

Treasures of the

Thunder Dragon

Her Majesty the Queen of Bhutan, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck



Its spectacular natural beauty and pristine environment, its extraordinary architecture and living spiritual culture, and its monarchs' approach to governance, which measures the country's progress and development not by Gross Domestic Product but by Gross National Happiness, is the stuff of which legends are made.

For more than forty years, the Smithsonian Institution's annual Folklife Festival has afforded peoples around the world the opportunity to share their living cultures and traditions in the most open, interactive, and personal ways possible. Coming from one of the world's smallest and least known countries, we Bhutanese especially look forward to presenting many aspects of our life in the eastern Himalayas to people from the United States and other nations at this summer's Festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. We are very happy to be a living part of this wonderful, yearly tradition and are mindful of the great stage the Festival provides. We know that the outside world's reactions to Bhutan tend to swing between two extremes. It is perceived either as a paradise on earth or as a country completely isolated from the rest of the world and trapped in a time warp. Neither image is true. But it *is* true that Bhutan is like no other place in the world. Its spectacular natural beauty and pristine environment, its extraordinary architecture and living spiritual culture, and its monarchs' approach to governance, which measures the country's progress and development not by Gross Domestic Product but by Gross National Happiness, is the stuff of which legends are made.

Bhutan is one of the world's smallest, most remote, and least known countries, but is also one of its most environmentally pristine and culturally rich. Photo by Julia Brennan

For centuries until the 1960s when roads made the country accessible to the outside world, Bhutan was known as a forbidden land. Its isolation was not a deliberate political or historical choice but a consequence of its geography. Compared to its neighbors, Bhutan's population density is quite low—about sixteen persons per square kilometer. Bhutan is still a predominantly agrarian country, with 79 percent of the population dependent on agriculture for its livelihood and all Bhutanese owning their own land. However, because of geography, only about 8 percent of the land is arable. Forest covers approximately 72 percent of Bhutan's territory, and perpetual snows cover nearly 20 percent.

Bhutan's topography has to a large extent shaped the history and way of life of the Bhutanese people. The country can conveniently be divided horizontally into three geographic areas. The foothills of the south, which rise from the Indian plains to an altitude of 1,500 meters, have thick broadleaf evergreen forests,



fertile farmland, and a relatively high population density (at least by Bhutanese standards).

The central temperate zone—cut off from the foothills by the high ranges of the Inner Himalayas—has a succession of valleys at altitudes ranging from 1,500 to 3,500 meters. The hillsides are thickly forested with blue pine and other conifers, oak,



magnolia, maple, birch, and rhododendron. Farmers grow rice, millet, wheat, buckwheat, and maize, as well as cash crops like asparagus, mushrooms, potatoes, strawberries, apples, peaches, mandarin oranges, and cardamom. The capital Thimphu and most of Bhutan's major towns and monastic communities are located in this zone.

Above the temperate zone—at elevations ranging from 3,500 to 5,500 meters—there are subalpine and alpine highlands that are ringed by the towering snow-clad peaks of the Greater Himalayas, which include Chomolhari (7,300 meters) and Bhutan's highest peak Gangkar Puensum (7,541 meters). They are Bhutan's sacred mountains and most have never been climbed. In the summer months, the pastures are dotted with herds of yak and the distinctive black tents of the yak herders.

Several elements of Bhutan's culture bring together its diverse, sometimes-isolated peoples. Bhutan's official language is Dzongkha, which is spoken mainly in western Bhutan. However, in addition to English, there are two other major languages—Sharchopkha (spoken mainly in eastern Bhutan) and Nepali (spoken mostly in southern Bhutan). There are also up to nineteen major dialects, which have survived in isolated valleys and villages cut off from neighboring areas by high mountains.

Most Bhutanese continue to wear the traditional national dress—the *kira* for women and the *gho* for men. The *kira* is a rectangular piece of cloth about the size of a single bed sheet. The art of weaving,

which is done almost exclusively by women, is highly developed; an elaborate *kira* can take a whole year to weave. A *kira* is wrapped around the body and secured at the shoulders by a pair of silver clasps called *koma* and at the waist by a tight belt, a *keyra*. A *wonju* (an inner blouse with long sleeves) and a *tyoko* (an outer jacket) complete a woman's outfit. Unlike most Asian women, most Bhutanese have short-cropped hair cut in a fringe across the forehead (although some young women in Bhutan's emerging urban centers prefer longer hairstyles).

The man's *gho* is a one-piece costume rather like a kimono with broad white cuffs. The *gho* is pulled up to knee length and fastened at the waist with a tight-fitting belt that forms a deep pouch across the chest. This pouch is like a huge pocket and is used to carry all sorts of things—money, important papers, a wooden bowl for drinking tea, some hard cubes of dried cheese for snacking, and perhaps a little round box for carrying *doma* (betel nut, wrapped in a *paan* leaf smeared with lime paste).



(Above left) In Bhutan's agrarian society, people live very close to the land that sustains them. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism

(Below left) Wedged between two of the world's largest countries (China and India) in the isolation of the eastern Himalayas, Bhutan's geography has allowed its people to live independently for more than a thousand years and has provided protected habitat for a dazzling diversity of rare plants and animals. Map courtesy National Geographic

(Right) The traditional *kiras* worn by Bhutanese women feature complex designs and take many months to weave by hand.

Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism

The most important events in the Bhutanese calendar are religious festivals. The major ones, which attract enormous crowds, are the *domchoes* and *tsechus*, held annually at the big monasteries and *dzongs* (enormous fortresses) all over the country. The dates vary from year to year, but most *tsechus* are held in autumn, which is a leisure period for farmers (although the very famous *tsechu* in the Paro Valley in western Bhutan is held in the spring). The highlight of a *tsechu* is the religious dances performed by monks and laymen in fabulous costumes and masks. Clowns known as *atsaras*—often carrying large wooden phalluses—entertain the crowds with their slapstick routines in between the dances. Many individual households hold their own private annual prayers, or *choku*, followed by a feast for the whole village.

Archery, or *dha*, is undoubtedly Bhutan's most popular sport. It is traditionally played with bamboo bows and arrows and two small targets placed approximately 145 meters apart at opposite ends of a field. (In international archery competition, the target is at a distance of only fifty meters.) Every village has an archery ground, and at important matches, the two competing teams are supported by lively groups of women "cheerleaders." On holidays, several archery matches can be underway at once. More and more common are expensive imported bows with pulleys that increase the speed and force of the arrows. They are coveted status symbols among Bhutanese archers, although traditional archers continue to use bamboo bows and arrows with great skill. *Khuru*, or darts, is another favorite sport played outdoors with the target placed at a distance of twenty meters.



A Meditation in Dance

by Lopen Lugtaen Gyatso

The *drametse ngacham* is a dance form that originated in Bhutan five centuries ago. Today, the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies is documenting the dance. The following is a rare insight into the tantric Buddhist teachings of this meditation in dance.

"If you know the purpose of the dance and what the dancers are visualizing, it is a very powerful experience," said a teacher at the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies. "Even the hair on my arm stands up as the trumpets, music, and intensity of the dance increase."

The *drametse ngacham*, one of Bhutan's best-known masked dances, was conceived in a powerful moment of intensive meditation. During a retreat, the dance came as a vision to a grandson of one of Bhutan's revered saints, Pema Lingpa.

In his vision, Khedup Kuenga Gyaltsen saw three beautiful, celestial women (*dakinis*) dressed in silken gowns and adorned with garlands of precious stones. The celestial beings guided him to the abode of Guru Rinpoche, where the deities performed a dance. Guru Rinpoche, the eighth-century spiritual teacher who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, later instructed Khedup Kuenga Gyaltsen to introduce the dance to the human world for the benefit of all living beings. Khedup Kuenga Gyaltsen noted the choreography of the dance and taught it at the Thegchog Ogyen Namdroel Choeling Monastery in Drametse in eastern Bhutan.

Sixteen people perform and ten others provide musical accompaniment in the *drametse ngacham*, making it the perfect example of Bhutanese masked dance. Refined artistic skills and a flawless balance between dancers and instrumentalists result in fluid, uniform, and complex movements. *Drametse ngacham* has twenty-one parts and lasts more than two and a half hours. The dancers wear spectacular, colorful costumes and masks representing real animals and mythical beings. All the masks symbolize the wrathful and peaceful deities of the pure lands of celestial beings. The dancers become manifestations of these deities.

Time and space are instrumental in creating different versions of *ngacham*. For many years, the dance was performed in relative isolation in the Talo, Trongsa, and Gangteng

Archery, Bhutan's national sport, provides frequent opportunities for communities to gather for festive competitions. The holes found in bread box-sized targets, shot at a distance of 145 meters (approximately 475 feet), reflect the staggering accuracy of Bhutanese archers. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism



The *drametse ngacham* is a sacred masked dance that originated in central Bhutan more than 500 years ago. Inspired, according to Bhutanese Buddhists, by celestial performances in honor of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), the dance is revered throughout Bhutan and has come to signify the nation. By witnessing the dance and listening attentively to the sound of the drums, believers may acquire some spiritual enlightenment. UNESCO recognized the dance as a masterpiece of intangible cultural heritage in 2005. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism

monasteries in central and western Bhutan. Today, *drametse ngacham* is widely performed in Bhutan; its choreography and meaning differ slightly from place to place.

Visualization is critical to *drametse ngacham*. The dancers picture the physical world, imagining it as the Buddha's land of magnificent glory, where all sentient beings are peaceful or wrathful deities with intrinsically pure, Buddha-like qualities. They visualize endless numbers of each deity, which slowly enter them and all things mortal to transform all ordinary beings into extraordinary deities. Finally, the beings and the deities become one. All visions are seen as manifestations of deities, all sounds as divine speech beyond human understanding, and whatever appears in the mind as the great realization of ultimate reality. The dancers establish spiritual contact with the audience through this powerful visualization, which serves to transmit the awakening state of mind to all who are watching. The *drametse ngacham* is truly a meditative art form.

The dancers must undergo rigorous training to achieve the right state of mind for the dance. This explains why the dancers and the ritual master have to complete a course in *ngondro* (preliminary meditation practice) and, if possible, a class in *losum chogsum* (a three-year and three-month meditation retreat). The physical dance itself requires years of training in order to attain perfect synchrony among dancers.

Unlike other dances, the *drametse ngacham* transcends the physical performance to become a means of enlightenment. It is a didactic way to impart the sacred Mahayana tantric teachings that epitomize the path to liberation and victory over negative and evil forces. The *drametse ngacham* is believed to

destroy all evils and natural calamities to establish peace and harmony. Dancers cultivate a pure vision that reflects the Buddhist concept of direct liberation from *samsara* (world of suffering). The dance exudes a spiritual energy that permeates the whole atmosphere.

The *drametse ngacham* is evidence of a unique living cultural expression. Its strong impact on society is articulated through its popularity in the whole of Bhutan and its dominance at most religious and secular ceremonies. The Bhutanese believe that this dance has the power to cleanse all defilements and negative mental actions of the dancers and the audience.

Bhutanese find the *drametse ngacham* spiritually empowering. They believe that a person has to see the dance at least once in life in order to be able to recognize the deities in the *bardo*—the intermediate state between life and death, where all the deities that appear in the *ngacham* are present to lead the deceased person to higher realms. The sacred texts state that, just by watching this dance, people can be liberated from rebirth or avoid rebirths in lower realms.

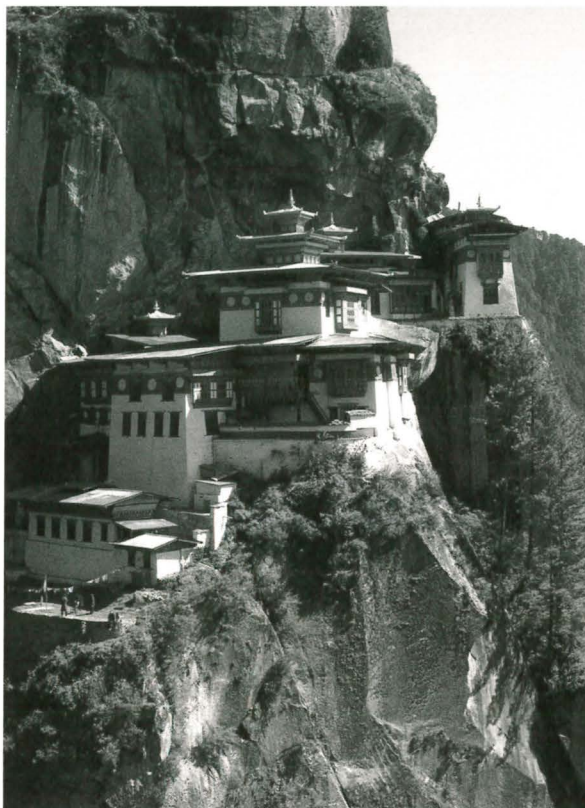
Lopen Lugtaen Gyatso is the director of the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies (ILCS). Under his stewardship, the ILCS has produced research on *drametse ngacham* (the Drum Dance from Drametse), which was designated by UNESCO in 2005 as a masterpiece of intangible cultural heritage. Lopen Lugtaen Gyatso, a scholar and monk, obtained a master's degree in Sanskrit from the University in Varanasi before joining the civil service of Bhutan.

Bhutanese call their country Druk Yul (Land of the Thunder Dragon). According to legend, nearly a thousand years ago, a Tibetan monk heard thunder during the consecration of a monastery. He believed it was the voice of a *druk* (dragon), loudly proclaiming the Buddha's teachings.

Little is known about the early history of Druk Yul, although archeological evidence suggests that Bhutan was inhabited as early as 2000 B.C.E. Oral tradition indicates that at the beginning of the first millennium, the country was inhabited by semi-nomadic herdsman who moved with their livestock from foothills to grazing grounds in higher valleys in the summer. Like other inhabitants of the Himalayan region, they were animists, many of whom followed the Bon religion, which held sacred trees, lakes, and mountains.

By the eighth century C.E., with the advent of Buddhism in the eastern Himalayas, Bhutan's history became closely entwined with religious figures and the myths and legends associated with them. In the early seventh century, the Tibetan Buddhist king Songtsen Gampo built the first temples in Bhutan. But another century passed before Buddhism actually took hold in Bhutan. In 747, the Indian saint and teacher Guru Padmasambhava first came to Bhutan. Legend says that he manifested himself riding a flying tigress and stayed in a meditation cave in a cliff in the Paro Valley in western Bhutan (now the site of the famous monastery of Taktsang, or Tiger's Nest).

Guru Padmasambhava—or Guru Rinpoche, as he is more commonly known in Bhutan—was a historical figure, one still highly revered in Bhutan. He was born in Uddiyana in the present-day Swat Valley of Pakistan and became a renowned sage in India and Tibet. He visited many parts of Bhutan during his lifetime, performing miraculous feats and winning people over to Buddhism. During this period, many local deities became assimilated into the Bhutanese Buddhist pantheon (usually as the protecting deities of a particular village or valley). Many Bon practices, particularly those that hold nature sacred in its many manifestations, have been integrated into the Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Bhutan. But there are still some isolated pockets in the country where the Bon religion, with its shamanistic practices, lives on. Bhutanese



In the eighth century C.E., the Indian Buddhist Padmasambhava (popularly known as Guru Rinpoche) traveled to many places in Bhutan while teaching Buddhism. He later meditated in a cave high above Paro Valley, arriving (it is said) on the back of a flying tigress. The magnificent Taktsang, or Tiger's Nest, monastery, which clings to the rock face thousands of feet above the valley floor, now memorializes the site of the cave. Photo by Preston Scott

culture remains both deeply spiritual and robustly earthly, owing much to the religious traditions that have influenced the country for more than a thousand years.

Today, more than 2,000 temples and monasteries throughout Bhutan and the ubiquitous presence of red-robed monks indicate the important role that Buddhism continues to play in almost every aspect of Bhutanese life. Every district in the country has a *dzong*, which houses the official local monastic community, and several temples. And every village has a temple, around which the life of the community revolves. People of Nepali origin, who live mainly in southern Bhutan, follow Hinduism, the other major religion in the country.

Three Marks of Faith

by Karma Ura

Bhutan is a deeply spiritual country, where religious customs strongly influence people's values. Three marks of faith shape the Bhutanese personality.

The first is prayer. Prayer includes short, daily individual acts and liturgies led by monks or lay priests that continue for days. The purpose and duration of prayers vary greatly. Typically, prayers concern what people desire in this life, but they may stretch into the next life. Rituals and petitioning prayers are conducted frequently to solicit gracious and compassionate actions from protector deities. Prayers may consist of mantras or sutras (the Buddha's teachings). They may be profoundly lyrical and non-sectarian or philosophical. Prayers may represent narrow interests. But traditionally, most feature soul-lifting wishes for justice and the well-being of all life-forms—the path that will lead them to happiness. As teachings, prayers should stimulate reflection and practice of the central values of Buddhism, such as compassion. Their function is ultimately to shake off the believer's convoluted and cloudy conscience, which so easily relapses into individualistic self-centeredness. At a more sophisticated level, prayers help believers discover what Buddhist philosophers have described as the "wisdom mind," which can distinguish between the ultimate reality of things and the mental constructions people take to be real.

Another mark of faith, or shared trait among the Bhutanese, is the spirit of volunteerism in the construction of community temples and the installation of spiritual offerings in temples. A 2004 national survey confirmed that no infrastructure activity required more communal labor than that required for construction and maintenance of temples. The annual labor contribution of each household to large and complex temples surpassed the voluntary labor spent in building community schools and suspension bridges and safeguarding sources of drinking water. And it explains the profusion of temples all over the country.



There are about 2,000 temples in Bhutan, which means that people are never too far away from their objects of veneration. Serene statues are the centerpieces of temples. These statues contain scriptural teachings of the Buddha and body relics of eminent Buddhist masters. Thus, temples signify the presence and representations of the Buddha and help to project Buddhist insights.

Stupas (Buddhist memorials that usually house holy relics) remind Buddhists to open their minds to understanding the interdependence of everything, as explained by the teaching of Interdependent Origination. They should realize that every person can contribute to others' happiness and well-being and that each person needs contributions from others to achieve happiness. Happiness depends on sustaining a pattern of giving in meaningful relationships.

The third shared trait, or mark of faith, is the strong Bhutanese belief in the wrongness of killing any life-form, including livestock and wildlife. In the ideal Buddhist world, even flies or rats, which can spread disease, should not be killed. Poultry, swine, fish, and beef cattle should not be raised to feed human beings. In the real world, however, Bhutanese consume an increasing amount of meat as income rises. But they seem to feel morally more comfortable if the meat is imported or if others slaughter the animals. The future demands of an urban society may well clash with the very strong belief in not taking life, one of the virtues taught by the Buddha.

Human behavior is a delicate, dynamic balance between the ideal and the pragmatic, between individual pursuits of happiness and social justice. Lay Buddhist ethics include constraints on individual behavior and demands for social action. Together, they can shape the basic relationship not only between individuals (as a respect for human rights does), but also between individuals and other sentient beings (which human rights do not guarantee).

Dasho Karma Ura is the director of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, a prolific writer, and an aficionado of fine art. Karma Ura studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, and the University of Edinburgh where he earned a master's degree in economics.

A silk scarf (*katah*) is worn as a sign of respect while polishing a statue of Guru Rinpoche in Gangtey Monastery. Guru Rinpoche is depicted holding a *dorje* (thunderbolt), which symbolizes the energy and strength required to defeat ignorance. Photo by John Berthold

While much of the history of Bhutan's medieval period has been lost, because many historical records were destroyed in a series of fires and earthquakes, enough is known to provide an outline of major events. For most of the medieval period, Bhutan had no dominant authority figure. A number of local chieftains ruled the different valleys, and there was a great deal of conflict.

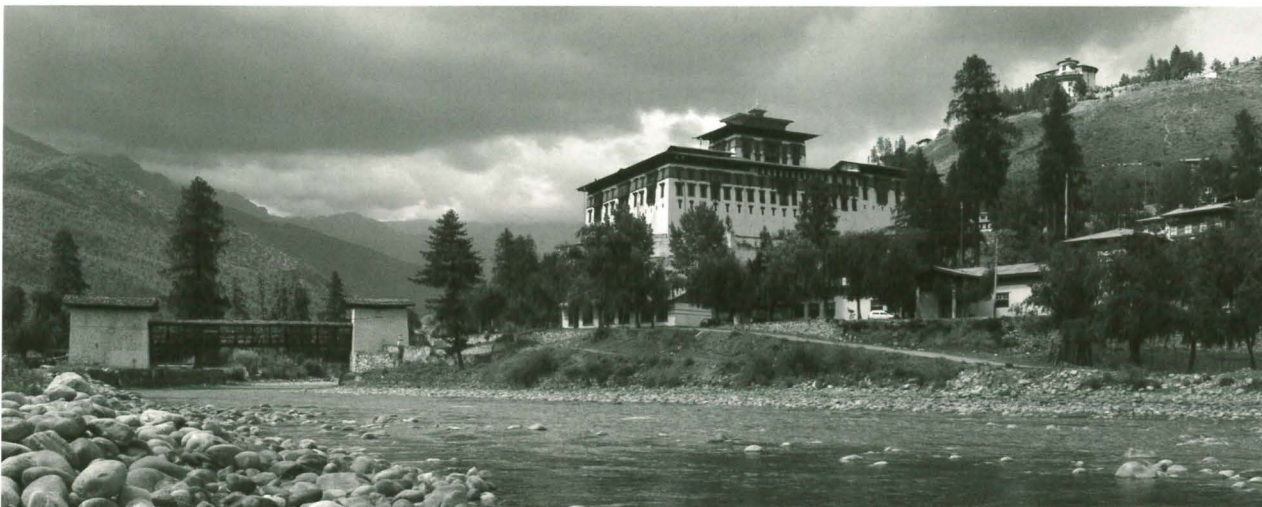
In the early seventeenth century, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, an important Tibetan lama, unified the country for the first time. He exercised his authority through a series of *dzongs* he built across the country, established a code of laws, and helped institutionalize many cultural and religious traditions that helped shape Bhutan's identity. He is widely regarded as the founder of modern Bhutan. In 1907, an assembly of people's representatives, high officials, and important lamas unanimously elected Ugyen Wangchuck the first hereditary king of Bhutan, and he was given the title Druk Gyalpo. His coronation day (December 17) is now Bhutan's National Day.

His great grandson came to the throne in 1972. The young Fourth King's coronation two years later focused the world's attention on Bhutan. It brought the international media to the country for the first time. Photographs and articles published in international journals projected Bhutan as a fairy-tale kingdom ruled by a dazzlingly handsome young king. Soon after his coronation, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck announced his philosophy for the future development of his country. He declared that Bhutan's growth and progress

would be guided, as well as measured, not by its Gross Domestic Product but by its Gross National Happiness (GNH). It was a revolutionary concept and one that initially invited much skepticism from economists and other development experts. GNH was a nice catchphrase, many of them said, but on what index do you measure happiness? Today, the success of his Gross National Happiness theory is widely recognized and has become a model for economists and planners the world over.

Put very simply, GNH is based on the conviction that material wealth alone does not bring happiness or ensure the contentment and well-being of the people; economic growth and "modernization" should not be at the expense of the people's quality of life or traditional values. To promote GNH, the Bhutanese government has given priority to several policy areas—equitable socio-economic development in which prosperity is shared by every region of the country and every segment of society; conservation and protection of the environment and the country's pristine natural resources; the preservation and promotion of Bhutan's unique cultural heritage; and providing good, responsive governance in which the people participate.

The highest priority has been given to rural development by making health care and education accessible to all, including those living in the most remote villages; building roads and telecommunications networks; launching livestock and agricultural development plans and their associated industries;



and promoting traditional handicrafts. All of these endeavors aim to improve rural livelihoods and create new job opportunities.

When Bhutan created its environmental protection program, it kept in mind mistakes made by other countries in the neighborhood. Laws ensure that forest cover in Bhutan never drops below 60 percent and that industrial and commercial activities do not cause environmental deterioration or threaten wildlife. All of Bhutan's hydroelectric projects are run-of-the-river—no large dams cause ecological damage or submerge habitats. Such stringent eco-sensitive measures have not affected the profitability of Bhutan's power projects. Instead, they now provide more than 40 percent of the country's revenue and help ensure Bhutan's continuing economic prosperity and independence. Environmental and cultural concerns have also resulted in the decision to discourage unlimited mass tourism and to prevent exploitation of many of the country's rich natural resources (such as copper), which would destroy human and natural habitats.

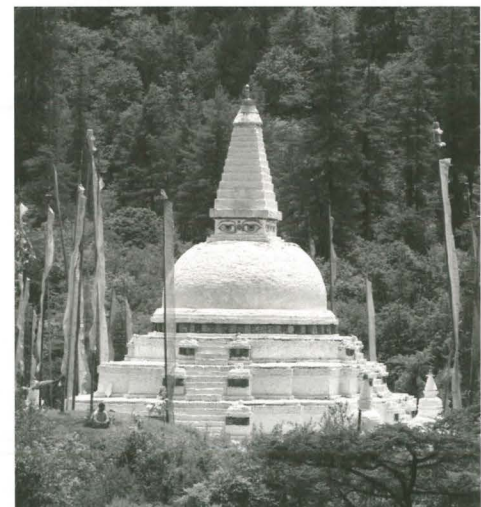
Laws preserve the cultural traditions that give Bhutan its distinct identity. They encourage all Bhutanese to wear traditional dress in public (which helps keep alive important weaving traditions) and strictly regulate the preservation and practice of Bhutan's superb architecture and traditions. Regular government and monastic patronage and large projects for the restoration and renovation of *dzongs*, monasteries, and other historic structures guarantee that traditional artists and craftspeople maintain the highest standards.

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(Left) Paro Dzong, which was built in the 1640s, houses a monastic community and serves as the administrative seat of the Paro district in western Bhutan. The seventeenth-century *dzong*, a few miles from the national airport, is surrounded by the natural splendor of the Eastern Himalayas. Some scenes from the 1995 film *Little Buddha* by Bernardo Bertolucci were filmed here. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism

(Upper right) Bhutan's Fourth King His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck speaks with a young boy. The king was the world's youngest monarch when he ascended to the throne in 1972 at age sixteen. He is credited with setting Bhutan on the path to democracy before voluntarily retiring in December 2006. Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism

(Lower right) The Bhutanese people developed their own cultural identity when Buddhism came to the region more than a thousand years ago. They also incorporated important cultural traditions from Tibet, Nepal, and India (as reflected by this Nepali-style stupa in central Bhutan). Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism



Bhutan's spiritual culture permeates every aspect of life, including the government. Even in the twenty-first century, about 3,000 privately supported monks and other religious teachers continue to play an essential role in the life of the community by presiding over festivals and rites of passage and by providing guidance, advice, and solace. Bhutan also has lay monks, or *gomchens*, who live with their families but have acquired the religious knowledge that allows them to conduct prayers and other religious ceremonies. They play a particularly important role in eastern Bhutan, where they travel from village to village to provide services. Because monks are highly educated, greatly respected in Bhutanese society, and influential in shaping opinion, they now play an important new role in national life: they are very effective agents of social change in family planning, AIDS awareness and prevention, and other fields of public health.

For twenty-five years, providing responsive and participatory governance has been a priority of Bhutan's Fourth King. For example, in 1981 he began the process of decentralization and democratization by giving each *dzongkhag* (district) in the country the power to determine its own development priorities. In 1991, he extended this decision-making power to

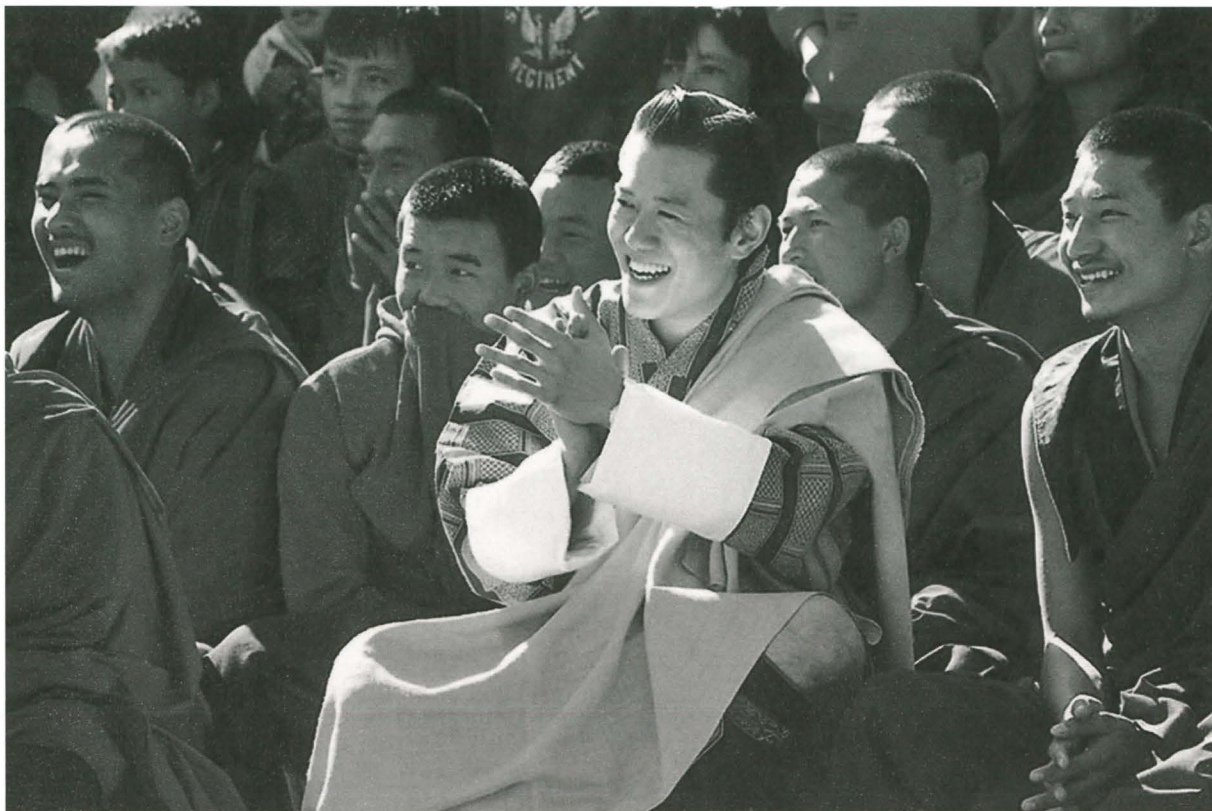
the villages. Then, in 1998, he divested himself of his executive powers and transferred them to a council of ministers. To protect the future well-being of the country, he also advanced a new law that gave the National Assembly the power to call for a vote of confidence in the king. In 2001, he called for a new constitution that would give Bhutan a two (or more)-party democratic electoral system, with an independent judiciary and other important safeguards. In late 2005, the king began visiting the districts to hear the people's opinions about the new draft constitution, allay their doubts, and personally explain to them why he believed the new constitution would give them greater control over their own lives and destinies for the benefit of the country.

Despite the initial skepticism that GNH first drew from economists and other development experts (perhaps not unlike some of the reactions that Thomas Jefferson must have received when he inserted the words "pursuit of happiness" into the U.S. Declaration of Independence), there is now concrete evidence of its relevance in Bhutan. From 1985 to 2007, life expectancy rose from forty-seven to sixty-six years. Literacy increased from 23 to 59.5 percent, and enrollment in primary schools reached 90 percent. There are now thirty hospitals in the country and 176 basic health units. Bhutan has been named one of the ten most important biodiversity hot spots in the world and has been recognized for its exemplary management of natural resources.

In 2008, the country will complete its transition to democratic governance under the new constitution and will celebrate 100 years of the monarchy with the coronation of Bhutan's Fifth King (and first constitutional monarch). Bhutan does not want to keep the outside world or the twenty-first century



Bhutan's many monastic communities remain vital centers of learning and cultural life and provide important links between Bhutan's past, present, and future. Photo by Preston Scott



at bay. Like people everywhere, the Bhutanese also want prosperity, but not at the expense of cherished traditions and culture. Bhutan wants to introduce modern technology at its own pace and according to its own needs. This is why Bhutan waited until 1983 to build an airport and start regular air services to Bhutan, why it gradually increased the number of foreign tourists from only 200 in 1974 to over 17,000 in 2006, and why television was not introduced until 1999.

People often wonder how long, in this age of information technology and an increasingly globalized economy, Bhutan can retain its distinct identity and deeply spiritual culture. One only has to see how adeptly a Bhutanese monk uses the computer to prepare a scroll of 100,000 prayers to put inside a prayer wheel to realize that Bhutanese society is both vibrant and deeply rooted in tradition—that it has an extraordinary capacity to appreciate, absorb, and adapt new ideas and effortlessly make them a part of the Bhutanese way of life.

Since Bhutan's Fourth King came to the throne as the world's youngest monarch at the age of sixteen in 1972, Bhutan has enjoyed unprecedented progress.

The 2008 coronation of His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the Fifth Druk Gyalpo, will complete the transition to democratic governance under Bhutan's new constitution and mark 100 years of the monarchy. Photo courtesy Kuensel Corporation

His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Father of Bhutan's Democracy, retired in December 2006, entrusting his responsibilities to his beloved son and able heir, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. His Majesty the Fifth King, will guide the nation toward greater peace and prosperity and into a new era in Bhutanese history.

Her Majesty the Queen of Bhutan, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, was born in 1955 in Nobgang, western Bhutan, and was educated in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India. She heads the Tarayana Foundation, which provides medical, educational, and social support to people and communities living in the most remote areas of Bhutan.

This essay was adapted from Her Majesty's book, *Treasures of the Thunder Dragon: A Portrait of Bhutan*.

Zorig Chusum: Bhutan's Living Arts and Crafts

by Dorjee Tshering and Thinley Wangchuk

The artistic traditions of Bhutan have been kept alive, promoted, and further developed because they are useful, ennobling, and inspirational. In fact, Bhutanese life and culture remain robust and richly colorful due in large part to the continued teaching and practice of *zorig chusum* (thirteen traditional arts).

Zorig chusum include the following arts: *yigzo* (calligraphy), *lhazo* (painting), *jimzo* (sculpture), *lugzo* (metal casting), *troezo* (gold- and silversmithing), *shingzo* (carpentry), *tshemzo* (tailoring and tapestry), *tsharzo* (bamboo and container work), *shagzo* (wood turning and lacquering), *thagzo* (weaving), *dzazo* (pottery), *chakzo* (blacksmithing), and *dozo* (masonry). *Shogzo* (paper making) and *poezo* (incense-stick making) are closely tied to and often practiced with the traditional arts of *zorig chusum*.

Many Bhutanese arts and crafts have been practiced for centuries and, since the seventeenth century, have been fostered by great builders of *dzongs* (fortresses). Historian Lam Nado wrote that the great unifier of Bhutan, the Zhabdrung, invited artists from neighboring countries to refine the arts of clay sculpturing, painting, and calligraphy; build the Punakha, Trashichodzong, and Wangdiphodrang *dzongs*; and set a formal curriculum for



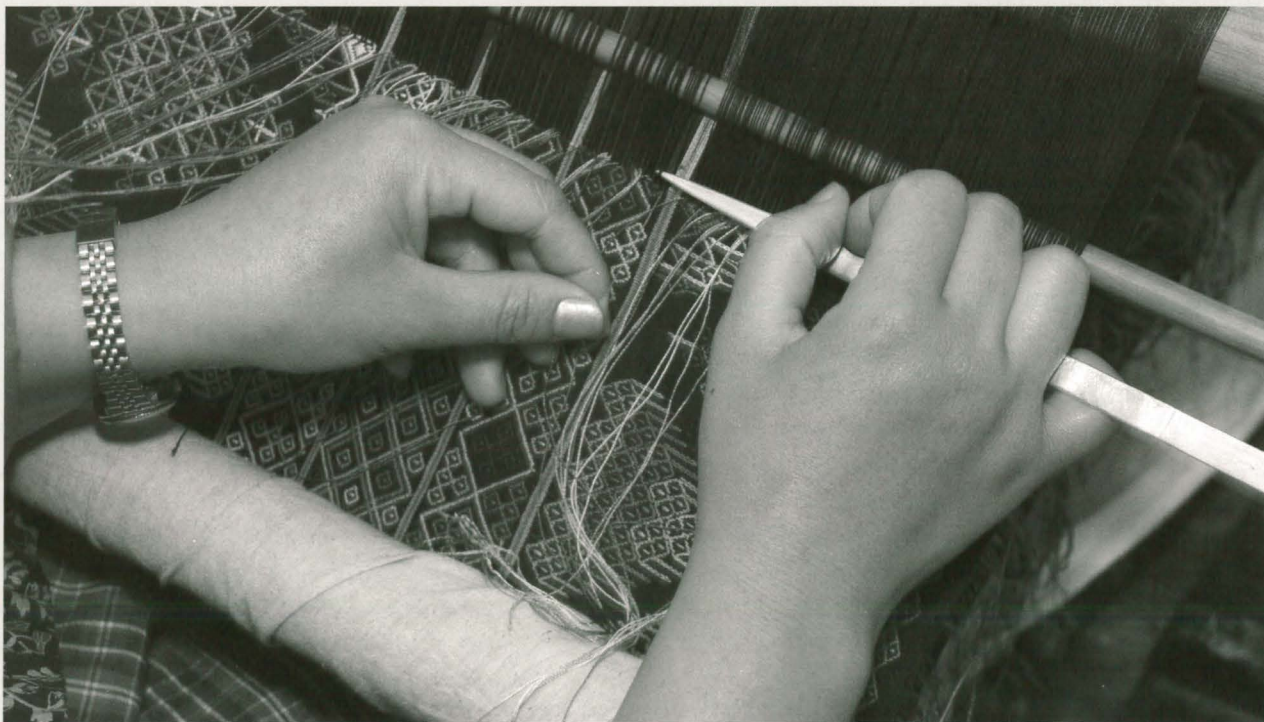
The art of carving in Bhutan dates back many centuries. Artists engrave wood or slate with images and texts to help communicate the Buddha's teachings. Photo by Preston Scott

monastic studies. Bhutan's fourth *desi* (secular ruler) established a school of arts and crafts in the seventeenth century that institutionalized *zorig chusum*. Since then, the visual arts have been carefully cultivated as the primary means for expression of Buddhist teachings, even in secular daily life.

In contrast to many artistic traditions elsewhere, the visual arts of Bhutan were never considered merely decorative. While beauty is clearly cultivated and appreciated, the fundamental purpose of the arts in Bhutanese society is to express Buddhism and convey genuine life experiences.

Bhutanese textiles are some of the most coveted in the world. Each region of Bhutan has its own specialties, passed down through generations. Weavers still obtain dyes from locally available vegetables and minerals. Pieces include complex symbols and may take more than six months to weave.

Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism



Throughout Bhutan today, you can see houses, temples, monasteries, government, and other public buildings that include elements of *zorig chusum*. Buildings typically require masonry, carpentry, and carving expertise. They feature stone foundations, rammed-earth walls, and elaborately carved wooden structures, windows, doors, pediments, and stylized architectural embellishments. Because most Bhutanese buildings are wooden, they are easily painted with designs that symbolize harmony and good fortune. Important religious and government buildings usually feature murals, wall paintings, and sculptures that portray major religious and political figures from Bhutanese history and Buddhism. They often display complex mandalas, richly designed compositions, and designs that represent understandings of the cosmos, life, and death.

All around Bhutan, one can see *zorig chusum* in the colorful, intricate weaving of garments—women’s *kiras* and men’s *ghos*. The threads and dyes that color them are produced by hand from local and prized remote sources. Because most cloth in Bhutan was traditionally made by hand and woven (or stitched) thread-by-thread, textiles and related products have always been highly valued. Like the building arts, they have an important role in ritual life. For example, huge embroidered religious tapestries are hung outside on the final morning of the annual masked dance festivals in the country’s many valleys.

While many, if not most, *zorig chusum* have their origins in the monastic communities of Bhutan, they have been thoroughly

incorporated into all aspects of Bhutanese society. In order to preserve and promote the thirteen arts and crafts, the Royal Government of Bhutan established the Institute for Zorig Chusum in Thimphu in 1971. Another campus was subsequently opened in far eastern Bhutan in Trashiyangtse. The campuses create meaningful job opportunities for a new cadre of highly trained Bhutanese artisans and craftspeople.

Thanks to the students who have received formal training in *zorig chusum*, Bhutan’s rich cultural heritage enhances the lives of new generations of Bhutanese, as well as the experiences of people who visit the kingdom. Some artists are beginning to explore other forms of artistic expression not traditionally practiced in Bhutan. These include filmmaking and other recently introduced visual arts. Bhutanese appreciate the artistic gifts and traditions of their visionary leaders and work to keep the arts alive and healthy for the benefit of all.

Dorjee Tshering became the director of the Department of Culture under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs for the Royal Government of Bhutan after working for many institutions of higher education in Bhutan and directing the National Library. He is on the curatorial team for the Festival’s Bhutan program.

Thinley Wangchuk is the director of the National Institute for Zorig Chusum. He has extensive knowledge of Bhutanese crafts and trained in sword smithery in Germany. He is helping curate the arts and crafts component of the Bhutan program.



(Left) *Thangkas* are traditional Bhutanese paintings on cloth that are displayed during important ceremonies. They also occupy places of honor in homes, temples, monasteries, and even contemporary offices. The artist initially draws a complex grid of geometric lines on the cloth to organize the overall composition. *Thangka* geometry is taught according to very strict artistic principles from which there is little deviation. For centuries, the visual arts have played an important role in teaching basic Buddhist traditions in Bhutan. Photo by Preston Scott

(Center and right) Bhutan’s *zorig chusum* (thirteen traditional arts), which include clay sculpting (*jimzo*), still decorate major public structures, such as fortresses (*dzongs*) and temples, as well as houses. Photo (center) by Sean Riley. Photo (right) by Preston Scott

Reinforcing Culture: Tourism in Bhutan

by Siok Sian Pek-Dorji

From explorers to mountaineers, from environmental specialists to trekkers, from culture-hungry adventurers to seven-star jetsetters—Bhutan's tourism continues to evolve. Today, tourism planners want to ensure that the kingdom's \$18.5 million industry benefits not only the tour operators, but also the people.

In 2007, just over 20,000 tourists visited Bhutan—a record. But Bhutan looks beyond numbers. Tourism is more than a source of hard currency. It is part of Bhutan's journey toward development, change, and the enlightened goal of Gross National Happiness. "We see tourism as a means by which we can strengthen our values and our identity," said Lhatu Wangchuk, director general of tourism. "We've become more aware of the value of our own culture and our uniqueness because of the positive feedback from tourists."

Based on evaluations from tourists and the experience of the past four decades, the tourism department plans to involve the people, especially those from remote communities. In the past, cultural enthusiasts and trekkers came into contact only with tour operators. The average Bhutanese citizen, apart from the operators and a few handicraft manufacturers, benefited little from the industry. Lhatu Wangchuk talks about "community-based tourism." Even though tour operators have started taking tourists to smaller rural *tsechus*, because travelers complain that the larger festivals have become too "touristy," the department plans to do more. In a promising initiative, it has started to develop new trekking routes and areas in remote Zhemgang and Kheng. Staff are training local people to manage campsites, guide, and cook for trekkers. The communities will also provide cultural entertainment for tourists and sell local handicrafts.

The department is marketing Nabji Korphu, a pristine portion of the Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park. The trail passes through small mountain villages (like Monpa) and broadleaf forests that are home to endangered wildlife, including the golden langur and Rufous-necked hornbill. With clear conservation regulations that restrain forestry activities, tourism is an environmentally sensitive, ideal source of income for the people. "Our people have always depended on the forest for their livelihood," said a village elder from Jangbi village. "With the area declared a national park, many of the inhabitants have to look for new ways to survive. I hope that tourism will give the people additional income to support their daily life." Camping fees and other revenue will support a "community development fund" that will finance local irrigation channels, renovation of monasteries, and organization of *tsechus*. The fund will spread the earnings in a meaningful way.



Bhutan's National Museum is housed in the historic Ta Dzong (watchtower), which is nestled in the hills above Paro Dzong. Its rounded, shell-shaped walls are an impressive accomplishment of seventeenth-century Bhutanese architects and builders. Photo copyright Michael Tobias

Feedback from tourists has inspired the department to issue guidelines for the development of infrastructure, facilities, campsites, and viewpoints. They will be built with traditional aesthetics in mind, use local materials and skills, and offer modern comforts. "The challenge is getting greater," said Thuji Nadik, a tourism planner. "Today, we have close to 250 tour operators, and many more people are building tourism infrastructure with very little understanding of what is required." Progressive planning, training, and education are essential to the new tourism policy. The Hotel Management and Tourism Training School, which will open in 2008, and several other government initiatives will guarantee high-quality service and promote Bhutan's magical aura. The Tourism Act will protect the country's age-old spiritual, environmental, and cultural heritage.

"We will not try to be someone or something else," said Lhatu Wangchuk. "If we lose our culture, our identity, our uniqueness, what do we have?"

Tourism is not just a business. It is a part of the kingdom's journey on the middle path to progress. Tourists are guests of the Bhutanese people. They are asked to come to share, as well as to preserve what Bhutan has to offer.

Siok Sian Pek-Dorji is a journalist who works independently on media and communication projects in Bhutan and is a member of the board of directors of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation.

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