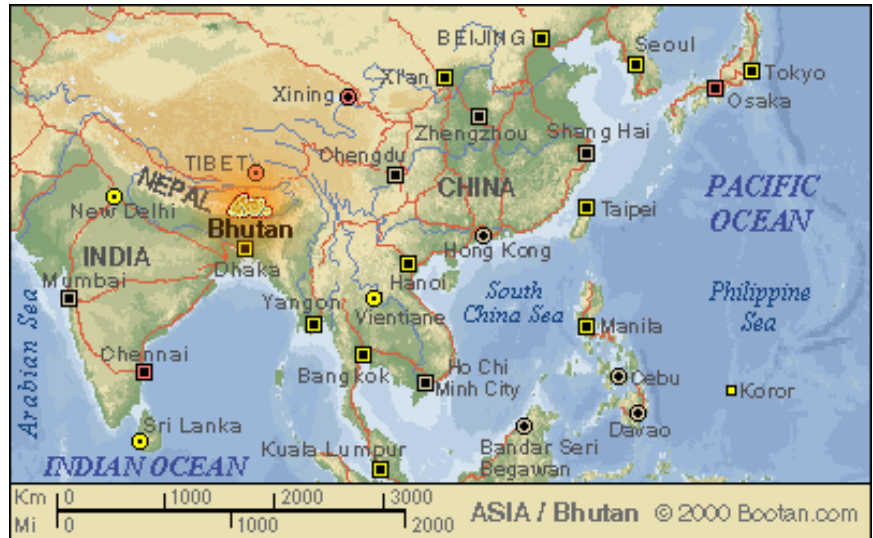


Kingdom of Bhutan and Royal Rajasthan, India: *Buddhism, Monuments, Temples, and Tigers* October 20 – November 8, 2006

Our Land locked Mountain Kingdom is bordered by Tibet, China, India, near Nepal and Bangladesh. Never Heard of Bhutan? The spelling has changed a few times. The original spelling from Marco Polo times was "Bootan" in the Roman alphabet, but we call our country "Druk Yul." Most Asians haven't even heard about Bhutan - we've been pretty quiet up here in the Himalayas. We were not involved with the Industrial Age, the World Wars, nor the Arms Race, and until recently not even cyberspace. In fact many of us didn't know you existed until we got your e-mail. We live on our own "Roof of the World" and have kept to our selves for hundreds of years.



Geography:

Bhutan is a landlocked country. It is about 47,000 kilometres - roughly the size of Switzerland. It is located between Tibet in the north, Indian states of West Bengal and Assam in the south, and Arunachal Pradesh in the east. Bhutan is a land of soaring snowcapped peaks, alpine meadows and densely forested hills and ravines abounding in exotic flora and fauna. From May to August, hills are covered with an awesome variety of flowers decorated with waterfalls and streams gushing in wild abandon.

History:

Bhutan's early history is steeped in Buddhist tradition and mythology. Bhutan's medieval and modern history was a time of warlords, feuds, giant fortresses and castles. The visit of Padama Sambhava in 747 AD is the important landmark in the history of the country. The kingdom's recent history begins with a hereditary monarchy that was founded in the 20th century and continued the country's policy of isolationism. It was under the leadership of the third king that Bhutan emerged from its medieval past of serfdom and reclusion.

Despite the speed of modernization, Bhutan has maintained a policy of careful, controlled policy of development in order to preserve its national identity.

Though known as Bhutan to the outside world, to the Bhutanese, the country is known as Druk Yul, 'land of the thunder dragon'. The people are known as the Drukpas.

Religion/Culture:

The State religion is Drukpa Kagyupa a branch of Mahayana Buddhism. It has been institutionalized in the Dratshang (Central Monk body), headed by the Je Khenpo (Chief Abbot) who is chosen from among the most learned lamas and enjoys an equal rank with the King. Bhutan is the only country in the world to have adopted Mahayana Buddhism in its Tantric form as its official religion. The Buddhist faith has played and continues to play a fundamental role in the cultural, ethical and sociological development of Bhutan and its people. It permeates all strands of secular life.



Dzongs:

These massive fortress-monasteries decorate most hill-tops and valleys. They serve as the administrative headquarters and are the focus of secular and religious authority in each district.

The Rural Bhutan:

The first thing that a visitor to Bhutan will notice is the great expanse of green, forested hillsides. A drive or trek through the country-side of Bhutan will take you from the subtropical forests over high alpine passes and down to broad valleys with colorfully painted houses scattered across the landscape.

Flora and Fauna:

Bhutan is a botanical paradise. One of the ancient names given to Bhutan was 'Southern Valleys of Medicinal Herbs'. To name a few floras in Bhutan- rhododendrons, junipers and magnolias several meters high, carnivorous plants, rare orchids, blue poppy (national flower), edelweiss, gentian, medicinal plants, daphne, giant rhubarb, high-altitude plants, tropical tress, pine and oak etc.

Among the rare and exotic faunas found in Bhutan are - Golden Langur, Red Pandas, Black-necked Crane, Snow Leopard, Takin, Musk Deer, Himalayan Brown Bear, Himalayan Marten, Tiger, hornbills, pheasants, mountain goats and timid blue sheep.

A Tiger's Nest in the Land of the Thunder Dragon

By Katherine Anne Paul

The Land of the Thunder Dragon, better known to the west as Bhutan, is a Buddhist Kingdom in the eastern Himalayas (See map p.). It is roughly the size of Switzerland and is cradled by the Indian provinces of Arunachal Pradesh to the East, Assam and West Bengal to the South, and Sikkim to the West. Tibet is located to the North. Bhutan's geology and geography are inextricably inter-woven with its religion and history. The Tiger's Nest, known to the Bhutanese as Taksang, is a sacred cave in the Paro Valley in western Bhutan. This cave is just one example of how a sacred site embodies Bhutanese religious belief and historical understanding. It also exemplifies a tension between Western and Bhutanese concepts of cultural preservation.



The geology of the Paro Valley reflects that of the middle Himalayas. The Himalayan mountain range is the youngest in the world. It was created when the continental plate of the Indian sub-continent collided with Asia's continental plate. Because it is such a young mountain range the soil on top is less compact. The malleability of the earth makes terracing possible allowing the Bhutanese to create relatively flat fields on steep mountains. There are also disadvantages to the loose soil. Landslides are frequent. Small seismic shifts in the bedrock may cause more drastic changes on the surface. Perhaps due to the dramatic geology, the Bhutanese envision the land as a living and moving entity or groups of entities.

The king who supported the first wave of Buddhism that arrived in Bhutan in the seventh century C.E. was the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo. He is known for having 108 temples constructed to pin down the body of a demoness who opposed Buddhism.¹ After this period of initial fluorescence, the influence of Buddhism waned. Buddhism was revived in the eighth century C.E. with the arrival of a tantric religious figure, named Guru Rinpoche. Guru Rinpoche is credited with the permanent establishment of Buddhism in Bhutan and other Tibetan cultural areas. The key to his success was his ability to convert local deities to protectors of Buddhism. The integration of local religious traditions with Tibetan Buddhism insured the continued success of Buddhism, and the survival of indigenous Bhutanese religious practice to the present day.

Taktsang owes its very name to the illustrious Guru Rinpoche. According to legend the tantric master flew to this cave on the back of a tiger or tigress. His purpose was to meditate at this auspicious location. Meditation is an active, not a passive endeavor as practiced in Tantric Buddhism. Meditative retreats in inaccessible caves are believed to assist concentration, heighten meditative powers, and catalyze potent visions. These activities increase the power of the tantric master enabling him to perform super-human feats. In addition to its legendary discovery, the Taktsang cave has had much subsequent activity that has increased its importance as a sacred site. Guru Rinpoche's powerful consort Yeshe Tshogyal and follower Dubthok Singye are reputed to have meditated at Taktsang.³ In the early 12th century C.E. Milarepa, the primary religious figure of the Kargyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism, composed one of his famed 100,000 sacred songs at Taktsung.⁴ In 1648 a temple was built around the cave.⁵ The temple complex seems to defy gravity as it clings to the side of the cliff. Over the years the temple complex was expanded to include a monastery. Like many Bhutanese temples important ritual paintings, called thangkhas, golden statues encrusted with precious and semi-precious jewels, murals and religious texts were installed in the temple complex.

Bhutan is also one of the rare areas in which indigenous traditions have had minimal contact with British colonialism. In 1904 the governance of Bhutan shifted from an incarnate system, like that of the Dalai Lama, to a hereditary monarchy. A treaty was signed first with the British Empire and later re-confirmed with independent India that guaranteed no external interference with Bhutan's domestic matters. However, in international affairs Bhutan agreed to be guided by Britain, and later India. This placed Bhutan in a unique position compared to similar Himalayan Buddhist kingdoms. The British, Tibetans, Chinese, and Indians have not had significant political influence within the country.

Like its Himalayan neighbors, Tibet, Sikkim, and Nepal, Bhutan chose to keep its borders closed to western influence in the early part of this century. After the Chinese invaded Tibet in the late 1950's Bhutan began reconsidering its isolationist policies. In 1975 India absorbed Bhutan's western neighbor Sikkim. This confirmed the need for international exposure if Bhutan wished to retain its sovereignty.

Bhutan and Nepal remain the only two independent kingdoms that survive between China and India. Bhutan's current development policies are quite different from Nepal's. Bhutan has far less contact with the outside world and, by its own choice, a slower rate of development. The Bhutanese government is attempting to address the disadvantages of development where it affects the environmental and cultural integrity of Bhutan.

The recent popularity of Bhutanese and Tibetan art in international exhibitions has increased interest to the potential detriment as well as benefit of places like Bhutan. Sacred sites and monuments have been desecrated for their material goods. Temples throughout the Himalayas have been robbed. Stupas have been broken into and consecrating items removed.¹⁰ the perpetrators of these crimes are not necessarily highly organized black marketers. Temples throughout the Himalayas have experienced problems with "tourists" filling their rucksacks with items from the altar.

It is disturbing that some opinions in the West attempt to rationalize Western "collecting" of these treasures. One strand in this conversation discusses the abstract concept of cultural preservation and suggests that only through global dissemination of knowledge of Himalayan art, literature, and language, can the culture be preserved. Another more concrete thread of the discussion rationalizes the physical conditions for preserving art. This rational cites instances of political instability where cultural objects were destroyed in the line of fire. It also suggests because only developed nations have the physical ability (such as climate control) to preserve objects, the West's ability to preserve should supercede the indigenous control of cultural objects.

The West's concern for conservation and preservation has a very different perspective and agenda than the Tibetan Buddhist's cyclic vision of life. The West attempts to conserve murals and monuments in a sort of suspended animation that fights the laws of nature. Because of the confrontational relationship between

architecture and nature, conservation almost by necessity goes hand in hand with restoration. The Bhutanese see the re-building and re-decorating of temples as merit-making activities. According to the Bhutanese conception of life, one may be re-born innumerable times. The objective is to be re-born in the best possible circumstances. The accumulation of merit is the spiritual currency that will help individuals to better future re-births. Merit can be accumulated by donating money, labor, and materials for a number of projects. Temples and temple murals have an additional advantage in the merit-making system. Not only is merit accumulated by donation, but once a temple exists pilgrims who come to view the murals and visit the temples also gather merit from viewing the murals on their visit. This furthers the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy that one's actions should "benefit all sentient beings". Thus redecoration of the temple has spiritual advantages that are overlooked in the West.

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BHUTAN

"The Land of The (Peaceful) Thunder Dragon"

If there is any country on Earth that qualifies as an Eden -- not just in part, but in its entirety -- I believe it is Bhutan. This tiny kingdom has the highest original forest cover of any nation. In less than 100 kilometers (60 miles), Bhutan rises 25,000 feet from the subtropical jungles of the south to the arctic cold of the high Himalayas. This extraordinary range of conditions, packed into such a small area, makes Bhutan very special. Combined with all these riches is an underlying conservation ethic, embedded deep in Bhutan's Buddhist culture and in the hearts and minds of the ordinary man and woman.



Bhutan is a magical place, and sometimes the line between fact and fiction gets a bit blurred. The natural and the mythic worlds exist side by side as easy neighbors.

Like the original Eden, Bhutan is a place where human beings live in harmony with their overwhelming array of natural neighbors. Because of the rare relationship Bhutan's populace has with the environment, many living things have taken on spiritual significance in the lives of Bhutan's people.

Each year, the black-necked cranes in central Bhutan leave the Tibetan plateau and fly south to winter in Bhutan. According to local belief, the birds are sacred, considered reincarnate beings that come back to our world to help other souls to enlightenment. When you discover that these cranes can live over 80 years -- twice the life expectancy of the average Bhutanese -- the reasons for the respect in which they are held make more sense.

Each year, I was told the cranes would arrive on exactly the same day and fly three times around the monastery that stands on a hill above their marsh -- always in a clockwise direction. The significance of this is that it is the ritual performed by every Buddhist pilgrim on arriving at a sacred place. To my astonishment, this is more or less what happened. The cranes arrived as foretold on a particular day and flew thrice around the ancient Gantey Gumpa monastery, their arrival celebrated by the monks.

There is of course a rational explanation; the cranes' migration is fixed by the lunar calendar. The monastery, being the highest feature in the landscape, is the point they navigate by. But somehow, I prefer the Bhutanese explanation.

Harry Marshall, Producer/Director, "The Living Edens: Bhutan"