

The Path of Modernization

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January 2007

When you think of American culture, what are some of the first thoughts you have? Football and the Super Bowl? Hamburgers and hot dogs? Walmart? But if you ask any American to sing 10 folk songs that involve a dance, what would they choose? What if you asked any American what our traditional outfit is? Ask any American what major leader of the 15th century helped established the government of his country? America wasn't even thought of at that time. The truth is that America is many different cultures blended into one. Any traditions we have aren't truly American originals.

Bhutan is a small country in south Asia. Only since 1971 has Bhutan come out of isolation and opened its borders to the world. Although many people have never heard of Bhutan, it is probably the best example of cultural preservation in the entire world. With a population just under 700,000 people, the Royal Government of Bhutan has been able to apply and enforce its cultural preservation laws with minimal resistance. Why? Bhutanese want to preserve their culture.

The Bhutanese have been able to retain their cultural values quite well. It is a matriarchal society, which differs greatly from our Western society. Women inherit land in the family, and can marry as many husbands as they wish. If a Bhutanese woman marries a foreign man, they can move to Bhutan and be considered citizens, but if a Bhutanese man marries a foreign woman, they cannot live in Bhutan and the wife would not be considered a Bhutanese citizen. The law also requires citizens to wear traditional clothing of Bhutan, *gho*, for men, and *keras*, for women. If they do not wear these traditional clothes in public, they are given a warning, after so many warnings the government fines them. The government requires that at least sixty-two percent of the forest must remain intact at all times throughout Bhutan. The government also requires that for every house built in a forested area, for each tree cut down in building the house ten new trees will be planted in its place.

Even though there are many rules governing clothing and behavior, the people of Bhutan comply with these laws without any resistance. “It’s good to preserve culture,” Passang, our guide, told us, “It helps identify yourself. That’s why I like wearing [ghos] instead of regular clothing.” We also learned that eighty percent of the people in Bhutan are farmers so complying with laws dealing with plants and nature is not difficult. Along with Buddhism as Bhutan’s national religion, many Bhutanese believe in natural mysticism, which means the people believe that local deities must be appeased or supernatural occurrences will ensue: famine, illness, infestations, etc.

Recently, the nation of Bhutan has experienced many changes in their government. In 2008, the government will change from a monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. The country that has relied on its king for centuries will have the king’s power redistributed to the Prime Minister of Bhutan. This is only the beginning of the long path of:

Modernization.



Many displays like this are set up to appease the local deities.

Bhutan has made many small steps in the modernization process. The first radio broadcast occurred in 1973, while the West has had radio for more than half a century, Bhutan has just recently learned what it means to hear radio broadcasts. Then in 1999, the King of Bhutan lifted the country’s ban on television and the Internet with the formation of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service. While America awaited the impending doom predicted to arrive with Y2K, Bhutan was just beginning to see what television and the Internet really had to offer them. In spite of these technology advances, the Bhutanese have not progressed when it comes to transportation. The country is far too mountainous and rugged, making roads difficult to establish and maintain.

There have been repercussions to these newly introduced technologies, since Bhutan is trying to preserve its culture, the government has censored certain international television stations such as MTV, wrestling stations, and other similar stations. But, the damage from the outside world has already effected the youth. “Modernization’s worst effects are on the youth,” said Lungsten Jamtsho, Principal and Monk of the Institute of Language and Culture in Thimphu, Bhutan, and is also a member of the Bhutan Constitutional Committee charged with drafting the new constitution. Reports have shown that since 2002 the juvenile crime rate. Families have begun to change from the traditional extended family to Western atomic households. This new family structure has been detrimental to the passing on of traditions.

With the problems that are already occurring due to modernization, you could just say, “Okay, I see the problems with modernization, but there is some good in it.” Then you ask, what? Jobs? Jobs could require companies to build factories. Bhutan does not have the land or resources for large production plants. Higher standard of living? Bhutan has one of the highest standards of living in all of Asia. More modern conveniences? More machines and other technology create greed and destroy nature, which would go against everything the Bhutanese pride themselves on as well as go against their laws protecting nature.

“Fine,” you say, “then why don’t they just stop modernization?” The problem is: You cannot stop modernization. It is an inevitable process.

There are many who are in favor of modernization, but only understand the material incentives that come with it. We spoke with a local farmer in a village where we were staying, who told us, “If I had enough money, I would buy myself a tractor because of all the hard work there is with just a plough....” With better equipment, he said that he could double his productivity. This would really help the economy of Bhutan. The people would produce a surplus that they could keep for their families and still have crops to sell to the markets.

There are problems with this farmer’s wish, which may



be hard to see. Community activities are a large part of society, people do almost everything together, especially farming. Because it is such rigorous work, it requires the whole community's help on each other's plots of land. While in Bhutan, we worked in a rice paddy by doing the weeding, ploughing, and planting; it was truly a social event more than rigorous work. The women sang songs, the men talked to each other, and the kids chatted and took turns ploughing the mud. Bhutanese schools have a rule that if the child lives more than seven kilometers from the school, the school is required by law to board the child at school. This also limits community interaction. Tractors would reduce community interaction with individuals working their own land on their own time and not relying on others to do the work with them. This would lead to people owning larger plots of land and greed could soon come before friends and family.

Another problem is the idea of getting "better things". It is like anything else: people want what is new and improved. The idea can be applied to Bhutan: having a small tractor will eventually create demand for a bigger tractor or other farm equipment. It's only human nature to have more and "better" conveniences. "When you've walked ten miles, you can't walk back and correct it and go back to where you were," said Lungsten Jamtsho. He has a point; once you have progressed, you cannot go back, which is troubling many Bhutanese.

Bhutan has found one indicator of how to track "when" and "how" to stop progress in the country. It's called: Gross National Happiness (GNH). In a recent study by The University of Leicester, it ranked Bhutan the 8th happiest country in the world. Bhutan's government is about to try to apply GNH to the country's domestic policies. They want to assure a maximum happiness condition in Bhutan. "[GNH] does not claim that everyone will be happier... besides, the criteria differs for every nation because of the different people and different needs," Lungsten Jamtsho explained. GNH is a survey taken of a large number of people in dispersed areas of the country. Because they seek no riches or luxuries, they do not require luxuries to be happy, only the necessities: food, water, and shelter. Buddhist monks are known for begging in the streets for food with only their wooden bowls.

This is truly a difficult situation because Bhutan is situated between the two fastest growing countries in the world: China and India. With their rising population and international power, they pose a threat to Bhutan's modernization and cultural preservation equilibrium hopes. With the borders recently opening with India, many Hindus have begun migrating from the west and south into border towns and casually assimilating themselves into Bhutanese politics knowing well that there is ample opportunity within the commercially virgin Bhutan. To the north and east, Tibet, Bhutan's historical archrival, was annexed by China and now the battle between cultural preservation and modernization is being influenced by a much larger and stronger adversary, the Republic of China.

Bhutan remains in partial isolation, to get into Bhutan as a tourist costs about two hundred United States dollars a day as a "tourist tax". The money goes to the Bhutanese Tourist Agency, which is redistributed to the foreigner in the form of food, water, lodging, transportation, etc. so a tourist does not have to worry about paying those costs. There is also only one airport in the whole country, and only four highways to enter and exit the country, all from India. Also, the geographic isolation helps keep out foreigners, including the Himalayas to the north that deter the Chinese from entering the country.

"You need to progress just far enough that the people are happy and the country is still functioning," Lungsten Jamtsho. But when does the government truly put its hand down and say that enough is enough and stop the progress? Realistically, Bhutan cannot let go of the idea of modernization because they have realized it's inevitable and cannot be stopped. They realize that stopping modernization is like moving all of Mount Everest to Canada with just your bare hands: impossible and suicide.

For Bhutan, the old adage “the children are the future” is very true because they



These children hold the key to answering the question that is plaguing the Bhutanese. They are the future.

are Bhutan’s hope and downfall.

In Bhutan, education is public and given to all children with no exceptions. They have rigorous curriculum that spans from Buddhist studies to *Dzongkha*, the national language of Bhutan, to Algebra taught in English. Third grade students learn every subject, in English and *Dzongkha* only in

Dzongkha studies. The Bhutanese are educating their children to be

more global in their thinking, very different from the elders’ knowledge of a secluded Bhutanese culture and state-of-mind. They know English will benefit the youth by allowing them to participate in the business world and in places that Bhutanese economics and politics have never ventured.

The future of Bhutan is truly unclear and will only begin to reveal itself when the government changes in late 2008 and the first ever votes are cast for Parliament. Once this revolution takes place, the future path will be better understood because people will be heard and understood through their elected officials.

A country that for centuries secluded itself from the world to protect its identity and culture is now on the brink of a new era. Bhutan, so small but containing some of the largest and most beautiful mountains in the world, could change dramatically in the next fifty years. Soon it could become another “America” with no distinct cultural identity, only other countries’ cultures. Perhaps, instead of displaying their culture to the whole world, people would have to pay money to see encased displays of what their culture “once was”. Nobody knows the end result and what the outcome for Bhutan will be. We can only hope that Bhutan can find a middle ground on its road to modernization and cultural preservation.