

# CHANGE IN THE LAND USE SYSTEM IN BHUTAN: ECOLOGY, HISTORY, CULTURE, AND POWER

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## **Abstract**

In this two part analysis I attempt to answer questions with reference to historical land use and tenurial systems in Bhutan. The first part throws light on the popularly held view that land tenure in Bhutan was feudal prior to the advent of moderisation. By looking at the lived experiences of peasants in Bhutan, as human agents at the nexus of social, political, economic, and ecological forces, a nuanced and complex picture of land use systems in Bhutan emerges. I argue that in contradistinction to a feudal tenancy mode, historically land has been held in private for the most part although other arrangements existed alongside private property ownership. Monastic estates, and estates belonging to the handful of nobility were worked by tenured serfs and slaves.

In part II, I have tried to build an analytical framework for an alternative explanation to feudalism in Bhutan. Rather than relying on the 'Tibetan model' and the 'empty land model' which are closely linked, I instead build a layer model for the explanation of land use systems in Bhutan.

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## **Introduction**

There is much confusion today as to the land use system in Bhutan prior to 1960. When one looks at the lived experiences of the day to day lives of the peasantry, questions as to what exactly was happening arise. Was Bhutan a feudal society prior to the advent of modernisation? Or was the land tenurial and distribution system more akin to tribal organisation? How did the current land use systems in Bhutan come into being? What were the forces of change affecting land tenure? What role did the farmers play in the land and ecosystem management decisions historically?

I will attempt to answer these questions by an analysis of the social and ecological history of Bhutan. For analytical purposes, the study is divided into two parts. The first part will look at currently practised systems, which will be compared to the period prior to the advent of modernisation in 1960. This will constitute a comparative analysis both in space and time. Feudalism as practised in Europe will be looked at and compared to the land use systems in Bhutan prior to 1960, which is generally dubbed as "feudal" Bhutan.

The second part of the analysis is more of a research proposal to generate some clues to the questions that arise in the first part and more speculative in nature. It is an attempt to look back deeper in history and find the "origins" of not only the diverse peoples of current day Bhutan but also to the land use systems that they practised prior to state formation in the 1600's. The nation state of Bhutan came into existence only in the mid 1600's prior to which the region consisted of "one valley kingdoms" ruled by hereditary kings, chiefs, or lamas (Aris, 1979). The second part then is a more general look at Bhutanese origins. It is assumed that by looking at the deeper, older layers of Bhutanese land use history, current systems can be better understood.

In the first part, the land user, the peasant or minap<sup>cxlv</sup>, will be viewed as an actor among a multitude of kings, chiefs, and

priests in my story. On these actors ecological, social, political, and economic forces are constraining structures. Also, rather than viewing the farmer as a passive victim of history, the role of the peasant themselves played in structuring the land use systems, by resisting and strategizing against the constraints will be explored (Scott, 1985). This approach is inspired by several scholars (Baviskar, 1997; Burch, 1997; Isaacman, 1996; Siu, 1986; Worby, 1985) who have looked at human experiences at the nexus of political, historical, social, economic, and ecological systems. By doing this however, I do not mean to romanticise resistance as Babiskar (1997) citing from Marx (1852) makes clear:

...people make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are confronted...

Attempts to balance and play off the tension between constraints and resistance will be made in the analysis.

## **Part I: Was Bhutan Ever a Feudal Society?**

Many western scholars studying Bhutan (Rose, 1970; Pommaret, 1984, Aris, 1987; Aris, 1996) label the period prior to the rule of the third king (1952) as feudal Bhutan as opposed to modern Bhutan. They generally assume that Bhutan was a feudal society much like Europe was in the Middle Ages before the Enlightenment. In Bhutan's case the enlightenment is thereby implied to have dawned with modernisation. This view is largely accepted as a historical fact by both Western and western educated Bhutanese scholars. This pre-modern, "dark age" is seen as a stage from which Bhutan just recently emerged to embrace modernity. High-modernist discourse of social systems and states progressing and developing along a trajectory are implicit in such views.

I argue that under scrutiny, the above distinctions show that pre-modern Bhutan was certainly different from present day Bhutan but was not feudal either in the 'general or technical' sense as Goody (1971) distinguishes. Why then have so many scholars assumed Bhutan to be a feudalistic society? Certainly there were elements of oppression, reminiscent of feudal Europe. However, as shown below the tenurial system and property rights can hardly be labelled as feudal in Bhutan. Perhaps it is a result of scholars preferring a high-modernist ideology, which sees feudalism as preceding modern societies. Such scholars are bounded by this evolutionary framework and as Goody writes '...the Western European starting-point heavily influences the outcome of the analysis.'

Another compelling explanation for Bhutan to be labelled "feudal" may be that western scholars who study Bhutan have been trained as Tibetologists. They look to Tibet for causal explanation of not historical events in Bhutan but also the country's entire socio-cultural systems in general. This is understandable in light of the fact that there was strong religious and cultural influence on Bhutan from Tibet. However, this does not mean that Tibetan systems were wholly transplanted onto Bhutan. Rather, a hybridity between "roots" and "routes" (Clifford, 1997) of rooted cultures and cultures on the move offer a more complex understanding. This is further explicated in Part II below. My main aim here is to problematize both the "high-modernist" European evolutionary model and the "Tibetan model." I offer a counter narrative based on the lived experiences of farmers in Bhutan. Due to the recentness of the introduction of development, most middle aged and older Bhutanese peasants today lived through the transformation. As such there is a wealth of knowledge, undocumented and existing mostly in peoples memories. As Isaacman (1996) writes, accessing this is to create space for alternative perspectives and as Worby (1990) explains, observing the problem with a different "conceptual lenses" can reveal new insights and answers.

## **What is Feudalism?**

I first begin with a working definition of feudalism as understood in Europe and then compare this to the situation in pre-1960 Bhutan. Defining feudalism is a much debated topic even in the European context. Bloch (1961), however, is seen as authoritative and offers the following:

A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e the fief) instead of salary ...supremacy of a class of specialised warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man; fragmentation of authority; and in the midst of all of this, survival of other forms of association, family and State.

Applied to pre-modern Bhutan, there is a subject peasantry in the sense of being subject to heavy taxation in kind and labour by the state. State authority was increasingly fragmented after the death of the first Shabdrung, the monk statesman who unified Bhutan after 1616. This fragmentation seems to be the basis for Aris (1994) to describe Bhutan as fiefdoms ruled by regional governors under limited authority of the centre. However, there never was service tenement or the existence of a class of specialised warriors.

This becomes clear when we consider Peter's (1997) explicit division of feudal Europe into a tripartite society consisting of the clergy, knights, and peasants. In particular he highlights the importance of the knights and lords to feudal Europe: 'kighthood bound the men of war together and contrasted them with the men of work...These individuals often combined the social status of high birth with old royal titles of service (count, duke, viscount) and landed wealth that enabled them to attract and bind subordinates to them by oaths of vassalage....they assumed control of ...public legal and financial powers which made the aristocracy...private lords and public authorities.' Bhutan never had a knighthood but rather a "church bureaucracy" (Carrasco, 1959) to administer public legal and financial matters. According to

Deby (1980) it is only when the 'rights of government (not merely political influence) are attached to lordships and fiefs that we can speak of fully developed feudalism.'

On the issue of a "subject peasantry" and land tenure, Bhutan clearly had a system vastly different from feudal Europe. I argue that rights in property have always been held in private by the peasantry. In feudal England, there were estimated to be about a thousand lords who shared the landed property amongst themselves (Peters, 1997). By contrast Bhutan had only about 5000 serf/slave families, all of whom were granted manumission in 1959 by the third king (Karan, 1963). Karan writes that the third king "...freed the 5000 slave [families] giving them choice of remaining with their masters as paid servants or accepting land from the government and setting up as farmers." Further support for this figure is provided by Rose (1977) who writes that the "estimates vary from 700 to 5,000 families.

Even if the higher estimate of 5,000 families is taken and an average family size of 10 is assumed, a figure of roughly about 50,000 people results. If one projects backwards from the current population of 600,000 and population growth rates between 1959 and now (varying between 0.5% to 3.1%), the population in 1959 is roughly about 500,000 people. Consequently, slaves and serfs formed roughly about 10% of the population. The others were mostly *kheap*, free peasants who paid taxes to the government in kind and labour. This basic division is reflected in the composition of many villages in Bhutan today, although detailed surveys are needed to verify this. Inordinate amounts of attention have focused on the slaves and serfs and their masters and hardly any on the vast majority of the peasantry, the *kheap*, in Bhutan.

The *zasen* or slaves were descendants of people captured from India. Wealthier peasants occasionally bought some slaves from traders. Most were attached to monastic lands, which the slave families cultivated. Some of their descendants

to this day continue to farmland owned by the central monk body and sharecroppers.

This has often been confused with the entire peasantry being labelled as serfs and a feudal model used to explain the rest of society. Rose (1977) writes ' The traditional landholding system in Bhutan was feudal...tenancy which was the norm earlier in most of Bhutan has been much reduced in scope...what is more important perhaps is that the character of the tenancy system has changed....more often than not now it is families that are already landholders in their own right'. In short Rose tells of a revolutionary change not only in the land tenurial system but the entire society at large. He does not explain the factors behind this purported revolution but assumes that they occurred based largely on an erroneous reading of the existence of slaves, tenancy, and elites in the traditional system.

The vast majority of peasants were freemen (to use a feudal term), either owing private lands or sharecropping for wealthier families, monasteries, and other elite. They are even today referred to as *minap*, loosely translated as "ignorant people" or "people in the dark" but nevertheless free. Some were *drap* or serfs in the true feudal sense, attached to estates of the handful of hereditary nobles "*choje*" or lords of religion in central and eastern Bhutan. Ura (1995) explains their situation: '*drap* worked without any payment on the master's land in return for a piece of land allocated by the master for their own use ...*drap* families did not pay any tax [to the state] because they were only answerable to the master. It is important to keep in mind that they constitute a notable minority to the free peasants. Others were *zasen* or slaves as explained above. Ura distinguishes them from the *drap*: '*zab* [*zasen*] were in a worse situation: they worked entirely for the master who gave them only food and clothes.'

Thus, a mixture of landholding systems existed at the same time between the *minap*, *zasen*, and *drap*<sup>xlvi</sup>. The important point is that the slaves and serfs constituted only about 10%

of the total population at the time of their manumission in 1959 (Karan, 1963).

### **The Burden of Tax**

Most of the free *minap* were poor, yet heavily taxed. In eastern Bhutan, some are said to have fled to Arunachal Pradesh in India to escape this heavy tax (Aris, 1980). Lopen Kinley (1985) of Ramena village, a monk in his late fifties, recalls from his childhood days, the immense loss felt by the yak herders at the time of taxation.

The *boeds*<sup>cxlvii</sup> would come to our village, *pata ben* [sword] at their sides. They did a *pu-yig* and counted each family's yaks and then demanded butter and meat taxes on this basis. Some of the harsher *boeds* would point out live yaks and demand that they be slaughtered for the *sha thray* [meat tax]. It did not matter if the selected ones were milching *bjim* [females] or *zhuli* [seed stud yaks], as long as they were fattened enough. I remember my mother crying and pleading with the *boed* but to no avail. Of course some *boeds* were kind and did not force the issue. The lifting of the *sha thray* and *ma mi-sayr* [public]. It was the kindest *kidu* [welfare] granted to us *bjops* [yaks herders] by the government.

The amount of tax was determined by animal census or *pu-yig* when representatives from the central government would count each family's holdings and tax them accordingly. However, this was changed to a light monetary tax system with the families reporting the number of animals they own. The animal census was dropped since the tax collected was nominal and the census expensive. People thus report much lower numbers than they actually own in order to evade taxes. The change in the tax system freed the pastoralists from central government control to a certain extent.



Thus taxes were a heavy burden on the people and it was only during the third king's reign that they were alleviated. Depending on the agro-ecological zone people lived in, they paid taxes for what they produced. For instance, as shown above in alpine regions, taxes were paid in yak butter and meat. In the lower farming valleys, taxes were paid in rice, maize, or wheat. In addition, peasant households also had to render labour services, such as transporting goods to the centres of administration in the monastic fortresses or the *dzong*.

Thus as another informant Aum Thinley Bidha says: 'We had to pay taxes from the *Utse* [gold roof] of the *dzong* all the way down to the *tari* (stables).' This is a metaphorical reference to a system where the entire state administrative apparatus was supported by the taxes of peasants.<sup>cxlvi</sup> However, it was only after 1952 that taxes in kind were completely abolished, thereby lifting a great burden off the peasantry. Today, only nominal token taxes are collected in monetary terms and these "rural taxes" collected from the peasantry only account for less than 5% of total government revenue.

Under heavy taxation, evasion tactics were common practices by the people. For instance, many older tax paying Bhutanese today recall several tactics used. Since unhusked rice was collected, in many cases peasants mixed in *shupa* or chaff with the actual kernels of grain. Grain was not weighed but measured according to volume of a measuring container, the *drey*.

### **Can Bhutan be Explained by Tibet?**

In *Land and Polity in Tibet*, Carrasco (1959) looks in detail at the 'systems of land tenure as related to political organisation' in Tibet. What is of great relevance for the present purpose is that it is one of the few studies, which compare land use systems in Tibet with what he calls the "Lesser States" such as Sikkim, Ladakh and Bhutan. Other Tibetologists have assumed that land distribution and tenure in Bhutan can be

explained by the Tibetan model, notably Aris (1994) writes: 'the land itself was divided into provincial units and sub-units, and each was given its own administrative designation on a Tibetan model'.

Turning to Carrasco (1959), Aziz (1978), and French (1990), a very different picture between Bhutan and Tibet emerges. Carrasco concludes his analysis on Bhutan by writing:

In comparison with other Tibetan states, the most remarkable trait was the absence of hereditary landed estates as the main source of income for the officials, and the apparently greater social mobility within and into the official class. In this respect, the officialdom of old Bhutan closely resembled the monk officials of Lhasa but without a class corresponding to the lay nobility of Tibet.

Although there has been a disproportionate amount of attention focussed on the handful of *choje* and other landed hereditary nobility <sup>cxlix</sup> in Bhutan, the vast majority of peasants lived a life closer to that described by Carrasco. It is important to keep in mind that until the instituting of the monarchy in 1907, the ruling class was non-hereditary. Bhutan's numerous civil wars are wars of succession simply because there was no hereditary ruling family along which the secular regentship and powers were passed. After the Shabdrung's death was revealed in 1705 and until 1907, Bhutan was in a 'perpetual cycle of conflict' with very few secular rulers, the Druk Desi, being able to serve the full three year term in office (Aris, 1994). Many were assassinated and still others were exiled. The most ruthless and conniving emerged as the most powerful. Since there was no hereditary ruling elite, very often peasants starting as lowly court attendants, stable boys, and messengers managed to find their way to the top.

In Tibet, 'the underlying right of ownership to all the land in Tibet was in the person of His Holiness the Dalai Lama....all

land grants were conditioned on the continued goodwill of the government toward grantee.' (French, 1990). Peasants were attached to estates directly administered by the state, to estates owned by nobility and monasteries, or farmed small plots on which they paid 'a sixth part of the field' as taxes (French, 1990). Also, peasants could not vacate these lands without permission and in the case of not having an heir who both inherited the land and the tax obligation, peasants adopted children to fill in for them (Aziz, 1978). Among the 'three classes of commoners' described as agriculturists, traders, and itinerants such as artisans, Aziz writes of the agriculturists as: '...all are tax paying tenant farmers, working holdings leased from the government or another landlord.' In short there is no private-property owning peasants. The nobility too is hereditary including the men of religion, *ngag-pa* or hereditary priests (Aziz, 1978). These priests own estates farmed by tenants. Aziz explains the aristocracy of Tibetan society as *per-pa*, 'the term *ger* means private, designating the exclusive property rights members enjoy as private landlords.'

The situation in Bhutan is very different; there is no *ger-pa* or *ngag-pa* class. The agriculturists worked their own private land as tax paying subjects. Monks were recruited from the peasantry as were the government servants.<sup>cl</sup> This is not to say that there was no social stratification in Bhutan. The basis of stratification was different; it was not hereditary, and was not determined by the quality of tenancy or land holdings. Rather, it was the quantity of land owned that determined one's social position. This of course depends on several factors but is open to manipulation. Another important distinction is that land inheritance in Bhutan is passed through the daughter, a matrilineal system, where as in Tibet it was patrilineal. Suffice is to say that while Bhutan and Tibet have many similarities, fundamental differences remain and the Bhutanese land tenurial system cannot be explained by Tibetan models.

## Current Practices

In a comparison of three villages in three different ethnic zones in Bhutan, Sangay Wangchuk (1998) summarises the current land use practices in Bhutan. Citing Ura (1995) he writes that after 1953, the distinction between private and public property was made official or legalised through the passage of the *Thrimshung Chenmo* or Supreme Laws. 'The official recording of agricultural land after 1953 separated private and community property rights...prior to this, property rights were loosely defined.' This can be understood as the State making the country more "legible" for easier control. Previously, customary law regulated land use practices. Currently, this customary law has been overlain with various national legislation such as the Land Act (1978), Forest Act (1969), and Livestock Act (1980). However, this does not mean that customary laws have disappeared. At the local level, customs or *luso* still determine everyday decisions in many significant ways. For instance, village sacred groves and forests, which may not be distinguished from other forest by state laws, are protected by customary laws. E.P. Thompson (1991) writes:

Agrarian custom was never a fact. It was ambience. It may be understood with the aid of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' - a lived environment comprised of practices, inherited expectations, rules...norms, and sanctions...Within this habitus all parties strove to maximise their own advantages. Each encroached upon the usages of others.

In Bhutan, such a habitus is also the nexus where customs meet formal laws and are negotiated, contested, used and abused by the local actors. Thus to acknowledge the existence of only one system is to deny history to a rich process. For instance, to look at the Forest Act and to assume forest usage existing on the ground as legislated in the Act would be an incomplete picture.

However, the general effect of the legislation resulted in private property being measured, recorded, and titled in a systematic way. This can be misinterpreted as the granting of private property and instituting a change in land tenure practices from a feudal to private property relationships. It is important to keep in mind that these activities are state schemes at rationalisation and ordering. In *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Scott (1998) shows the need for states to simplify the complex in order to exert control. Consequently, the schemes should be seen as an exercise in "administrative ordering" and making legible a complex society. Today the effort continues with the use of more sophisticated cadastral equipment, and computerisation of the entire land records of the country into a database. Peasants have lost rights over common property resources such as forests and pastures with the enactment of the Forest Act. Sangay Wangchuk (1998) explains:

The enactment of the Forest Act in 1969 whereby all forests became the property of the state, had a profound impact on the tenurial system. However, this did not have an immediate effect on forest resource use by the local communities, as the state did not have adequate machinery to implement the provisions of the Forest Act. Therefore the informal tenurial relationship continued. Over the years...the state's enforcement of the respective laws has increased. This process has led to the widening of the gap between the state who owns video camera, talked to her surviving children and other village elders. The story is important since it reveals the dynamics of land tenure in Bhutan during a time when most historians dismiss as a "feudal" state.

Thinley Bidha was born in 1908 in the village Wang<sup>cli</sup> Simu in west Bhutan. As the eldest and only daughter she inherited the ancestral property from her mother who died at the young age of 29 when Thinley Bidha was only 11. Various maternal

aunts served as the *nangi aum* in the household until she took over at the age of 26 after the death of her aunts. The peasant household revolves around the *nangi aum*. This term is variously translated as mother at the core and anchor mother. Although sometimes upstaged by a forceful husband, the *nangi aum* still retains some control since the husband joins the household as an outsider and the property owner is still the wife. The division of labour ideally is that the husband handles the outside work while the *nangi aum* the inside work. Outside work can range from dealing with the state, tax collectors, performing the labour tax, serving in the militia recruited during times of war, resolving disputes in court, and sometimes going on trading expeditions. Inside work reflects work not only in the house but also all work related to the land such as making decisions about planting, harvesting, and day to day work schedules of the land.

Thinley Bidha's lost her husband to an illness when she was 43. Her younger brother increasingly took on outside work on her behalf but could not be fully committed since he had married out and was responsible for his wife's household duties also.

In 1947, after she had lost her husband and her younger brother had already married out, a distant relative filed a *labzhi* case against her. Seeing her household strong male representation, the relative took advantage of this to grab not only her valuables but also her property. Without a fair trial, the court granted all the movable valuables such as jewellery to her enemies. She however, refused to hand over the *Phazhi* citing ancestral claims and invoking the protection of guardian deities. Her brother was taken as a prisoner due to her refusal to move out of the house. By doing so she would have symbolically given up her rights to the land. She was personally threatened with eviction but the relative nor the court could not do so simply because the land and house were her personal property and everyone in the village acknowledged this ownership. At one point after her brother was taken prisoner, she almost relented but finally sought

protection from the queen. Her brother had served as a personal attendant to the queen. Citing the folk saying 'in my house I am king' Thinley Bidha was given a fair trial eventually. Serving as her own *jabmi* or solicitor she not only managed to hold on to her property but also won back her valuables.

Two important points become clear, that the nature of ownership and 'legal relations are between persons...a person owns not an object itself but a right to do certain things with or in regard to that object' (Gluckman, 1965). In this case Thinley Bidha's land could have been coerced from her by her enemies but the rights would still have been vested with her as per customary law as acknowledged by fellow villagers. Secondly, if the land was held in a feudal tenancy mode, the case would not have arisen at all. The landlord would simply have reassigned the land to another tenant without so much fuss.

### **Farmer as Land Owner**

What are the implications of this fact that farmers in the past have always made land use decisions themselves, including crucial forest and pasture resources? There is no feudal lord to manage the estate. The state until the 1960's did not intervene in local resource use and management choices. But with increasing legislation and rationalisation on a Western model, as recommended by development experts, local resource use is increasingly regulated by the state. Farmers legally lost common property resources such as pastures and community forests through such legislation. However, the state's lack of resources to completely monitor and enforce the legislation has created space for farmers to continue to manage the resources within certain constraints imposed by the legislation.

For instance, even today, in most villages in Bhutan, customary rights still govern access to village forests. There is clear demarcation between one village and the next by the use

of *laptsap*, cairns of stone serving both as boundary markers and village entrance guardian spirits. People from other villages may not collect firewood, timber, or graze their cattle beyond these boundaries. If they do so, they are made to pay compensation and in the case of illegal grazing, cattle are retained until the fine is paid. The fine is used for community activities such as sponsoring numerous village ritual ceremonies in the village monastery.

The community forest is held as *masa* or public land on which villagers collectively pay a tax to the state. Thus, village members themselves cannot abuse the resources in the common forests with impunity. There are sacred groves where trees may not be felled. Also, the resource extraction process should not harm a neighbour's property such as felling trees from near a neighbour's house. Excessive felling of timber for commercial profit would not be permitted unless the whole village benefited. Additionally, some villages enforce a *ridum* or forest closure during certain times of the year. When a *ridum* is in force no one may enter certain parts of the forest since it is believed that the *rigamem* or forest spirits are not to be disturbed during these times. Interestingly, these times also correspond with times when trees and other forest plants are flowering and seeding and disturbances would interfere with the production and growth cycle. These customary regulations are sometimes overridden by state laws such as the Forestry Services Division granting permits to collect timber and other resources from a village's traditional common forest, causing much resentment among the villagers.

Can farmers regain historical resource use rights? The answer to this is difficult given the new dynamics and market forces in action. There is much to be gained for short-term profit and the fear of losing all control over Bhutan's natural resources has prevented the state from moving towards handing over community forests back to the farmers. However, the important distinction is to be made between open access resources and common property resources. If the



latter pattern is legalised then the former is not a threat since rights in the land and resource belong to a village and they are responsible for any decisions they make.

With regards to this, Ostrom (1990) debunks Hardin's (1968) myth of tragedy of the commons, which has become an 'accepted way of viewing problems' with common property resources. She shows that these models view individuals as prisoners with constraints imposed on them, which they cannot change. She instead gives the actors in her models agency who are viewed as being able "to change the constraining rules of the game". Ostrom's model shows alternatives to overcoming the problem of the commons other than privatisation and state control. Actors have the ability to negotiate with each other and discuss best strategies for the use of the resource. They then enter into a contract agreed to by all parties, and this results in an equitable sharing of resources on a sustainable basis.

From the description of the village forests above, they are far from being open access resources, which are free for all. Rather, strict customary laws govern their use. This is often undermined when outsiders impinge on the rights a village through bureaucratic procedures or with state approval. Thus, rather than protecting and controlling resources, state laws undermine traditional customary laws which are recognized by a village and its members. In effect, they create a situation whereby previously common property resources are turned into open access resources.

As a first step, the government can re-recognise customary laws operating in a village forest and stop issuing resource use permits to outsiders from such forests. The village institutions are already in place and are recognised for other purposes such as for *gewog yargay tshochung* or village development purposes. In a very simple process, the village forests can be handed over to the villagers for their own management and use without state interference.

## **Part II: Origins**

In Part I, I have attempted to deconstruct the existing representations of Bhutan as a feudal society prior to the advent of modernisation. The next question then arises, if not feudal, then what? I use different conceptual lenses to answer this question, as Worby (1995) writes 'the solution to this puzzle lies less in a changed reality that has suddenly been registered in the 'data' and more in the changing observational and conceptual lenses through which that reality has been viewed and represented.' The different conceptual lenses are analytical tools developed from a multidisciplinary approach. Thought processes from ecosystem and landscape ecology, paleoecology, social history, and political economy are stitched together to present a varied and patched mosaic of lived experiences on the landscape of Bhutan. To the conventional tools of the historian, that of narrating significant events in a temporal sequence, I add spatial dimensions.

'The total effect of austere mountains, rock, and river was that nature had laid out a grand and eternal stage for human action' (Burch, 1997), is the central theme on which this dimension is built. When looking at the early history and origins of Bhutan, most historians write of obscurity and myth and lament the lack of written sources. Aris (1979) in a bold attempt not only gathered existing written Bhutanese and Tibetan sources but also conducted interviews and visited places of historical curiosity to him. The product was a doctoral dissertation and a book titled 'Bhutan: the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom' (1979). Commendable as his work is one might raise questions about what constitutes history. Does it consist only of the collection, analysis, and interpretation of written "primary" sources into a structured narrative? Whose history is it anyway? In a country where oral traditions are the preferred mode of sharing stories and experiences even today, among an increasingly literate populace, dependence on written sources alone is "annoying" as Aris himself admits. Nonetheless, Aris has presented a

basic temporal structure based on the available written sources. I will attempt to add to this temporal framework some spatial history and "thick description". What dramas did human actors play on nature's stage? By looking at history through the lens of landscape ecology, and adding multi dimensionality, will a more nuanced and fuller picture emerge?

## **The Thesis**

The current model of the origins of the different ethnic groups in Bhutan are that Tibetan people invaded western Bhutan, pushed out the indigenous people and extended their influence over other indigenous groups in eastern Bhutan. No one claims this model since it is too flimsy and most importantly, unauthenticated. However it has become accepted such that even guidebooks for tourists visiting Bhutan reproduce this model for popular consumption. The latest one gives the following version (Armington, 1998):

The Sharchops, who live in the east of the country are recognised as the original inhabitants of Bhutan. They are Indo-Mongoloid; it is still unclear exactly where they migrated from and when they arrived in Bhutan. The Ngalong are descendants of Tibetan immigrants who arrived in Bhutan from the 9th Century. These immigrants settled in the west of the country...The third group is the Nepalis, who began settling in the south of Bhutan in the late 19th century...Minority Groups: several smaller groups many with their own language form about 1% of the population...

This "empty land" model which gets filled with various ethnic groups is problematic for several reasons. For one, the area's prehistoric era is completely dismissed. For another, historical complexity is simplified and the forces impinging on the historians themselves are seen as neutral. The "original inhabitants" or the Sharchops are more accurately described as Tsangla. This denomination is derived from being the clan

descendants of Prince Tsang-ma of Tibet (Aris, 1979). The Tsangla identity emerged only in the 17th century as a conscious construction of a monk-historian, Ngawang, and his works (Aris, 1979). Meanwhile, the "Tibetans" in the west couldn't be more anti-Tibetan. Several wars were fought with invading Tibetan armies. Ballads, songs, and stories ridiculing the Tibetans became popular. Most importantly, the land tenurial system cannot be explained by the Tibetan model as shown above. Yet the empty land model is unquestioned largely since the Tibetan bias of Tibetologists, which assumes everything in Bhutan came from Tibet, is not challenged. The empty land model is an untested assumption built on another untested assumption.

Instead of the 'empty land' model, I am more comfortable with Clifford's representation<sup>clii</sup>, which introduces a new dynamics to the system, of layered hybridity. Cultural patterns are conveyed and altered along routes of immigration, trade, and war leading to new "roots" or communities and identities. There is no "original inhabitant" existing in a cultural vacuum, unchanged and unique. Rather I 'focus on hybrid...experiences as much as on rooted' ones. In this model during prehistoric times, Palaeolithic peoples dispersed from east to west, from the upper reaches of the Yellow River in China to present day Yunnan province and thence east to Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Shillong, Myanmar, and as far west as central Nepal<sup>cliii</sup> (Allchin, 1982; Marshall, 1997; Ross, 1990). Kosambi (1965) writes: 'eastern parts of India...were penetrated by prehistoric people from Yunnan and Burma.' The movements of these peoples, how and in what patterns they occurred are explained by Fagan (1990):

Population movements associated with *Homo sapiens*...should not be thought of as migrations, certainly not in terms of the kind of mass population movements that characterize later migrations in human history. These millennia-long population movements were gradual, dictated in large part not by

the innate human curiosity of what lay over the next horizon, but by a myriad of complex environmental, climatic, and entirely pragmatic factors...they were short term responses to ever changing local conditions, often triggered in turn by larger global climatic fluctuations throughout the last (Wurm) glaciation...our remote modern ancestors were part of a complex world ecological system that affected all animal species on earth.

One can then imagine this gradual movement from east to west and later from north and south, adding layers to the previous layers. It is also important to keep in mind that if there is movement in, then movement out is also possible. The focus has entirely been on the north to south influence, that of Tibet on Bhutan. But earlier records also show important refugee princes from India seeking refuge in Bhutan, for instance the Sindhu Raja fleeing and establishing a kingdom in the 7th century. Most historical personalities arrive as refugees, written sources document their arrival, and their exploits in detail. The sources never mention mass migrations of people as popularly imagined. The idea of mass population movements within a short period of time is problematic. In this empty land scenario, then the Tibetans arriving in west Bhutan would simply have filled up the land and carried on as in Tibet. The land tenurial system should reflect this similarity but it does not. Rather, a more sensible explanation is that singular Tibetans scholars, saints, and princes, arrive in Bhutan as refugees, bring "high Tibetan culture" and religion which is layered onto existing native practices.

Chhoki (1994) differentiates this habitus as the nexus between the "sacred" and the "obscene". The sacred is represented by Tibetan Buddhism, which is adopted as the state religion while the obscene is the animistic religion, which the people practiced in the villages. Chhoki finds the coexistence of the two in a village in west Bhutan, she writes: "The *nenjorm-pawo* (indigenous ritual specialists) themselves

describe their complex as having native origins, in contrast to the monastic tradition which came to Bhutan from Tibet.'

The prehistoric and historical landscapes of Bhutan can then be thought of as consisting of mosaics or patches of diverse peoples. This diversity is not only in space across the landscape but also in time and "depth". By this I mean that if we look under one layer of religion, culture, and land use practices, we will encounter other vibrant layers of local practices as Chhoki's (1994) work makes clear. With this I attempt to build an analytical framework for exploring this thesis below.

### **Mosaics and Connectivity**

Mosaics are perhaps most simply and clearly described by E.O. Wilson (1995) in a forward to Forman's (1995) book 'Land Mosaics: The Ecology of Landscapes and Regions:'

...the real world consists of finely fragmented habitats. The pieces range from radically altered urban parks and gardens to remnant pockets of the original environment. Across periods, living species arrive, impinge, dominate, yield, and disappear in this kaleidoscope. The vast majority of the inhabitants we never see, because they are too small and obscure: creepy-crawlies, immense in diversity, from insects to fungi and bacteria.

All together, they are as important as the towering trees and the birds on which our attention is ordinarily focused.

This conceptualisation of land and landscape as patches or mosaics provides an understanding of the processes occurring on the human cultural and historical landscape in Bhutan. Forman (1995) explains patch as a 'particular type that differs from adjacent land.' A mosaic then is an aggregated pattern of patches, within the patches there is

internal micro heterogeneity as well. Prior to Bhutan's unification, people constantly 'arrive, impinge, dominate, yield, and disappear,' changing the nature of the patches. The whole country was what Aris describes as 'one valley kingdoms' with fixed and jealously guarded and well-recognised borders (*sa-tsam*). On a larger scale these one-valley kingdoms may be seen as patches on a complex landscape.

At a continental level, Bhutan is a mountainous frontier land rising abruptly from the Gangetic plains of India and ending again at the edges of the Tibetan plateau. Over the years, refugee kings, princes, priests, and monks fled to the safety of the mountains from north, south, east and west. An ancient name by which the Tibetans referred to Bhutan is *Lho-mon Kha Zhi* roughly translated as the southern barbarian land of four approaches. So at this larger scale, the plains of India, plateau of Tibet, and mountains and hills of Bhutan may be viewed as three patches across which kings, saints, traders, and lamas moved both in and out of Bhutan as political, economic, and ecological circumstances demanded.

The comings and goings are recorded by Bhutanese, Indian, and Tibetan sources, scantily and in some cases with biased political motives. Patch dynamics can explain these patterns and processes even if the details of specific and particular events are unknown or unrecorded. For explicative purposes, history is thus released from the tyranny of the few and biased written "primary" sources. One can at least imagine what were the general patterns and processes across these landscapes.

By connectivity, I do not mean to impose a totalising master narrative, which unifies these diverse mosaics into a single monolithic understanding of Bhutanese national history. Connectivity in landscape ecology is understood as 'how connected an area is for a process' (Forman, 1995) such as understanding how and why species "arrive, impinge, dominate, yield" and how the people in these patches

interacted with people from other areas. We know that they traded, exchanged ideas, fought, married, formed alliances, and eventually were unified into the peoples of the nation state of Bhutan. It is the legacy of these actions, which are reflected in the land use systems.

### **People as Ecological Beings**

In calling for a 'humanist environmentalism' Cronon (1998) laments the nature and culture dualism that Western societies view the world with. He instead expounds a holism in which humans are intrinsically connected by complex webs of linkages and are a part of nature. Cronon (1992) writes:

...human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural. To such basic historical categories as gender, class, and race, environmental historians would add a theoretical vocabulary in which plants, animals, soils, climates, and other nonhumans become the coactors and codeterminants of a history not just of people but also of the earth itself.

This basic realisation, which gained ground only recently in Western thought through the efforts of postmodernist thinkers, has always been the way pre-modern peoples viewed their place in the world and in history. Chief Seattle's call is echoed worldwide and finds common ground with diverse beliefs from Hindu and Buddhist mythology to Dayak swidden cultivators. In a strange way then, the post-modern ideal is a lived reality of pre-modern peoples.

For the task at hand, such a holism and connectivity allows for an ecological interpretation of history or as Worster (1992) writes, using 'ecology to help explain why the past developed the way it did...this new history rejects the common assumption that human experience has been exempt from natural constraints.'



Landscape Ecology due to its integrative and spatial nature is my choice from the various ecologies for the analysis. This provides an alternative way of looking at Bhutanese history since the narrative texts that exist are few and as Aris (1979) writes of one such text, the *Gyalrig*, '...the schematic preoccupations of a local historian can so color his writings as to alter the true order of reality.'

The substantive nature of the narratives are not disregarded, they are the 'data' or evidence I will rely on. However, the cause and effect interpretation is from an ecological and political economic perspective and not from 'schematic preoccupations.' (Although why Ngawang, the Author of the *Gyalrigs* wrote what he did is of interest.) Narrative as Cronon (1992) writes '...succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meaning of its story. Whatever its overt purpose, it cannot avoid a covert exercise of power: it inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others.'

### **Layers Upon Layers, but Still Pockmarked**

In this section I look first at the larger regional population dynamics of people from prehistoric times to the present. I will then try to explain what the origins of the people of Bhutan are using the regional analysis and spatial landscape patch dynamics. The underlying assumption is as presented in the thesis above, of 'millennia-long population movements (that) were gradual, dictated in large part...by a myriad of complex environmental, climatic, and entirely pragmatic factors.' By this, I reject the idea of local autochthony and instead, depend on paleoecological evidence, which has more or less established the east to west movement in the eastern Himalayas and the later historical evidence of strong Tibetan influence.

In the absence of written evidence, what the landscape would suggest is that the current identities of the various ethnic groups are a complexity of layers upon layers of history, as

described above, and a single 'pure' lineage and identity is not tenable for any of today's politically defined ethnic groups. By the same token then, the land use systems are a reflection of these layers and simple labels such as 'feudalistic' does not capture the complex nature of land use.

Specifically, external influence cannot be discounted but neither can they explain everything. One can only conjecture that as Clifford writes 'hybrids' are the norm. Of external influences impinging on existing native 'tribal' ones and thereby producing a 'uniquely' Bhutanese land use pattern and identity. Languages in Bhutan provide some clues and linkages to understanding this situation. In Bhutan, today, there are 19 languages grouped under four main language groups; Central Bodish, East Bodish, and Bodic language of the Tibeto-Burman family and an Indo-Aryan language (van Driem, 1994). Nineteen is a conservative grouping which can be divided further into dialects, literally by the major river valleys that flow north-south through the country. How can this situation be explained? If the analytical framework developed above is applied, one can then imagine a 'sacred language' made dominant through regional power dynamics and layering onto existing languages. Regional dominant lingua franca such as Ngalop in west Bhutan, Bumthap in central Bhutan, and Tsangla in east Bhutan gained ascendancy but did not totally wipe out earlier languages. Thus, a layer model emerges. There are subordinate local groups, dominated by a larger regional identity such as Ngalop, Bumthap, and Tsangla, which finally is overlain with a national layer, 'Bhutan' extending across the entire country. Even in eastern Bhutan, popularly believed to be the original inhabitants, as explained above, if we look under the layer of the Tsangla language, various local dialects are discernible such as Dzalakha, Chalikha, and Brokpakha. Needless to say these language speakers are bilingual, speaking both their local dialect and Tsangla.

In the same way, land use systems of earlier local patterns and systems are layered as a regional system, onto which is

layered a national system. Thus, the evolution of land use systems from tribal to feudal to modern is not supported. Rather, they exist all at the same time but in layers. Looking at the national level, the Land Act and various other legislation would seem to be in effect, but a closer look would reveal customary laws governing land use systems. The pattern of connectivity informs that there may certainly have been borrowing and exchanging but the existence of one 'original' system evolving into a multitude of others is not supported.

## **Conclusion**

In contradistinction to a feudal system, historically land use decisions especially regarding forests have been made by the people themselves without major state intervention as is being done today. The past generations of villagers have bequeathed to us a pristine environment and it would be well worth the effort to learn from them and share the burden of managing and conserving Bhutan's natural resources. Also, causal explanations for land use systems in Bhutan need to be rethought giving preference to indigenous 'layer models' rather than Tibetan ones.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The word minap today is loosely used to refer to any one from a rural area. It has acquired the meaning, which literally means person in the dark or ignorant person.

<sup>1</sup> Ura (1995) refers to them as *drami*.

<sup>1</sup> Attendants of the regional governors recruited from the peasantry themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Some many argue that this is evidence of a feudal society (Weber, 1947) but if we look at the United States, tax dollars similarly support the entire state apparatus. Yet no one would dare call the US a feudal society.

<sup>1</sup> During the reign of the second king, Ura (1995) mentions the following nobility to whom people paid taxes: "the king, the Elder Queen, the powerful aunt of the second king ,... and Lame Gonpa Dasho Phuntso Wangdi.

<sup>1</sup> Usually recruited as children, they start "work among the lowest menials...fetching firewood and water" designated as "tozen, literally, 'food eaters'" and work their way up to *zingap* or attendants in general, to *changgap* or personal attendants to the governor, to junior chamberlain, to junior chamberlain, to chamberlain, and sometimes to the governship itself (Aris, 1994). The former of the present monarchy, Jigme Namgyal, rose through the ranks in a similar way although his final ascendancy depended on "tactics of blunt coercion" (Aris, 1994).

<sup>1</sup> The wang have been variously describes as a "tribe" and clan and several explanations as to their origins exist. The most popular is that they came to Bhutan as part of an invading Tibetan-Mongolian army, felt in love with the country, married the local girls and settled down.

<sup>1</sup> ... the representational challenge is seen to be the portrayal of local/global historical encounters...one needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones. In my current problematic, the goal is not to replace the cultural figure 'native' with the intercultural figure 'traveller.' Rather, the task is to focus on concrete mediations of the two...

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, faunal penetration from east to west in the Himalayas also extends as far as central Nepal. One such example is the red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*).

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