited amount of research currently conducted. Plant life is sheltered within huge tracts of forest, its nature corresponding roughly with the different relief and climatic zones. In the tropical and sub-tropical south perennial evergreens – with wild banana, fig and wool-trees – quickly make way for oak, sal, walnut and cherry. At about 1500m one encounters the first treelike rhododendrons. Moving into the temperate zone, between 1800 and 3500m, there is again an immense localized diversity changing within and between valleys. Poplar, willow, ash, magnolia and more rhododendron are found amongst dominant oak, birch and maple shifting to spruce, yew, weeping cypress, juniper, larch, fir and blue pine. The landscape of blue pine and dwarfed higher altitude varieties converts to alpine meadows above the tree line at 4500m.

Over 5000 species of plant have been identified within Bhutan. There is an immense array of orchids, found anywhere up to 3700m. The Blue Poppy, the national flower, grows within the high altitude rocky terrain, blooming only once over a life span of several years. In spring, and again during the monsoon, the alpine meadows are carpeted with an immense vibrancy of wild flowers – including anemone, primula, delphinium, iris and forget-me-not. Many natural products, especially in mountain regions, satisfy



some practical purpose. Aside from timber and fuel, wild plants are used in traditional medicine, for cooking and handicrafts. Bhutanese medicine - influenced by Indian Ayurvedic and Chinese pulse reading methods – is similar to traditional Tibetan techniques, using preparations based on vegetable, animal and mineral substances. Several ferns are used in Bhutanese cuisine, and the buds of a certain orchid are a delicacy. The bark of edgeworthia and daphne is used to make high-quality paper, lemongrass is harvested for its essential oil, the weeping cypress is valued for producing incense.

Animal life is equally varied, including several high profile endangered species. A number of groups are now totally protected – these include the golden mahseer, Rufous-necked hornbill, monal pheasant, black-necked crane, musk deer, pygmy hog, takin, red panda, golden langur, Himalayan black bear, clouded and snow leopards, tiger and Asian elephant. The lakes and rivers support a rich variety of fish – although 42 species have been recorded, possibly another 200 exist. There is an immense assortment of birds, some of which have gained cultural significance. The god Mahakala is believed to have assumed the form of a raven to guide the Shabdrung to Bhutan and the crown worn by respective Kings carries the same creature. Mammals are in abundance, protected in secluded forests and high plateaus and by Buddhist beliefs. Yaks are the central livelihood for nomadic herders, wild boars destroy crops, bears are common threats. The national animal is the takin - a strange looking moose-like creature - herding in the summer on alpine pastures, wintering in isolation within dense forests. The shy snow leopard roams solitary in the thin high altitude air. There have been numerous claimed sightings of the yeti, the mythical Himalayan beast.

## NATURAL LANDSCAPES

There is a certain underlying purity associated with Bhutanese landscapes. Physical panoramas tend to highlight an essential simplicity over the immense diversity contained within. The ascetic whites of high peaks stand out against the blanket of lush greenery. High clouds and shrouding mists float suspended in the mass of fresh clean air flowing lucent with the breeze. The overall natural setting is preserved to a degree that is both unusual and extremely valuable. Large expanses remain wholly undisturbed. Cataloguing respective species only hints at the fact that entire ecological systems remain relatively uncompromised. Such ecosystems harbor a mass of biodiversity that is almost boundless, interacting through extremely complex context specific processes. To appreciate wildlife within its understated natural habitats is often to be aware of its presence without ever making actual contact.

Bhutan's environment is often referred to as 'pristine'. Such labeling, alluding to some immaculate perfection, serves to emphasize the dominance of the natural over the man-made. It may also be misleading in that it neglects a fundamental human dimension that always causes certain disruptions. Indeed, a "profound relationship ... has existed since time immemorial between nature and culture" (Toledo (1988:1)). Human interventions have an inclination to simplify ecology, often affecting its essential multiplicity. However, as highlighted in the table below, only a very minor proportion of land area is



currently used for productive pursuits. There are basically four explanations for this: the area suitable for agricultural production is very limited; industrial resource use is heavily regulated; currently there is not heavy population pressure on fragile marginal lands; and conservation oriented policies limit encroachment.

#### LAND USE PATTERN (1995)

LAND TYPE	AREA (Ha)	%
<b>AGRICULTURAL LAND</b>	<b>314582</b>	<b>7.85</b>
Wetland	38760	
Dryland	97723	
Tseri (shifting cultivation)	88332	
Orchard	5741	
Mixed	84026	
<b>FOREST</b>	<b>2578617</b>	<b>64.44</b>
Coniferous	1061621	
Broadleaf	1510570	
Plantation	6426	
<b>SCRUB FOREST</b>	<b>325812</b>	<b>8.13</b>
<b>PASTURE</b>	<b>155346</b>	<b>3.88</b>
<b>SETTLEMENTS</b>	<b>3128</b>	<b>0.08</b>
<b>OTHERS</b>	<b>628946</b>	<b>15.70</b>
Snow/glaciers	298859	
Rock Outcrops	200753	
Land slips/eroded areas	95431	
Water spreads	30375	
Marshland	3528	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4006431</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: LUPP (1995)

The fundamental relationships between the environment and its human inhabitants are currently unassuming and essentially sustainable. Agricultural land use predominantly takes the form of long-established, isolated, self-contained farming systems, combining crop and livestock production and use of forest products. Such traditional practices generate the most modest of impacts. These systems have been cautiously modernized to integrate new technologies where applicable and the production of cash crops. Certain lands have been converted to orchards, principally for the larger scale production of apples and oranges for domestic use and export. However, such changes focus on the more efficient use of existing agricultural lands, rather than on increasing the area under cultivation. Moreover, the country has been able to resist impulses for modern large-scale industrial resource extraction.

Bhutan has to date been relatively successful in meeting the imperatives of conservation and sustainable natural resource management. However, although the natural resource base remains largely intact, this cannot be taken for granted. Future pressures on the natural environment will be fueled by a complex array of forces, deriving from both traditional and modern sectors. As a product of both development and underdevelopment, these include population growth, unemployment, agricultural modernization, hydropower and mineral development, industrialization, urbanization, tourism, competition for available land, road construction and the provision of other physical infrastructure associated with social and economic development. The full monetization of the economy is also impacting on traditional land management systems, based on the principles of participation and cooperation.



Localized unsustainable resource pressures are already emerging. In certain vicinities extraction rates for fuel-wood, timber and other forest products are already approaching unsustainable levels. In areas close to population centers an estimated 10% of forest area is degraded as a result of heavy natural resource utilization. The progressive removal of vegetation cover, especially in critical watershed areas, is beginning to affect the hydrological balance, leading to the localized drying up of perennial streams and flash flooding. The determination of the inevitable trade-offs required will be of fundamental importance to the achievement of an acceptable degree of sustainability in the future. The pressures will certainly increase, and these increases will occur in some of the most fragile ecosystems to be found anywhere in the world.

### **THE MIDDLE PATH**

Bhutan enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with an immense wealth of natural resources. There are basically five reasons for this scenario: geographical circumstance has bequeathed ecological, mineral and hydroelectric riches; traditional resource management systems, underpinned by Buddhist values, have encouraged long-term sustainable resource use; a low population-land ratio has led to the current averting of excessive grassroots resource pressure; delayed integration within global processes, and gradual development thereafter, has forestalled the plethora of modernizing pressures for resource extraction; and government dedication to sustainability has mitigated against the temptation for short-term economic gain. The country therefore undertakes the ongoing challenge of sustainable development with the considerable advantages of a relatively uncompromised natural resource base, currently sustainable practices and the strong commitment of government.

Keenly aware of the current and future importance of environmental conservation, and mindful of the potentially conflicting dynamics of conservation and development, the government and its development partners have introduced a set of environmental policies and programmes that aim to preserve Bhutan's rich biodiversity and guide the country on a sustainable development trajectory. These include the nationalization of forest land in 1969, the demarcation of 26% of total land as protected area, the ruling by the National Assembly in 1995 that no less than 60% of land must be retained under forest cover at all times, and the ongoing introduction of comprehensive environmental legislation. In 1998 the National Environment Commission released a National Environment Strategy for Bhutan, clarifying a development path to minimize potentially negative environmental impacts.

The National Environment Strategy outlines three main avenues for sustainable development – hydropower expansion, increased self-sufficiency in food production, and industrial development – all framed by concerns over environmental and cultural preservation. It is noted that environmental degradation may occur in conditions of extreme poverty, and in the exploitation of natural resources for the generation of significant wealth. Furthermore, the environment possesses economic, social, cultural and inherent values, which may differ between social groups. The strategy aims at



pursuing a “Middle Path”, understanding that accomplishing goals within different sectors will involve necessary compromises.

The state is to play a central role in the sustainable development of the nation and in the regulation of the behavior of different social groups. The cross-sectoral nature of environmental issues and the need for an integrated approach towards resource management is reflected in the responsibilities within individual ministries for the sustainability of their development initiatives. The majority of direct environmental policy aims at strengthening the capabilities of government institutions and state-society relations. Towards this end, five key cross-sectoral needs are identified: (1) Information systems and research; (2) Institutional development and popular participation; (3) Policies and legislation; (4) Training and education; and (5) Monitoring, evaluation and enforcement.

Past policies have placed an emphasis on top-down conservation measures. However, whilst recognizing that such national level policies and priorities are important in defining general directions and broad parameters, it is the interaction of humans with their respective environments at the grassroots level that some of the most important and tangible dynamics are in operation. As the margins narrow, with pressures from both traditional and modern sectors, it will be increasingly important to develop a participatory and representative style of governance, refine the systems of environmental information and analysis and promote continuing sustainability in resource management institutional arrangements. Informed decisions may then be effected which adequately represent popular environmental values and successfully resolve potential conflicts. Solutions will eventually depend on the form of future social pressures and the nature of popular sentiment.



## 5. CULTURE – CONTINUING TRADITION

Anyone who has had the opportunity to experience Bhutan's unique built landscape will have marveled at its strikingly beautiful traditional architecture ... In terms of Western values and approaches to issues of cultural preservation and conservation, each and every traditional architectural landscape in Bhutan, each and every building and structure, would seem entitled to conservation.

Yet Bhutan has no tradition of documenting aspects either of its material culture in general or its architecture in particular. From the point of view of its Buddhist religion and its history (a striving, ever since the country's unification in the seventeenth century, for cultural uniqueness), there were no reasons to document the physical or tangible aspects of the material culture. The Buddhist doctrine of the impermanent character and condition of all modes of existence has never associated buildings with eternity. Like other aspects of material culture, architecture does not escape from the wheel of existence (Skt. Samsara) – the cycle of life, death and rebirth; architecture, too, is subjected to a continuous process of construction, demolition and re-erection. Like various comparable Buddhist cultures, Bhutanese culture celebrates a continuous process of cultural renewal as its very tradition.

Marc Dujardin *From Fortress to Farmhouse: A Living Architecture in Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods*

Religious festivals are opportune occasions to glimpse what might be termed Bhutanese culture. Celebrated throughout the country, they occur in a host of differing forms, depending upon the scale, the nature of the ceremonies performed or the particular deity being revered. The best known are the Tshechus, festivals which honor Guru Rinpoche and celebrate one of his remarkable actions, and the most popular of these take place annually in or around the great dzongs, attracting both tourists and large numbers from the surrounding districts. Lasting several days, the central focuses are the series of prayers and religion inspired dances. These dances, made especially striking by the spectacular costumes of the dancers – bright silks and rich brocade, ornate hats or extraordinary masks – may either depict morality tales, invoke protection from demonic spirits or proclaim Buddhist victories and the glory of remarkable saints.

And then there are the atsaras - clowns sporting fiendish masks, making lewd gestures and cracking salacious jokes – who mingle on the periphery of the performance, are entitled to mock both spiritual and temporal subjects, and through their distractions infuse a lighter side to otherwise serious matters. The whole gathering begins to resemble a country fair, as the jolly and convivial assembly – many turning out in their vibrant finery – further entertains itself in lively conversation, the playing of an assortment of games and the imbibing of copious amounts of food and alcohol. Tshechus may end with the bestowing of powerful blessings, delivered orally by a high lama or visually with the unfurling of a huge appliqué thangka representing Guru Rinpoche and his Eight Manifestations.

The commanding backdrop of a monastic fortress, the visual extravagance of the dances, the cacophony of musical accompaniments, the solemnity of chanting mantras, the artistic splendor, the unfamiliar smells and the overall exuberance of the diverse crowd lend the scene an extremely exotic air. An outsider may rarely feel so out of place, as the ongoing performances are assiduously and reassuringly captured on camera. The



alternative ways in which different peoples do things are both the first details one becomes aware of and the last comprehensive approaches one might fully understand.

Although such festivals provide only a very partial insight into the difficult area of culture, they do reveal certain important aspects. On show are some of the overt symbols of Bhutanese culture: the ceremony, the fine art, the architecture, the dance, the dress and the dietary habits. The underlying importance of the Buddhist religion is clearly evidenced, as the obscure and the accessible appear together as a fusion of both high and popular culture. Furthermore, the manner in which performance and assembled gathering so comfortably interact alludes to an active, living, working tradition. The linkages between the past and present appear unassailable. And yet the tourist, the sophisticated urbanite and the brand name toting youth are not wholly inconspicuous. Although strongly informed by a rich history, the Bhutanese culture is undergoing some fundamental changes.

## SYMBOLS

Bhutan's national flag is a white dragon on a diagonally divided background of golden yellow and reddish orange. The yellow represents the secular power of the King, the orange the Buddhist religion. The white of the dragon is associated with purity, and the jewels held in the claws stand for the wealth and perfection of the country. The national emblem is composed of a double diamond thunderbolt placed above a lotus, surmounted by a jewel and framed by two dragons, all contained within a circle. The thunderbolt represents the harmony between secular and religious power resulting from the Vajrayana form of Tibetan Buddhism, the lotus symbolizes purity, the jewel expresses sovereign power and the two dragons, male and female, stand for the name of the country, Drukyl, the land of the thunder dragon.

Bhutan is the only country to maintain Mahayana Buddhism in its Tantric Vajrayana form as the official religion. The main practicing schools are the state sponsored Drukpa Kagyupa and the Nyingmapa. Buddhism transects all strata of society, underpinning multiple aspects of the culture. Indeed, religion is the focal point for the arts, festivals and a considerably above average number of individuals. The presence of so many monasteries, temples and stupas, monks and tulkus (reincarnations of high lamas) is indicative of the overarching role religion plays throughout the nation.

Bhutanese art possesses a major Tibetan influence, although it has developed some of its own derivations. It has three main characteristics: it is anonymous, religious and performs no independent aesthetic function. Intricate wall paintings and thangkas (wall hangings), most historical writing and fine sculpted images all have a religious theme. Given their role, these may be interpreted as created by artisans rather than artists, although there exist many extremely fine examples. All are viewed as sacred, and newly commissioned paintings and sculptures are consecrated through a special ceremony whereby they come to personify the respective deities.



Although the Shabdrung is regarded as the founder of the nation, the secular realm has achieved an unprecedented degree of unity under the influential guidance of a Twentieth Century monarchy. Within a cultural context where the spiritual and temporal spheres are intimately connected, political leadership remains interpreted as divinely determined. The royal family traces its roots to the great Sixteenth Century saint Pema Lingpa, and the present monarch still enjoys a god-like status throughout much of his Kingdom. The Forth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck as the head of state now rules the Kingdom, with the throne retaining its position as the fulcrum of the political system.

Although both Buddhism and the monarchy are critical elements, it is the general extensive perpetuation of tradition that is possibly the most striking aspect of Bhutan's culture. This is most overtly reflected in the nature of dress and architecture. All Bhutanese continue to wear the traditional dress: for men and boys the gho, a long gown hitched up to the knee so that its lower half resembles a skirt, for women and girls the kira, an ankle-length robe somewhat resembling a kimono. Generally colorful apparel, the fabrics used range from simple cotton checks and stripes to the most intricate designs in woven silk.

The Bhutanese architectural landscape is made up of chortens, stonewalls, temples, monasteries, fortresses, mansions and houses. Associated with a number of clear-cut architectural concepts and building types rooted in Tibetan Buddhism, there is a strong association between state, religious and secular forms. What makes it quite unique is the degree of uniformity, with all structures corresponding to traditional designs. Thus ancient monasteries and fortresses appear to merge with more modern popular dwellings to create a setting that is fully internally consistent.

## INHERITANCE

What is immediately apparent on entering Bhutan is the clarity of difference. The country was almost entirely isolated from the more modern outside world until the early 1960s and has subsequently undergone only very partial integration in line with the measured and balanced development policy pursued. It is only one generation removed from what might be termed a pre-modern condition, and for many their overall situation – although considerably improved in certain important respects - has not changed that dramatically. The prevailing culture, therefore, not only draws on certain aspects of the past for inspiration, but also bears an unusually close resemblance to a long-established undiluted tradition. Within this context neither the positions occupied by religion and the monarchy, or the perpetuation of dress, architecture, handicraft and overall social organization appear as particularly outdated throwbacks.

There is a rare coherence and sense of balance in current cultural conditions. Throughout the world pockets of indigenous culture perpetuate. However, it is unusual that an entire nation remains collectively so connected to its traditions, and significant dislocations have not yet occurred across time and space. Much of Bhutanese history retains direct contemporary relevance, rather than being a record of a remote and incongruent past. Furthermore, a complete division has not yet occurred between modern urban and



traditional rural cultural systems. Individual identities remain firmly rooted within established structures and belief systems, reflected in a lack of self-consciousness, an underlying self-confidence and the high return rate of students studying overseas.

The foundations of contemporary Bhutanese culture lie with several closely interrelated traditional legacies: ethnicity, Buddhism, hierarchy, community and self-sufficiency. There are three main ethnic groups - the Sharchops of Indo-Mongoloid origin, the Ngalops of Tibetan origin and the Lhotsams of Nepali origin – and there remain a few distanced tribal communities. The most profound cultural influences arrived with the Tibetan migration. The Ngalops are the dominant group within the country, over the centuries bringing with them Tibetan Buddhism, artistic and more functional practices. The earlier settled Sharchops were converted to Buddhism and subsequently integrated within a centralized Ngalop dominated nation. The Lhotsams' arrival is much more recent – over the course of the Twentieth Century – and, due to Hindu religious belief, the relative strength of an existing culture and their concentration in the south of the country, many have not become wholly assimilated within the prevailing Ngalop dominated national culture. Although the national language is Dzongkha - belonging to the Tibetan language family and historically spoken only in the west of the country – Nepali (and to a lesser extent Sharchop) remain widely spoken. The national newspaper, the Kuensel, represents the major language sets, being published in Dzongkha, Nepali and English, which has become a principal language of instruction.

Since its arrival in the Seventh Century and gradual diffusion, Tantric Buddhism has underpinned individual and collective outlooks. The relationship between religion and culture was and remains particularly intimate due to the both the holistic approach to life that Buddhism implies, and the enhanced significance attributed to religion within traditional societies. In the sense that Buddhism, especially in its tantric form, lays out a blueprint for correct thoughts and actions (and therefore correct values), it has strongly informed the development of political and social institutions. There remains an unusual consistency between respective elements of a supporting cultural system. Furthermore, since the natural environment, art forms, rituals and ceremonies are all connected to religion, Buddhism has been the fundamental influence on material as well and psychological aspects of culture.

Politics and religion remain deeply interrelated. Whereas Bhutanese society is predominantly egalitarian, the legitimacy to rule is divinely determined. This implies a very steep natural hierarchy, with a significant division between those to whom divine legitimacy has been attributed – high rinpoches, the King and blood relations – and everyone else. Those in authority possess an awareness of their responsibility and the reciprocal nature of implied relationships. Around these centers a system of court politics has developed, where power is given through the nature of the relationship with the source. This implies a very vertical and narrow central political hierarchy. Although the political system is being reformed – and new hierarchies are developing related to wealth and more broad-based notions of status – power remains concentrated. Other more aesthetic cultural forms are essentially passed from the top-down, for example fashion and architectural style.



The basic social structure remains highly devolved. Scattered self-reliant village communities were traditionally relatively distanced from each other and monastic-fortress power bases. This has led to highly localized and self-contained worldviews and life-worlds. A restricted perspective on the material world has served to accentuate a village's relationship with itself and the spiritual domain. Local stories and superstitions – many with fantastic themes and twists - thrive within a rich storytelling tradition. Religious aspects are deeply embodied within village systems, varying from a temple or priest to an auspicious location and interesting explanation. There remains an immense multiplicity and diversity of cultural practice, concentrated around respective communities. A number of local dialects are spoken and an integrated extended family system remains firmly in place.

The idea of community remains extremely strong, being a robust source of identity. Where everyone knows everyone else and their personal histories, one is more likely to suffer from claustrophobia than alienation. Even when transferred to an urban environment – particularly among the majority first and second-generation migrant - most people still associate with a particular region and village, and a similar sense of community has evolved within these new settlements. Traditional values possess a high respect for age, history, local deity, learning, face and family. The essential self-reliance of individual villages underlies traditional economic systems that were non-monetized, subsistence-based and internally self-sufficient. It is no coincidence that communities with a trading culture - for example the people of Laya and Chapcha – have proved more successful at taking advantage of emerging business opportunities.

## GENERATIONS

Bhutan's traditional self-contained cultural system is intrinsically fragile in the face of ongoing modern developments. Indeed, the current situation is in no small part the consequence of delayed entry to the outside world and then only partial and controlled exposures. As the country becomes regionally and globally integrated, clear established boundaries are being both broken down and permeated. Increasing contact to powerful new ideas and the fundamental changes that these imply, threatens to undermine the very foundations of the preexisting system. The cultural dynamic that previously drew predominantly on domestic influences to generate a gradual and internally consistent succession has now been opened up to unfamiliar, persuasive, multidimensional, potentially contradictory and destabilizing external authorities. Bhutanese culture is experiencing a paradigm shift.

The goal of, and associated initiatives towards, development and modernization implies some fundamental alterations in traditional legacies. Previously stable social and economic systems are being transformed, generating major structural changes and a host of new opportunities. The relatively equal distribution of such opportunities requires significant alterations in the traditional distribution of power. Furthermore, an augmented emphasis on the material dimension naturally distracts attention from the spiritual, thereby diminishing the popular role of religion. Notions of both individual and



national accomplishment are shifting – now valuing material progress and constant development - and are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. The ongoing strength and unity of an inherently dynamic culture will require it to continue to collectively judge its performance a success.

The government response has been to both promote and strengthen a national culture, and - whilst reforming economic, social, political and cultural systems - to attempt, during transition, to maintain a balance between changes in these respective areas. Keenly aware that strength comes from unity, and that the nation's continued sovereignty and independence will be reliant on the preservation of a distinct national identity, there have been concerted moves towards forming a clear national culture within its distant and diverse communities. National unity coalesces around three key interrelated elements: common history, common religious belief and common leadership. Building on dominant Ngalop traditions, several national symbols have been either encouraged or introduced. These include a national language (Dzongkha), national dress, national religion and Driglam Namzha, a code of etiquette. All congregate around the central idea of the Tsa-Wa-Sum - the King, the Country and the People – a derivation of the Three Jewels in Buddhist thought.

The processes of integration and development are inherently uneven. Aspects of traditional cultures and their more tangible manifestations are both the first things to be affected and the last things to be completely transformed by ongoing modernization. Encounters with global capitalist culture tend to encourage consumerism well before associated political, social and economic transformations are effected that might enable the overall satisfaction of these new desires. Aiming to achieve a transition that is balanced and relatively stable, the government has placed an emphasis on cultural preservation (or at least avoiding immediate cultural corruption). Policies aim to both promote traditional practices and reduce immediate exposure to potentially disorienting external influences. Tight guidelines have been put in place regarding traditional dress and architectural styles. Programmes have been introduced to promote language and religion. Furthermore, a heavily controlled tourism policy, an erstwhile ban on television (which was only made legal in 1999) and tight regulations regarding external business ventures, all aim at limiting disproportionate cultural contacts.

Government interventions notwithstanding – which should be interpreted as pragmatic rather than reactionary - transformations are relentless, and are being generated from both within the evolving internal environment and more directly from outside. Processes of social and economic change are altering the parameters within which people exist. Whereas the lifestyles of the majority have been slowly shifting, a select very modern community has emerged, associated with high status and wealth, educational achievement, profession, travel and urban living. New hierarchies are forming based around connections with multiple aspects of modernity. With increased opportunities and new aspirations a modern business mentality has taken root that places an emphasis on the production of material wealth.



People are experiencing an expansion of life-world and a broadening of worldview. With the processes of globalization few remain unaware of alternative ways of life, even if it is through overt symbols. Although television was banned, videos were available, along with books and magazines. A generation gap is emerging in Bhutanese culture, particularly within the urban communities. Although tradition remains – associated with family and broader social perforations – the more performative aspect of culture is promoting a host of modern values. Whereas the older generation considers that things are moving extremely fast, for the young they cannot happen quickly enough. Inevitable undercurrents of discontent are emerging, where some feel that their abilities and aspirations are becoming stifled. The traditional Bhutanese culture possessed the ability to reproduce the valuable elements from its past as it continually reformed itself to accommodate more current realities. To date something resembling such equilibrium has been sustained. However, if the Bhutanese culture maintains its overall coherence and retains its most valuable aspects amidst the ongoing cultural whirlwind, it will represent a major - possibly critical - achievement.