

Bhutan

Preston T. Scott



The Thunder Dragon Comes To Washington

(Far left) Bhutan's geography is punctuated by elegant architectural forms unique to the remote eastern Himalayan kingdom. Photo by John Berthold (Second from left) The deep respect for cultural traditions still found in Bhutan is reflected in clothing styles, as well as in reverence for rituals incorporating important artistic skills practiced for generations. Photo by Julia Brennan (Third from left) Painting is one of the thirteen traditional arts of Bhutan, known as *zorig chusum*, celebrated at the 2008 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Photo by Preston Scott (Right) With more than half of its population under the age of twenty-five, Bhutan looks toward a new future in the twenty-first century that will necessarily bring change but will build on the country's rich and independent cultural foundation. Photo copyright Michael Tobias



More than a thousand years ago, the great Indian teacher Padmasambhava came to the remote part of the eastern Himalayas now known as Bhutan. Although Padmasambhava (or "Guru Rinpoche," as he is known in Bhutan) was not the first Buddhist teacher to come to this part of the Himalayan region, his presence proved to be a defining and lasting influence on the life and culture of Bhutan.

Guru Rinpoche was an important historical figure, highly respected for his compassion and wisdom in India and Tibet before he ever traveled to Bhutan. He first arrived in central Bhutan before moving west to the Paro Valley sometime in the eighth century. According to tradition, he reached a high cliff-side cave 2,000 feet above the Paro Valley floor atop a flying tigress. For anyone who has been lucky enough to see the site today (the location of the great Taksang, or Tiger's Nest, monastery), it is easy

to understand why this may be the only reasonable explanation of how he got there.

Bhutan's landing on the National Mall for the Smithsonian's forty-second annual Folklife Festival may be understood as another flight of the tigress. And the "tigress" arrives just when Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) measure of development is inspiring important thought and discussion about what makes a good society. GNH, which is not unlike Thomas Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness" in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, will be celebrated during the Festival.

The Smithsonian is very happy to host Bhutan at the 2008 Folklife Festival, the ceremonial heart of the capital city of the United States. The event provides a very special opportunity for American and international audiences to experience firsthand the remarkable life and culture of the place traditionally known as Druk Yul (Land of the Thunder Dragon).

Bhutan is a small country, about the size of West Virginia, with a population of fewer than a million people. Although bordered by only India and China (the world's two most populous countries), its geographically isolated location, high up in the rugged eastern Himalayas, has kept it unknown to most of the world.

Few places on Earth have such great natural beauty or have such a rich cultural heritage as Bhutan. Its vertical landscape rises abruptly from the steamy lowland plains of Assam in northeastern India to some of the world's highest peaks along Bhutan's northern border with the Tibetan region of China. Its diverse ecosystems—representing most of the climatic zones found on the planet—provide refuge to thousands of species of birds, plants, insects, and mammals. Pristine habitats support a dazzling variety of orchids and rare plants, including the legendary blue poppy. There are rare birds and mammals such as yak, takin, snow leopards, blue sheep, red pandas, and black-necked cranes in the highlands, as well as elephants, tigers, rhinos, and golden monkeys in the southern lowland jungles. Sometimes called the “Land of Medicinal Plants,” Bhutan also has a rich traditional

pharmacopoeia that draws from the country's rich biodiversity. Bhutan is one of the most treasured biodiversity hot spots in the world.

The history of Bhutan is closely associated with the development of Buddhist culture throughout the Himalayas, and it is one of the last places on Earth where the Vajrayana form of Mahayana Buddhism is practiced. It is the home of the Drukpa (People of the Thunder Dragon), who have lived in its isolated high valleys without occupation or colonization for more than a thousand years. Its geography has protected and defined its cultural heritage and traditions. Indeed, the first road to the outside world (India) was constructed only in the early 1960s. The total number of tourists has averaged below 20,000 annually.

The Bhutanese have worked very closely with their colleagues at the Smithsonian to showcase as many of their traditions as possible. Because Bhutan is so remote, the 2008 Smithsonian Folklife Festival offers what may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for most people to experience the rich cultural life of the Bhutanese people. It will provide visitors the chance to witness or participate in Bhutan's many music and dance traditions, which are very rarely performed outside of the kingdom. In fact, some of Bhutan's highly symbolic, mystical masked dances will be performed for the very first time in the United States. Audiences will learn from the dancers themselves about the meaning of their elaborate costumes, complex steps, rhythmic chants, and music.

They will see in one place all of Bhutan's thirteen traditional arts (*zorig chusum*). Bhutan has taken steps to ensure that the arts of *zorig chusum* continue to be taught and practiced throughout the kingdom, and many of Bhutan's finest artists and craftspeople will be on the Mall to share their artistic skills and insights. Examples of their work will be displayed throughout the Festival site to show how Bhutanese traditional arts are incorporated into the daily lives of Bhutanese people.

Visitors will also encounter examples of Bhutan's architectural heritage and have the chance to meet some of its finest builders. Representatives



Bhutanese masked dances reflect highly sophisticated symbolic understandings of life in a complex universe. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism

from Bhutan's religious communities will share a unique, ten-day cycle of Bhutanese ritual life, while practitioners of Bhutan's traditional medicine and some of its most celebrated cooks will explain how contemporary Bhutanese continue to rely on the land for much of their daily sustenance, health, and well-being. Elsewhere on-site archers will demonstrate the national sport, which colorfully punctuates virtually every village celebration in Bhutan.

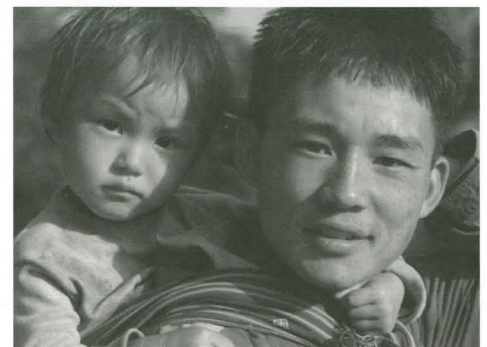
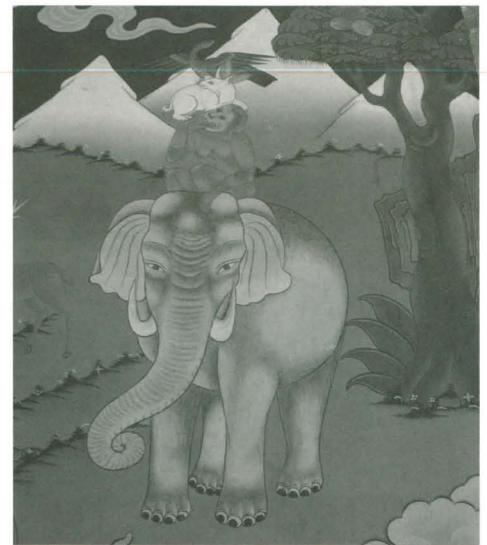
A popular Bhutanese tale—one that is portrayed throughout the kingdom in homes as well as in sacred and public places—is the story of “The Four Friends.” The characters include a peacock, a rabbit, and a monkey who stand on an elephant beneath a high tree abundant with fruit. According to the story, the peacock finds and plants a seed, which is watered by the rabbit and fertilized by the monkey. After the seed sprouts and the young plant starts to grow into a tree, the elephant protects it. Once the tree matures, however, its fruit is so high that it cannot be reached by any of the four animals. However, by standing on top of each other and combining their strengths, they are all able to reach the fruit and enjoy the reward of their cooperation.

In much the same way that the “Four Friends” work to achieve something that none of them could alone, the 2008 Smithsonian Folklife Festival's celebration of the life and culture of the people of Bhutan represents the fruit of cooperation among many people—participants, friends, and supporters—from opposite sides of the planet. For two weeks, the people of Bhutan will share their life and culture with the people of the United States and the world. It will be an intellectually and spiritually exciting experience that will surely spark a sense of discovery, adventure, and renewal.

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Tashi delek! (Good wishes!)

Preston Scott is on the curatorial committee of the 2008 Folklife Festival program Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon. He has served as an advisor to the Royal Government of Bhutan on several environmental and cultural conservation projects and has traveled frequently to the eastern Himalayas. As a legal advisor and consultant to many international organizations, he has participated in environmental conflict resolution initiatives in more than twenty-five countries.



Most Bhutanese people have two proper names—a first and a second—although the “second” is not a “family” name as it is in many other cultures. In addition, most Bhutanese names are interchangeable and not gender specific. Accordingly, Bhutanese names are presented and used at the Festival and in Festival-related publications as they are known in Bhutan, while the names of others are presented alphabetically by “last” name.

(Upper) Pictures of “The Four Friends”—the peacock, rabbit, monkey, and elephant—decorate homes and important public buildings throughout Bhutan. They capture the ideal of harmony with nature and the importance of cooperation to social well-being. Photo by Preston Scott

(Lower) The Bhutanese people's approach to the concept of Gross National Happiness is rooted in a deep, abiding respect for the country's important resources and traditions, as well as in caring for the needs of present and future generations in a sustainable way. Photo copyright Michael Tobias