

Bhutan's Cultural Landscape

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The tiny landlocked Kingdom of Bhutan, which is roughly the same size as Switzerland, is sandwiched between two vast, politically aggressive, countries - India and China (Chinese Tibet). Nearby is Nepal; many Nepalese have settled in Bhutan over the recent century.

Bhutan, a Buddhist theocracy, was never colonised, but has been forced to guard its national independence, identity and unity in the face of Nepalese population influx, the influence of its powerful neighbours, and the circumstances of its own fractured topography. Before Bhutan was unified in the seventeenth century, Bhutan's heterogeneous population (it has an extraordinarily diverse collection of language groups) was a result of its extremes of altitude and the isolation of its inhabited valleys. In just 90 to 150 kilometres, its elevation increases from just 160 metres above sea level on the Indian border, to some of the highest mountains in the world on its north western and northern borders (Jomolhari: 7316m, Masangang: 7200m, Gangkarpunsum: 7541m). The result of this dramatic rise in relief is that Bhutan is made up of three distinct ecological bands with populations pursuing three different modes of existence. The northern alpine regions will not support crops, so northerners are sometimes nomadic, often transhumant, herders of yaks and other high altitude beasts. The valleys of the central band support a variety of cereals and vegetables, depending upon altitude. This, most populous, band – of sedentarists – has dominated politically and given Bhutan its unique politico-religious system. The narrow, southern band is tropical, and has been heavily influenced by adjacent Indian provinces, such as Sikkim, West Bengal and Assam.

To these horizontal divisions between distinct altitudes must be added another, complicating, topographical factor. Such great variations in altitude have created deep river valleys carrying the melt from the alpine regions south. High mountains separate the populations of these valleys, which have only been able to communicate with each other in relatively recent times due to the construction of roads. In the past, the north-south valleys acted as corridors for communication and trade between groups from different altitudes that produced different, complementary, food and artisan products. Hence, Bhutan is a topographical chequer-board whose isolated communities, which were almost entirely agrarian until the 1960s, evolved from different ethnic origins, had different languages, lived different lives, adhered to different customs, and, before Buddhism became an aggressive agent of unification (seventeenth century), adhered to different cults. Buddhism, moreover, through its particular capacity to tolerate variety and diversity, has incorporated and thereby preserved a substratum of different pre-existing (often animistic) beliefs and deities, so that even today religion varies from region to region.

Before the 'creation' of Bhutan in the seventeenth century by the Tibetan Lama and military leader, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, different regions were ruled by local feudal lords who constantly warred with each other and with incursive groups from India and Tibet. Power in each region in the central altitude band was concentrated in fortresses, the precursors of Bhutan's dzongs. With politico-religious unification, these dzongs took on a particular character, purpose and meaning. They, for example, gave Bhutan its national language, Dzongkha. (The word "dzongkha" means the language - kha, jong - spoken in a dzong). Modelled physically upon Tibetan monasteries, they became physical and symbolic loci of the particular blend of secular and religious hegemony that sets Bhutan apart in the world. These complexes today are constituted structurally of heavy fortress walls above which appear intricate temple and palatial buildings. The fortress walls are inherited from the period before unification. The buildings of the

superstructure, which also may include the tombs of holy men, are intricately decorated with a myriad colourful wood carvings and paintings. Although Tibetan monasteries provided the general model for these superstructural buildings they have been adapted to specific Bhutanese ideas and conditions. Many of the decorations, for example, depict local gods or mythic beasts incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. The dzongs are the administrative, religious and psychological nodes of Bhutan.

"From the beginning it seems the internal layout of every dzong was divided between an ecclesiastical wing occupied by the state monks of the Drukpa school and a civil wing where the business of government was transacted and where the grain tax and other levies raised from the public could be deposited in storerooms. The whole complex was dominated in every case by a tall, usually free-standing structure (utse) containing a temple on every floor. Thus the secular triumph of the Drukpa theocracy was actualized in a concrete and unambiguous form that all could see from [miles] around." (M. Aris, *The Raven Crown: The Origins of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan*, London, Serindia Publications, 1994), p.32.)

The plan of a dzong can be complex (eg Trongsa) with several courtyards surrounded by a labyrinth of small temples, sleeping quarters for the monks, and rooms for district administrators. Battered stone white-washed walls of considerable thickness (often 2m at the base) give a feeling of longevity and unity with nature. Defensive walls surrounding each complex are usually pierced by only one entrance. If these walls are decorated with a red band encircling the top of the wall, the dzong is a religious site. Whereas the Tibetan monasteries on which Bhutanese complexes are modelled have flat roofs, their counterparts in this country have an extra, pitched roof atop this. The Bhutanese roofs also have deep eaves that are highly decorated with intricate painted woodwork (of trusses etc). Although from a distance the roofs seem to hover above the mass of the building they are, in fact, of heavy construction. The Bhutanese have adopted pitched roofs with deep eaves because Bhutan has a much higher rainfall than either Tibet or Ladakh, Buddhist regions that are sheltered from the monsoon by the Himalayas. The interior faces of a dzong's stone walls are rendered with mud and then white-washed or prepared for murals. Windows and projecting balconies (rabse) that act like miradors adorn the upper walls of each dzong building. Both are adorned with wondrously intricate, painted wood carvings. The wood of poplar and cypress, local trees, was once used for the dzong's floors. Himalayan blue pine is now used.

As emblems of national identity and unity, and as an expression of Bhutan's need to differentiate itself from its neighbours, dzongs differ from 'national monuments' elsewhere in a particular way. In many countries, the centre of power and/or national symbol is a heritage building. Such monuments, like Westminster Palace, the Parthenon, or Persepolis (under Iran's last Shah) represent the unique history and traditions of a nation. It follows that these monuments must look enduring and therefore must not change. It is unthinkable that the profile of Westminster Palace be altered or that a modern wing be added to the Parthenon. In Bhutan the opposite is true. Although Bhutan reinforces national identity with legislation that demands that all buildings be constructed in a Bhutanese style, modifications of the Tibetan model, albeit in a roughly similar style, have continued to the present day. In fact, the constant enhancement of complexes by the addition of new buildings and ever greater and more intricate decorative features, is seen as a reflection of the dynamism of the politico-religious system. In other words, the 'sense of place' that underpins Bhutanese identity, conceives of heritage in terms of constant architectural change rather than tradition (Eric Hobsbaum and Terence Ranger have argued that an essential quality of tradition is changelessness).

So powerful is the emblematic meaning of dzongs that they provide the model for smaller scale secular buildings such as farmhouses, which ape the solid lower walls and the intricate superstructures of these important complexes. The dynamic relationship, therefore, between general stylistic unity (and freedom from modernist intrusions) on the one hand, and infinite variety within this uniformity, gives to the Bhutanese cultural landscape a particular tone and quality.

The cultural landscape, moreover, fuses human interventions in the environment with beliefs concerning its animate, spirit, nature. Sometimes these interventions may signify the relation of Buddhism to earlier, local, animist cults. The large village of Rukubji, on the eastern side of the Pelela Pass looks out on a broad plain from the entrance to a long, winding valley. It is believed that a huge, malevolent snake spirit occupies the twisting course of the valley. The village is built on the body of the snake and its temple, on the snake's head, subjects the spirit to Buddhism. Travellers to Bhutan encounter this sense of a 'living' landscape whose forms everywhere have special meanings. These form the foundation for the unique 'ecological' mind bent of the Bhutanese and their powerful 'sense of place'. The meaning of existence here differs markedly from the Western view of the world, where human identity is defined in terms of abstract principles (in an intellectual space) rather than by locale.

Bhutan's unique understanding of the environment and dynamic interaction between national and local identity, which is also reflected in infinitely varied yet (on a national scale) fundamentally cohesive local artisan work and dress, in the coexistence of local tongues with a national language, and in infinite variations upon general Buddhist rituals, is founded on the Buddhist politico-religious philosophy. Based upon Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, Bhutan's state religion propagates such values as social harmony and protection of the environment. Hunting, for example, is banned in the country, and extreme care is exercised in the selective introduction of Western influences. Tourism, for example, has not been allowed to develop into the mindless, mass, low profit industry that blights so many countries. The monarchy sees itself as the active custodian of Bhutanese unity and identity, and carefully monitors the construction of infrastructure (a number of isolated communities still cannot be reached by road, and have no electricity) and essential services such as health and education. It has also taken an active role in promoting and protecting local customs and handicrafts, which are an important export. Particular care has been taken to preserve the distinctiveness of local crafts, such as weaving and woodcarving.

Until the 1960s, Bhutan had no true urban centres. Even today, 90% of its population is rural. Bhutan has not, therefore, undergone the cultural homogenisation and social alienation that comes with big, modern metropoli. Although there is some inappropriate modern development in Thimphu, this is marginal. Bhutan's rural nature underpins its national identity, its particular blend of regional variety and politico-religious unity, the ability of its government to control development, and the resistance of its people to the temptations of modern secularist materialism and consumerism. Above all it has enabled Bhutan to preserve its unparalleled pristine environment.

