



Himalayan Niche *An Introduction to Bhutan*

In the eastern Himalayas, wedged between the Indian and Chinese sub-continent, is the small kingdom of Bhutan. Covering about 46,500 square kilometers and with an estimated population of 650,000, the country certainly does not feature prominently in global consciousness. However, for the relatively small number of foreign visitors, Drukyl, the land of the thunder dragon, exudes a special esoteric charm. The kingdom is a fascinating microcosm, its sheltering from the wider world testament to circumstance and independent outlook. Indeed, Bhutan's distinctive character is most evident when interpreted as a small self-enclosed whole, rather than deconstructed into its constituent parts. The cultural and ecological environments are widely hailed as extraordinary, yet such classifications remain overly general to all but those with a specialist interest. A short visit leaves the guest immersed by the totality of this extremely unusual setting. Enduring images tend to be reflected in subtle little instances, particular to each individual, when the contrasting experience of being in Bhutan strikes a special chord within. Tiny yet evocative jewels stimulated by the unique ambiance of a land and its people.

As the world undergoes a process of integration and assimilation, Bhutan is made ever more remarkable through its singularity. There is aroused a striking sense of the exotic when an outsider finds few reference points in personal experience. Overt symbols of cultural particularity overshadow those alluding to a more familiar way of life. The Bhutanese dress differently, their architecture is different, their language is different, lifestyles are different, religious beliefs are different, the system of governance is different. Bhutan is the last remaining independent Himalayan kingdom, the final Mahayana Buddhist state. The country is a monarchy, where His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck is the head of state, with the throne retaining its status as the fulcrum of the political system. The Drukpa sect of Kagyupa, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, is the state religion and remains a dominant force in national affairs. Dzongkha, with its root in Old Tibetan, is the official language. Everyone wears national dress, the gho, a knee-length gown, for men and boys, and the kira, an ankle-length robe, for women and girls. Within a varied architectural landscape there is a traditional uniformity of form.

A cursory examination of the history of the Himalayan region adds depth to the image, where it becomes evident that such symbols are not a weightless national veneer. Through the centuries the inhospitable terrain of the Himalayan region has provided natural insulation, remaining a buffer zone between great empires. It was not until the modern era that these communities were exposed to significant external influence, as the surrounding sub-continent have gradually closed in around them. Tibet is now part of China, Sikkim and Ladakh are merged with India, Mustang is joined with Nepal, all at the edge of national affairs. Communities, previously existing in an alternative epoch and possessing traditional values, are being integrated at the periphery of world economic, social and cultural systems, experiencing a decentering and loss of identity. Only Bhutan has retained its sovereignty, and therefore the ability to influence these destabilizing trends. The approach adopted has been conservative and pragmatic, with an emphasis on the protection of the territory against potentially negative processes. Until the 1960's the Kingdom followed a policy of self-imposed separation, thereafter one of gradual and suitably controlled development and change. Contemporary Bhutan, however, remains more informed by a long and essentially isolated past than by the integrating globalizing current.

The name Bhutan derives from the ancient Indian term Bhotanta, meaning the end of the land of the Bhots (Tibet), and it was from the equally secluded north that the country was exposed to its most significant outside influences, most notably religion. Indeed, the role of Tibetan Buddhism is omnipresent in Bhutanese history since its arrival in the 7th Century, permeating all aspects of political, social and cultural life. The gradual emergence of a relatively united national community from the collection of dispersed and remote groups inhabiting this geographically demarcated enclave is punctuated by legendary personalities. Guru Rinpoche, widely revered as the second Buddha, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, and thereby provided an initial cohesive force. Inspirational religious figures such as Drukpa Kunlay, the "divine



madman”, and Pema Lingpa, the 16th century saint. Ngawang Namgyel, the Tibetan lama who first united the country under a central authority of intertwined secular and religious government in the 17th Century, assuming the title of Shabdrung, “at whose feet one submits”. Ugyen Wangchuck, elected the first King of Bhutan in 1907, marking the culmination of a process towards greater stability following centuries of internal conflict.

Being in Bhutan there is a strong sense that one has stepped back in time, the optic blurred between the medieval and the modern. Trekking parties and yak herders live parallel lives within the same landscape, the former seeking novelty, the latter perpetuating an age-old way of life. Western educated professionals, responsible for the introduction of new knowledge and technology, perform religious rituals to mitigate personal astrologically dictated misfortune. Bhutanese culture is not reflected in a watered-down celebration of the best elements of a seemingly halcyon past, it is ingrained in the Bhutanese mindset as an ongoing assertion of a particular identity and history. It remains the product of an environment of small inward-looking communities, possessing specific indigenous knowledge and firm religious and mystical beliefs, more inclined to seek explanation in the spiritual than the temporal. The Buddhist faith is the bedrock for both high and popular culture, providing the inspiration for literary and artistic achievement, prescribing a blueprint for correct thoughts and actions, being the motivation for festivals and ceremonies, major social occasions. Religion permeates all aspects of life, from the naming of babies to the ascribing of legitimacy to a 20th Century monarchy.

An overwhelming feeling of tranquility is evident where the natural dominates over the man-made. The land is made up of a collection of steep hills and narrow valleys, rising sharply from the Indian plains to the Tibetan plateau, 100 to 7,550 meters above sea level. Within this setting the products of human activity are dwarfed by the imposing terrain, ripples of cascading water, dense forest and barren rock falling from the snow covered peaks of the high Himalayas. Fortress centers find natural battlements, roads cling to hillsides, isolated farming communities are governed by the placement of the limited fertile tracts. Only about 8 percent of land area is suitable for cultivation by a predominantly agrarian society, with one of the lowest population densities in the region. The majority are small-scale farmers, existing within the narrow parameters implied by their environment, and possessing a Buddhist respect for the inter-connectedness of all living things. There are very few cases where humans have left an indelible imprint on the landscape. If the mountains are the abode of the gods, the Bhutanese appear in submissive prostration.

The natural environment in Bhutan forms a rich ecological enclave, characterized by its diversity and more or less unspoiled state. Within a territory spanning three distinct relief and climatic zones, from the sub-tropical lowlands, through the temperate central valleys, to the alpine high Himalayas, there exists a mosaic of particular locales, possessing specific blends of climate and terrain. These harbor a wealth of exotic flora and fauna, and a number of globally endangered species: giant rhododendron, juniper and magnolia, rare orchid and blue poppy, high-altitude, carnivorous and medicinal varieties; black-necked crane, red panda, golden langur, blue sheep, yak, takin, tiger and snow leopard. Yet, aside from such high-profile groups, what is remarkable about Bhutan’s environment is the presence of entire relatively uncompromised ecosystems. This is reflected in sheer mass and variety: the atmosphere is unpolluted, approximately 72 percent of land area is under forest cover, there have currently been identified an estimated 770 species of bird, 160 species of mammal, 50 species of rhododendron, and over 300 species of predominantly alpine plants used in Bhutanese traditional medicine. In 1988 the prominent environmentalist Norman Meyers identified Bhutan as one of ten global biodiversity hot spots.

Bhutan enters the 21st Century with a unique legacy, which both sets it apart from and corresponds with certain values held dear to the modern world. However, no longer insulated from the restless and potentially progressive modernizing momentum, the nation is now undergoing an inevitable and uncertain transformation. In the major urban centers, the gateways between the medieval and modern, there is an eclectic mix of old and new. Internet connections in ancient fortresses, pop music blends with the chanting of mantras and the revving of engines, monks parade foreign status symbols. As a small country on the periphery of the world system, Bhutan faces major challenges in successfully negotiating such a reorientation of perspective, whilst maintaining the individuality and stability that may prove vital for the preservation of independence. Indeed, the Himalayan region at large has experienced many of the negative



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aspects of integration without witnessing the major benefits. Blessed with an enlightened leadership and significant economic, social, cultural and environmental resources, Bhutan undertakes this process of fundamental change with a tentative sense of optimism. The strategy adopted seeks to merge tradition with modernity, gradually building on the foundation of a deep heritage. Over the past decades there has been gradual development without undermining the unique Bhutanese character. Whether suitable synergies can be maintained amidst the myriad of complex ongoing processes only time will tell.