

democracy. Development works go on hand in hand with cultural and environmental preservation to fulfil the overarching goal of Gross National Happiness.

Religious Tolerance

Bhutan's main religious traditions are the Drukpa Kagyud and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Although the Drukpa Kagyud is still the state religion, the Nyingma school dominates central and eastern Bhutan. As they are very close in philosophy and practice, most people view them as the same or of equal significance. Thus, very little sectarian tension, much less communal conflict, happened in the past or happens today among the Buddhist communities.

Most Bhutanese however are staunch Buddhists and have strong reservations against other religious traditions. The evangelical works carried out by some Christian missionaries are condemned as acts of proselytization and have even become a serious subject of debate in the National Assembly, the nation's highest legislative body. The ethnic and political problems in the southern districts in 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in an departure of a large number of ethnically Nepali people, have also some religious overtones.

BUDDHISM

Number of followers

Approx. 600,000

History

The first phase of spread of Buddhism in Bhutan occurred between 7th and 9th century. The first signs of the Buddhist religion are the two temples of Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang and Kyerchu Lhakhang in Paro, monuments which are believed to have been built by the Tibetan Emperor Srongtsen Gampo (c. 617-698). According to local history, the arrival of the Indian master Padmasambhava at the court of a local ruler in Bumthang in the middle of 8th century marked the proper advent of Buddhism to Bhutan. Although there are no historical records of change brought by his mission, oral traditions have it that people took lay Buddhist vows and gave up animal sacrifices.

In the second phases of the spread of Buddhism from 11th to 17th century, Buddhist virtuosi mainly from Tibet including Myos Lhanangpa, Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo, Longchenpa, Barawa Gyaltsen Palzang, and others poured into the region. The Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism widely spread in what are now central and eastern parts of Bhutan and produced religious figures such as Padma Lingpa (1450-1521), the foremost native Bhutanese Buddhist figure, while other sects such as Lhapa, Barawa, Nenyang, Sakya, Drukpa and Karma Kagyud started to spread mainly in the central and western Bhutan. Thus, in this period, Bhutan saw the arrival and propagation of several schools of Tibetan Buddhism and a gradual conversion of the people into Buddhism.

The third phase starts from 1616, the year Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), the founder of Bhutan, escaped from Tibet and started his temporal and spiritual unification of the country. Under his supervision, the Drukpa Kagyud sub-school of the Tibetan Kagyud school was promulgated in the country and the Zhung Dratshang or the central ecclesiastical body was established. All other schools, except the Nyingmapas, declined after the Drukpa domination of the Bhutanese valleys. The following centuries saw the spread of Drukpa Kagyud tradition across the whole

country through the establishment of numerous branches of the central ecclesiastical body.

Throughout centuries, Buddhism influenced all aspects of Bhutanese lifestyle both at the level of an individual and of the state. It is the guiding light for an individual's daily life as well as for the country's development policies, legal system, social service and traditional etiquette. Since the building of earliest temples in the 7th century to the writing of the constitution today, Buddhism has played a vital role in Bhutanese history and forms an integral part of Bhutanese identity.

Historical and Contemporary Leaders

The first and foremost religious figure in Bhutanese Buddhism is Padmasambhava, who even surpasses the Buddha as an object of worship and prayer. Two most important religious sites and hundreds of others are related to this master and devotion, prayers and offerings to him form the rudiments of Bhutanese Buddhism. The second most respected historical figure is Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, under whom the country was unified and a theocratic system of government founded. The lines of his reincarnations, the ecclesiastical centres and traditions he established to this day constitute the some of the most important religious institutions in Bhutan. Of them, the line of Zhabdrung reincarnations and the post of Je Khenpo, the chief abbot of Drukpa Kagyud school in Bhutan, have seen distinguished religious figures throughout Bhutan's history. The current Je Khenpo Trulku Jigme Choedra, the first one from eastern Bhutan to occupy the seat, is a very well respected and active religious leader in the country.

A major saint of Bhutanese origin is Padma Lingpa, who is widely revered in the Himalayan region as a prominent *terton* or a discoverer of religious treasures buried for posterity by Padmasambhava and his disciples. Like Zhabdrung, Padma Lingpa has profound influence on Bhutanese society through his family lineage and through the religious institutions he started.

Major Theologians and Authors

Bhutan until recently produced more prominent historians than religious thinkers and philosophers. The most notable religious scholar in the recent past was the Je Khenpo Gedun Rinchen, who composed eleven volumes on Buddhist philosophy, mysticism, grammar and history. However, Bhutan is witnessing an active generation of Buddhist scholarship today. Young Bhutanese authors such as Khenpo Tsewang Sonam and Lupon Thegchog are popular even among Tibetan scholars.

Houses of Worship and Holy Places

The two oldest places of worship are Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang and Kyerchu Lhakhang in Paro believed to have been built by the Tibetan king Srongtsen Gampo in the 7th century. Kurje Lhakhang, where Padmasambhava is believed to have left an imprint of his body on the wall of a cave, and Taktsang, the tiger's lair hanging perilously on a cliff in Paro, are the most revered places. Beside these, all Bhutanese districts have forts known as *dzongs*, which houses district religious headquarters and every village has a village temple where people gather for religious ceremonies. Every family home also houses a chapel or *choesham* where most of the family rituals and ceremonies take place. Bhutanese landscape is dotted by hundreds of *gompas* or hermitages and *chotens* or monuments containing religious relics.

What is sacred

Most Bhutanese are very devout Buddhists and therefore treat all kinds of sentient life as sacred. Killing of any form of life is a religious violation and therefore also viewed as a social taboo in many districts.

There are also many valleys and mountains, particularly associated with Padmasambhava, which are considered sacred and powerful landscapes, and attract a lot of pilgrims. Monasteries and the religious objects including Buddhist scriptures, statues, prayer flags, etc. are attributed much sanctity and treated with respect.

Mode of dress

Bhutanese men wear a long sleeved robe known as *gho* which, pulled up to the knees, is then tied at the waist with a sash. Women wear a long dress called *kira* held by silver hooks on the shoulder and tied with a sash at the waist. A short jacket is worn on top of the *kira*. This dress, worn originally by the Buddhist Bhutanese in the north, is now worn by all Bhutanese as the national dress. Most men and women keep fairly short hair. It is believed that this tradition derives from shaving the hair when Padmasambhava ordained Bhutanese men and women as lay Buddhists. Monks and lay priests wear red robes similar to Tibetan Buddhist clergies with minor differences.

Deitary Practices

Although non-violence and compassion are so fundamental to Bhutanese Buddhism and most people are strongly against taking life, meat is a common part of Bhutanese diet. More recently, a controversial regulation banning the sale of meat during holy months has been enforced. Rice, wheat, maize and buckwheat are the main staple food and Bhutanese are famous for their consumption of chilly. Bhutan's most famous cuisines are *phagsha pah*, a pork dish, and *ema datshi*, the chilly-cheese.

Most Bhutanese chew betel nut with lime wrapped in *pan* leaves. A legendary story has it that pre-buddhist Bhutanese were wild cannibals and when Padmasambhava tamed them, he had to substitute meat eating with the habit of eating of *doma*. The leaf is said to be the substitute for tongue, slated lime for brain, and betel nut for heart.

Although intoxicating drinks form one of the primary Buddhist prohibitions, alcohol, in the form of locally brewed spirits and ciders, is popular in Bhutanese societies and festivities are marked by a lot of drinking. Religious influence has however made many give up alcohol, meat, egg and fish, and also observe fasts during holy days and weeks.

Rituals

Bhutanese perform a wide variety of rituals throughout the year. The rituals comprise performance of religious rites with monastic music, known as *choga*, or simply the recitation of prayers and scriptures. Ritual services for the sick are very common and diverse, and funeral rituals are the longest and economically cumbersome, lasting for twenty-one days or more.

A popular family ritual is the *lochoe*, which observed by every family once a year, is the annual supplication to the family's tutelary deities. There is no formal Buddhist marriage ritual and Bhutanese generally do not have any wedding ceremony.

Holidays/Festivals

There are around half a dozen national holidays associated with the Buddha and other Buddhist figures. Beside these, there are also anniversaries to mark the birthday of the

King and to commemorate the founding of monarchy on 17 December 1907. Major religious festivals, mostly known as *tshechu* or *drubchoe*, are observed in the monasteries with colourful religious mask dances performed by monks and folk dances by girls. The most festive occasions however are the local village festivals held by the villagers to propitiate local deities, celebrate good harvest, etc. Dances are performed in the temple courtyard during the day and parties go on in the morning and evening during these festivals. Among non-Buddhist festivals, the Hindu festivals of Dashian and Tihar are observed, particularly in southern Bhutan. Christmas is beginning to be celebrated in the major towns although it is not an official holiday. Bhutan has about five different New Year celebrations due to discrepancies in the calendar systems that different parts of the country use.

Rites of Passage

There are no general and formal rites of passage in Bhutanese Buddhism or in Buddhism in general. A person first becomes a Buddhist by taking refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma - his teachings - and the Sangha - the spiritual community. This is done at an early stage of life before a lama, who cuts the tip of the person's hair and gives him/her a new name. Bhutanese uses names received from a lama in this manner and do not share family names. This practice of taking refuge and naming is also in many cases repeated several times in a person's lifetime.

Many tantric practices in Bhutanese Buddhism require specific preliminary procedures such as *wang* or empowerments, *lung* or scriptural authorization and *thrid* or quintessential instructions. Most of the major religious ceremonies in the country are connected to these preliminary rites.

Membership

It is through taking refuge in the Three Jewels – accepting the Buddha as the teacher, the Dharma as the path and the Sangha as the companions on the path – that one truly becomes a Buddhist. However, most Bhutanese consider themselves to be Buddhists by birth. People who do not believe in *karma* or the law of cause and effect or subscribe to theism are sometimes looked down as heretics.

Social Justice

Buddhism adopts a very egalitarian approach to social issues. A person's status is determined by his or her moral and spiritual status but not by birth, caste, colour or race. Because there is no inherent self and everyone is equal in being an assembly of psycho-somatic components, there is no innate difference in people's status. It is the quality of the physical and spiritual components, which determines the personality and differentiates one person from the other.

Beside, Bhutanese also believe that all sentient beings are endowed with Buddha Nature, and that all beings have been one's mother in course of the innumerable rebirths one has had in this cycle of existence. Both these beliefs help nurture a sense of equality and equanimity toward all persons. Perhaps due to these religious concepts, Bhutan has much better social, racial, and sexual equality compared to its neighbours.

However, the most vivid and strongest social impact of Buddhism on the Bhutanese society is perhaps seen in the application of two religious principles of *le jumday*, the law of cause and effect, and *tha damtshi*, a code of moral rectitude. These concepts dictate Bhutanese way of life and have recently also come to use with strong

political overtones. The government is also working on incorporating the values of Buddhist *vinaya* or monastic rules, which adopts a democratic style of decision-making through consensus, into its judicial system and the plan for decentralization.

Social Aspects

Although the spirit of Buddhism pervades all facets and all levels of Bhutanese life, there are no formal Buddhist rites and rituals concerning marriage and family life. However, religious influences are evident in Bhutanese family. Unlike most of its neighbours, Bhutan enjoys much sexual liberty, and Bhutanese men and women indulge in sexual promiscuity with very relaxed attitude, perhaps due to the influence received from tantric figures such as the crazy saint Drukpa Kunley. It is perhaps also due to the same influence that polygynous and polyandrous relations are still common in the country.

Political Impact

Bhutan, since its foundation in the seventeenth century, professed a political system of *choesrid zungjug*, the union of religious and temporal power. Religion has played a vital role in the governance of the country through ages under theocratic leaders including monk rulers and religious kings.

Resonance of religious influence is heard no less today in political idioms such as *Tsawa Sum* – a concept borrowed from Buddhism but to refer to the trio of the king, country and people – and Gross National Happiness - the overall goal of the country's development policies. One of the key issues of debate concerning the constitution that is being drafted today is also on whether or not Bhutan should have a secular government. An adoption of secular system will end the historical status of Buddhism and the Drukpa Kagyud school in particular as the state religion. However, contrary to such a move, most Bhutanese even today attribute the sovereignty, peace and prosperity of country to its close association with the Buddhism and pray for its longevity as can be seen in the last two lines of the national anthem:

*May dharma, the teachings of the Buddha flourish
May the sun of happiness and peace shine on the people.*

Controversial Issues

The status of Drukpa Kagyud school as the state religion and the prerogatives and benefits it is entitled have been issues of persistent question and disquiet. The state school has been often accused, by the Nyingmapas in central and eastern Bhutan, of a vicious policy of monopolizing the religious domain. The Nyingmapas allege the Drukpa Kagyud of coercive extension of their authority and jurisdiction in areas originally dominated by Nyingmapas, and even launched anti-government campaigns in the far eastern districts. An issue related to this and much debated is also the visit of renowned Tibetan lamas from India and elsewhere and the socio-economic affect they have on the Bhutanese societies.

Another controversial issue, although more political than religious, concerns the dispute between the ruling family and the line of Zhabdrung reincarnates. The last Zhabdrung candidate went into exile to India and lived in Manali, where thousands of Bhutanese pilgrims visited him until his death recently.

Cultural Impact on Music, Art and Literature

Although much of what can be classified as folk craft comprising architecture, metal works, weaving, carving, bamboo works, etc. have little to do with religion, Buddhism is the almost the only theme of arts such as painting and sculpture. Folk songs evoke both religious and worldly subjects while monastic hymns and music are of purely religious nature. Performing arts is more or less bifurcated into profane folk dances and sacred religious dances. However, the growing number of new songs, dances and dramas, which are set in modern western style and reflect contemporary Bhutanese life, do not touch much on spiritual themes.

Most of traditional Bhutanese literature is on religion or heavily laden with religious content. Even writings on non-religious topics such as language, history, biography and folk tale could not escape the influence of religion. Today, there are, on the one hand, an emerging class of literati, who are trained in the West or in the western form of education and write in the medium of English, and, on the other, a large number of traditional virtuosi who write in the medium of classical Tibetan. Of the two, the latter in both content and style represent the traditional writing and imbibe their inspiration from Buddhism.

OTHER RELIGIONS

Hinduism is the only other religion which a visitor in Bhutan may notice beside the dominant Buddhist schools. The followers of Hinduism are mostly of Nepali ethnic origin and concentrated mainly in the southern districts. Akin to Hinduism in India and Nepal, Hindu communities are divided into four major castes and hundreds of minor ones. The Brahmins, as the highest caste, transmit the religion through family lines and also religious schools known as *patshalas*. Religious training is done in the medium of Sanskrit, the language of the Hindu scriptures such as *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The government, in an endeavour to promote cultural and religious harmony, supported some of these Sanskrit *patshalas* and also encouraged scholars to write on the similarities between Buddhist and Hindu religions.

Bhutanese Hindus believe in the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and observe dozens of religious festivals in a calendar year. The two most important occasions are the Dashain and Tihar, both falling sometime in October. During Dashain, the Goddess Kali is worshipped and hundreds of animals are slaughtered as sacrificial offering. This practice of animal sacrifice is perhaps the most contentious religious point, where the southern Hindus and the northern Buddhist diverge strongly. On the contrary, Tihar or Deepavali, which is celebrated with lots of lights and funfair, is a veneration of Goddess Lakshmi and even some Buddhist Bhutanese take part in it. Such religious affinity is also strengthened by the fact that both Kali and Lakshmi and many other gods appear in both the Hindu and Bhutanese Buddhist pantheon.

Among both Buddhist communities in the north and Hindu communities in the south, there is also a growing number of Christian neophytes. The first Christian missionaries arrived in Bhutan even as early as the seventeenth century. However, active missionary works started only in 1960s, but Christian movements, facing the opposition of orthodoxy, have not succeeded in Bhutan as they did in other parts of the Himalayas. Most Bhutanese still shun Christian missionary work as proselytization of the poor and ignorant through economic and material incentives.

Still a very small minority and fledgling movement, there is no known public place of worship or formal organization of Christians.

Beside the major religions, a wide range of folk beliefs and rituals are also prevalent throughout Bhutan and sometimes even play more important roles than the institutionalised religions. Shamans, oracles, fortune-tellers and astrologers play crucial roles in the Bhutanese societies and are consulted by the people as much as the Buddhist and Hindu clerics on occasions such as birth, illness and death, and even more than the clerics, on matters such as construction of a new house, beginning of a journey or business, tracing loss items, etc. Although most of the practices and practitioners have now assimilated into the greater Buddhist system, a lot of what they do still evoke a local and folk religious culture reminiscent of pre-Buddhist Bhutan.

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