

SPIRITUALLY MOTIVATED NATURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION IN EASTERN BHUTAN*

ELIZABETH ALLISON*

Around the world, rapidly increasing human populations vie for and depend upon the same forest and water resources that support the last reservoirs of extensive biodiversity. As forests are lost and species vanish in the face of anthropogenic change, the global loss of biodiversity is considered by some leading ecologists to be the most urgent problem facing science.¹ Eminent biologist E.O. Wilson warns of “death of birth,” as increasing rates of extinction cause the rapid decline of entire ecosystems, the very cauldrons of fecundity from which species adapt to changing conditions and new life forms emerge. Those areas of particularly high endemism and high biological diversity that face the greatest threats have been identified as global biodiversity “hotspots.”² Most of Bhutan lies within the Indo-Burma hotspot.³ While forests throughout much of this region are under severe threat, those of Bhutan remain uniquely intact thanks, in part, to cultural and religious beliefs that limit the use of certain natural resources.

Most practitioners and scholars agree that current methods of biodiversity conservation are insufficiently effective and fail to provide adequate species and habitat protection.⁴ While new models and means

* I am grateful for the financial, intellectual, and moral support of the Jubitz Family Endowment for Summer Research Internships, administered by the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, which has generously supported three trips, amounting to nearly six months, of field research in Bhutan; the Tropical Resources Institute of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies (FES); the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation; Bomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary; and my family. Tashi Wangdi, Dechen Wangdi, Phurba Lhendup, and Phuntsho Dorji have my gratitude for the excellent assistance they provided in the field. I extend much appreciation to all those who participated in the interviews, guided me to deity citadels, and shared their knowledge. The guidance, insight and advice of Professor Stephen Kellert of Yale FES kept this project on course. I thank Rob Allison, Gordon Geballe, and Sophia Lehmann for comments and editorial advice.

* Fulbright Fellow, Nepal. Master of Environmental Management, Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, 2003. Master of Arts in Religion, Yale Divinity School, 2003. Elizabeth.allison@aya.yale.edu.

¹ E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 254.

² Wilson, 262.

³ Conservation International, “Biodiversity Hotspots: Indo-Burma,” available at http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/indo_burma/

⁴ SR Brechin, PR Wilshusen, CL Fortwangler, and PC West, “Beyond the square wheel: Toward a more comprehensive understanding of biodiversity conservation as social and political process,” *Society & Natural Resources* 15 (1): 41-64 Jan. 2002.

are needed, yet no clear consensus about the direction that these changes should take has yet emerged. Environmental laws and policies compel people only so far. Legions of cases of corporate toxic waste dumping in which penalties fail to prevent release of toxics show that, when economic success is the only pertinent yardstick, regulatory penalties can be subsumed into the cost of business without resulting in a change in behavior. Political and legal tools deal with external motivations – financial, social, and political – but often fail to address the internal motivations behind human choices.

Scientists and theologians who note the inseparability of environmental and ethical considerations have criticized the incompleteness of current environmental conservation approaches. In a widely read 2002 article, ecologists Ludwig, Mangel and Haddad point out that “ecologists can be effective in conservation efforts only if they understand and appreciate the social and ethical aspects of conservation.”⁵ Further, they assert that ecological problems such as conservation of forest resources and endangered species “involve a host of academic disciplines that cannot be separated from issues of value equity and social justice.”⁶ Attention to value equity and social justice creates conservation programs that are more robust and sustainable, with better acceptance from local people who become partners in protecting their own surroundings.

An imperative challenge, then, is to address the social and ethical of biodiversity and habitat conservation, especially in the areas that are most at risk of destruction and extinction. Much effort by international conservation groups focuses on biodiversity hotspots, including the Indo-Burma hotspot, which covers about two million square kilometers of tropical Asia, east of India, including most or all of Cambodia, Lao, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand and Bhutan, as well as eastern parts of Nepal and India.⁷ In the northern reaches of this hotspot, the steep mountains and deep valleys of the southern and eastern slopes of the Himalayas break the terrain into a succession of isolated pockets, and thirty-nine percent of the plant species are found only in the region.⁸ With their proximity to some of the most densely populated areas of the world and to countless rural settlements, the eastern Himalayan forests

⁵ Donald Ludwig, Marc Mangel, and Brent Haddad, “Ecology, Conservation and Public Policy,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, 32: 482.

⁶ Ludwig, et al, 482.

⁷ Conservation International, “Biodiversity Hotspots: Indo-Burma,” available at http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/indo_burma/

⁸ Wilson, 267.

have been reduced by about two-thirds.⁹ It is estimated that less than 5% of the original habitat is still in pristine condition, while 10-25% of the forest may be mildly damaged but still ecologically functional.¹⁰ Erosion, deforestation, and clearing for agriculture impose severe pressure on forests and wildlife, while reducing the quality of rural livelihoods. These forests must be protected, not only to provide habitat for vulnerable species and to support rural livelihoods, but also because they provide a wide variety of essential ecosystem services – waste decomposition, nutrient cycling, flood prevention, water purification – that support life far beyond their boundaries.

In the midst of the erosion and deforestation that characterize so much of the southern and eastern Himalaya, Bhutan appears anomalous. Forests, including the last remaining large tracts of mid-hill Himalayan ecosystem cover 72.5% of the land (29,045 square kilometers).¹¹ Elsewhere in the Himalaya, this ecosystem, the most hospitable for human habitation, has been cleared for agriculture.¹² One-quarter (26%) of the country is under park or protected area designation.¹³ Another 9.5% of the nation is protected in the biological corridors that link the nine protected areas.¹⁴ Bhutan is home to remarkable biological diversity, including 5446 species of vascular plants, 178 species of mammals, and 770 species of resident and migratory birds.¹⁵ Bomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary in northeastern Bhutan harbors four globally endangered mammals (tiger, snow leopard, red panda and capped langur), and five globally threatened birds (rufous-necked hornbill, Pall's fish eagle, chestnut-breasted partridge, black-necked crane and wood snipe).¹⁶

⁹ Wilson, 267.

¹⁰ Conservation International, "Biodiversity Hotspots: Indo-Burma," available at http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/indo_burma/

¹¹ Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation (BT FEC), <<http://www.bhutantrustfund.org/framePA.html>>.

¹² PBS – The Living Edens. "Bhutan: The Last Shangri-La," available at http://www.pbs.org/edens/bhutan/Bhu_dragon4.htm. Accessed 5/1/03.

¹³ BT FEC

¹⁴ BT FEC

¹⁵ Tobgay Namgyal, "Sustaining Conservation Finance: Future Directions for the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation," in *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Summer 2001, Vol.3, No. 1. available at http://www.bhutanstudies.com/pages/journal/3.1_folder/contents.html. Accessed 5/1/03.

¹⁶ Royal Government of Bhutan, *Draft Management Plan for Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary*. (Thimphu: Ministry of Agriculture. Department of Forest Services, 2001), 3.

Other globally vulnerable animals occurring within Bhutan include musk deer, leopard, Himalayan black bear, serow, and Himalayan monal.¹⁷ Sixteen threatened bird species and 46 species of rhododendron occur in Bhutan.¹⁸ Rare plant species include blue poppy and yew. Chinese caterpillar is a highly desired and increasingly rare fungus used in traditional medicines. Many of the reptiles, amphibians, fishes, and invertebrates have not yet been surveyed. Overall, Bhutan's parks and protected areas are home to 72 of the world's threatened species.¹⁹

The stated reason for the unspoiled condition of Bhutan's natural environment is perhaps even more unusual than its vast forests. The Royal Government of Bhutan asserts that Buddhism is responsible for the pristine forests and mountains. Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism, as practiced in Bhutan, imbues its adherents with a compassion and reverence for life that tends to curb profligate use of natural resources. Buddhist and traditional beliefs about appropriate interactions with animals and plants are codified in Bhutan's conservation principles and laws. The Biodiversity Action Plan recognizes that "the mountains, rivers, streams, rocks and soils of Bhutan are believed to be the domain of spirits. The Buddhist respect for all living things has led to the development and adoption of environmentally friendly strategies."²⁰ It also highlights the special respect Buddhism holds for trees because the four major events of the Buddha's life – his birth, enlightenment, first teaching in the Deer Park in Saranath, and death – occurred under trees.²¹ *Bhutan 2020*, the country's guiding vision document, begins its section on "environmentally sustainable development," one of the five development goals, with the recognition that Bhutan's "approach to the environment has traditionally been anchored in ... Buddhist beliefs and values. We not only respect nature, we also confer on it a living mysticism. Places are identified with deities, divinities and spirits."²² This approach connects environmental preservation and cultural preservation, rooting the present Bhutanese in the context of their forebears. Within the cultural heritage are the values and ethics that make culturally appropriate

¹⁷ RGOB, 2001, 3.

¹⁸ Rebecca Pradhan and Tandin Wangdi, *Threatened Birds in Bhutan*, (Nepal, 1999). Rebecca Pradhan, *Wild Rhododendrons of Bhutan*. (Thimphu, Bhutan: 1999).

¹⁹ IUCN 2002. 2002 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Downloaded on 04 May 2003.

²⁰ RGOB, Ministry of Agriculture, *Biodiversity Action Plan for Bhutan*, (Thimphu: 1998), 18.

²¹ RGOB, Ministry of Agriculture, 1998, 19.

²² RGOB, *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, (Thailand: Planning Commission Secretariat/ RGOB, 1999), 87.

environmental conservation possible. Protecting the culture allows for the expression of traditional values in relation to the natural environment; protecting the natural environment provides content and application for traditional values.

That Western initiatives are beginning to give more attention to the social and ethical dynamics of conservation long familiar in Bhutan suggests that Bhutan has much to teach about the reasons for and the results of its long preservation of forests and the associated biological diversity. With its devout adherence to Buddhist traditions that influence every aspect of daily life and its concomitant preservation of vast forests, Bhutan is an exemplar of the mutually reinforcing connections between environmental and cultural preservation, religion, and ethics, with the potential to provide guidance for environmental and cultural preservation in other locales. Essential to understanding the dynamics that have protected Bhutan's natural environment for centuries is an understanding of the particularities of traditional beliefs about appropriate relations with the elements of the natural environment. In Bhutan, these relations are mediated through the deities believed to inhabit certain features of the natural environment. Predating Buddhism, these deities are believed to have been subdued and converted to Buddhism by Guru Rimpoche, the great eighth-century saint who brought Buddhism to Bhutan. As owners of the rocks, trees, lakes, and rivers where they are found, the deities resent intrusion or disturbance by human inhabitants, and are thought to retaliate against transgressors by causing illness, wild weather, or other misfortune. Because of these beliefs, villagers tend to avoid deity habitats or "citadels."

While these beliefs may wane as Western media and values infiltrate the country, they are still widely shared in Trashi Yangtse Dzongkhag, in remote eastern Bhutan, where most practice the traditional way of life, and connections with the outside world are limited. Dozens of personal interviews, conducted over the course of two summers in Trashi Yangtse, illuminated the ways in which the teachings of Buddhism and the deity beliefs align to promote attitudes and practices that moderate the use of natural resources. Traditional cultural and religious beliefs appear to serve, through design, chance, or co-evolution, to protect biological diversity through restrictions on individual and group behavior in relation to the natural environment. When government policies are harmonized with such traditional beliefs, ethical, sustainable and culturally-appropriate systems of environmental conservation can arise.

Research Question

The existence of protector deities throughout the Himalayas, particularly in areas of Tibetan cultural influence, is well-established.²³ In their analysis of deity beliefs and associated rituals, Tibetan scholars often highlight the role of natural landscape features in the religious and cultural life of Himalayan peoples. An animating impulse, projecting analogies onto the landscape, is prevalent throughout the Himalayas and the Tibetan cultural sphere.²⁴ For example, several scholars concur that communities tend to deify the mountain from which their water comes.²⁵ In such circumstances, villagers recognize that their fields, their cattle, and their very lives are utterly dependent on the mountain, so they project their appreciation, adopting worshipful attitudes toward it.²⁶ From this reverent stance, people are unlikely to harm that upon which their lives depend, and their focus on veneration precludes destruction. This “Tibetan proclivity to read features of the landscape as animated”²⁷ has implications for natural resource management where people live close to the land and depend upon it for their sustenance. In this tradition, unseen beings do not just inhabit features of the landscape, but actually shape its physical appearance through human interaction with the landscape.²⁸ The perception of a deity residing in a particular feature of the natural landscape shapes human response to this feature, thereby shaping the physical appearance of the feature itself, which may reinforce a particular set of human responses toward the feature. An obvious example of this dynamic is the human relationship with huge old trees believed to be inhabited by deities. The belief that deities live within the trees shaped the human response of leaving the trees alone, allowing them to grow to great sizes, which reinforces the human belief that the trees are inhabited by deities, which reinforces the tendency to leave the trees alone.

²³ See for example Anne-Marie Blondeau and Ernst Steinkellner, eds., *Reflections on the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya* (Wein: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996); Samten G. Karmay, *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet* (Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998); Toni Huber, ed., *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1999).

²⁴ Huber, 81

²⁵ Blondeau and Steinkeller, xi.

²⁶ Blondeau and Steinkeller, xi.

²⁷ Toni Huber, ed., *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1999): 81.

²⁸ Huber, 81.

Bhutan's historical seclusion and relative lack of influence from industrialized, mass-media culture allow religion and traditional cultural norms to dominate and influence nearly every aspect of life, including resource use. In seeking to understand how internal motivations guide the use of natural resources and thus can contribute to biodiversity conservation, this study examined the ways in which both the formal teachings of Buddhism and the tradition of local and protector deities influence perceptions about and actions involving natural resources. In the homes of deities, resources use is prohibited according to tradition. Resources may not be taken from the deity habitats without facing the wrath of the deity. Because of these beliefs, villagers avoid deity habitats or "citadels."

The study sought to identify physical characteristics of deity citadels - their contents, size, location on the landscape - as well as cultural and historic aspects of the deity citadels which could provide insight into the characteristics identified as belonging to the deities, and which could explain the inhibiting effects both deity beliefs and Buddhism have on natural resource use. To the extent that advantageous and convenient natural resources remain undisturbed because of the influence of religious and cultural beliefs, such beliefs can be said to exert a protective effect. Biodiversity conservation effects can then be inferred based on the qualities of the landscape areas that are protected by religious and cultural belief.

Fieldwork was carried out over two summers: June - August 2001 and June - August 2002. Semi-structured interviews explored the delineation of places from which villagers were prohibited from gathering forest products, the reasons for these prohibitions, changes in the prohibitions over time, and consequences of violating prohibitions. Deity habitats mentioned in interviews were visited, and basic ecological data about the habitats was collected.

During summer 2002, three villages - Lichen, Womenang, and Ninda - were selected for in-depth research on the basis of the prevalence of traditional religious and cultural norms. The villages are located in three different geogs - Trashy Yangtse (Lichen), Bomdeling (Womenang), and Jamkhar (Ninda) - representing a diversity of social and environmental conditions.

The remoteness of Trashy Yangtse, eastern-most district of Bhutan, bounded on the north by Tibet/ China and on the east by the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, allows people to live their lives relatively unaffected by the western influences that are increasingly pervasive in Thimphu. Roughly half the district is within the boundaries of Bomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary (BWS), a national park established in 1994

with multiple goals: “to protect the ecological integrity of the ecosystems of the Sanctuary, and to increase knowledge of nature conservation and protect the cultural heritage.”²⁹ The Sanctuary and its buffer zones encompass cool and warm broad-leaved forests, coniferous forests, and alpine scrub and pastures. Approximately 800 people live inside the park boundaries and another 800 live in the park’s buffer zone and use park resources. Almost all (95%) households rely on agriculture for their sustenance, with millet, maize, rice, and potatoes as the main crops. Wildlife crop damage is a major concern.³⁰

Results and Discussion

Deity beliefs were particularly important in mediating relations between humans and natural resources. Everyone interviewed mentioned one or more places that were off-limits because they were abodes of deities, and 26 of these places were visited with the assistance of local village guides. The places are well known to most villagers. Most villagers referred to the restricted places by their specific names – 88.5% (23) of the restricted places had proper names, which were consistent throughout the village. The abodes of the deities are often notable for their uniqueness, their singularity, or their darkness, and most villagers can readily recognize these sites. Most of the deity habitats were described as having tall trees. Visits to the abodes of the deities allowed the collection of physical data, such as tree species, canopy cover estimates, and area.

The deities associated with the prohibited places varied. The most frequently mentioned deity was the *nepo*, a general term for the “protector (or owner) of the land,” which encompasses several more specific types of deities, including *tsan*, *gyalpo*, and *sadag*. Most respondents mentioned a nearby place that was off-limits because it was the citadel of a *nepo*. In contrast, the *tsan* protector deity is usually associated with high mountains far from the villages. Different types of relationships between the deity and the village represent the various kinds of deities. The *lu*, which is associated with water and may also be found living in a large rock or tree, is a personal or familial deity that can grant wealth and prosperity when treated well, and may become malicious if not properly propitiated. The *tsan* is a protector deity, usually understood as the original owner of the entire area of the village, and the one to whom obeisance is due. The *dud* is a type of demon that

²⁹ Royal Government of Bhutan, *Draft Management Plan for Bundeling Wildlife Sanctuary*. (Thimphu: Ministry of Agriculture. Department of Forest Services, 2001), v.

³⁰ RGOB, 2001, v, 4.

can be destructive and unruly, and the *sadag* is the “lord of earth [soil].” A *nedak* is the “owner of the *ney*,” a holy place.

The various types of deities have differing roles, responsibilities and requirements, leading to different relationships with the villagers within their purview. The categories of relationship discussed by the villagers reflect the attributes of different deities. For example, a deity experienced as a “guardian of trees or caretaker of a certain place” would likely be a *nepo* or *tsan*, while a “harmful” deity is probably a *dud*, or a *tsan* insufficiently propitiated, or a disrupted *nepo*. The protector deity, as noted above, is the *tsan*, while the birth deity is responsible for all the people born in a certain area (even if they later live in another locality). All these understandings of relationship between the deity and the village incorporate a belief in the power and presence of the deity. At a minimum, a deity takes up physical space through ownership of a particular place; in its supremacy, the deity provides protection or causes harm.³¹

While much of the literature relevant to the protection of forest remnants through religious and spiritual belief focuses on “sacred groves,”³² it is important to note that villagers do not characterize all deity habitats as “sacred” or holy. Indeed, the term “deity” was problematic at some points in the interview process, because some of the unseen being that villagers recognize are not supernatural, religious, or holy. Two broad categories of deities are recognized: the enlightened ones who exist beyond the six realms of karmic existence, whose role is to protect the dharma and its practitioners, and the “haughty and wrathful” deities, residing within the six realms, who are not enlightened.³³ In the Buddhist cosmology of Bhutan, sentient beings occupy six levels, in ascending order: hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demigods, and gods. All these beings are subject to rebirth within the cycle of samsara. The ultimate goal is to escape the cycle of samsara by achieving enlightenment and participating in the oneness of all creation. The

³¹ For more detail on the specific qualities of various deities, see Karma Ura, *Deities and Environment*, (Center for Bhutan Studies: Thimpu, 2001), which appeared in the Kuensel, Bhutan’s National Newspaper beginning Jan. 17, 2002, and subsequent weeks, and is online at <http://www.mtnforum.org/resources/library/karmu01a.htm>.

³² Subrat Sharma, Hem C. Rikhari, and Lok Man S. Palni, “Conservation of Natural Resources Through Religion: A Case Study from Central Himalaya,” *Society and Natural Resources* (1999) 12: 599 - 622; P.S. Ramakrishnan, “Conserving the Sacred: From Species to Landscapes,” *Nature & Resources* (1996) 32:1. Pp. 11-19.

³³ Ura, 2001.

“mundane” deities have “more pronounced environmental significance in mediating between resources and people.”³⁴

These beings do not have supernatural or otherworldly powers. They have been commanded by the great spiritual leaders, including great lamas such as Guru Rimpoche, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan, to serve as guardians of Buddhism and protectors of the land. Throughout this paper, the term “deity” will be used for convenience and general reference to a large group of unseen beings because this is the term used by leading Bhutanese scholar Karma Ura.³⁵ This use carries with it the recognition that it is an unsatisfactory term. The Bhutanese distinguish various types of such beings, including *tsan*, *nepo*, *lhu*, *dud*, *gyalpo*, and *chesum*, and generally refer to a particular being by its type.

Geographical Prohibitions

Deity citadels are off limits because the deities want to be left alone, being particularly sensitive to *drib*, ritual pollution, caused by foreigners or ritually unclean objects, such as garlic, pork, eggs, human excretions, and dirty clothing in their abodes. When disturbed, a deity will express its displeasure by sending illness to the transgressor or another village member, or by sending severe weather that disturbs the agricultural cycle. People living in remote places often know when a stranger is approaching because of the violent weather generated by the deity’s displeasure.

The rules for these restricted areas are quite consistent. According to nearly half the interview respondents, villagers cannot touch or take anything from the deity citadel without experiencing retaliatory consequences. In general, villagers must not disturb or disrupt the deity’s habitat, by entering it, polluting it with foreign or unclean material, cutting down trees or branches, or removing any material from it. Disturbance of the deity results in retaliatory consequences, such as illness, wild weather, crop destruction, or other misfortune. However, the precision of these rules varies with the power and type of the deity and the consequent fear of the villagers. In some cases, the villagers may not go into the habitat, and in my survey, I could only walk around the circumference of some habitats. In other situations, the villagers are only prohibited from cutting down trees, but can gather edible plants, mushrooms, or leaf litter. In the most extreme cases, villagers will not even approach the deity habitat. One woman in Womenang told a story about a powerful and holy place named Goenpa Dong that is “very

³⁴ Ura, 2001.

³⁵ Ura, 2001.

sensitive even if you cut a little bit." The deities of the place – a *tsan* and a *gyalpo* – were thought to harm people by suddenly taking their souls away to the deity habitat (thereby causing death.) According to this woman, stones from outside the deity habitat were used in the construction of two houses near the habitat. Because of the power of the deities, one adult died in each house. While people are not allowed to remove stones or to cut trees in this 1.5 acre area, they may harvest small plants or collect walnuts. Cattle can graze in the habitat without causing problems.

Slightly less restrictive rules, which are more common, require that the villagers not take anything from the habitat. More lenient rules allow the collection of foodstuff and sometimes leaf litter, but not the removal of trees or stones. Even trees that have fallen down on their own must not be removed. Sometimes, the natural collapse of a tree can still engender consequences for the village, as several villagers suggested in Shedhi. A large tree fell down in a storm there. Some villagers cut wood from the trunk for personal uses, but soon fell sick, and realized that their illness was due to taking wood from a forbidden place.

These rules do not appear to be enforced by any individual forest guard or a local management institution. Rather, social pressure exerted by common knowledge of the boundaries of deity citadels and the rules for behavior therein circumscribes individual actions. Strong social control results from the fact that the negative effects do not always accrue to the trespasser – they may accrue to anyone else in the village. In several cases, respondents spoke of illness or injury befalling a family member who had not disturbed the deity habitat, but was experiencing the consequence of someone else's transgression. In small villages, where no action goes unnoticed, such rules and sanctions serve as strong incentives for adhering to social norms. Effects at a distance are believed to affect only those who are "spiritually low." One who is in good spirits may possibly disturb the deity habitat with impunity, but negative consequences may befall another. As a tool of social cohesion, this belief ensures that no one can flagrantly flaunt the rules. The actions of one effect everyone in the community and rules must be observed equally by all.

In observing appropriate behavior in and around the deity citadels, villagers are following age-old family customs, as instructed by their parents and elders. Young adults will generally consult their parents or elders if they have any questions about the location or rules of a deity habitat. However, if the elders have passed away, or are otherwise unavailable, this becomes impossible. Nonetheless, the boundaries are

generally well-known: only two respondents expressed confusion about the boundaries of the areas.

Sometimes, however, villagers will inadvertently trespass into a deity citadel or otherwise unwittingly disturb the deity. In this case, villagers typically learn that they have disturbed the deity by consulting a *pawo*, a spiritual-magical healer. Through rituals, conversation with the deities and spirits, and divination, the *pawo* determines that the person has fallen sick as a result of trespassing into the deity's area and engaging in forbidden behavior such as cutting trees or removing stones to use in building a house. Not all illnesses, however, are understood to be the result of disturbing a deity citadel. Only those illnesses or deaths that appear 'unusual' are suspected to be caused by deity retaliations, and a consultation with a *pawo*, who can interact with the deities, is required to confirm this diagnosis. Villagers also make use of both traditional herbal and modern medicine, depending upon the type of illness and their suspicion of the cause. Based on consultation with the *pawo*, villagers then know that an area is protected by a deity and is off-limits.

After inadvertently removing material from a deity habitat, the villager may have the opportunity to make amends. Everyone who responded to this question suggested that there was some way of rectifying the mistake. After restitution is made, the sick person will recover. Offerings to the deity were the most frequently cited means of making amends, cited by just over a third. This reflects the agrarian emphasis on maintaining balance with the surrounding systems, and not upsetting such systems through extreme or unusual actions. Villagers make frequent offering to local deities to ensure their good graces. Additional offerings may be made to rectify a disturbance. An even more explicit form of restitution is the replanting of trees that might have been cut down or taken away. This type of restitution attempts to restore the disturbed area to its former integrity. The belief is that once the trees have grown back, health will be restored. The replanting of trees is generally at the instruction of a *pawo* or a *tsipa*, an astrologer, another type of spiritual leader who is consulted about the auspicious timing of events and offerings.

Immutability of Rules and Sizes of Deity Habitats

In addition to understanding the specific rules for behavior in deity habitats, it is important to know how immutable these rules are. If, for example, villagers were willing to bend the rules for behavior in the face of unusual conditions, the deity beliefs would provide only moderate protection for the natural resources.

Although relationships between the deities and villages persist from time immemorial, these relationships are occasionally subject to change with changing conditions. In two places, deities behaved like a next-door neighbor who surreptitiously mows an ever-wider swath of grass around his house, subtly extending his claim of property onto others' land. That is, the deities seemed to extend their domains to include more land in areas that the villagers did not regularly use. In these places, villagers noted that someone had fallen sick after harvesting trees outside the deity's citadel, and presumed that the reason behind the sickness was that the deity had claimed more land, and resented the villagers' incursion. One woman told the story of her brother who fell sick with a leg problem after another villager cut some wood from outside the boundary of a deity habitat. After consultation with a *pawo*, the family learned that the brother was affected by this incursion into the deity's habitat. The respondent hypothesized that the villagers' general avoidance of the area around the deity's habitat allowed the deity to claim more land within its habitat.

Conversely, the noisy blasting involved in building a road up toward Lichen/ Shedhi was thought to disturb some deities, either causing retaliation or reducing their power and causing them to flee. Another man described the lessening of negative effects from an area that had once been highly restricted. These days, he said, villagers could cut some trees nearby without serious effects. He thought this change was due to the "value of the area decreasing." He thought some causes of this decrease in value could be nearby bomb blasts for road construction, changes brought by development, or extraction of resources. These stories point to an important aspect of the dynamic relationship between deities and humans: the power of the deities over human life is determined to some extent by the depth of belief the humans have in the deities.

As Mynak Tunku, Director of the National Library pointed out, "Fifty percent depends on the belief of the person. If you think there's something, there will be something."³⁶ This comment points to the dynamic interplay between the deities and the villagers. The deities persist, to some degree, at the villagers' pleasure. When the humans avoid the deities' areas, deities may begin to take over more territory. On the other hand, when humans infringe into the deities' habitats, the deities and their powers may shrink. Infringement on deity citadels represents more than the triumph of rational knowledge over superstition. Such infringement represents the breakdown of restraint, a

³⁶ Personal Communication, Aug. 6, 2002.

classic Buddhist virtue, which instructs people not to take anything that is not freely given. In maintaining the deity citadels as inviolable, the villagers avoid taking that which is not freely given for their livelihoods. The deity beliefs, and the actions they engender, have adaptive value for the villagers living a hardscrabble subsistence existence. By proscribing use of certain areas, deity beliefs ensure that these areas will continue to persist, providing tangible and intangible benefits to the villagers. Further, deity beliefs contextualize the villagers, relative to the forces affecting their lives. The deity beliefs allow them to encapsulate a bundle of important practices under the rubric of a comprehensible and easily-conveyed story, thereby passing on accumulated knowledge about successful living in their specific conditions.

Physical Characteristics and Utility of Deity Habitats

The non-utilization, and consequent protection, of the deity citadels is relatively meaningless if the citadels lack utility to the villagers. If villagers have no interest in using resources from the citadels because they are so remote, desolate, empty, or otherwise undesirable as to be economically useless, then the deity beliefs are not having a particular prohibitive effect on the villagers' actions. If the villagers do not make use of forest resources, then the non-utilization of the deity habitats is unremarkable. Or if, for example, the deity habitats are so far removed from the villages that people encounter them only infrequently, they would lack the incentive to use resources from them, when resources could be obtained much closer to the village. To test the question of whether the villagers have any economic incentive to make use of resources from deity habitats, I compared village use of resources with the resources available in deity habitats, and the proximity of those habitats to the villages.

The villagers, being subsistence farmers, depend mainly on crops from their fields, supplemented with goods from town and from the forest in most cases. Some also sell produce harvested from the forests in town. Villagers harvest a variety of non-timber forest products, as well, with varying degrees of frequency. Forty percent go the forest to harvest useful plants 1-3 times per month, suggesting that forest vegetables play an important, if supplementary, role in villagers' diets and health. In addition to vegetables, some villagers harvest medicinal plants from the forest. Villagers depend on forest timber for house and temple construction, prayer flag poles, and other construction uses, as well as for fuel wood.

Utility of Deity Citadels

As measured by estimations of stem frequency, four species of trees predominate in the deity habitats: *Quercus griffithii* (oak), *Schima wallichii* (needlewood), *Alnus nepalensis* (alder), and *Juglans regia* (English walnut). Variations in species composition of moist broadleaf forests are dependent on geology and slope. *Alnus nepalensis* and *Juglans regia* tend to dominate the temperate deciduous broadleaf forests, while oak species dominate the temperate evergreen forests.³⁷ One or more of these four species dominates 60% of the deity habitats studied. Some have suggested that sacred groves surrounding worship points such as temples developed as a form of “in situ germplasm preservation/ collection centers to conserve natural resources, sustain the daily requirements of the villagers, and provide the ‘elite’ stock material for multiplication.”³⁸ This hypothesis may be applicable to the deity-protected groves of eastern Bhutan, which contain a variety of multipurpose trees. Oak, which provides fodder, fuel wood, and timber, is the basis of the subsistence economy in central Himalayan villages, and thus an essential resource.³⁹ In addition, acorns are medicinal, and edible mushrooms can grow on the trees.⁴⁰ Oaks, which were found in nearly 60% of the deity habitats visited, serve many functions: in addition to providing natural resources for human use, their deep root systems help maintain soil fertility and moisture, contributing to the biodiversity of the local ecosystem. Other trees frequently found in the deity habitats are those that provide timber, firewood, fodder, food and medicine. *Schima wallichii*, more common after disturbances, was found in 30% of the deity habitats visited. *Alnus nepalensis* was found in 19% of the deity habitats. At least one of these useful species was found in nearly 60% of the deity habitats. *Schima wallichii* and *quercus griffithii* were found together in almost one-quarter of the deity habitats.

³⁷ Gopal S. Rawat and Eric D. Wikramanayake, “Eastern Himalayan broadleaf forests (IM0401),” WWF, 2001.
http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/im/im0401_full.html

³⁸ Sharma, 599.

³⁹ Sharma, 599.

⁴⁰ Bhutan-German Sustainable RNR-Development Project (BG-SRDP), “Participatory Forest Management for Local Use: Report of a Participatory Rural Appraisal of Forest Resources and Forest Management in the Lingmutey Chhu Watershed.” Project Document No. 41, 1998. Available at [www.gtz-asia-online.org/HDP/Lib.nsf/0/E3D9CEAAF32F63E347256A690031AB08/\\$FILE/FULLTEXT.html](http://www.gtz-asia-online.org/HDP/Lib.nsf/0/E3D9CEAAF32F63E347256A690031AB08/$FILE/FULLTEXT.html).

Table 29: Dominant Trees in 26 Deity Habitats

Tree Species	# of Habitats	% of Habitats	Uses	Location
QUERCUS GRIFFITHII*	11	42.31	FIREWOOD, DURABLE ROOF SHINGLES, SOURCE OF EDIBLE MUSHROOMS, FODDER, LEAF LITTER, SEED/ ACORN IS MEDICINAL*	800-2000M
SCHIMA WALLICHII**	8	30.77	STURDY WOOD USED FOR PLOUGHS AND FURNITURE ELSEWHERE, TIMBER, FIREWOOD, 450-2000 M MORE COMMON AFTER DISTURBANCE**	
ALNUS NEPALENSIS]	5	19.23	FIREWOOD, GREEN LEAF MANURE, ANIMAL BEDDING, SOME CONSTRUCTION USES. PIONEER SPECIES THAT GROWS WELL IN FULL LIGHT. FREQUENTLY FOUND ON MOIST SITES, NEAR RIVERS AND IN RAVINES. FIXES NITROGEN. EDIBLE SEEDS (WALNUTS), MANY	500-3000 M
JUGLANS REGIA†	3	11.54	MEDICINAL USES, DYE, HERBICIDE/ INSECTICIDE, FODDER, VALUABLE TIMBER	1000-3000 M

Sources: * Bhutan-German Sustainable RNR-Development Project (BG-SRDP). **Apel.] Winrock International. †Duke, 1983

Given the variety of uses to which these trees may be put, it is clear that the deity habitats are not lacking in utility. On the contrary, the deity habitats seem to have an abundance of utility represented in their tree species alone. The utility of the tree species and their convenient proximity to the villages suggests that a strong mechanism is at work protecting these forest remnants from use.

About 30% of the dominant trees in the deity habitats were “huge,” including one enormous mango tree that itself comprised a deity habitat, suggesting that the trees protected in the deity citadels are ancient, and that they have been preserved by the human community’s appreciation of them, whether for utilitarian or other values. Seven of eight of the “huge” trees were found in deity habitats in the midst of rice paddies or agricultural fields, indicating that land had been cleared around them,

but the trees had persisted. In contrast to the dominance of certain tree species throughout the habitats, the huge trees were of seven different species (in eight habitats – two habitats contained huge *Cupressus corneyana*). These huge trees may meet needs beyond the physical by connecting villagers historically to previous times and reminding them of their integration in the continual flow of events. Cypress trees provide incense and remind villagers of the cypress tree that grew from Guru Rimpoche's staff planted in the ground. Thus, the spiritual and affiliative value of the cypress trees may be more important to their preservation than pure utility.

The presence of snakes in the deity habitats is another ecological aspect that shades into the metaphorical. Snakes could be found in deity habitats, according to 30% of respondents. Relative to the ecological characteristics of the area, this response is a bit surprising, as snakes are not especially common. However, taken in the spiritual and metaphorical context of the deity habitats, this response becomes clear: snakes are believed to be the visible forms of some deities (especially the *lu* and the *nepo*), and exert a powerful effect on the villagers' imaginations, as they do in cultures throughout history. Throughout Africa and Asia, cattle-keeping people commonly use milk – the product of their cows – to propitiate snakes, despite the fact that snakes will not drink milk even when thirsty.⁴¹ It has been suggested that snakes are fed milk in recognition of their existence as prior inhabitants, "victimized by grazing bovines and deserving of their output."⁴² Similarly, the *lu*, which will cause skin rashes or mischief if disturbed, must be propitiated with milk "because the serpent is the custodian of the land."⁴³ The *lu*, serpent deity associated with water which appears as a snake, frog or reptile in dreams, is "very old supernatural entity, right from the time of the Buddha," a counterpart of the Indian *naga*. While the appearance of a snake may suggest danger, the *lu* is also the holder of treasures, and may grant wishes when treated well, just as nature itself can provide abundance or cause devastation.

Though the villagers use a variety of non-timber forest products to supplement their diets and healthcare, it does not appear that they collect these products from the deity habitats with much frequency – fewer than one-third of the interviews indicated that food could be found in the

⁴¹ La Barre cited in Jane Schneider, "Spirits and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *Religious Regimes and State Formation: Perspectives from European Ethnology*, ed. Eric R. Wolf. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

⁴² Schneider, 187.

⁴³ Karma Ura, personal communication, 1 Aug. 2001.

deity citadels, and none indicated that medicinal plants were found there. The association of unpleasant things – snakes and mud – with the deity citadels may be another reason that people avoid them. Visits to the citadels verified the villagers' responses: only eight (31%) of the citadels contained edible plants or mushrooms. However, six (23%) contained medicinal plants, in contradiction to the villagers' assertions.

In addition to useful trees, many deity habitats enclosed water springs, essential resources in close proximity to homes and fields. To determine if certain deities were associated with the presence of water or other resources within the deity habitats, chi-square tests were conducted. If useful resources exist in a habitat, and villagers are prevented from using them based on their beliefs, the deities serve to protect natural resources. The tests for food and medicinal plants were insignificant, both having p-values too large (0.183, 0.517, respectively) to allow us to reject the null hypothesis with $\alpha = 0.05$. Several chi-square tests led to the conclusion that there is no significant relationship between deity and dominant tree species.

However, the chi-square test of the relationship of deities and the presence of water resulted in a p-value of 0.002 ($\alpha = 0.05$), allowing us to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a relationship between the presence of certain deities and the occurrence of water in the areas surveyed. The *nepo* is more commonly associated with water, while the *tsan* is not associated with the presence of a water source. Sixteen of the 26 habitats (61.5%) surveyed enclosed either a water spring or a stream. Of these sites, 14 were associated with a *nepo*, 1 was associated with a *lu*, and one was associated with another type of deity. These citadels were close to fields and houses, and about one-third of the respondents said that water from these locations was used for human or agricultural purposes. Without a control group of non-deity plots, it is difficult to say what proportion of natural water sources are associated with deities, but it is clear that the presence of water is associated with the presence of a *nepo*. The protective influence of the *nepo* may serve to monitor water usage necessary for human purposes. Approximately one-third of the respondents said that water from the deity habitats was used for human or agricultural purposes.

The control of water usage by means of the *nepo*'s rules and restriction may help allocate a scarce resource among multiple players. Spiritual beliefs have been shown to serve as the basis for efficient water allocation in Indonesia, where Balinese rice farmers traditionally managed their irrigation water to optimize rice harvests through a

complex system of water temple rituals and offerings.⁴⁴ Yet, this system was relatively invisible to outside consultants, who encouraged the farmers to make use of Green Revolution innovations by ignoring the traditional cropping patterns and purchasing additional fertilizers and pesticides to “improve” their rice harvests. The consequence of the breakdown of system-wide traditional fallow periods was an increase in bacterial and viral diseases, as well as insect and rat populations.⁴⁵ Still convinced of the validity of their traditional methods, local farmers sought advice at the water temples for dealing with the increase in pests.⁴⁶ Modeling analysis showed that the regional water temple system led to higher average harvest yields and an increased ability to handle ecological perturbations over either autonomous local control or centralized hierarchical control.⁴⁷ Within a system of temples and offerings, the Balinese had developed a way to manage pests and irrigation needs that was culturally intelligible and turned out to be more efficient than the “modern” methods.

Proximity to Human Settlements

The surroundings of the deity habitats further support the idea that these patches remained while forest around them was cleared: *nepo* and *lu* habitats were frequently found in the middle of paddy fields or within the settled area. If deities are considered fearsome or otherworldly, villagers might be expected to avoid the places that they are found. Villagers might be expected to associate deities with places that are dangerous or seldom visited. However, most of the deity habitats visited were less than 20 minutes’ walk from any given settlement, in close proximity to houses and agricultural fields.

To see whether there is an association between the presence of a deity and the type of land use surrounding the deity habitat, chi-square tests were conducted. It was hypothesized that certain types of deities might be commonly found in certain types of surroundings, as the Bhutanese typology associates each type of deity with a particular location. In the first chi-square test, the presence of a *nepo* or “other deity” (the category into which all the less frequently occurring deities were

⁴⁴ JS Lansing, “Balinese Water Temples And The Management Of Irrigation,” *American Anthropologist* 89 (2): 326-341 Jun 1987.

⁴⁵ Lansing.

⁴⁶ Lansing.

⁴⁷ JS Lansing and JN Kremer, “Emergent Properties Of Balinese Water Temple Networks - Coadaptation On A Rugged Fitness Landscape,” *American Anthropologist* 95 (1): 97-114 Mar 1993.

lumped) was compared with the land use surrounding the deity habitat (forest, paddy or other, as recorded in field notes). Only one category of surrounding land use was assigned to each deity habitat. A chi-square test of the relationship between the presence of deities and the use of the area surrounding the deity habitats (i.e. forest, paddy, or “other,” which included pasture, houses, other human uses, other unmaintained areas) produced a p-value of 0.028 ($\alpha = 0.05$). We can thus reject the null hypothesis that there is no association between deities and the features surrounding their habitats. It appears that *nepos* are more strongly associated with paddies and less commonly found in forests, while “other” deities are more commonly found in the forest.⁴⁸ This result is congruent with the narrative explanations of deities.

One might wonder if the local guides took me only to the most accessible deity habitats for their own convenience, causing the deity habitats to all appear to be proximate to the villages. A trip to one deity habitat that was said to be an hour and a half walk beyond the village was vetoed, and a visit to another distant deity habitat was vetoed because of the presumed danger of going there. On the other hand, I made clear my intention to stay in each village until I had visited “all” deity habitats, and the village guides seemed to be willing to assist me in my task. The village guides did not control the interviews through which I learned about the names and locations of the habitats, and were willing to take me to all habitats described in the interviews, with the exception of the two locations mentioned above. Given the role of the deities in proscribing resource use in certain locations, it is logical that deities would be found more frequently in populated areas than in unpopulated areas. In unpopulated areas, there is little pressure on natural resources, and no need for rules regarding resource use, while in and near villages, pressure on natural resources is likely to be greater, requiring the development of systems for controlling and managing use of the resources.

The restrictive influence of the deity beliefs raise questions about just how much land is protected in this manner. The deity habitats displayed great variation in area, ranging in size from a couple square meters to more than 53 hectares, with a mean of 6.68 hectares, and a standard deviation of 12.52. More than 75 acres was protected within deity habitats in Shedhi/ Lichen and in Womenang, while only six acres was protected in Ninda, where the habitats tended to be little more than a large tree and associated water spring. While the average size of a deity

⁴⁸ Nao Teshima contributed much to the statistical analysis.

citadel in lower, drier Ninda was less than one hectare (<1 ha), the average size of the citadels in the other two areas within moist broadleaf forest was much larger – eight to nine hectares. Given the small sample size (26), one-way ANOVA testing revealed that there is no statistically significant difference between the sizes of the deity citadels in the three villagers.

Table 30: Sizes of Deity Citadels

Village	Area in Hectares Enclosed Within Deity Citadels	Number of Citadels	Average Size of Deity Citadel
SHEDHI/		8	
LICHEN	75.51		9.44
WOMENANG	91.96	11	8.36
NINDA	6.33	7	0.90

Table 31: Distribution of Deity Citadel Sizes

Size	Number of Citadels
<1 HECTARE	11
1 – 5 HECTARES	9
5 – 10 HECTARES	1
10 – 20 HECTARES	2
20 – 30 HECTARES	2
30 – 40 HECTARES	0
40 – 50 HECTARES	0
50 < HECTARES	1
TOTAL	26

It is difficult to determine the proportion of village land protected by the deity beliefs and the citadels. Village boundaries are not clearly defined, and maps of the villages and topography, onto which the deity citadels could be mapped and analyzed, were not available. The deity citadels in Shedhi/Lichen and Womenang occupy eight to nine times as much land as those of Ninda. Forest closes in on Shedhi/ Lichen and Womenang, and numerous deity habitats can be found at the boundary between the forest and the cleared, settled spaces. Some deity citadels are within the forest, but easily identifiable by the sharp boundary between previously cut forest, and undisturbed older growth. In Ninda, deity citadels tend to be singular trees near water springs, rather than forest patches as in the other two. Both Shedhi/ Lichen and Womenang include a large deity citadel, from which nothing should be taken, within close

proximity (just a few minutes walk on a path) to village houses. In Lichen, the citadel is occupied by a *nepo*; in Womenang, the corresponding citadel is occupied by a *tsan*, who is venerated at a *chorten* (small religious structure) within the citadel. At Shedhi/Lichen, a *chorten* stands a short distance outside and above the deity citadel, and is the location of the annual “*tsan* ceremony” propitiation. The existence of a large protected area (53 ha in Shedhi/Lichen; 31 ha in Womenang) in the midst of the village is provocative. Both places are home to large, old trees that have clearly been protected even as surrounding areas have been cleared for homes or paddy fields. The Shedhi/Lichen site has a water source within it, while the Womenang site encloses a stream that begins outside the deity citadel. In both cases, the deity citadels are “peninsulas” of forest jutting into settlement areas. Land is cleared and used for human purposes on two or three sides, but the citadel also connects with the forest that surrounds the communities. These two sites in particular represent significant parcels of land that easily could have been cleared for agriculture or stripped of their resources, but instead were consciously set aside and protected by the villagers’ beliefs. These two places may serve as islands or corridors of habitat for wild species within the matrix of farming and grazing land, footpaths, and homes. In connecting villagers with the local ruling/ protector deities who rule over all beings within a particular geographical area, these citadels also connect villagers with wild species, situating them in the greater web of life.

Temporal Prohibitions

By local custom, and increasingly, by government policy, villagers are prohibited from going to the high mountains during certain times of year. Large trees for construction purposes are harvested from the high mountains, so this practice bans the harvesting of timber during certain times of the year. The practice is known variously as *ri dam*, *yi dam*, or *la dam*. More than half the villagers said that the deities must not be disturbed during the time of closure, lest they retaliate with heavy rain and wild weather that could destroy the crops at a sensitive time in their growing cycle. Others gave more scientific explanations, pointing out that *la dam* is practiced during the time when the trees are beginning to bud and leaf out, a sensitive time during which the trees and plants should be left alone to grow. Villagers noted that if trees were harvested at this time of year, the new growth would be removed, decreasing future growth and lessening the sustainability of the forest. Further, the villagers pointed out, heavy rain or hail during early spring has a particularly erosive effect on the ground as the leafless trees are unable

to block the precipitation before it hits the ground with great force. Despite the strong agreement that there are certain times when people should not go to the high mountains (all villagers knew of the practice), villagers expressed widely varying views on exactly *when* this time is. General consensus indicates that the practice begins in the second or third month of the Bhutanese calendar, and continues until the eighth or ninth month. The practice of *la dam* therefore prohibits venturing into the high mountains during the growing season of March through November. All villagers agreed that travel in the high mountains was allowed during January/February.

Villagers share a common understanding of the rules for *la dam*, even if they don't agree on the exact dates. Everyone knew that travel in the high mountains was prohibited. Additionally, half the respondents mentioned that the mountainous areas should not be disturbed, and slightly more than half (53%) said that people should not shout or make noise if they travel in the mountains at this time. Several other prohibitions related to the avoidance of ritual pollution were mentioned – visitors to the high mountains should not litter, dirty the area, or burn meat during *la dam*. The potential for retribution from the deities if the practice is not followed properly exerts social control and ensures close adherence to the rules.

The environmental punishments that result from travel at the wrong time stand in contrast to the more personal punishments that result from travel into the wrong place (a deity citadel). Travel into the wrong place leads to harm to the individual human body, while travel at the wrong time leads to harm to the environmental or communal body. The deities' influence on both personal and environmental disease emphasizes the correlation between villagers and their environment, strengthening the connection between healthy human beings and balanced environmental relations. The dialectic of temporal and geographical restrictions recognizes the need for both lands that are set aside, free from human influence at all times, and for fallow time periods when the land is allowed to recover. Localities are generally subject to one set of restrictions or the other: high mountain areas, which are considered to be the general homes of deities, especially the *tsan*, are not subject to the restrictions surrounding specific deity citadels within the villages.

Conclusion

The beliefs of the villagers of Trashi Yangtse follow the pervasive Himalayan pattern that links faith and reverence with specific places, grounding the sacred in the phenomenological world. Locating the sacred and the supra-human (which are not always synonymous) in

definite places, villagers place themselves in explicit and tangible relation to the forces beyond themselves on which their lives depend. Within an agrarian world in which their power is relatively meager, villagers express their vast dependence through their perceived relationships with deities who mediate relations between the villagers and the natural resources on which they depend. They establish and acknowledge a cycle of interdependence and reciprocity that encompasses humans, plants, and animals, and the larger forces of nature. While unable to control these larger forces, the villagers recognize that they do *influence* these forces by their behaviors and attitudes. In recognizing interdependence and reciprocity, the villagers take a profoundly ecological stance.

Deity beliefs, with specific rules pertaining to certain places, strongly influence the villagers to avoid of use of material from deity citadels, discrete areas proximate to the villages and rich in resources. Within deity citadels, numerous useful trees grow to great size, and water springs are undisturbed. Villagers may sometimes take edible plants or leaf litter from the citadels, but may not cut down trees. While the deity habitats were not identified, they are important sources of edible or medicinal plants, habitats owned by *nepos* are statistically linked with the presence of water. This important finding suggests that traditional beliefs in deities, and their potential for retaliatory action, serve to inhibit overuse of an essential resource, serving as a form of community-based natural resource management grounded in traditional cultural beliefs.

Feedback Loops

The paradoxical avoidance of conveniently-located, resource-rich areas suggests that the villagers' motivations extend beyond sheer practicality and expedience. The deities' power, and the fear it engenders, proscribe the use of certain resources and limits the villagers' behavior. Consequences for trespassing in a deity habitat are not limited to the trespasser, but may befall anyone in the village who is "spiritually low," creating a strong form of social control in small villages and explicitly linking the villagers' common fate, which is utterly dependent on the health of the resource base. Not wanting to be blamed for the misfortunes of others, villagers must adhere to the communal norms regarding the use of the deity citadels. One village told the story of some government workers who had inadvertently camped within a deity citadel. Because of their disturbance of the water spring within the citadel, a local boy fell sick with an ear problem. A geographical error - disturbing a fragile habitat - became internalized as a personal consequence - illness. Disturbances to the body of the earth are played out on human bodies.

This tight negative feedback loop contrasts sharply with the lack of feedback about the consequences of environmental disturbance in industrialized countries (witness the continued dispute about anthropogenic climate change despite extraordinary weather conditions and melting ice caps.) While industrialized countries commonly face problems resulting from the externalizing of environmental consequences onto people and places far from the original sources of the disturbance, the Bhutanese villagers internalize repercussions for all types of transgressions within a tightly bounded reciprocal system. Fear of negative consequences from the deities limits actions in the natural environment, maintaining the health of some natural resources, and thus the health of the villagers. Thus, the personal, communal, and environmental are linked together in a tight negative feedback loops through the deity beliefs.

This feedback loop creates a self-reinforcing system whereby protected deity citadels gain greater value through increasing age and collection of biological richness, which further inhibits their use. As the deity citadels remain undisturbed over time, they accumulate not only the physical value of large trees, clean water and the like, but also emotional and spiritual value through their historical, personal, and affiliative qualities. The villagers' preservation of deity habitats represents an enlightened interest that extends beyond narrow utilitarian or economic calculations. If their interests were limited to utility, the villagers might well have cut down and used up the trees long ago, or perhaps implemented a plan for slow, sustainable extraction of timber. Instead, they have preserved discrete areas of rich utility near their villages, revealing motivations beyond the immediate and the physical. The preservation of the deity citadels represents the implicit recognition of the spectrum of values associated with wild places and species.

Social ecologist Stephen Kellert has identified nine basic values – material benefit, source of knowledge, aesthetic beauty, companionship and relationship, mastery through challenge, morality/ spirituality, naturalism and wonder, fear, and symbolism – that are commonly applied to natural places and wild species.⁴⁹ All of these values are strongly attributed to the deity citadels, showing that the citadels meet important human needs on many parameters. The citadels have high utilitarian value in their useful trees and their proximity to settlements. As reservoirs of wild species amidst settlements and rice paddies, the citadels are places to increase knowledge about wild species, and to appreciate the connections between humans and other species. The

⁴⁹ Stephen R. Kellert, *The Value of Life* (Washington, DC: Island Press. 1996).

villagers recognize that trees have lives worth preserving both for their own sakes and because they provide habitats to sentient beings. The villagers value wild species for their strength, beauty and cunning, and for the affiliative connection they provide. One villager said, "There is no difference between humans and animals. If we kill animals, we feel bad." In viewing wild animals with respect and admiration, villagers reinforce their own position in a world that is valuable and worth protecting.

In addition to providing habitat, citadels create aesthetic breaks in the landscape – places where trees take on gigantic or unusual gnarled shapes, where dark rocks protect seeping springs. A break in the plane of the ordinary has long been recognized as an incursion of the sacred, and the citadels are seen as places where the supra-human and the human worlds can meet. As homes of deities, the citadels are places of spiritual and symbolic value, connecting humans and non-human, past and present, material and spiritual. Connection with the supra-human is never without danger, however, and, in their potential to cause harm, the citadels are also places of fear and aversion. Places with high values on all nine parameters are thought to be especially important to human well-being because of the postulated human trait of biophilia – the "need to affiliate with nature and living diversity not just to ensure ... material and physical well-being, but also to satisfy emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs."⁵⁰

Rich in all the nine values of biophilia, the deity citadels satisfy a multitude of human needs, including higher needs such as intellectual and spiritual engagement. While the deity citadels seem to serve as seed banks of culturally important species within the open matrix of settlements and rice paddies, their role in meeting needs beyond the material may be even more important for the villagers' well-being. The multitude of values associated with the deity habitats creates positive feedback loops that work in tandem with the negative feedback loops to inhibit use of resources from these places, further serving to protect the deity citadels. As the biophilia hypothesis predicts, the villagers' sense of well-being incorporates the well-being of other life, creating incentives to protect other life to improve their own lives. This creates a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop that feeds increased personal well-being through protecting the well-being of others. Working together in a mutually reinforcing system, the life-protecting tenets of Buddhism support and reinforce the deity beliefs that reflect biophilic values to mediate the negative and positive feedback loops that connect humans with their environments. The fear created by the deity beliefs creates a

⁵⁰ Kellert, 27.

negative feedback loop that limits behavior, while the appreciation engendered by Buddhism and the biophilic values creates a positive desire to protect. These two dialectics create the potential for borderless and boundary-less conservation areas,⁵¹ in which internalized beliefs about appropriate interactions with natural resources guide human interactions and external inputs of force are not needed.

Deities and Environmental Relations

While some might be quick to dismiss the deities as the ancient superstitions of uneducated villagers, the deities play exceptionally important social, spiritual and environmental roles. In the lived experience of the Bhutanese villagers, the deities are as 'real' as the crops that feed them and the animals that roam the forests. The deities represent emanations or crystallizations of the relationship between the villagers and their environments.⁵² Buddhist cosmology allows an entrance into this hypothesis with its acknowledgment of six realms of sentient beings, which makes room for the existence of unseen yet active beings. The idea that relatedness-of-beings can be manifest echoes the Buddhist idea of "co-dependent arising." In this notion, nothing has any individually existence, but is radically dependent on all other circumstances, factors, and beings that bring it into being. As Karma Ura explains,

With development, you get an egomaniacal sense of ownership, with your household items and cars... but with cattle, in which the value is in co-dependent arising, then you see that nothing has any value without the cooperation of others. You see this with the land too - no value without sunshine, rainfall, etc.⁵³

Similarly, Nurit Bird-David points out that the individual is not regarded as a finitely-bounded and tightly-integrated "single entity" in all times and places.⁵⁴ The individual understood as a less tightly-bound identity may be more aware of its relatedness of other beings, and thereby discover meaning in the course of action that is "both physical

⁵¹ Ugyen Chewang brought this phrase to my attention.

⁵² Nurit Bird-David (1999) has argued a similar point in her discussion of "relatednesses" as expression of spirits among the Nayaka tribe.

⁵³ Personal Communication, Aug. 2001.

⁵⁴ Nurit, Bird-David, "Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment and Relational Epistemology, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 40 (Feb. 1999): Issue Supplement: Special Issue: Culture, A Second Chance? S67 - S91.

and psychical, yet neither”⁵⁵ importantly, “ ‘meaning’ is not ‘imposed’ on things – it is not pre-given in consciousness – ‘but discovered’ in the course of action.”⁵⁶ The appropriate metaphor for this discovery of meaning is “conversation,” a term that expresses give-and-take and creation through process (Bird-David chooses the term “talking with”). Through conversation, multiple parties express their relatedness, creating meaning that did not exist before the conversation began.

Thus the deities exist within or as the relationship of people with their environment. When this relationship is smooth and harmonious, and the needs of both sides are met, the deities are happy. When the relationship goes awry, personal and environmental calamities, understood to be the vengeance of the deities, reflect the disruptions in the larger system. As Karma Ura points out,

[The deities] probably represent the revenge of the environment on people who pollute and poison mediums such as air, water, forest, and land. When the environment is disturbed, these spirits of pollution unleash storms of epidemics (nad kyi bu yug) and throw snares of diseases on the people who pollute.⁵⁷

The existence of the deities, then, is dependent upon the villagers’ conscious awareness of and participation in the relationship with the surrounding environment. Without a reciprocal relationship, the deities have no relevance. One Bhutanese woman, hearing of the lack of forest and the overabundance of buildings and paving in the United States, hypothesized “You must not have any deities, or else you’d have more trees.” In the United States, tress and forest are not understood as beings with which one would generally have a conscious relationship. Without the recognition of such a relationship, there can be no deities mediating and crystallizing that relationship.

This mediating role, which serves as a bridge connecting people and the resources on which they depend, points the way to a more balanced and equitable relationship between humans and the land. The mediating role of the deities between the people and the land, which involves people, land, and deities in relationships of reciprocity and obligation suggests that a paradigm shift from *conSERVation* to *conVERSAtion* with the land maybe be helpful in sustaining the natural environment. Meaning is not imposed but developed through interaction between people, land, and deities, as in a conversation. Through conversation,

⁵⁵ Gibson [1979: 242] cited in Bird-David [1999:S74].

⁵⁶ Gibson [1979: 242] cited in Bird-David [1999:S74].

⁵⁷ Ura, 2001.

multiple parties express their relatedness, creating meaning that did not exist before the conversation began. When this relationship is smooth and harmonious, and the needs of both sides are met, the deities are happy. When the relationship goes awry, personal and environmental calamities, understood to be the vengeance of the deities, reflect the disruptions in the larger system. Through greater attention to the *conVERSAtion* aspect of caring for the natural environment, we may develop strategies that meet the needs of people, other species and land.

Implications for Environmental Conservation

In their deity beliefs, the Bhutanese villagers link the spiritual world and the physical world much more tightly than is usual in the West. The villagers recognize that errors in the spiritual world can have repercussions in the physical world, and errors in the physical world can negatively affect the spiritual world. By closely linking the two worlds, they gain a wider array of options for effecting change in either world. Charles Ramble explains the efficacy of this process as follows:

A principle that underlies many ritual strategies for healing, protecting, or otherwise acting in the phenomenal world, involves merging the latter with an ideal, which may be myth, a divine realm, or some more abstract notion (such as the Void); then performing various transformations on this more malleable sphere and thereby affecting the desired changes in the material world that has been harnessed to it. The form of this landscape varies considerably within the Tibetan tradition, but at its simplest consists of the divinities who people the landscapes and settlements.⁵⁸

Changes in attitude, which in turn effect changes in action, are essentially spiritual changes. Following Ramble's explanation, and the example of the Bhutanese villagers, we see that minor attitudinal and spiritual changes can have significant physical results. This idea has important implications for environmental conservation initiatives. If Ramble's interpretation of the Buddhist and Bon insights is correct – that the spiritual realm is more malleable, and can exert effects on the phenomenal realm when the two are merged together – then the necessary change to address environmental problems should happen on the spiritual level. Changes at this level not only effect the phenomenal world, they can also lead to more balanced human-environmental relationships that require fewer ongoing external inputs of capital and

⁵⁸ Charles Ramble, 7.

human resources. As we saw in the discussion of feedback loops, actions that are reinforced by their consequences can be sustained without external inputs. Spiritual relationships with the natural world must be nurtured and practiced so that people can become more adept in maintaining balanced human-environment relationships. The first step, however, is awareness of these spiritual connections.

Traditional methods of spiritually-motivated, community-based natural resource management, such as that of the Bhutanese villagers, must not be lost. These systems have much to teach about sustainable, border-less and boundary-less methods of managing resources, but development and globalization endanger them. Western rational education often teaches people to devalue the non-rational or non-scientific. However, such ways of thinking and perceiving hold important insights for the development of more sustainable and equitable human relations with the land. The Bhutanese example shows the interconnection of cultural and environmental preservation, which should serve as a role model for other conservation efforts.

Additionally, the long-protected deity citadels must not be lost through cultural erosion, increasing tourism, or western education. With increasing development and western influence, the knowledge of these important and long-protected places is beginning to slip away, especially in the western part of the country. As people become less attuned to the deities' requirements, they may begin to trespass into these ecologically and culturally significant areas. Increasing tourism could also lead to destruction or disturbance of some deity citadels out of ignorance. Thoughtful leaders are attuned to the dangers of cultural erosion. *Thamche Khenpa Rinpoche*, of *Rigzin Osel Choeling Gonpa* in *Trashig Yangtse* has proposed to locate and document the sacred places (*neys*) described in religious texts, to ensure their protection and continued existence. The Rinpoche plans to reinforce and support religious traditions through such documentation.

Deity citadels and other spiritually-protected places are intrinsic to Bhutan's past and future, and should be maintained through promotion of traditional cultural values, and even legal protection, as has been suggested. Legal protection should not supplant the community-based protection that deity citadels already enjoy. Legal protection would reinforce the value of such places to both Bhutanese and foreigners, and would highlight to the entire world the importance and efficacy of spiritually-protected places. Other states might follow Bhutan's lead and recognize their own indigenous conservation mechanisms through support with protective laws.

To truly understand the impact of the deity citadels on the quality of Bhutan's natural environment, a systematic inventory of the locations and physical characteristics of such places should be undertaken. This study examined only 26 of the deity citadels, in one part of Trashi Yangtse. Many more deity citadels throughout the country were surveyed by Ura and other researchers, who collected detailed information about the attributes of the deities, their manner of invocation and propitiation, and provided suggestive conclusions about the ecological role of deity citadels.⁵⁹ To date, however, here is no complete ecological inventory or map of the deity citadels, which could establish more strongly their ecological role, their pattern on the landscape, their efficacy in protecting certain species and providing important habitat, and their proximity to villages, *lhakhangs*, roads, and other important structures.

Building on Ura's pioneering work, such a study would have several positive outcomes, contributing to environmental and cultural conservation in Bhutan. A comprehensive study of the deity citadels, with special attention to their ecological characteristics, would allow for local and legal protection, and could contribute to reinvigorated belief and practice among local people. Identification of the locations and boundaries of deity citadels would ensure that outsiders do not inadvertently trespass into them. Mapping the deity citadels throughout the country will establish the location and composition of a large number of mini protected areas, and will provide clarification of the ecological and cultural roles of such sites.

A more comprehensive study of the ecological role of the deity citadels would allow Bhutan to quantify the area of land protected by religious belief, thus making an important contribution to the overall goal of biodiversity protection. In the search for effective methods of biodiversity conservation, increasing attention to the social and ethical aspects of conservation initiatives will contribute to their success and sustainability. Traditional community-based methods, grounded in local norms, and cultural and spiritual beliefs, as exemplified in eastern Bhutan, reveal strategies that draw on internal motivations for their efficacy. Based in deeply-held mores, such local conservation strategies should not be overlooked, as they can increase the efficacy and sustainability of biodiversity conservation efforts around the world.

⁵⁹ Ura, 2001.

Bibliography

- Agrawal, Arun and Clark C. Gibson (1991). "Enchantment and Disenchantment: The Role of Community in Natural Resource Conservation," *World Development*. 27:4 (April 1999): 629 – 649.
- Apel, Ulrich (2001). "Forest Types and Tree Species in Xishuangbanna." Available at http://natureproducts.net/Ecology/Apel1.html#_Toc507215833;
- Bhutan-German Sustainable RNR-Development Project (BG-SRDP) (1998). "Participatory Forest Management for Local Use: Report of a Participatory Rural Appraisal of Forest Resources and Forest Management in the Lingmutey Chhu Watershed." Project Document No. 41. Available at [www.gtz-asia-online.org/HDP/Lib.nsf/0/E3D9CEAAF32F63E347256A690031AB08/\\$FILE/FULLTEXT.html](http://www.gtz-asia-online.org/HDP/Lib.nsf/0/E3D9CEAAF32F63E347256A690031AB08/$FILE/FULLTEXT.html)
- Bird-David, Nurit (1999). "Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment and Relational Epistemology, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 40: Issue Supplement: Special Issue: Culture, A Second Chance? S67 – S91.
- Blondeau, Anne-Marie and Ernst Steinkellner, eds., (1996). *Reflections on the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*, Wein: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Brechin, Steven R. Peter R. Wilshusen, Crystal L. Fortwangler, Patrick C. West (2002). "Beyond the Square Wheel: Toward a More Comprehensive Understanding of Biodiversity Conservation as a Social and Political Process," *Society & Natural Resources*, 15 (1): 41-64 Jan. 2002.
- BTFFC. Website of the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation. <http://www.bhutantrustfund.org/>
- Chandrakanth, M.G. and Jeff Romm (1991). "Sacred Forests, Secular Forest Policies, and People's Actions," *Natural Resources Journal* 31 (Fall 1991): 741 - 756.
- Colding, Johan and Carl Folke. 1997. "The Relations Among Threatened Species, Their Protections, and Taboos," *Conservation Ecology*[online](1):6. www.consecol.org/vol1/iss1/art6
- Conservation International – Hotspot website http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/indo_burma/
- Kellert, Stephen R (1996). *The Value of Life*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Lansing, JS (1987). "Balinese Water Temples And The Management Of Irrigation," *American Anthropologist* 89 (2): 326-341. Jun 1987.
- Lansing, JS and JN Kremer (1993). "Emergent Properties Of Balinese Water Temple Networks - Coadaptation On A Rugged Fitness Landscape," *American Anthropologist* 95 (1): 97-114 Mar 1993.

- Ludwig, Donald, Marc Mangel and Brent Haddad (2001). "Ecology, Conservation and Public Policy", *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*. 32: 481-517
- Malhotra, K.C., Shashi Stanley, N.S. Herman, and Ketaki Das (2000). "Biodiversity Conservation and Ethics: Sacred Groves and Pools," in *Bioethics in Asia*, edited by Norio Fujiki and Darryl R. J. Macer. Eubios Ethics Institute, 2000. <<http://zobell.biol.tsukuba.ac.jp/~macer/asiae/biae338.html>>.
- Namgyal, Tobgay (2001). "Sustaining Conservation Finance: Future Directions for the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation," in *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Summer 2001, Vol.3, No. 1. available at http://www.bhutanstudies.com/pages/journal/3.1_folder/content_s.html
- PBS: *The Living Edens*. "Bhutan: the Last Shangri La." 28 Jan. 2001. <http://www.pbs.org/edens/bhutan/Bhu_dragon4.htm>.
- Pradhan, Rebecca and Tandin Wangdi (1999). *Threatened Birds in Bhutan, Nepal*
- Pradhan, Rebecca (1999). *Wild Rhododendrons of Bhutan*, Thimphu, Bhutan
- Ramble, Charles (1999). In Toni Huber, ed., *Sacred Spaces and Powerful Places in Tibetan Culture*, Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives
- Ramakrishnan, P.S (1996). "Conserving the Sacred: From Species to Landscapes," *Nature & Resources* 32:1. Pp. 11-19.
- Rawat, Gopal S. and Eric D. Wikramanayake (2001). "Eastern Himalayan Broadleaf forests (IM0401)," WWF. http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/im/im0401_full.html
- Repetto, Robert (1986). *Skimming the Water: Rent-seeking and the Performance of Public Irrigation Systems*, World Resources Institute Research Report #4.
- Royal Government of Bhutan (1999). *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, Thimphu: Planning Commission
- Royal Government of Bhutan (1998). *The Middle Path: National Environmental Strategy for Bhuta*, Thimphu.: National Environment Commission
- Royal Government of Bhutan (2000). *Forest and Nature Conservation Rules*, Volume 1. Thimphu: Ministry of Agriculture
- Royal Government of Bhutan (2001). *Draft Management Plan for Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary*, Thimphu: Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Forest Services
- Royal Government of Bhutan (1998). *Biodiversity Action Plan for Bhutan*, Thimphu: Ministry of Agriculture

- Schneider, Jane (1991). "Spirits and the Spirit of Capitalism." in *Religious Regimes and State Formation: Perspectives from European Ethnology*, ed. Eric R. Wolf. Albany: State University of New York Press
- Sharma, Subrat, Hem C. Rikhari, and Lok Man S. Palni (1999). "Conservation of Natural Resources Through Religion: A Case Study from Central Himalaya," *Society and Natural Resources* 12: 599 - 622
- Stutchbury, Elizabeth A (1996). "Raja Gephan - The Mountain Protector of Lahul," In Blondeau, Anne-Marie and Ernst Steinkellner, eds., *Reflections on the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya*, Wein: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften
- Tashi, Khenpo Phuntshok. Interview by the author, August 2002
- Tashi, Khenpo Phuntshok (2000). "The Origin of Happiness." *Kuensel: Bhutan's National Newspaper*, May 27
- Tulku, Mynak. Interview by the author., August 6, 2000
- Ura, Karma. Interview by the author, August 2001
- (2001). "Deities and Environment," In *Kuensel: Bhutan's National Newspaper*. Nov. 26
- Wilson, E.O (1992). *The Diversity of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Winrock International. 1990. "NFTA 90-06 November 1990: A quick guide to useful nitrogen fixing trees from around the world." NFT Highlights. Available at http://www.winrock.org/forestry/factpub/FACTSH/A_nepalensis.html

ECHOES OF ANCIENT ETHOS: REFLECTIONS ON SOME POPULAR BHUTANESE SOCIAL THEMES

KARMA PHUNTSHO

A few years ago, a man was interviewed on radio asking why he became a soldier. He replied: "To serve the *Tsawasum* with *tha damtshig*". When asked what the *Tsawasum* are, he enumerated army, bodyguards and police force. Similarly, teacher-trainees at the National Institute of Education were asked in an exam to name the *Tsawasum*. Some wrote the names of their three best friends. These anecdotes amply show (1) that concepts such as *Tsawasum* and *tha damtshig* are very profusely bandied about in Bhutan and (2) that most people take them for granted without any accurate knowledge of their significance. Even among those who grasp their significance, their frequency and ubiquity have rendered the weighty concepts meaningless catchphrases. It is these socio-political concepts – *Tsawasum*, *tha damtshig*, *le judre*, *driglam namzha*, and *Gyalyong gakyi palzom* – their historical origins, significance, usage, implications and underlying assumptions which I shall attempt to explore briefly.

I am a philosopher by training, and particularly a student of Buddhist ontology and epistemology. Therefore, I am fully aware that in undertaking this study I am venturing into a domain beyond my own expertise. Hence, I make no claims to offer original ideas or penetrating insights into these themes. Nevertheless, it is my philosophical inclination and interest in the affairs of home, which give me the impetus to reflect on these topics of great significance and popularity.

I concur with Bertrand Russell in maintaining that philosophers are both effects and causes of their host societies, 'effects of their social circumstances and of the politics and institutions of their time; causes (if they are fortunate) of beliefs which mould the politics and institutions of later ages'. A successful philosopher, in Bertrand Russell's words, 'is a person in whom are crystallized and concentrated thoughts and feelings which, in a vague and diffused form, are common to the community of which he is part'.¹ Unfortunately, I cannot claim to be such a fortunate or successful philosopher but I surely cannot deny being an image cast in the mould of the Bhutanese socio-cultural milieu and political situation insofar as my personality, attitude, outlook and viewpoints have been shaped, *en rapport* or otherwise, by the prevailing socio-cultural and political circumstances.

¹ Russell (2001), p. 7

Thus, it is the highly influential status of these concepts in the traditional Bhutanese society and in particular the recent promotion of these with political overtones, which compel me to engage in the following discussion. My urge is indeed further enhanced by the patriotic impulse of being a conscious and responsible member of the tradition and society concerned. This is however not to suggest that this study, motivated by a patriotic zeal, is going to be an emotional and prescriptive discourse rather than a rational and descriptive analysis. I aim to undertake, using a conglomerate of philosophical, historical, sociological and anthropological approaches, an analytical discussion of the themes, unaffected by any linear or particularistic stance.

By the same token, this is not to be construed as a calculated critique of either the social norms or the state policies and practices in vogue but a systematic scrutiny of the religious, ethical and political dimensions of the themes in question. My main aim is to take the discussion of these themes to a higher philosophical and analytical level and thereby attempt to reveal the underlying assumptions. Should such 'philosophization' and the critical approach universal to academia reveal or reiterate any discontinuity, inconsistency or contradiction either between the original purport and later interpretations, between principle and practice or between reality and rhetoric, such I hope will be seen as findings of constructive value. Much of the time, I shall be only asking questions, the art of which my mentors in academia taught me as the very first lesson. As far as possible, I shall also try to integrate into my reflections the concerns of other like-minded Bhutanese, whose voices this discussion ought to echo.

It is perhaps appropriate at the very outset to state two salient features of the themes to be discussed: (1) they are originally religious or para-religious concepts and (2) they acquired, mostly in recent years, a secular and political dimension to their application. The discussion thus spans from the origination of these concepts as moral principles understood within the parameters of a given religious system, to the process of secularisation at later stages. I shall now turn to discuss the two stages of development for each of these concepts in the order of their probable historical sequence.

Le Judre

Le judre (*las rgyu 'bras*) or the law of karmic cause and effect certainly figures as a concept of great antiquity. Pappu traces the origin of karma to the *ta* (*rta* and in *i aap* (*rta* in the *Rig Veda*, which is the earliest of the

four Vedas.² O'Flaherty conjectures that the concept of karma could have preceded the belief in rebirth.³ Obeyesekere, on the other hand, hypothesises that the theory of karma developed from the theory of rebirth through a process of speculative activity which he labels 'ethicization'.⁴ He argues that the theory of rebirth could have flourished among the tribals of the Gangetic plains just as it is widely spread among different tribals in many parts of the world and that Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thinkers transformed this 'rebirth eschatology into karmic eschatology'. Whatever the origins, the theory of karma forms the ground rule for all major religious systems of Indic origin including Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism. A great number of both classical and secondary literature on karma is available, hence, for the present purpose I shall only draw upon few authoritative Buddhist texts to demonstrate the nature, significance and ramifications of the law of karma in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition from which our concept of *le judre* is derived.

Le judre, it should be noted, is a subject which tradition believes is so vast and abstruse so that only the omniscient Buddha can fully fathom it.⁵ Hence, a few paragraphs of discussion will hardly do it any justice. My intention here is to provide only a synopsis of karma as a moral and ethical principle. A comprehensive treatment of the metaphysical theories of karmic mechanism has been carried out elsewhere.⁶

² Pappu (1987), p. 1: He describes *♦ta* as 'the principle of cosmic order which controls, unifies, and orders all phenomena', and *i•nap(ṛta)* as 'the payment made to the priest for performance of a sacrifice and obtaining merit'.

³ O'Flaherty (1980), p. 3

⁴ Obeyesekere (1980), p. 138

⁵ See, for instance, Vasubandhu and Yaśomitra (1981), vol. ii, p. 1222 for Rāhulabhadra's verse which Vasubandhu quotes:

sarvakara∞ kara)am ekasya may\racandrakasyapi /
nasarvajñair jñeya∞ sarvajñabala∞ hi tajjñanam //

rma bya'i gdongs ni gcig la yang / / rgyu yi rnam pa thams cad ni / /
kun mkhyen min pas shes bya min / / de shes kun mkhyen stobs yin no //

The multiplicity of causes

For [producing] even a single peacock feather

Is not conceivable by [those who are] not omniscient.

Knowing [all about] it is the power of Omniscience [only].

See also | Shantideva's remark in *Bodhicaryavatara*, IV/7

vetti sarvajaa evaitam acintya∞ karma)o gatiṃ /

las tshul bsam gyis mi khyab pa / / thams cad mkhyen pa kho nas mkhyen / /

The Omniscient one alone knows

The inconceivable nature of karma.

⁶ Phuntsho (1998)

The Buddha taught a voluntaristic theory of karma proclaiming karma to be intention. Speaking against the Brahminical and Jain theories of karma as physical and material phenomena, he declared, "O Monks! Karma, I declare, is intention. Having intended, the body, speech and mind perform action".⁷ According to the Buddha, good and bad karma are not defined by the physical appearance and verbal speech but by intention. It is virtuous, non-virtuous and neutral intentions, which determine actions to be virtuous, non-virtuous and neutral. The three kinds of actions then bring respectively happiness, suffering or no results.

The Buddha rejected the deterministic doctrine of the Brahminical religion, which taught karma as social duty determined by caste and sex. Maintaining karma *qua* intention to be the main moral determinant, he used the moral and spiritual values people adopted in their life as the yardstick to judge their virtue and social status. This ethical voluntarism of the Buddha has been reiterated throughout the ages by subsequent Buddhist savants such as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu and Candrakīrti.⁸ Corollary to such ethical philosophy, the Buddha and his followers professed a social egalitarianism whereby all persons are equal irrespective of their caste, race and sex.

Crucial to the theory of karma as intention is then the distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous intentions. Like the issue of good and bad, and right and wrong in normative ethics, the question of what constitutes virtuous and non-virtuous intention is a vital and complex issue in Buddhism. Suffice here to cite Nāgārjuna who formulates the distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous intention in the following verse:

'dod chags zhe sdang gti mug gsum // des bskyed las ni mi dge ba // ma chags ma sdang gti mug med // des bskyed las ni dge ba 'o //

Actions motivated by attachment, hatred and ignorance are non-virtuous.

Actions motivated by non-attachment, non-hatred, non-ignorance are virtuous.⁹

Buddhist thinkers such as Nāgārjuna, philosophising in a strictly spiritual and soteriological context, argued that any action motivated by thoughts contaminated with the three poisonous emotions of attachment, hatred and delusion are non-virtuous and negative, whereas actions

⁷ *Aṅguttaranikāya*, iii, 415: "cetanahaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi, cetayitva kammaṃ karoti kayena vacaya manasa /

⁸ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamādhyamīkākārikā*, XVIII/ 2-3; Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, IV/1, Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvātāra*, VI/89

⁹ Nāgārjuna, *Ratnavālī*, I/20:

motivated by their three antidotal impulses are positive and virtuous. The latter are considered good because they bring forth happiness, and the former are considered evil as they entail suffering as their result. Thus, Buddhist thinkers propounded an axiological and teleological form of moral philosophy with subjective volition at its heart. This theory of karma as intention/volition and the law of corresponding causation that virtue causes happiness and non-virtuous actions cause suffering form the foundations of the edifice that is the Buddhist soteriological and ethical system.

Now, the law of karma, in spite of its philosophical profundity and practical complexity, is one of the most popular religious concepts. It is not merely an intellectual topic broached by philosophers and scholars but a belief espoused by the masses. In Bhutan, the law of karma often referred to as *le judre* or just *le*, certainly features as a very popular religious concept. People view it as an infallible law of virtuous actions leading to happiness and happy rebirth and non-virtuous actions leading to suffering and unhappy rebirth. When and where such conviction is fickle, several kinds of religious teachings and practices are also adopted to instil constant awareness of and steadfast certainty about the infallibility of the law. Giving it a role akin to that of God in theistic religions, *le judre* is also feared and seen as both the explanation for the past and present state of being and the answer for the future. To be a moral man is to abide by *le judre* through engaging in virtuous actions and eschewing non-virtuous actions. 'To have no [regard for] *le judre*' (*las rgyu 'bras med pa*) is to be morally unconscientious, irresponsible and reckless.

The application of *le judre* in recent years however found new socio-political ramifications, which diverged from the original religious purport. It acquired a new political dimension whereby regard for *le judre* got confounded with political loyalty and submission to the ruling power or *zhung* (*gzhung*). Those lacking loyalty and commitment to the government were often described as not having *le judre* because of their lack of the sense of political obligation and duty. It is this secondary application with a nationalistic interest that I call here secularised *le judre*.

The main shift from the original spiritual purport to this secularised use is in taking mental attitudes such as loyalty and gratitude to the state and the sovereign as intrinsically positive and in not placing virtuous and non-virtuous intention defined by the three positive and poisonous emotions at the centre of *le judre*. From a strictly Buddhist psychological viewpoint, loyalty and gratitude, like regret and zeal, are classified as neutral attitudes and are not virtues *per se*. Regret after doing a bad thing and zeal for a good cause are virtuous while regretting a good deed and

zeal in an evil project are non-virtuous. Likewise, the moral qualities of loyalty and gratitude are determined by their object and purpose; pledging loyalty and gratitude are not inherently virtuous actions and proper observance of *le judre* or the *vice versa*.

Furthermore, certain acts which can be considered admirable and noble deeds in secular and worldly respects can contradict the Buddhist theory of *le judre*. Killing even in defence of the country, for instance, is a non-virtuous act motivated by hatred instigated by attachment and thus against the first Buddhist precept of not taking life. Vasubandhu, an authority on Buddhist ethics, even goes so far as to argue that every member of battalion would incur the negative deed of taking a human life when one soldier from the battalion kills an enemy.¹⁰ These examples suffice to demonstrate that allegiance and loyalty to the state and government is not necessarily consonant with the Buddhist observance of *le judre*, and confounding *le judre* with political loyalty is an aberration from the original concept. Although in actual use, the distinction between the *le judre* which is a pure religious principle and the *le judre* with political connotation is blurred, there is certainly a serious disjunction between the two.

Tha Damtshig

The concept of *tha damtshig*, like *le judre*, has an Indian origin. In its religious application, the Tibetan term *dam tshig* is used to translate the Sanskrit word *samaya* and refers to the precepts of tantric practice. Giving its etymological explanation, scholars describe *damtshig* as a pledge which ought not be transgressed ('*da' bar bya ba ma yin pa'i tshig*). It denotes the many general (*spyi*), special (*khyad par*) and extraordinary (*lhag pa*) do's and don'ts an initiate is required to observe after receiving tantric initiations. Thus, it is mostly used in connection with esoteric tantric Buddhism rather than with philosophical *sūtra* Buddhism, in which equivalent terms such as *sdom pa* and *bslab pa* are commonly used.

The *damtshig* of tantric practices include a great number of obligatory precepts ranging from obeying one's guru and loving all fellow beings to performing ceremonies at the right time. Tantras also vary in the number and type of *damtshig*. The Kālacakra cycle, for instance, proclaims fourteen primary *damtshig* and numerous minor ones while others such as the *Guhyagarbha* have five primary and many auxiliary ones. *Damtshig*, as a solemn oath and code of practice for the highly revered and esoteric form of Buddhism, is seen with much awe and fear. The proper observance of *damtshig* rewards the practitioner

¹⁰ Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa*, V/72

with swift enlightenment but an infringement of it is said to cause rebirth in the deepest hell. Hence, the tantric path with its solemn *damtshig* is often compared to trapping a snake in a bamboo stem. There are only two polar exits. *Damtshig* is also seen as a binding force, which keeps the community or line of practitioners spiritually pure and soteriologically effective. Persons who have violated *damtshig*, especially by opposing their guru, are considered to be spiritually dysfunctional and corrupt and often excommunicated from the community of practitioners.

The religious understanding of *damtshig* as tantric precepts however got extended to several social and moral notions, attitudes and behaviours in worldly use. Supplied with the prefix *tha* (*mtha'*), taken from *las kyi mtha'* and denoting moral limitation or boundary, *damtshig* acquired a range of social meanings. It may also be noted that *tha damtshig* is used more frequently in Bhutan than in other Himalayan countries and done so mostly in a social context.

Tha damtshig, depending on the context, covers a wide range of referents including honesty, fidelity, moral integrity, moral rectitude, moral coherence, reciprocal affection, gratitude, filial piety, etc. To say a shopkeeper did not have *tha damtshig* when she overcharged or manipulated the scales meant the shopkeeper lacked honesty. A spouse with no *tha damtshig* generally referred to a lack of marital fidelity while *tha damtshig* in connection with teacher-student and master-servant relations usually referred to kindness, respect, gratitude and loyalty. Among family and friends, it denotes affection, a feeling of kinship and sense of obligation. A person generally described as not possessing *tha damtshig* is someone lacking personal integrity and moral rectitude, and an act lacking *tha damtshig* is one which is unethical. An important social concept, *tha damtshig* thus has a wide range of referents and applications. It is however not my intention here to delve into these nuances and connotations. This brief survey will, I hope, provide an adequate backdrop against which to discuss the recent use of *tha damtshig* with a political connotation.

By recent use, I am referring to the application of *tha damtshig* in a socio-political context, in which persons who failed to remain loyal to the state and the government were seen as persons without *tha damtshig*. *Tha damtshig* in this case is confounded with political loyalty and allegiance to the government. Just as there is the *damtshig* bond among a religious group and *tha damtshig* ties within families and friends, a political bond is perceived between the people and the government.

The government plays the role of the senior party and is to be seen as an object of service and gratitude whereas the individual citizens are considered as the recipients of social benefit, who ought to be obedient

and grateful. Partly a relic of the past social stratification, this notion of the government as a superior entity to be respected and served instead of an administrative body to represent and serve the people still dominates the Bhutanese perception of government.

In this context, to breach the political bond by displaying disobedience and revoking one's political allegiance is seen as lacking *tha damtshig*. This interpretation of *tha damtshig* with a political and nationalistic overtone has gained currency especially after the 'anti-national' movements in the southern and eastern districts of the country towards the end of the last century. Persons who went against the government and state, irrespective of their moral stance and observance of *tha damtshig* in all other senses, were branded as lacking *tha damtshig*.

This leads us to the imperative of defining the importance of the various moral obligations and social contracts an individual can have vis-à-vis his/her religious master, family, friends and ruler. Which of the *tha damtshig*: the religious bond with the guru and colleagues, the social ties with family and friends, or political allegiance, should receive priority? The answer perforce is bound to vary from one individual to another depending on variant backgrounds and circumstantial reasons and no unitary and arbitrary answer can prove viable under proper scrutiny.

Similarly, should *tha damtshig* be defined more by socio-political obligations and considerations than by personal integrity and moral rectitude? Should not social vices such as misappropriation, nepotism and other forms of corruption and poor work discipline, which constantly mar Bhutanese bureaucracy, be reckoned as grave a neglect of *tha damtshig* as disobedience and defiance of authority? In the face of sweeping materialism and the social vices such as corruption, nepotism and power abuse, is it not *tha damtshig qua* moral dignity and ethical conscientiousness which we need most, rather than *tha damtshig* as zealous and sycophantic loyalty? In raising these issues, I am not questioning the moral rectitude of our bureaucrats or proposing the preference of one form of *tha damtshig* over the others. Neither am I being cynical about social contracts, a subject which Uni Wikan and Adam Pain has touched during the conference. My intention is merely to stimulate a thorough going discussion of the wide ranging nuances, interpretations and applications of *tha damtshig* with a hope to unpack the complexities of so popular and important a concept.

Driglam Namzha

Unlike *le judre* and *tha damtshig*, the origin of *driglam namzha* is not bound by a religious context. Neither is the recent promotion of *driglam namzha* a politicised aberration of religious concepts as is the case with

the two earlier concepts, but a formal reinforcement of what was previously a diffused and spontaneous tradition. *Drig* (*sgrigs*) denotes order, conformity and uniformity. Thus *driglam* literally means the way or path (*lam*) having order and uniformity while *namzha* (*rnam gzhas*) refers to concept or system. *Driglam namzha* is thus a system of ordered and cultured behaviour, and by extension, the standards and rules to this effect. Whitecross, following Karma Ura, has rendered *driglam namzha* as “the way of conscious order” or “the way of conscious harmony”.¹¹ They seem to have confounded *namzha* – concept or system – with *rnam shes* – consciousness.

Driglam namzha is not concerned as much with moral and ethical do’s and don’ts, right or wrong and the philosophical theories thereof as is *le judre* or *tha damtshig*. It deals with more mundane issues of physical and verbal comportment determined as crude or courteous by the specific social and cultural contexts. Thus, as a concept of orderly good manners and uniform behaviour, it is a human concept universal to all societies and ages. However, in claiming the universality of good manners, I am not holding manners to be *etic*. Manners, like many socio-cultural things, is *emic* bound by culture and viable in specific social circumstances. Thus, the concept of etiquette is determined by cultural contexts.

Tradition claims the Bhutanese *driglam* to have started with the Buddhist *vinaya* just as *damtshig* originated in the tantras. For instance, comportments such as chuckling while you eat and prancing while you walk, which Bhutanese *driglam* considers unbecoming for a cultured person, are described in the *vinaya* as behavioural flaws to be eschewed by the monks. The highly regulated, disciplined and routinized life of the monks and nuns also sufficiently demonstrates how monastic life epitomises the practice of *drig*, true to the saying: *Grwa pa sdrig gis ’tsho* – Monks survive by rules. Thus, good manners in the Bhutanese context is to a great extent what Buddhist codes of physical, verbal and mental conducts dictate as proper and wholesome. In particular, the codes of practice which Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel introduced in the central monk body and in other monastic and administrative centres are largely based on the code of etiquette known among Tibetan Buddhist clergy and elites.

Although the origin of *driglam* can be attributed to Buddhist ethical practices, it is however difficult to speculate if any form of organized and institutionalised practice of *driglam* existed in Bhutan before the Zhabdrung. The Zhabdrung and his immediate circle perhaps can be

¹¹ Whitecross (2002), p. 88. See Ura (1997), p. 247

rightly credited with the earliest implementation of *driglam* as a formal practice at an institutional level. Nonetheless, it may be an exaggeration to argue that all Bhutanese *driglam* and etiquette originated with the Zhabdrung as some people have ventured to speculate. One certainly cannot deny that *driglam*, in the form of loose and informal adoption of proper behaviour and manners, existed even before the Zhabdrung and his establishment of organised institutions.

The first major modern discussion on *driglam* is perhaps the deliberation and the subsequent resolution passed during the 20th session of the National Assembly in 1963 requiring all Bhutanese to wear complete Bhutanese dress during formal occasions.¹² Nonetheless, the first occurrence of the term *driglam namzha* seems to be during the 51st session in 1979.¹³ With the onslaught of modernization and the insidious invasion of western culture, particularly among the youth, in the 1980s, the need to preserve Bhutanese *driglam namzha* became a national imperative and the issue surfaced frequently in the National Assembly. Linked with national identity, *driglam namzha* acquired a new political significance. The growing concern about the decline of Bhutanese customs and the need for strengthening *driglam namzha* culminated in the royal decree of 16 January 1989, a milestone in the history of *driglam namzha*. The late 80s thus marked the beginning of a systematic promotion of *driglam namzha*, particularly with the enforcement of the national dress. This period and subsequent years also saw the rise of both genuine awareness of *driglam namzha* and the ubiquitous and often hypocritical reiteration of it.

The serious concern that His Majesty, the King had regarding the fate of Bhutanese tradition in the face of rapid process of modernization at home and globalizing trend in the world at large, echoed across the upper strata of Bhutanese bureaucracy. However, for some, *driglam namzha* became a political catchphrase. The rhetorical and repetitious use of *driglam namzha* turned the issue into an empty slogan. I still remember an expatriate in 1986 criticising a senior official who visited schools giving lectures on the importance of Bhutanese tradition and language but had his children studying outside Bhutan with no knowledge of either the tradition or the language.

The qualms about declining tradition and lack of *driglam namzha* came simultaneously with the worry about increasing western influence on the Bhutanese people. This decline in the practice of Bhutanese etiquette and the acquisition of modern western influences occurred

¹² National Assembly Secretariat, (1998), vol. i, p. 129

¹³ Ibid., vol. II, p. 13

mostly among the rising bureaucratic class and the affluent section of urban population. Ironically, the criticism regarding the deterioration of *driglam namzha* was also mainly voiced by the same people. The rural population on the whole was outside this arena being neither the critic nor targets of criticism. The call for *driglam namzha* and *dzongkha* and the complaints about modern western influences were criticisms of which the actual targets were mostly the circles of critics themselves. It was thus what Karma Ura calls 'a deflected criticism'.¹⁴

Furthermore, in spite of the constant reiteration of the problem of *driglam*, many professed promulgators of *driglam namzha* failed to address it even among their immediate circles. This consequently gave rise to suspicions and accusations of double standards in the implementation of *driglam namzha* and of using it as window dressing. The problem of the apparent double standard however is embedded in the tradition of *driglam* itself. In a situation where an inferior Bhutanese interacts with a senior one, *driglam* requires the inferior and younger to be refined and restrained in the presence of a senior while the senior person could enjoy the freedom of ease and comfort. It is not generally the case of exemplary manners, in which good manners are shown by superior and older people so as to inspire and impress the lower and younger ones, as it ideally should be and appears to be the case with comparable traditions like gentleman's manners in Britain. This trait of Bhutanese *driglam* seem to negatively affect the upper echelons of society in learning and inculcating *driglam namzha*, leaving them less cultured and experienced than persons from lesser backgrounds.

At about the same time, the perception and understanding of *driglam namzha* also began to change. While on one hand, *driglam namzha* continued to be used as a political rhetoric, on the other, it saw an unprecedented codification and systematisation. The last decade saw the publication of three different books on *driglam namzha* as well as the introduction of new norms such as the *tshoglam* rule. *Driglam namzha* came to be viewed more and more as the formal and structured display of official etiquette rather than as the fluid and spontaneous practice of good manners. Concerted efforts were made to systematise and standardise existent practices as well as to invent new ones. *Driglam namzha* was increasingly perceived as a social skill, which like other professional skills has been learnt through formal lessons from a qualified instructor instead of seeing it as good manners which can be inculcated by one's association with cultured people. In this way, *driglam* became increasingly an official idiom and became distanced from the concept of

¹⁴ Personal communication

good conduct in everyday life. It became associated with court behaviour and a structured set of conduct during official events. This formalisation and reification of what were formerly loose and spontaneous forms of refined comportment in different facets of life elevated *driglam* to the status of a systematic concept. It became a formal system, as the word *namzha* denotes.

It is in such systematisation, standardization and ‘invention of tradition’ that we can see the divergence of the former concept of *driglam* and the latter system of *driglam namzha*. Whitecross shows this distinction by contrasting *driglam namzha* and *beyzha* (*sbe''bad bzhaq*), a word which denotes manners without any connotation of formalization. He correctly highlights the importance of *beyzha* in daily life more than the systematized *driglam namzha*. However, in portraying *beyzha* as a behavioural concept, he also runs the risk of reifying and formalizing *beyzha*.¹⁵

The real spirit and beauty of *driglam qua* etiquette lies in the spontaneous practice and inner appreciation of it as wholesome conduct. Formalization and enforcement of it kills this spirit turning it into mechanical acts of obligation and duty. The arbitrary extension of tradition and customs both temporally and spatially can only yield a superficial impact and not an ingrained tradition. Tradition is an evolving phenomenon. It is not a static entity but a flux and its course of development, like fashion, is decided by what is right at the time. To hold onto to an out-dated custom which time has rendered ineffective and unappealing or to wilfully invent and introduce prematurely a new tradition are both to interfere in the natural course of tradition, and therefore rob tradition of its beauty and purpose.

Moreover, the imposition of one tradition across the board and the standardization of numerous variants destroy the diversity and the spontaneity of traditions. Have we then in the course of formalization on the one hand and through the rhetorical use on the other defeated the very purpose of *driglam namzha qua* good manners?

Tsawasum

Tsawasum (*rtsa ba gsum*), literally means the three roots or foundations. The tantric Buddhist *Tsawasum* refer to the triad of *guru* or *bla ma*, *devatā* or *yi dam* and *āḍikinī* or *mkha'* 'gro. They are roots because they serve as sources of blessings, attainments and activities respectively. Thus, *Tsawasum* in tantric Buddhism form a crucial category similar to the Three Jewels in general Buddhism and the concepts of trinity in other

¹⁵ Whitecross (2002), p. 71

religions. The *Tsawasum* to be discussed here however is an altogether different category although there is no doubt that the terminology has been appropriated from the tantric religious triad.

The first mention of *Tsawasum* with the socio-political referents appears in the *Khrims gzhung chen mo* first written in the 1950s. In the *Khrims gzhung chen mo*, the Country, King and Government are mentioned as *Tsawasum*.¹⁶ Dasho Singkhar Lam however remarks that the third King's intention was to enumerate the Government, Country and People as *Tsawasum*.¹⁷ The third King, he recollects, reasoned that the King, as a part of the government, need not be separated from the government. In addition to these two textual and oral versions of reckoning *Tsawasum*, there is the recent enumeration of *Tsawasum* comprising the King, Country and People.¹⁸

Although the concept of *Tsawasum* started in the 1950s, it did not figure as popular a concept then as it did during its re-emergence in the late 1980s. Probably the first officially documented reoccurrence of *Tsawasum* was in the 65th session of the National Assembly in 1989, when the 'anti-national' conspiracy through distribution of pamphlets and booklets was discussed and officially defined as an act of treason against the *Tsawasum*.¹⁹ Keeping in tune with the act in the *Khrims gzhung chen mo*, all persons who went against the *Tsawasum* were branded as *ngolops* or 'anti-nationals' and *Tsawasum* were hailed as the trinity of Bhutanese nationhood. In the wake of the political crisis and armed conflicts in the southern districts, *Tsawasum* became an iconic political category which people cited so profusely as the cause to fight for. Loyalty and service to *Tsawasum* became the mantra to excite patriotism and nationalism in order to combat the threats posed by the crisis. It served as a buzzword which encapsulated everything that is Bhutanese and that Bhutan stood for.

Tsawasum however soon suffered the same fate as *driglam namzha* in turning into a topic of empty rhetoric. People began to use it too frequently and lightly, often without even knowing what the *Tsawasum* are. As demonstrated by the anecdotes I have told above, most people are not aware of what the *Tsawasum* are and what significance they have. Many used it as an ingratiating slogan in their dealings with the King and the government. The welfare of *Tsawasum* became a new purpose for

¹⁶ IHo tsan ldan bkod pa'i zhing gi khrims gzhung chen mo, p. 136, n.p. n.d

¹⁷ Personal communication

¹⁸ See documents such as National Assembly Secretariat (1991), p. 2

¹⁹ See National Assembly Secretariat (1989), p. 9

community endeavours, giving rise to the concern that *Tsawasum* is being used too excessively and smarmily, depreciating its value.²⁰

The devaluation of *Tsawasum* at the hands of rhetoricians and sycophants is further compounded by the dearth of serious scholarship on the topic. Despite being a topic of national importance, *Tsawasum* remained a neglected topic with no proper study or analysis undertaken so as to build a firm philosophical grounding. The viability of *Tsawasum* as the trinity of Bhutanese nationhood was taken for granted and loyalty and service to *Tsawasum* were inculcated without adequate moral reasoning and justifications. This is perhaps acceptable in the current situation and fine to be left untouched out of benign neglect. Nevertheless, imagine, for instance, a scenario where the *Tsawasum* are in a conflict of interest and where simultaneous loyalty to all three become inconsistent and therefore cannot be sustained. Which of the three should take precedence? Should such a scenario arise, can the iconic triad even survive? Asking such questions are crucial to ensuring the credibility of our system, its plans, policies and visions, as most of them revolve round the theme of *Tsawasum*.

A primary thrust of promoting *Tsawasum* and of slogans such as 'One Nation, One People' appears to be the arousal of a fervent sense of nationalism. Yet, the very purpose and value of nationalism itself is ambiguous and a double-edged sword. Looking from a Buddhist perspective, sentient beings have the inborn inclination to love oneself and what is one's own. This attachment, of all negative impulses, is the main cause of problems in the world and the root of the cycle of existence. To further inculcate this in people is a superfluous effort and is only adding fuel to the fire.

Moreover, nationalism can lead to ethnic and regional particularism, religious sectarianism and ultimately individualism. Promoting nationalism in order to counteract an external threat can backfire in the form of internal segregation based on minor differences. The fanatical Hindu nationalism that wrecks our big neighbour India is a stark example of how nationalism that was nurtured and taught in order to oppose an external enemy has outlived the enemy, bringing so much discord and violence in the country.

A similar sense of misgiving can also be felt with regard to our tendency for homogeneity that dictums like 'One Nation, One people' encourage. Homogenisation through the implementation of uniform values and customs, and standardization of localised variations, I have

²⁰ I heard a senior citizen remark during the recess of last National Assembly session: "Even reciting the *mDo mangs* or performing a *lha bsang* is proclaimed to have been done in service to the *Tsawasum* nowadays."

mentioned earlier, kills the spirit of tradition and subverts the policy of cultural preservation. Although it may serve some national interests temporarily, it will in the long run destroy the diverse spectrum of our priceless heritage. Thus, it is not a homogeneous and monotonous system that should form our future vision but unity in diversity and harmony within multiplicity.

Now, to turn to some concluding words, it may perhaps be quite fitting to conclude my discussion of the themes with a story of Drukpa Kunley that I heard as a young boy from my father sitting by the family hearth. Drukpa Kunley was once circumambulating the Jokhang in Lhasa when he found a man meditating legs crossed and eyes shut. Upon enquiring, the man told Drukpa Kunley that he was practicing patience. Drukpa Kunley, as mischievous as always, repeated the same question every time he went round the Jokhang. The more he asked, the more agitated and angry the man became and at about the fifth round, the man chased Drukpa Kunley with vehement anger, while Drukpa Kunley ran about shouting "The practitioner of patience is coming to beat me". Drukpa Kunley was a social and religious critic *par excellence*. With zest for humour and wit, he showed that the practice of patience is not about meditating crossed legged with eyes closed but about tolerating irritation, annoyance and hardship in every walk of life. This anecdote thus captures a vivid picture of how disparate verbal claims and applied practices can be and how the fruits of real purpose can be often obscured by the foliage of rhetorical speech.

A major problem concerning the Bhutanese social themes also appears to be the disparity between word and deed. Mention is made of all the themes but mostly as insincere and rhetorical remarks to embellish orations and speeches. In spite of the repetitious use made almost to the extent of obfuscating other concrete issues, no proper measures have been taken either to give these issues a philosophical and moral layout and grounding or to systematically relate them to the frugal life of the villages. What moral and social purposes do the promotion of these as national themes serve? What pragmatic relevance do they have with respect to an individual, a family, a village and the nation as a whole? For themes of great value and national importance, there are too many assumptions unaccounted for and questions unanswered. Questions are indeed eternal; they are forever. Answers are only for now.²¹

²¹ I owe this piece of wisdom to Prof. Richard Gombrich.

Bibliography

- Aṅguttara Nikaya (The Book of Gradual Sayings)*, F.L. Woodward (tr.) (1932). London: Pali Text Society, 6, 5 vols.
- lHo tsan ldan bkod pa'i zhing gi khrims gzhung chen mo*, n.p. n.d.
- Candrakīrti, (ed.) La Vallée Poussin (1912). *Madhyamakāvātara*, St. Petersburg: Bibliotheca Buddhica IX
- Nāgārjuna, (ed.) J. W. de Jong, (1977). *M(lamadhyamakakarika / Madras: The Adyar Library and Research Centre*
- . *Ratnaval* in *dBu ma rigs tshogs drug*, Lanzhou: Gansu People's Publishing House, pp. 74-124
- National Assembly Secretariat (1989). *Proceedings and Resolutions adopted during the 68th session of the National Assembly*, Thimphu: National Assembly Secretariat
- National Assembly Secretariat (1991). *The Proceedings and Resolutions adopted during the 70th session of the National Assembly held from 8th to 24th October, 1991*, Thimphu: National Assembly Secretariat
- National Assembly Secretariat (1998). *Resolutions of National Assembly of Bhutan, 1953-1980 (1st to 50th sessions)*, Thimphu: National Assembly Secretariat
- Obeyesekere, Gananath (1980). "The Rebirth Eschatology and Its Transformations: A Contribution to the Sociology of Early Buddhism", in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Religions*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger (1980). "Karma and Rebirth in the Vedas and Puraṇas", in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Religions*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Pappu, Rama Rao (1987). "Introduction", *The Dimensions of Karma*, Delhi: Chanakya Publication
- Phuntsho, Karma (1998). *Karmaphalasaṅbandha: The Link between Action and Result in Buddhism* (Dissertation submitted to the University of Oxford for the degree of M.St.)
- Russell, Bertrand (2001). *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge
- Śāntideva, (eds.) P. L. Vaidya & Sridhar Tripathi, (1988), *Bodhicaryāvatāra / Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute*
- Ura, Karma (1997). "Tradition and Development", in Schicklgruber & Pommaret, *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of Gods*, London: Serindia Publications
- Vasubandhu & Yaomitra (1981). *Abhidharmakośakārikā & Bhaya with Sphuārtha*, (ed.) Dwarikadas Astri, Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati
- Whitecross, Richard (2002). *The Zhabdrung's Legacy: State Transformation, Law and Social Values in Contemporary Bhutan*, Ph. D thesis, University of Edinburgh