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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon

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Dear Peter,

On my first morning in Bhutan hearty shouts of "hhhhaaaa", "hhhhooo", "hhhhaaa" floated in through my open window. It was 8:00 o'clock. Immediately I associated such exuberance with some sort of religious morning ritual perhaps morning prayers. While not an expert on Tantric Buddhism, Bhutan's national religion, I thought the rhythm too quick and the tone too loud to be connected with the peaceful sounds of the Buddhist monks I heard chanting in Nepal. I pulled back the lacy drapery to view the commotion first hand. I heard not a religious ceremony but a ritual - archery. Specifically it was the final match of a three day contest between the Ministry of Agriculture and the RBG (the Royal Body Guards). The earlier shouts of joy accompany a short victory dance made when a teammate has struck a bull's eye. Five or six team members gather in a circle with their six foot bamboo bows extend high in their left hands. Each team member hops around in his own circle on one leg. His other leg, bent at the knee, is extended out across the turning leg. In a hopping unison each member turns to face the inside of the circle, changes legs and turns back again in the opposite direction. This dance continued for five or six full turns.

There was more dancing on the sidelines. While women are not allowed to touch the bow, they actively participate in archery tournaments. Equivalent to cheerleaders, women dance and sing on the sidelines in support of one team while they try to distract and break the concentration of members of the opposing team with taunts and teasing. Monks likewise are forbidden to engage in archery matches but were among the hundred or so spectators.

Archery, the national sport of Bhutan, is played nearly year round both for general fun and serious competition. On days before important matches teams consult astrologers and make offerings to local deities [1, 2]. The bamboo species (local name zhushing) that the traditional bows are made from is protected in the Zhoshing Reserved Forest that was specifically designed for this purpose.

My window and balcony overlook the Changlimithang Sports Ground. The road and footpaths leading to the sporting complex follow the Thimphu chhu (chhu meaning river). The pink rose

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bushes in the gardens separating the pedestrian and vehicle avenues along the river are now in full bloom.

Bhutan, a small kingdom nestled in the Eastern Himalaya, is called the Land of the Thunder Dragon. The mountainous nation, relatively isolated from the outside world until the 1960's, is landlocked between India and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. In Dzongkha, the language of Bhutan, the country is known as Druk yul and its citizens, Drukpa. Drukpa (druk meaning dragon and pa meaning sect) is the name of the Buddhist religious school founded in the 12th century by Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje in Central Tibet. Religious and political men influenced by Drukpa migrated to Bhutan from Central and Eastern Tibet between the 12th and 17th centuries. By the end of the 13th century the first two Drukpa monasteries were founded in Western Bhutan. The Drukpa school continued to gain power over the other Buddhist schools in Western Bhutan. In the 17th century, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel unified Bhutan under Drukpa authority. At that time, the country was a conglomeration of tiny valley settlements, each with a different language and variations on Buddhist tradition, separated from each other by steep mountain passes. The name Bhutan most likely originates from the Indian term "Bhotanta" which refers to regions bordering Tibet [1, 2].

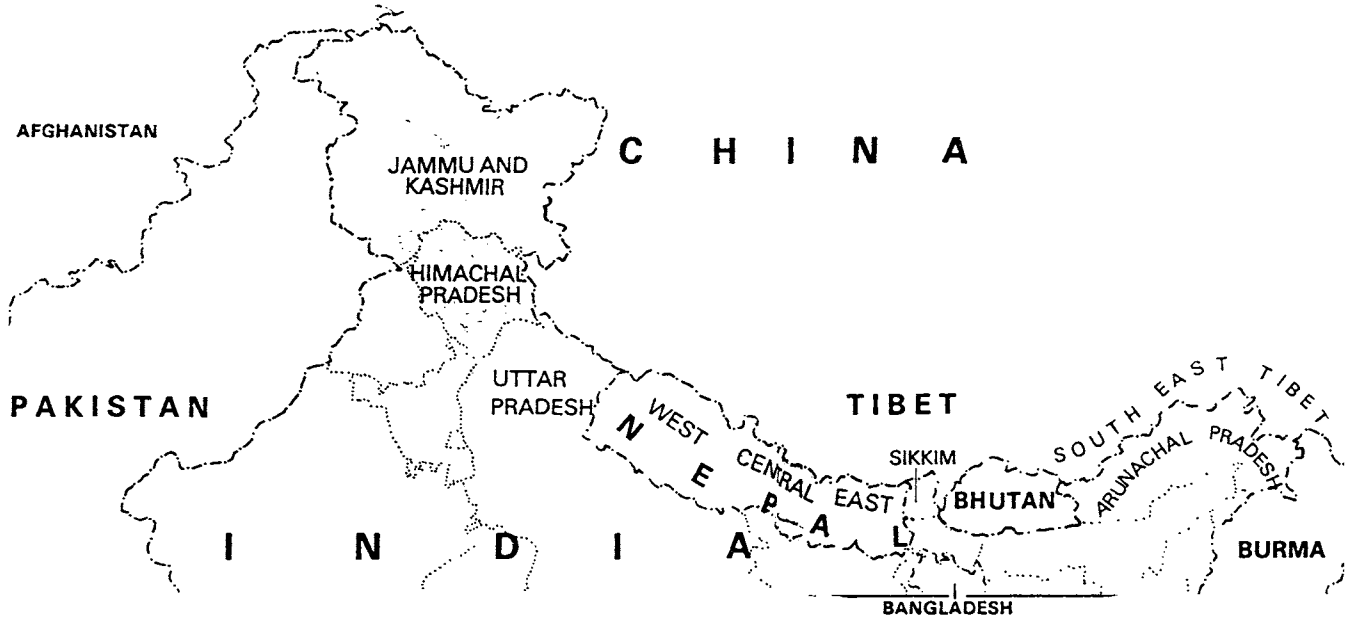

Figure I: Map of Bhutan in relation to surrounding communities in the Himalaya.
From: Stainton, A. 1988. *Flowers of the Himalaya: a supplement.* Oxford Univ. Press

True to its historical roots the country continues to be strongly religious. The government maintains religious and cultural traditions over what might be considered modern and developed to people from distant lands. With a strong Buddhist conservation ethic roughly 60% of the country is forested and 22% of the habitat is under some form of protection. All new buildings must be

constructed in the traditional style often without nails and iron bars. Windows have a distinct trefoil-shape. Each Bhutanese home has a worship room called a chhosho including an alter lined with religious statues [3].

The traditional dress for men is a robe called a kho (pronounced gho). It looks like a bathrobe. The kho loosely criss-crosses ove rthe chest and blouses over a belt called a kerey. This frontal fold forms a pocket traditionally used for carrying a sword, but for contemporary office folk it serves as a handy place for a wallet and daily planner. Underneath the kho men wear a shirt and shorts, and on colder days, cotton trousers or sweatpants. The robe touches the top of the knee. The fabric may be vertically striped wool, cotton, or silk or a woolen check. Stockings and foot wear lend an interesting contrast to the crisply pressed robe and present probable information about the status and destination of the wearer. Prominent government officials and office workers favor the knee high cotton blend solid colored dress sock with wingtips or sturdy leather shoes. For a causal day around town or in the market argyle socks and casual shoes appear a popular choice. For sports calf-high athletic socks with high top sneakers are most practical. Knee high socks are required for monastery visits. Footwear spans the spectrum from flip-flops to hiking boots. While it is not encouraged, Bhutanese men do wear western clothing.

I have seen very few women in western dress. Nepali and Bhutanese women alike wear the kira (pronounced key-ra), a rectangular piece of floor length horizontally striped silk, cotton or wool draped and pinned over the shoulders. Most pins are silver or gold with coral, turquoise and other precious stones. The kira itself feels like wearing a heavy drape compared to wearing a sari which feels like being wrapped in a sheet. When trying on the kira I was surprised to discover that the pins do not have clasps in the back. The pins themselves are sturdy and must off set the weight of the hanging fabric. The kira is bound at the waist with a cotton or silk kerey woven with multicolored geometric designs. Underneath the kira women wear a petticoat and a thin kimono style blouse called a wangju. The wangju has long sleeves extending beyond the finger tips. A waist long jacket of cotton or silk in the same style as the blouse called a tyoko is worn over the kira. The sleeves from the blouse are folded over the ends of the jacket to form four to five inch cuffs.

On official visits to the Dzong (government administration offices) and monasteries or

when attending official functions both men and women must wear a sash. For the men the large muslin colored kamney (sash), edged with fringe, wraps up over the shoulder and hangs down around the hips. Women double over and rest a slender scarf called a rachu over one shoulder. Like the women's kerey it is woven with bright geometric designs. While all women wear red sashes for men the sash holds the importance of denoting one's rank. Ordinary citizens wear the muslin colored ones. Men with high standing don unfringed varieties called by the honorific name namza. Blue namzas for court officials, orange for ministers, red for knighted officials and His Majesty the King wears yellow indicating supreme authority [3].

I enjoy wandering about Thimphu. It is difficult to become lost. My investigations on new routes often lead me to places I have been before. There is one main street in Thimphu called Norzim Lam. It runs the length of the town. Without stopping to look in the shops that all sell the same imported Indian goods it is approximately a thirty minute walk. There are three police roundabouts in town. One at the Lungten Zampa Bridge, the main entrance to Thimphu and two on Norzim Lam; one at the first and only four way intersection and one at the northern end of the street marking the edge of town. Bhutan is a country without traffic lights. Each roundabout is staffed with a white gloved police officer who directs traffic by gracefully bending his arms at the elbow. There are about another dozen paved roads in the city proper. For a country that just started building roads in the 1960's, they have built the finest roads I have ridded on or walked along in South Asia. The roads are suitably wide enough for safe, yet often prohibited, overtaking. I am impressed by the sidewalks that are in some stretches over five feet in width. There is plenty of space to stop and talk with friends without inconveniencing others passing by. Likewise the gutters are wide and deep enough so that while it is still early in the monsoon season I have yet to see one over flow.

Perusing this city is a joy. I feel an absolute sense of freedom, privacy and personal space. There are no beggars. Children do not run up to me and grab my skirt demanding pens or one rupee. None of the shopper keepers follow me down the street and try to convince me to visit their shop. I am left alone to go where I please. People are friendly often smiling and nodding as I pass by, a gesture I return. The streets for a nation's capital are quiet. Honking horns are heard mostly at dusk to alert pedestrians of their approach. On narrow windy roads horns are essential around the bends that are frequently only wide enough for one vehicle. There may be just as many video shops as food shops in Thimphu, but high pitched Hindi film songs cannot be heard. Video shops are recent. I am told that it is the Indian influence.

Thimphu is popular spot for Indian tourist at this time of the year. At approximately 7,700 feet the valley, surrounded by rolling fir-covered hills, is a refuge from the burning Indian plains. In the early morning and after dusk, turtlenecks and a light sweater are appropriate. The weather during the day is unpredictable. Some days the sky is bright blue with cotton ball shaped clouds. Other days it is down right grey, a harbinger of the annual monsoon season. The monsoon originates in the southwest from the Arabian Sea. The system travels east across the Indian subcontinent creating sudden bursts of rain as it moves along and picks up moisture again in the Bay of Bengal. From there, it strikes the Arkan coast of Myanmar (formerly Burma) and moves back west into the Eastern Himalaya. Regularly in the early afternoon we experience showers that develop into heavy downpours. These showers will become more frequent and fierce as mid-June approaches. From

then through the end of September, rain will fall with predictable regularity (daily in the late afternoon and into the night). Things begin to dry out in October.

I feel as though I am living in a homey yet exclusive hill resort community. In a certain way I am. Current figures for Bhutan's population range from 600,000 to 1.2 million. In official government documents the population is always cited at over one million (A consultant to the United Nations told me that many international donors only give assistance to nations with a population of at least one million). All estimates for Thimphu's population converge on 15,000. On my first Saturday here I encountered four out of the five persons I know well on the Thimphu streets.

I use the term exclusive because if you do not have a fortune to spend it is very difficult to visit this country. There are only three ways foreigners (except for Indians who enjoy the privilege of an open border) may visit Bhutan. The first is through employment. There are many foreign aid and international organizations here. The second way of gaining entry into Bhutan is to receive an invitation. When I arrived last week, I shared the airport passenger bus from Paro to Thimphu with an older German couple who are here by an invitation from an officer in the Ministry of Agriculture. The German gentleman had been part of an agricultural mission to Bhutan in the 1970's. A few months back he wrote to his Bhutanese colleague about organizing a holiday for him and his wife. If the purpose of Bhutanese visit is for a vacation and there is no way of receiving an invitation, then the third and only way to enter the country is through an organized tour. These tours are expensive. Two American women I met are paying $275.00 a day for seven days. Daily fees range between $170.00 and $300.00. Tours that include trekking tend to be longer with a lower daily fee. I combined the first two options. Sangay Wangchuck, head of the Nature Conservation Section of the Forestry Services Division, and I were classmates at forestry school. He and the WWF Bhutan Programme are sponsoring me to do fieldwork for the Jigme Dorji National Park management plan.

The country strictly controls and has only been open for tourism since 1974. The Royal Government takes a careful approach in its development activities. It intends on using the experience of its neighbors to avoid the misfortunes of unregulated and unplanned economic growth. The nation's primary generators of foreign capital are electricity generated by hydropower and forest and agricultural products. While recognizing the potential foreign exchange earnings from tourism, the government has opted to regulate tourism to minimize the possible adverse effects on its culture heritage and natural environment. Due to its small population, Buddhist ethics and strong government commitment to conserving its biological resources, Bhutan has a unique offering of pristine environments for nature-based tourism. But the present King once said that he is not so concerned with the GNP (Gross National Product) as the Gross National Happiness of his people.

When Jeremy Bernstein, a mountaineer from the United States, visited Bhutan in 1988, he spoke with Karchung Wangchuck, the manager of trekking and mountaineering for the government operated Bhutan Tourism Corporation. Wangchuck told Bernstein that he would like to reduce the number of trekkers to about 600 a year (there were approximately 1,500 in 1988). To provide a true wilderness experience, only one trekking party at a time should be allowed on a route [4]. In 1991, at the end of the Royal Government's sixth five year plan the Bhutan Tourism Corporation was privatized. Since then several independent travel and tour operaters marketing a number of

cultural trips and trekking expeditions have sprung up. Even with privatization, tourism has carefully implemented government regulations. For the seventh five year plan (1992-1997), the ceiling on tourists per year is 4,000 [5].

The weekend market in Thimphu is an opportunity to view a variety of local products and discover the diversity within the local population. Only on Saturday and Sunday do Thimphu's residents have a large selection of fresh fruits and vegetables. Shoppers stock up for the week. The produce reveals that sellers travel in distances from villages north and south of Thimphu. Many have deeply creased skin that is worn like supple leather. Apples and yak products primarily cheeses and long hair brushes are from regions north of Thimphu. Jakfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus* L.) and litchis (*Litchi chinensis*) more tropical products come from the southern foothills. Jakfruit happens to be one of my favorite snacks. The fruit, larger and heavier than a football, green in color and covered with small bumps, does not hang from the branches of the jakfruit tree but grows at its base. Inside the endocarp are small bright yellow fruits having a rubbery texture. Tearing off one end of the fruit carefully with your teeth, the pit in the middle slides out and the flesh is finished in one bite. Jak is sweet and delicious when sprinkled with salt water. Unfortunately every jakfruit I inspected on Saturday morning had a sickly overripe smell. The litchis, a frequent desert fruit, fetch a good price of Nu. 35 for a small bunch (Nu. stands for the Bhutanese currency ngultrum which has the same value as the Indian rupee. The two currencies are interchangeable in Bhutan. The current rate is Nu.31 = $1.00). I buy a bunch of bananas. In my attempt to buy two mangoes I end up with two kilos that will last me well through the week.

Bright red and green chilis, onions, ginger root, and garlic essential ingredients for a hot spicy meal are readily available. Sugarcane, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, carrots and green beans are just some of the produce available. Fiddlehead ferns and asparagus are in season only during May and June. Cheese products come in all little shapes and sizes. The most popular variety is dasti, necessary for making Bhutan's national dish hemmadasti. Made from cow's milk, it comes as a small soft white paddy easily crumbling at first touch. The cheese is carefully wrapped and carried away in a moistened banana leaf. I was first told about hemmadasti by a young Bhutanese man I met in Kathmandu. He said it was a delicious dish of chili peppers in a cheese sauce served with a local variety red rice. He warned me that I would need at least two hankies during my meal. One for my watering eyes the other for my runny nose. He was right about hemmadasti being delicious but the dish caught me off-guard at first. I visualized chili peppers in a creamy cheese sauce (maybe something like chili peppers au gratin). Instead I got a bowl of sliced red and green chilis and onions in a clear sauce with small lumps of white cheese resembling feta. Nevertheless this was a savory blend. I could distinctly taste the fiery peppers from and complemented by this cheese sauce. And my informant was wrong - one hanky was sufficient.

Today was a government holiday in honor of Lord Buddha's conception. I accompanied Mingma Sherpa, the WWF country representative, and his wife in paying their respects to the deity. Our first stop was the Memorial Chorten in Thimphu. A chorten (often called a stupa) is a religious monument representing Buddha's mind. Every day I see the chorten's golden spire sparkling in the late afternoon sun. The Memorial Chorten was built in 1974 to honor His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third King of Bhutan. I often wander clockwise along the square base of the chorten but had never been inside. One enters the chorten's walled compound on the south side. Immediately on the left inside the knee high whitewashed wall is an tremendous enclosure

sheltering a shiny red cylindrical prayer wheel. Continuing clockwise around the stone base of the chorten, the main entrance is on the north side. We climb three thick cement stairs and remove our shoes. The rounded ground floor is dark and much larger than it looks from the outside. The paintings on the walls commemorating events in Buddha's life are navy, maroon and forest green outlined in gold.

Ascending a narrow spiral staircase we reach the first floor. In the center, taking up over half of the room, is a large and unfriendly looking statue that is made up of nearly 1000 smaller statues. There are masks with protruding horns and pointed canines. The craftsmanship is magnificent following delicate lines and narrow creases. We wait at the bottom of the next staircase. There is barely enough room for two adults to pass each other. Children have the advantage of passing easily underneath the arm of an adult holding onto the hand rail. The second floor is relatively empty with a light and airy feeling. There is a balcony running around the outside allowing sunlight to penetrate the interior. The last staircase leads us to the top of the chorten. From here the views of the valley are spectacular. We tower over rooftops and the weeping cypress trees lining the city streets. The chorten tapers as we ascend and it is here within the small circular confines of the rooftop beneath the spire that the devout prostrate themselves three times to the Lord Buddha. Pressing their palms together in a prayer-like fashion, they lift their hands up in front of their face, at their lips and out in front of their chest before they descend onto their knees their palms flat out in front of them and press their forehead to the ground. Even the elderly flow through this process with exceptional grace.

When we leave the Chorten we wind our way up westward to the Changangkha Lhakhang situated on a knoll overlooking the valley. Built in the 15th century, this is one of the oldest temples in Thimphu. Plastic sheeting provides a protective cover to the statues. The painted thankas masked by sheets. Both the result of renovations. Today's ritual involves lighting butter lamps with sticks of incense. The lamps in Changangkha Lhakhang, in the shape of chalices, are lined along a series of tiers in front of a photograph of the current King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. The lamps we light stand waist high with bowls two feet in diameter. We light individual sticks of incense from an adjacent lamp. The lamps are filled with globs of varying shapes of melting butter. An elderly monk comes by and pours a one liter bottle of sunflower oil into one of the lamps. As we leave the temple we hear rumors that His Majesty is on his way there.

We end our pilgrimage with an excursion to Dechen four kilometers north of Thimphu. An hour's walk into the forest there exists a monastery with rock caves for meditating carved into the hills overhead. The gently sloping path into the forest is worn with use. The forest on either side of the path has a distinct structure. Conifers in the overstory, an open mid-story and low shrubby bushes in the understory. Pairs of birds glide through. With distance the path's grade gradually increases. As we pass through a clearing we encounter a near vertical rock face. White prayer flags with aged tattered edges mark the opening of a rock cave. At the next slope, we have our first glimpse of the monastery beyond rolling fields of ripening wheat and square plots of vegetables. Along the trail I counted several shades of green. Ripening crops, ferns, rose bushes, pines and mosses all have their own hue.

In this monastery I am not allowed to enter the same sanctuary as my Nepalese companions. With a sharp twist of his wrist, a young monk motions me to follow him. We ascend a solid wooden

staircase carved out of the trunk of a single tree. In a room with windows on three sides is an alter clouded by burning incense and smoking butter candles. The monk stands to my right and instructs me on each individual position taken during prostration. We go through the exercise three times. From the inside of his saffron-colored robe he pulls out a note. I take a crisp Nu. 5 note out of my pocket and press it to my forehead with my right hand. I lower my eyes, say a short prayer and place the bill on a brass platter with the offerings of the day's previous worshippers.

Best regards,

Cynthia

Cynthia

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The designs of a one ngultrum note. Nu.1 is worth approximately $0.03.