

## One of a Kind: Bhutan and the Modernity Challenge

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### **Abstract:**

A small Buddhist nation long isolated in the Himalayas between China and India, Bhutan navigates the passage to internal modernity and global integration by using the precepts of 'Gross National Happiness': cultural and environmental preservation, economic equity and sustainability, and clean and transparent governance. Challenges include the degree of homogeneity desirable under the doctrine of 'One Nation, One People'. The country's youth wrestle with an education often unsuitable for job prospects, urban migration, social temptations, and the waning of traditions. Choosing cultural elements suitable for preservation, modification, or substitution incorporates key elements of spiritual continuity for easing the development path.

**Keywords:** Bhutan | cultural preservation | Gross National Happiness | modernity

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

Transitioning from the traditional state into an increasingly modern one requires a perilous passage. Each step lays a foundation for the next in a phased emergence into a higher degree of globalization, stages known as 'bhumis' in the Buddhist theology prevalent in the small Himalayan nation of Bhutan. This research discusses Bhutan's unique identity, nourished in isolation but drawing on elements from its neighbors – India and Tibet – whose components the country seeks to define and selectively integrate into a modern sense of self. The thesis asserts that spiritual elements, including formal religious institutions as well as identification with the natural setting, although frequently dismissed in treatments of modernization transition (see McGregor, 2010) in actuality form a critical part of the Bhutanese sense of self and place that is employed to aid the development process. Government planners seeking a peaceful transition to a more open modern world with elements often at odds with traditional Bhutanese lifeways seek to bring along ties to community and country/place in order to ease a gradual transition. Ironically, the process of modernization involved writing a constitution that separated the traditionally fused monastic and royal institutions, headed by the Je Khenpo and the King, and adding a third globally familiar element of an elected Parliament and independent judiciary.

A term with multiple and contested meanings, 'development' can be seen as the path to and outcome of modernization. It implies improvement, which is frequently only partial, with material benefits but at the cost of cultural values, environmental degradation, increased rural–urban disparities and income inequalities, ethnic uneasiness and other ills that nevertheless can be addressed if an enhanced and broader empowerment is part of the picture. The United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI) measures indicate that on this widely used scale Bhutan is very much part of the South Asian subcontinent category of low but rising standards (Potter et al., 2008).

Bhutan formulated its own way to guide its development practices, intriguingly titled 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH) as opposed to what it deemed the overly economist measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in which it does not score particularly highly. Reported GDP in 2009 was US\$1,805 with 'purchasing power parity' based GDP of US\$4,700, placing Bhutan #171 of 229 countries measured (falling between the Central African Republic and the Republic of the Congo) according to the Central Intelligence Agency *World Factbook* (CIA, 2011). Buddhism's prioritization of personal satisfaction based on lack of attachments, over the pursuit of material prosperity, forms the ethical basis for GNH as an attempt to create a harmonious, sustainable relationship between the human, physical, political, and economic environment. However, ethnic distinctions amplified by migration pressure create challenges for harmonious integration that are further explored in the following sections (Zurick, 2006). Karma Ura, Director for the Centre for Bhutan Studies and a graduate of Oxford, embodies and is the leading spokesperson for the balancing act represented by GNH. First proposed by the country's widely venerated third king in 1961, GNH continues to be promoted as 'a balance between tradition and modernization ... the homogenizing impact of the West and globalization ...' (Ura, 2005). Stemming from the basic Buddhist belief that the motivating force behind human actions is the avoidance of suffering, GNH as articulated by Ura contains five major principles for Bhutan's development. The first is economic self-reliance – a challenge given the location, resource basis and historic underdevelopment of this longtime aid recipient country. The second is preservation of the environment, including a mandate of 60% forest cover which in 2007 officially stood at 72.5%. Third is attainment of regional balance in development, another difficult challenge given Bhutan's mountainous interior and concentration of population in the western part of the country close to the single-runway airport and national capital employment center. The fourth principle refers to political aspirations including decentralized, transparent exercise of power. The final goal pertains to cultural preservation, in which Ura includes 'local languages, knowledge, beliefs, customs, skills, trades and institutions, and even species of crops and plants' which thrive due to Bhutan's isolation and protection that respects their rare and endangered status (Ura, 2005, p. 6). An additional 'Nine Dimensions' accompanied by statistically evaluated components seek to add a quantifiable air to aid validity claims. Five global GNH conferences, held since the first one in Bhutan, sponsored by Ura's Centre for Bhutan Studies, ranging from Thailand to Brazil and North American sites, attest to interest in the idea.

Religion is foremost among the chief cultural components of Bhutan's national identity commonly cited in the literature. Approximately three-fourths of the population practise Buddhism, particularly the native school of Drukpa Kagyu and the 'old school' Nyingma Buddhism from Tibet (US Department of State, 2009). Animist and shamanistic elements of Bon and earlier traditional beliefs are admixed in various practices such as vertically displayed prayer flags (rather than the more Tibetan horizontal hanging), phallic representations in architecture as protective devices, and commemorations of particular places as sacred. Hinduism is largely practised by ethnic Nepali immigrants, known as the Lhotsampas, who settled along the country's southern border (Department of Tourism [DoT], 2007). The new Constitution adopted on July 18, 2008 guarantees Bhutanese citizens freedom of religion and religious belief, although 'Mahayana Buddhism is the state's "spiritual heritage".' (US Department of State, 2009). Significant elements of Bhutan's dance and visual arts derive from Buddhist practices common to the Vajrayana tantric school of Mahayana native to Tibet (Bartholemew & Johnston, 2008).

The cultural element of language spoken by the majority (50+%) ethnic group descended from Tibetan immigrants is Dzongkha, officially considered the national tongue and the subject of study from elementary to college level. Other than English, which is the language of instruction at all grade levels, the 18 languages used in Bhutan are part of the Tibeto-Burman classification spoken throughout the country. Another linguistic exception is Nepali, which is used as the primary tongue by 35% of the population that primarily live in the south, reflecting the origins of immigrants living in that region. The third major linguistic group is comprised of the earliest settlers who use Sharchop, also known as Tsangla, prevalent in the eastern portion of the country. Choeki, or classical Tibetan, is the liturgical tongue. Other languages reflect groups of isolated village populations, migrating herders, and ties to what are now Sikkim, northeastern India, and southwestern Chinese groups.

The cultural identifier of national dress is mandated for citizens engaged in all official and most daily functions. The *kira* for women and the *gho* for men both feature a bolt of cloth wrapped like a robe and fastened with a length of textile like a belt. The *kira* includes an inner blouse with a short outer jacket. It can be worn as a 'full' outfit held by a shoulder pin or a 'half' *kira* with a pin holding the jacket together and the woven material as a long skirt. Textile weaving is a traditional skill with distinctive regional patterns composed on a sitting loom (Myers & Bean, 1994). Dyes are made from plant material and tend to be strong red, orange, gold, blue, and green hues. The national sport is indisputably archery, the only Olympic activity in which Bhutan participates. Major towns feature an archery range, with economic distinctions and degrees of modernity evident in the use of either the traditional bamboo or modern high-power equipment. The national dish is also distinctive, featuring combinations of red chilies and cheese called *madatse*. This basic brew can be combined with potatoes or mushrooms, but the ubiquitous vegetable in the diet is the dried red chili pepper. Red rice indigenous to Himalayan paddy cultivation is a staple starch. However, Indian white basmati can be purchased less expensively than the uniquely Bhutanese grown small red cultivar.

Architectural style is another distinctive, mandated form of cultural expression which visually sets Bhutan apart and reflects its rural roots. The traditional structure is three stories high, with an elevated roof open on the sides for drying crops, and animal quarters on the ground floor. The wooden sides are brightly painted with Buddhist symbols and protective iconography such as the phallus representing Drukpa Kinley, the ‘divine madman’ fertility-promoting folk hero. Fortress monasteries (*dzongs*), temples (*lhakang*) and smaller religious structures (*chorten*) dot the landscape (Department of Works, Housing and Roads [DoWHR], 1993). Modernized combinations include concrete walls with some traditional accents, and blue glass characteristic of buildings in modern office parks framed in traditional ornamentation.

The following sections, discussing identity issues with Bhutan's modernization, begin with a necessary consideration of the country's topographic context and its influence on Bhutan's historical evolution, alternately drawing on and being threatened by its larger neighbors. The next section deals in turn and at greater detail with the four elements of GNH: culture, the natural setting, economics and governance. The final substantive section examines modernity challenges faced by Bhutan's youth, traveling the passage into a new national convergence in the making. The conclusion sums up the main components of the largely descriptive preceding scenario, and analyzes the shape – while not predicting the outcome – of Bhutan's modernity challenge.

### **Influences of Geographic and Historical Setting**

The country of Bhutan covers approximately 18,146 square miles (38,394 sq. km), including several small areas still disputed by China along the three sides of its shared border (CIA, 2010). The most recent census of 2005, intended to be an exhaustive total count, found a population numbering 699,847 (CIA, 2010, extrapolated from the Census of Bhutan 2005). Landforms fall into three basic categories, ranging from Himalayan foothills (985 feet) and micro-climates supporting banana and oranges for export, to the lower and higher Himalayas at elevations of over 23,000 feet (Pommaret, 2006). Several high passes, strategic for movement through these heights and traditionally used for trade with Tibet and Sikkim, are closely guarded by the military from three nations – joint Indian and Bhutanese patrols, and Chinese on the Tibetan border, which has been closed since 1959 (Walcott, 2010).

A brief historical background touching on the major dates relating to the evolution of a Bhutanese national identity begins in the year 1616 with the appearance of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594–1651): a Buddhist monk fleeing Tibet with a sacred relic to ease his reception into the land south of his homeland. Zhabdrung unified contending parts of both the country and rival religious schools as he came to embody the head of secular and sacred power. After his demise, authority was shared between the secular ruler (*Desi*) and the monastic head (*Je Khenpo*), each supreme in their own domain. Britain's extension of power over Himalayan regions bordering its Great Game stronghold of India led to its sponsorship of Ugyen Wangchuk – one of the major regional rulers (*penlops*) of Bhutan – as the supreme head of a hereditary monarchy founded in 1907. The coronation of the current Fifth King took place 100 years later.

His father, the still living and very popular Fourth King who gave his country both a Constitution and a son for their new king when he voluntarily abdicated amidst popular protest over that decision, declared that Bhutan's peace and prosperity were due to two primary factors: Buddhist beliefs and the close bond between the people and the monarch (Bartholomew & Johnston, 2008).

Opening to the outside world began during the reign of the Third King, who married a Sikkimese princess from the neighboring kingdom (now absorbed into India), and hosted a visit of the current (and future) Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira to Bhutan in 1958. That same year a law was passed granting citizenship to Nepalese who owned land in Bhutan and had been there for at least 10 years. From 1974 through 1975 Sikkim was fractured by Nepalese immigrants who outnumbered the locals and sought a separate political entity. Overtures by their monarch to China alarmed the Indian government to the extent that it made Sikkim an Indian state, declaring that the protesting Nepalese had requested India's intervention. In 1985 Bhutan passed a Citizenship Act declaring that only Nepalese immigrants who were in Bhutan since 1960 could obtain citizenship (Rose, 1993 ). The 'One Nation, One People' (ONOP, *Driglam Namzha*, or national customs and etiquette) proviso in 1989 was in part a response to the 1988 census that showed how numerous Nepalese in southern Bhutan had become. The Bhutanese fear of being demographically and culturally inundated out of existence, as happened to Sikkim, led to standardization and promulgation of Dzongkha, archery contests, along with traditional arts and crafts instruction and sales, and the wearing of *kira* and *gho* by Bhutanese citizens (Bhutannica, 2010). Following implementation of ONOP in 1989, and concurrent with a growing Nepalese separatist movement in India that sought refuge in Bhutan, violent protests and ultimately expulsions of non-compliant immigrants unable to meet the 1985 Citizenship Act requirements occurred in 1990. Many refugees were resettled in North America, Australia, the UK, and other European countries since 2009, after languishing in refugee camps administered by the United Nations in Nepal, which had refused to accept them into its over-populated country. Debates concerning the need for and compliance with the provisions of and sentiments underlying ONOP continue to surface, particularly with the freer speech permitted under the new constitution. A critical part of the country's evolving movement toward modernity involves sorting out the central characteristics of Bhutan's national identity, their forms, and modifications.

## **Implementing Gross National Happiness: Modernization's Discontents**

### **Cultural Context**

The most revered and recognizable figure actively shaping Bhutan's contemporary culture on the domestic and international scene is the reincarnate lama (literally born-again religious leader) and movie producer Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche. In a May 2010 editorial in the main national newspaper, *Kuensel*, he advocated finding 'ways to practice elements of our ancient culture in ways that are relevant, vibrant, alive, dynamic, inspiring, modern, and even

“fashionable” to combat increasing problems such as ‘drug abuse, youth unemployment, and alienation’ arising during the transition to modernity and increased urbanization. His main point was well-taken: the need to initially consciously and carefully select ‘the true core values and principles in our ancient traditions that are timeless and genuinely contribute to our well-being’ and then discard or adapt ‘forms, traditions and practices’ that are no longer serviceable or responsive to current needs. The best models to emulate, e.g. higher education in places most worthy of learning from rather than responding to fashionable trends, must be thoughtfully selected. Government provisos and INGOs encourage an increasingly self-sustaining, more entrepreneurial economy fueled by more private capital, innovation and an enhanced respect for labor. The application of creativity and integrity to choose which aspects of traditional culture to keep, which to discard, and which to update in what ways, is highly desirable but also contentious. One example he offers is to eliminate clothing items that embody class distinctions, such as scarves (white for official places, yellow for royalty, etc.) and robes showing rank.

The language issue of compelling the use of Dzongka also inspires heated discussion on the internet. Dzongka functions largely as a spoken dialect of the majority segment of Bhutan's population, but a sizable minority of Nepalese speak another dialect. Religious texts are largely written and chanted in Tibetan, which shares Bhutan's writing system but the sounds represented are arranged differently (such as distinctions among the Romance language). Advocates for variety point out that even within Bhutan more material is translated into English than into Dzongkha. Bhutan could likely be looking at its mentor India as a linguistic example, given the two national languages of English (their common colonial inheritance, although Bhutan was in Britain's penumbra rather than direct administration) and Hindi, the dialect of the ruling class in the region of the capital city. As a smaller country, Bhutan is hoping to be more successful in its attempt to make all of its citizens capable in Dzongka through required classes in the education system, much as China instructs, broadcasts, and writes in Mandarin (*putong hua*, ordinary speech). Linguistic affiliation remains a part of regional identification within Bhutan, particularly among the three major groups of eastern, western, and southern communities. The success of standardized, widespread Dzongka-ization is far from settled.

#### Environment and Place Attachment

‘Nature “set apart” in the [national] park becomes the embodiment of an Archetypal America, which is the ever-pristine source of the greatness of the nation and the people and, as such, serves as a sacred site and a unifying symbol in US American culture.’  
(Ross-Bryant, 2005, p.: 31)

As in the US, conversations with Bhutanese often evidence the perception of an important spiritual element binding the nation to its inhabitants and creating strong communitarian group identification. Evocative landscape components for Bhutanese from the central heartland include trees such as the blue pine and the cypress (the national tree) in a highland setting, along with ever-present prayer flags and temples. Small clay figures and cairns of piled stones also mark

significant spots. Bhutan is spoken of as a 'blessed land', protected on the south and east by India from the destruction wrought by China in Tibet to the country's north and west. The numerous chortens and prayer flags throughout Bhutan indicate particularly sacred sites and evoke the blessings of local spirits. Chortens mark and blend significant locations and events, from holding down a subdued malevolent spirit at that spot to a cluster of chortens at a high pass commemorating the victory of a monarch-led army repulsing foreign invaders on the distant border. Animistic identification with a spiritual element rooted in a specific landscape is found in many rural societies around the world. However, unlike in some areas where the formal religion (Christianity, Islam) was imposed by conquest, the subsequent Buddhist practices in Bhutan meld harmoniously with pre-existing chthonic practices and attachments that become associated with a national sentiment (Allerton, 2009).

At roughly the same time that the Third King formulated the principles of GNH, including environmental preservation, his friend the Prime Minister of mentor-neighbor India was also engaged in linking environmental preservation, economic equity and social justice (Karan, 1994). The movement a decade ago to encourage Bhutanese to use enclosed metal 'Bukhara' stoves, vented outside and maintained by a small amount of firewood, was just such an interlinked issue. The successful effort was pushed by proselytizing monks going from house to house, invoking the persuasive power of their respected position to convince hesitant users that adoption was for their health as well as good for the environment. It was also known to be the wish of the revered Fourth King, who lives simply in a relatively rustic dwelling on the outskirts of Thimphu, the capital city. Despite the international market for lumber and Bhutan's abundance, lumber exports are forbidden. City boundaries are visibly evident in Thimphu by the line of forest (although occasionally broken by the home of a presumably wealthy, persuasive person on the steep hillside) above the developed urbanized valley.

Cultural practices such as dance performances linked to religious beliefs, historical events, and folk stories that are part of annual events at particular locations continue to be encouraged by the government. The unprecedented permission for the creation and international exhibit of an art collection composed of treasures largely held in monasteries across the country occurred in part due to the opportunity for Bhutanese to learn curator skills such as textile and painting preservation, along with the archival filming of classic dances (Bartholomew & Johnston, 2008). The permitted syncretism of animist and formal religious beliefs, both supporting GNH principles such as environmental preservation, contrasts with other countries where the separate strands may be either supported or discouraged depending on the affiliation sought by government policy as is the case in Malaysia (Brennan, 2001). Indeed, the government of Bhutan seeks to keep these festivities for as well as by their own people, despite the obvious attraction of these colorful occasions for tourists who otherwise are a welcome part of the country's economic development plans (discussed in the following section).

### **Economics: Evolving Capitalism**

Imbuing economic policy within a culturally correct ethical framework such as Gross National Happiness represents an effort to reframe the development discourse, but in a way that is not all that exotic in its essence. Schumacher launched the 'Small is Beautiful' movement in the mid-1960s by drawing on what he termed 'Buddhist Economics' which (as he saw it) envisions labor as a means to the end of improving the quality of life for both worker and society in a manner not driven by the goal of material acquisition. 'Right Livelihood', one of the constituent spokes in the wheel of the Noble Eightfold Path, firmly placed economic activities in line with religious and spiritual values, among which should be equitable treatment of workers and distribution of benefits, along with minimal costs to the human and physical environment (Schumacher, 1966). Communitarian responsibilities rather than purely individual aspirations are drilled into the attitude of children who are exhorted to excel at their studies in order to get a good (government) job and thus a good salary to support their parents and relatives. Group assistance activities are particularly evident in rural villages which typically consist of 12–20 clustered houses. Residents cooperate with neighbours to rotate restoration of roof shingles, pool labour to harvest fields, and maintain pathways and market roads for the general good.

Tourism has served several useful functions since the early stages of Bhutan's modern development. Attributes of this service industry include the low skill level involved and short training time, now provided by a new hospitality institute set up in partnership with the Swiss. Tourism's ability to attract foreign capital was enhanced by the high minimum of \$200/day required as expenditures by visitors. The usual problem of leakage of capital to vendors outside the destination country was cleverly limited by requiring all would-be visitors to go through a Bhutanese travel agency and fly only on the national Druk airlines, staffed only by Bhutanese. Visas are obtained at the port of entry upon landing in the country, further providing a check on the status and number of incoming individuals.

Identification of Bhutan with a dragon – a recognizable and globally popular image – is used by the profitable and growing tourism industry to 'brand' the country for advertising campaigns. The nation's name of 'Druk Yul', or 'Dragon Kingdom' in Dzongka, is thought to refer to the loud sound of thunder during ferocious storms in the mountains. The creature's ferocious attributes also lend themselves to linking with the monarchy, as in 'Gift of the Dragon' for things emanating from that source and/or country (Bartholomew & Johnston, 2008). The name of 'Bhutan' by which it is known outside the country can be traced to an Italian map of 1683, which however describes Tibet and its spiritual-secular ruler the Dalai Lama rather than the location and characteristics of the kingdom to its south. Mentions of 'Bottanthis' appeared in European publications in the late 1500s. The correct location and identification of 'Bhutan' comes from the Englishman George Bogle who spent time in that country in 1774 on a British mission of familiarization with the Himalayan region bordering India (Gandolfo, 2007).

Creation of a 'Brand Bhutan' is now a primary policy of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which seeks to promote an association of the country with being green, organic, pro-environment, and self-reliant (Ministry of Economic Affairs [MOEA], 2010). While major



economic growth drivers are hydropower generation (the main export to India) and donor funds (principally used to build infrastructure), the largest proportion of the economy is in services (40%), of which tourism provides a substantial share – the third highest revenue generator in the economy. The source of hydropower lies with the rapidly descending meltwaters of Himalayan glaciers, which also pose problems for the future due to global warming effects. Sudden and massive floods have inundated downstream settlements and infrastructure in the past due to the build-up of water exceeding the capacity of natural containment. In the past Bhutan relied on carefully sited and camouflaged mini-dams to minimize the environmental impact. Cognizant of the diminishing capacity of high Himalayan glaciers, Bhutan is now building large-capacity dam projects in several locations to accelerate the yield from hydropower. This converted resource is largely sold to India due to the demands placed by rapid development in that country.

By the mid-1980s Bhutan had moved into the second stage of development with an acceleration of internal migration indicating the advent of regional disparities and the roadways needed to access areas of opportunity (Karan & Shigeru, 1987). Roughly two-thirds (63%) of the labor force remains in primary activities such as agriculture, which furnish 21–22% of the GDP, but services engage 31% of the populace and 40% of GDP. Studies done by the Department of Tourism revealed that ‘unique culture, nature, and undiscovered’ topped the list of tourist draws. The high daily minimum required expenditure of US\$200 leads to an older, better educated and more affluent tourist base which is desired by the government – far from the youthful trekkers with undesirable consumption habits in neighboring countries such as Nepal. Cultural preservation remains the underlying motivation for tourism in Brand Bhutan (MOEA, 2010).

### **Governance: Monarchy to Democracy**

Promulgation of a first-ever Constitution and elected parliament along with the accession of a new king in 2007 represented a huge, decentralizing shift in Bhutan's power structure, despite the lopsided landslide of one party which won all but two seats. Appointment of judges to head a new judicial system also broadened the base of legitimate power, although both the current and past monarch remain very popular and thus influential.

Separation of government into a secular and a spiritual realm is a new phenomenon as far as it goes too. The head of each side was considered a partial reincarnation of the Zhabdrung (heart and mind emanations), founder of the nation, with the Wangchuk Dynasty first king consolidating the power of regional *penlops* (rulers) most decisively into himself. As the British heir apparent serves as the Prince of Wales, the Bhutanese monarch-in-waiting has functioned as the Penlop of Paro during his waiting period. The king remains central to Bhutanese identity, and only he could have dethroned himself and insisted on the installation of a new government form.

The Constitution splits the realm and duties of the monastic world and the Je Kenpo from that of the secular side, with its new parliament, more clearly than ever before. Previously monks exceeded the number of government administrators, with half of them receiving some support

from the State (Karan & Shigeru, 1987). The monastic body is now clearly de-linked to affairs of the state, to the extent that voting rights are constitutionally denied to influential religious practitioners. One religious organization represents all the non-Druk Kagyu groups including Hindus, Christians, and other Buddhist sects. The Druk Kagyu monasteries and their inhabitants are supported by the State. The new Buddhist monastic university being constructed with large amounts of funding from India is designed to potentially serve as a major regional Buddhist center of learning, taking in monks from Indian Himalayan states such as Sikkim, Ladakh, Himachal and Arunachal Pradesh. English is not part of the curriculum, but since monks can join at different ages, some could have exposure up to fluency if they joined later in life. Linguistic issues during the writing of the Constitution also worked to marginalize the monastics, since very few were fluent enough in English to follow the discussions, which were conducted in the language of the secular educated elite. Ramifications of the new society being created by the new Constitution reverberate particularly for the generation coming of age, and shaping as well as being shaped by circumstances quite different from those experienced by previous generations.

### **Youth Issues: Gen Modern**

The problems afflicting Bhutan's youth are perhaps the most troubling for maintenance of a national identity, as they struggle with the temptations of practices such as substance abuse that are newly apparent and available via the internet, and opening to the outside world. Fully 31% of Bhutan's population is below 15 years of age, with almost double that below 24 years of age. Utilization of traditional culture is an issue of paramount importance for navigating the uncertain process of modernization, but is not unproblematic. Jettisoning the past can lead to a hollowing out of identity and instability; too close of an embrace can create an anchor limiting a society in unhelpful ways. Issues arise from the tradition of individuals (particularly youth and females) subordinated to group ends (particularly economic), decisions made within the group (particularly familial), and formal laws such as those seeking to compel school attendance where destabilizing information is learned, and the role of students as modernizers. In the poorer, more remote regions of the country, children walk up to 10 hours each day to school across dangerous terrain, through darkness at each end of the trip. Some communities constructed temporary housing where grandparents not needed on the farm can cook and supervise school children during the week, as a partial measure to ease their commute burden.

Tensions in Bhutan's ongoing navigation between the modern and traditional worlds can also be glimpsed in the community in which Sherubtse College, the original campus of the Royal University of Bhutan, is situated in the less developed southeastern edge of the country. The major dining facility for guests in the town is run by a family who also rent out a large guesthouse. The eating room's central stove is maintained and food served by a young woman, whose traditional wrap dress is unusually askew, and a young girl with downcast eyes who is of school age but not attending as legally mandated. Sherubtse students formed a branch of the global 'Save the Children' organization, and are aware of the situation, as are other shopkeepers in town. The club's faculty advisor waits for an appropriate time to talk with the child's

grandparents, owners of the facilities. Traditionally, elders decided what role family members (especially young females) performed and the community regulated itself. Laws as formal legal structures encapsulate new ideas. Under the Canadian Catholic priest who advised its founding, Sherubtse was placed in this corner of the country to spread development and train the country's future leaders to navigate the occasionally uncomfortable gap.

The education system underwent a major restructuring in the past five years in the interest of nationalizing a structure that previously followed the Indian pattern. The result was a large drop in the number of Indian teachers – as well as math and English scores – and a continuing need for students to go abroad for specialized training in higher-skilled professions. Reportedly youth make up 10,500 of the 13,000 unemployed Bhutanese, many of whom are school dropouts, but cannot compete with Indians for low pay–low skill positions such as construction and do not care to remain in rural areas (Tenzin, 2009). The shortage of jobs to match the training and aspirations of young Bhutanese is a potential source of unrest. Civil service positions with the central government remain prized, continuing a culture of reliance and underlying a ‘recipient nation mentality’ observed by international non-governmental organization (INGO) donors.

Rising migration and divorce rates often result in a fraying of ties to traditional settings, leading to growing substance abuse that compounds the problem particularly with school dropouts. Just under half (45%) of all migrants in Bhutan are 15–30 years of age, moving largely for a job or education. Almost one-third head for the capital city, indicating their hopes for the concentration of civil service positions there (Rinzin et al., 2005). Traditional respect for age over youth is also at odds with the need to flexibly adapt to modernization opportunities, and leads in turn to a growing generation gap. As one British writer new to the country observed: ‘Bhutan feels like a place with a great past in front of it’ (Beaumont, 2010, p. 35).

Recent youth culture changes in the arts include a Bhutanization of cinema and songs. Rather than the Hindi popular tunes and videos omnipresent during the earlier period of Indian tutelage, songs in Dzongkha and movies made by and for Bhutanese youth portray popular stories of youthful love, angst, and humor set in the contemporary world. Growing affluence and a new, more self-indulgent middle class permits the purchase of movie- and record-making equipment as well as a local audience interested in its own themes. As in Japan, Korean culture is also rather popular as an outside influence. The ability to travel to India and Thailand for college and/or shopping trips to supplement the more restricted fare available in Bhutan has not led to a greater appreciation for life in those countries, but rather the opposite: an awareness of Bhutan's relative peacefulness, clean orderliness, and less crowded community connectivity.

## **Conclusion**

This article identified major cultural elements held to be uniquely Bhutanese, and explored the challenge facing the country's transition to modernity as it consciously seeks to select elements of its national identity that they most want to preserve, which they see as subject to modification,

and which they see as of a lower priority. Bhutan's isolated location allowed it to develop a distinctive set of practices in a number of areas while blending elements from its neighbors in Tibet, India, and Sikkim. These components include languages, attire, architecture, visual arts and dance, food, and an environment in which endangered flora and fauna could flourish. The nation's development policy has been predicated since its beginning on keeping as much of the culture and context as intact as possible, while carefully, slowly, and deliberately seeking to provide a better standard of living for its citizens. While Bhutan features a mix of distinctive physical and cultural features, its thoughtful and gradual approach to integrative modernization could furnish a transferable model – whose outcome is still a work in progress.

Three primary components of development include a country's key people, resources, and institutions (Potter et al., 2008). Major individuals shaping Bhutan's modernization are a visionary King and returned students educated abroad but carefully reintegrated into their culture. Relatively undeveloped natural resources provide two major economic boosts in hydropower and tourism, based on features people pay to preserve rather than disturb, even though the price can be restricted access to sites to lessen disturbances for practitioners they came to see. Newly created institutions come from the constitution that blended a congress, a king and a court system – and removed the religious institutions of a former co-regency. The administrative bureaucracy is run by a highly competitive cohort of the ‘best and brightest’, only beginning to be enticed by still scarce private jobs with higher pay, but lower prestige.

The extensive areas of customs and practices that distinguish Bhutan from its neighbors, in a harmonious rather than contentious way, give the Bhutanese targets and grounds for preserving their national identity distinctiveness. Although Bhutanese often see their country as ‘a yam between two boulders’ represented by China and India, they work diligently to keep the relationship peaceful within a dangerous neighborhood. India's stake in preserving its ‘northern border’ includes joining military patrols to detect and rein in Chinese border excursions – not easy to do in an area of stunningly high mountains, isolated nomads, and high mountain passes quite distant from what few major roads exist in the Dragon kingdom. Posters and travel magazine covers frequently feature the iconic image of Taktsang, the ‘Tiger’s nest’ monastery a short distance and half-day climb from Paro where the airport is located. Also seen in the movies ‘Batman’ and ‘Little Buddha’, Taktsang's three-story main structure perches improbably on a steep cliffside, not unlike the position of the country it represents: a precariously located and difficult to access Himalayan Buddhist country trying to preserve its cultural heritage internally while gaining needed capital by externally opening to the world outside.

Bhutan's management of immigrant incursions and settlements in its southern regions by expulsion of those with relatively short stay periods has met with some negative world media coverage, but the Bhutanese point to Sikkim as an example of the result of demographic inundation from its impoverished, unsettled, and over-populated neighbour in the eastern Himalayas. Manual labourers now come largely from India, are closely supervised and allowed only short stays. Despite their valuable foreign currency, tourists are likewise allowed only

limited stays, with destination permission required in advance and the per diem kept high enough to discourage the less desirable. Trekkers as a subset are also limited to minimize erosion impacts on the highly vulnerable Himalayan heights. Bhutan is moving into modernity, but at its own speed and on its own terms, treasuring the elements of its national identity that provide a soul to assist its passage.

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