

On the Two Ways of Learning in Bhutan*

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Bhutanese folklore has it that the bat would show its teeth to the birds to evade the bird tax, and show its wings to the beasts to evade the beast tax. But come winter, when the food supplies are distributed, the bat would show its wings to the birds and teeth to the beasts to claim its share from both, although often it is rejected and ostracized by both parties. This paper is an outcome of my role as a bat-like scholar involved in both traditional and modern systems of learning and scholarship, with some of the academic teeth of the modernist beasts as well as the spiritual wings of the traditionist birds, and at times, like the bat, being disowned and despised by both, by the traditionists as an unfaithful, agnostic cynic, and by the moderns as a narrow-minded, *sutra*-thumping fanatic. This double role, however, to my advantage, has given me the opportunity to study my own religion and culture from the various perspectives using different tools, and revealed to me the privileged position in which one can blend the varying approaches and methods of the modernists and traditionists. It is from the vantage point of such position that I shall present a case study of the encounter of the two systems of education – traditional and modern – in the Kingdom of Bhutan.

* This paper is a written version of my presentation during the conference of South Asian Studies, Edinburgh, 2000, entitled, *Traditional Scholarship in Modern Bhutan, Current Educational Trends and their Impact on Traditional Learning*. My primary thanks go to John Guth and the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard, for the fellowship during which I worked on this. Many other persons are also to be thanked for their contributions. For easy reading, names of people and places are only transcribed but other *Chökey* (*chos skad*) and *Dzongkha* (*rdzong kha*) words are separately transliterated according to the Wylie system. However, I have transliterated even names in the endnotes and diacritics are used for Sanskrit spelling. The dates are mostly based on the database of Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center set up by E. Gene Smith.

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It may not be an exaggeration to claim that of all the changes and developments that the Kingdom of Bhutan saw in the last half of the twentieth century the ones in education are the most evident, momentous and far-reaching. The introduction of modern education toward the end of the 1950s opened a new chapter in the history of learning and scholarship in Bhutan. Although there is no denying that improvements were also made in other facets of living such as health, agriculture, communication, trade, transport, governance, etc., progressive changes in education were far more dramatic and far-reaching. Educational means, including the number of academic institutions, teachers, students and the rate of literacy have increased since 1959 by leaps and bounds, affecting all sections of society. This rapid development in modern education has brought about unprecedented changes in the social, cultural, political and economic structures, and has in particular revolutionized the education system.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to study the socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions of the impact the growth of modern education has had on Bhutanese society. My primary aim here is to discuss the encounter of the two systems of education, and to appraise the various ramifications their conflicts with and contributions to each other have engendered. Owing to various constraints, this paper is far from being a piece of thorough research. It is mainly a reflective account of my own experiences, gained, as mentioned earlier, from formal participation in the two systems.

Before delving further into the issues of traditional and modern education in Bhutan, a brief analysis of what we mean by “traditional” and “modern” may not be amiss here. “Tradition” comes from the Latin verb *tradere*, to deliver, hand over and pass down, and “modern” derives from *modo*, just now. In general, the two are understood as contrasting sets of human behavioural styles and methods of living, learning, thinking, speaking, writing, etc. While tradition is frequently seen as an indigenous culture of a particular society inherited from its past, modernism is viewed as a more recent development strongly influenced by innovative and scientific methodologies. Temporally, the former is considered old and the latter new and current, and spatially speaking, the former is local and the latter global, although it is often associated with the Occident. But this

is a rather simplistic understanding of the two systems and to bifurcate our styles of living and learning into traditional and modern on the basis of such difference would be an oversimplification. Hence, one must not overlook the complexities that underlie both systems and the nuances involved in the usage of the terms.

In this paper, I shall not try to define tradition and modernity, but by “traditional education and learning” shall arbitrarily mean the learning and pedagogical practice passed down to the present day Bhutanese by the indigenous scholars and adepts either in written or in oral form in the medium of classical or vernacular languages of Bhutan.¹ In contrast, “modern” shall denote the recently established system of learning, which consists of various strands of western methods of education and pedagogy received either directly from the West or through India and transacted mainly in the medium of English. Hence, it mainly constitutes a western import introduced during the commencement of modernization in the last half of the twentieth century. The former mainly thrives in the religious centres such as *shedras* (*bshad grwa*), *dratshangs* (*grwa tshang*) and *drubdras* (*sgrub grwa*) and the latter flourishes in schools and colleges.

Because of the fairly recent introduction of modernization and the historic isolation and conservatism that Bhutan maintained, the concepts of modernity, and of tradition as opposed to modernity, are relatively new to the Bhutanese. Nonetheless, the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, their conflicts and convergence, has manifested in various fields of music, art, health, etc. and the encounter of the two can nowhere be more vivid than in the sector of education and learning. The advent of modern education brought heterogeneity to the otherwise largely homogenous Bhutanese educational system. It made available to people not only the opportunity of having education, which to a degree was a privilege of elites and clerics, but of having several options to choose from. It is this encounter and the Bhutanese reception and acceptance of heterogeneity in education that will form the theme of this paper. The encounter of the two systems and their impact on each other and on the society in general has to be understood in the light of their general features and characteristics. Understanding rudimentary principles and perspectives enshrined in the two systems is pivotal to a proper

evaluation of their conflicts and contributions inter se. However, the two systems merits more elaborate study than this paper can contain. Suffice it here to outline the major difference between the systems.

The following table studies the two systems by contrast, juxtaposing the main purposes, perspectives, approaches, contents, media and methodologies used. The differences illustrated here however are mainly in emphasis and priority and the similarities between the two systems, which I am not enumerating here, should not be overlooked.

The primary factor that determines the difference in outlooks and approaches between the two systems is the ultimate goal they aim to achieve. Learning is not an end in itself in either system.

	Traditional Training	Modern Education
Purpose:	Mainly Introvert Spiritual Training culminating in Omniscience	Mainly Extrovert Skills for Human Development
Content:	Religion or Religion Oriented, Liberal	Secular and Scientific, Technical
Approach:	Mostly Passive Reception, Static, Conservative	Mostly Active Innovation, Creative, Progressive
Perspective:	Faith, Reverence, Sanctity, For Religious Edification	Interest, Curiosity, Rationality, For Acquiring Knowledge and Skills
Medium:	<i>Chökey / Dzongkha</i>	English
Methodology:	Buddhist monastic methods of memorization, debates, contemplation, exposition, etc.	Systematic Western educational techniques of critical scrutiny, statistics, experiments, etc.

In the case of traditional learning, which is laden with religious content, even lessons on linguistics and dialectics are viewed as indirect means of achieving the omniscience of the Buddha.² Each session of dharmic lessons begins with the imperative to generate the noble intention (*kun slong*) of Bodhicitta (*byang chub sems*), the benevolent thought of seeking enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Education is to be viewed as a process of edification and knowledge as a tool for benefiting the world. Although human development and worldly happiness are sought to an extent, they can only be temporary goals and are secondary to the soteriological goal of inner enlightenment.

In contrast, modern education is generally aimed at human development and improving living conditions in this world. Very often, it is for the purpose of obtaining happiness and material comfort for oneself. Unlike the traditionists, who view learning as spiritual training which can culminate in the omniscient wisdom of the

Buddha, modernists consider education as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills which in turn can contribute towards the development of individual or communal standards of life. Hence, it is strongly influenced by materialism, and spiritual endeavours, if any, are marginal. A student is encouraged even at an early stage of learning to opt for subjects through which he or she can develop skills to earn a better living or choose professions that are financially lucrative and socially beneficial.

In brief, the ideal purpose of most traditional training is introverted spirituality whereas the extroverted pursuit of worldly happiness remains at the heart of the modern system. Although one certainly cannot attribute the materialistic attitude to all modernists and the spiritual inclination to all members of the traditional institutions, the ideological difference in the objectives, as enshrined in the two systems and promulgated by their institutions, is quite clear. In Bhutan, this difference in objectives is particularly evident in the reasons students and their parents give for their choice of monastic or modern education. It is the goal of education which determines the candidates', or often their parents', choice of traditional or modern training.

The disparity in objectives is directly connected to the discrepancies in the content of teachings given in the two systems. Formal education in the tradition is largely training in religious philosophy and religious arts such as liturgy, monastic music, dances, sculpture, painting, etc. Thus, the content of teaching is mainly Buddhist philosophy, soteriology, metaphysics, monastic discipline and other subjects related to Buddhism. Due to the dominant role of religion, other subjects such as ethnography and political history are neglected and often despised as subjects without any soteriological value. When common sciences (*thun mong gi rig pa*)³ such as epistemology, logic, language, poetry, prosody, astrology and history are taught, it is with a strong religious orientation. However, it may be noted here in passing that the tradition of thirteen crafts (*bzo rig bcu gsum*), the concept of which is unique to Bhutan, is less associated with religious education and is often practised outside religious institutions.

The content of modern education varies from the traditional in that it encompasses many disciplines which were not covered by the traditional curricula. The domain of learning, classified into humanities and sciences, with sub-categories and further sub-categories, encompasses a wide range of subjects. In comparison, traditional scholars, following the Indo-Tibetan typology, classify fields of learning (*rig pa'i gnas*) into five or ten kinds of sciences.⁴ However, not all five or ten sciences are formally taught in traditional institutions and the emphasis is laid on religious subjects, and also on language and astrology in some cases.⁵ Thus, traditional training is almost exclusively a liberal education, strongly embedded in Buddhist moral values and generally aimed at making the student wiser and more enlightened, while modern education comprises both liberal and technical training, and is less value-oriented and aimed at making the student more skilful and productive.

This disparity in defining the goal and the content of education subsequently led to differences in perspectives, outlooks and approaches. Traditional education, as dictated by religion, is conducted in an atmosphere of awe and reverence. A solemn and rigorous classroom code of conduct is observed with each session, beginning with prayers to Manjushri and concluding with a dedication of merits for the sake of sentient beings. Before the lesson, the teacher, in a preliminary sermon on religious etiquette, reminds the students to cultivate benevolent intention, adopt the proper behaviour, and eschew unbecoming and mundane attitudes and acts.⁶ Students are asked to view themselves as patients, the teacher as a physician, the teachings as medicine, and cure as resulting from the careful adoption of teachings.⁷ Faith and devotion to the teacher and the teachings are important and the subject and the texts that contain it are to be treated with respect. Education, viewed as religious training in itself, is taken as a virtuous activity leading to a higher spiritual plane of enlightenment, and knowledge acquired through it is seen as a tool for benefiting the world.

On the contrary, such faith and devotion to the teacher and teachings are not required in the modern system. Instead, it invites rational enquiry and critical scrutiny. Besides, learning a particular discipline in modern institutions is mostly instigated by personal interest and

curiosity or driven by a Desire to acquire knowledge and skill in the field, which in turn would fulfil some other goals. Hence, a devotional treatment of the teacher and his discourses is not required or even recommended. Although rationality is not unknown in traditional education as reasoning and logic form a major component of Buddhist philosophy, the student is generally obliged to accept the authority of the teachers and texts, at least of those that are regarded as authoritative in that particular tradition, because they serve as standard guides and guidelines in the quest for freedom from samsaric existence. Thus, the authority of the tradition is seldom questioned and no attempt is made to surpass the existent theories and practices through new discoveries. At best, one can reformulate the existent doctrines with some novel interpretations to explicate the otherwise abstruse, or to elaborate condensed teachings.

In this way, the traditional approach is characterized by passive reception and repetitive exposition, an enterprise to receive and uphold, to preserve and prolong rather than innovate and invent. Modern education however is marked by innovation and development and is by nature progressive learning aimed at discovering more and inventing something better. The fast changes in electronics and information technology today are an excellent example of this modern pursuit of novelty and improvement. Corresponding to this kind of outlook and approach, modern education uses scientific and creative methods of learning. Courses and syllabuses are carefully Designed, instructors are trained professionals, and instruction is imparted proficiently using skilful pedagogical techniques. All kinds of educational equipment and methods are used for making learning faster, easier and enjoyable.

The traditional system of education lacks such stimulating and exciting methods and techniques. Learning in the tradition is a solemn and onerous undertaking demanding a lot of intellectual concentration. Of the methods used, memorization, exposition, contemplation and debate are the most common, although the last one is used less in Bhutan than in Tibetan monastic colleges. Lectures called dharma sessions (*chos thun*) form the main component of traditional training but they are often cumbersome and too long to retain uninterrupted attention. Debates and discussions are more

stimulating. Generally speaking, religious training consists of the triadic activities of learning (*thos pa*, literally hearing), reflection (*bsam pa*, literally thinking) and meditation (*sgom pa*, literally practising), of which the first two constitute scholarly activities. These three are also sometimes presented in the binary sets of reading (*klog pa*), which includes the first two, and renunciation (*spong ba*), which corresponds to the third activity of practice or meditation.

Scholarly activities in tradition are classified into exposition (*'chad pa*), debate (*rtsod pa*) and composition (*rtsom pa*), but the last is used more as a means of scholarly output than as a method of learning. Exposition and debates are common methods of learning, the first being prevalent in the *shedras* of *Nyingma* (*rnying ma*), *Kagyü* (*bka' brgyud*) and *Sakya* (*sa skya*) schools and the latter in the seats (*gdan sa*) of the *Gelug* (*dge lugs*) school. It is typical in the *shedras* of *Kagyü* and *Nyingma* schools for a teacher to give a lesson in the form of exegetic monologues, which at times can last hours, and assign the student to repeat it the next day. In certain cases, meditation is also used as a method of scholarly learning. In the tradition of *Dzogchen* *_r_siha* *Shedra* (*rdzogs chen srisimha bshad grwa*), a text such as *Bodhicaryavatara* is read verse by verse, and students are encouraged not only to learn by listening to the explanations and to memorize the text but also to meditate on the content of the verse in order to gain steadfast certainty in the subject.

Unlike the modern system, traditional training involves mostly verbal expositions and debates, and education in writing, for instance by assigning homework, is limited to learning grammar and poetry. This lack of learning through writing can be explained by the paucity of stationery resources, although there were also other reasons. For instance, the study of writing, that is grammar and poetry, was officially restricted in the major *dGe lugs pa* monasteries in the old days, in order to curb secular interests in students. Besides, traditional syllabi are not well structured to be comprehensive and lack a systematic and graduated approach. Although a gradual process of learning, especially in the case of meditation, is incorporated, modern curricular structures and methods by far excel the traditional styles.

Similarly, limit on the size of classes are not defined and lectures can be public sermons with thousands of people in the audience or one to one instruction between the master and disciple. Feedback from the teacher is not regulated or formal, but because of the master-disciple *Bond* (*bla slob kyi 'brel ba*) in the traditional set-up, the teacher pays ample attention to the student's welfare, both academic and otherwise. Likewise, there are many other subtle differences between the two which cannot be dealt with here. It is also these differences in perspective, approach and methodology between the two that distinguishes the modern academic study of Buddhism from the study of the same discipline by traditionists.⁸

Having sketched in the major discrepancies between the two systems, I shall now turn to briefly survey the history of their development in Bhutan. It hardly requires mentioning that until the end of the 1950s Bhutan remained an isolated country enclosed within its towering mountains and rustic valleys, and had very little interaction with the outside world. Although it was a self-sufficient society, most of the people being subsistence farmers, basic social services including educational facilities were scarce. Formal training in institutions such as *shedras* and *lobdras* (*slob grwa*) was rare and access to it was the prerogative of the monks and the upper strata of the society. The *dratshangs* mainly served as centres for training in monastic liturgies and rituals and rarely provided training in philosophical or linguistic subjects. However, a lot of people sought their learning by studying under a private master, who would impart informal discourses on religion, language, poetry, etc. to his group of disciples. Aristocratic families often had their children educated in basic literacy and numeracy by such masters. Most of these masters were themselves trained in Tibet, which to the Bhutanese then represented the hub of Buddhist learning and scholarship.

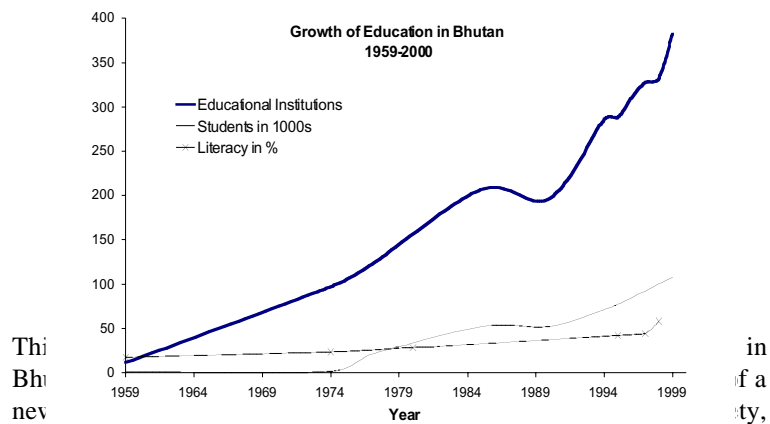
The introduction of formal school education in 1959 marks a watershed in the modern history of education in Bhutan. Eleven schools were established and a total of four hundred and forty students are recorded to have been enrolled in them.⁹ Prior to this, only a few Bhutanese received formal schooling in the British public schools in India established by the Raj. Although during its inception most people viewed modern education as an alien system intruding into a

traditional Buddhist system and approached it with cynicism and reluctance, in the following decades Bhutan saw unabated proliferation of modern education. The rapid propagation of modern education brought about unprecedented changes to the learning patterns and the social structures across the country.

Initially, most Bhutanese misunderstood the scientific and secular aspect of modern education for non-Buddhist heretical doctrines, and labelled it *phyi pa'i chos*, a term that Buddhists used to refer to the non-Buddhist religions in ancient India.¹⁰ Unlike texts written in *Chökey (chos skad)*, those in English were looked down on as profane, and parents preferred to send their children to monasteries rather than to schools, or even chose to keep them on the farm rather than be 'converted to an alien system'. In some cases, parents even went to extent of bribing school heads and officials to take their child, who has been conscripted by the government officials for school, out of school. Opposition came mainly from the conservative traditionists in the monasteries. Against all odds, the government, under the farsighted and dynamic leadership of the Third King, continued with the campaign of propagating free school education for all youths in the country.

Such opposition from traditional conservative group was not unique to Bhutan. In Tibet, the thirteenth *Dalai Lama* introduced modern secular education in the beginning of twentieth century and even sent four Tibetan boys to Rugby School in England in 1912. Few years later, Frank Ladlow, a British educationist, was invited to start a school in Gyantse, and later a certain Mr. Parker started a school in Lhasa in 1944. All attempts however were thwarted by opposition from the conservative groups in the clergy and aristocracy.¹¹ By comparison, Bhutan's story is one of success and jubilation, as the number of schools increased to ninety-seven and students to ten thousand three hundred by 1974, when the present king ascended throne.¹² The opposition to and scepticism about school education began to diminish as the first school graduates entered the public arena as prominent people. Although the misunderstanding of school education as pursuing *phyi pa'i chos* continued, the worldly value of school education became self-evident.

According to the Human Development Report in South Asia, there were 122 educational institutions and 20,435 students enrolled in 1977, 206 and 51,835 respectively in 1985, and 288 and 77000 in 1995.¹³ By the beginning of the new millennium, there were 26 high schools, 55 junior high schools, 148 primary schools, 133 community schools, 8 private schools and 10 other institutions. The rate of adult literacy increased from the estimate of 17% in 1959 to 23% in 1984, 35.2% in 1991, 47.5% in 1995, 54% in 1998, and to over 58% by 2000.¹⁴ Enrolment of the children in a given age range has also made a drastic climb from an estimate of 5% in 1959 to around 74% in 2000. Bhutan has also made steady progress on the general Human Development Index ranking, standing 155th in 1995 and 142nd in 1998. The following chart illustrates the development of modern education in Bhutan from 1959 to 2000.



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albeit in the medium of English, and an atmosphere conducive to modern learning and intellectual interaction. It is in such a favourable climate that modern learning found another dimension during the last decade, with the publication of several works in English by Bhutanese authors such as Karma Ura, Kunzang Choden and Sonam Kinga. The establishment of the Centre for Bhutan Studies in 1998 is yet another milestone in the development of modern learning in Bhutan. Despite a fairly late start, modern education has made great progress in Bhutan, often leaving one to wonder the direction and the degree to which it will shape and reshape the Bhutanese nation in the years to come. Let

us now turn to look briefly at the developments of traditional education.

While the sporadic data from diverse sources provide a clear picture of the growth of modern system, there is hardly any statistical information available to study the trends of traditional learning. Given the scarcity of statistical information, much of what is said below will be personal accounts and private opinions. Some form of traditional education in religion could be assumed to have started with the introduction of Buddhism to Bhutan by the master Padmasambhava. During Padmasambhava's second visit, the great scholar Denma Tsemang (c. 750 AD), who was a translator (*lo tsaba*) and one of the twenty-five accomplished disciples of Padmasambhava, is said to have accompanied him to Bhutan, and Bhutanese students such as Monmo Tashi Kheudron (c. 750) and Mongom Haminatha (c. 750) are said to have followed Padmasambhava to Tibet and learnt dharma.¹⁶ There is no available record of whether or not Denma Tsemang taught in Bhutan but Bhutanese have often claimed that the *gyo yig* (*mgyogs yig*) script, which is now considered the national script and thus known as *druk yig* (*'brug yig*), was designed by Denma Tsemang.

In the centuries after Padmasambhava's visit, Bhutan witnessed the arrival of many Tibetan missionaries such as Nyos Demchog (1179-1265), Longchen Rabjam (1308-63), Barawa Gyaltshen Palzang (1310-91), some of who carried out scholarly activities in different parts of the country, leaving some impact on religious learning in Bhutan. However, the earliest Bhutanese author, whose *oeuvre* we have with us today is *Terton* Padma Lingpa (1450-1521), a treasure discoverer and a saint of great eminence in the *Nyingma* school. The institutions he founded later became some of the liveliest centres of Buddhist education in Bhutan.

A new phase of traditional learning and scholarship began, especially in western Bhutan, with the unification of Bhutanese regions into the *Drukpa* (*'brug pa*) state by *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651?) in the seventeenth century. The Central Monk Body (*gzhung grwa tshang*) was founded with the plan to provide formal training in Buddhist philosophy, liturgical chanting, dialectics and linguistics

under the four masters (*slob dpon bzhi*). That was followed by establishing several branches of monastic bodies of *rabdeys* (*rab sde*) and *drubdeys* (*sgrub sde*) in different districts. However, most of these *dratshangs*, including the Central Monk Body, did not provide much training in philosophy, language or dialectics, but came to emphasize monastic arts and rituals. As they were involved in performing countless ceremonies for the state and public, active scholarship remained outside the focus of their routines. Most monks became only literate enough to read monastic liturgies and perform rituals.

Nonetheless, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Central Monk Body and its branches saw quite a few of its monks emerge as outstanding scholars and authors. Among them were Shakya Rinchen (1710-59), the ninth *Je Khenpo* (*rje mkhan po*), Tenzin Chögyal (1701-66), the tenth, Yonten Thaye (1724-84), the thirteenth to name a few. In the east, there were a few scholars such as the genealogist Ngawang of Tashigang Dzong (c. 1700), but nothing definite can be said about scholarly activities there before the twentieth century. In general, learning and scholarship from the formation of the *Drukpa* state until the middle of nineteenth century seems to have thrived uniformly with no significant changes. But literary activity seems to have declined between the middle of the nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, probably due to the political anarchy and transitions going on in the country. It is plausible that the rate of literacy from *Zhabdrung's* time through the *Desi* (*sde srid*) period until the second king's reign was somewhere around 15%, excluding people with semi-literacy who could read texts but not write. *Chökey* was undoubtedly the main medium of written communication.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Bhutan had a renaissance of traditional scholarship. It saw the development of an active literary scene to which an unprecedented number of Bhutanese virtuosi contributed simultaneously and of their own accord. The development of this literary activity was a direct outcome of several intellectual, social and political trends. Michael Aris argued the underlying cause of this literary revival to be the opening of Bhutan's border to the outside world, which 'encouraged the intelligensia to turn back to the country's traditional heritage on a quest of rediscovery'. He also

credited the state for creating a climate conducive to the growth of such literary activity. However, it may be noted that the state, under the visionary leadership of the third and fourth kings, not only created a good atmosphere but actively promoted the development of this literary scene. The proliferation of modern education also stimulated this development in traditional learning as a movement vis-à-vis modern education. The movement in no small measure was also due to the unfortunate exodus of the Tibetans into Bhutan and neighbouring regions. Exiled Tibetan masters such as Dilgo Khyentse and Gyalwang Nyima played active roles in this literary renaissance.

Bhutanese scholars in this renaissance included the late *Je Khenpo* Gedun Rinchen, *Lopen* Norbu Wangchuk, *Lopen* Nado, *Lopen* Pema Tsewang, *Dasho* Lam Sangak, *Lopen* Gombo Tenzin, *Dasho* Tenzin Dorjee, et al. They and others contributed mainly in the fields of history, language, and religion.¹⁷ At about the same time and under the supervision of some of the religious virtuosi, intellectual monastic centres of *shedras* multiplied throughout the country. The establishment of Semtokha Lopdra (*sems rtogs kha slob grwa*) under the supervision of Dilgo Khyentse in 1961 was a milestone in the development of traditional education. The school produced a large number of graduates, and was, until recently, a renowned alma mater of traditionally trained scholars, teachers and bureaucrats. Another event that is connected to traditional learning but which had the most far-reaching impact on the Bhutanese population was the propagation of *Dzongkha* as the national language and efforts to put it into a formal written form. The inclusion of *Dzongkha* text books, first in *Chökey* and later in *Dzongkha*, in the school curriculum as a major subject brought a drastic rise in the number of people who can read and write the Bhutanese script, although only very few became proficient. Many traditional virtuosi such as *Lopen* Pemala, *Lopen* Nado and *Lopen* Gombo Tenzin pioneered the project of promoting *Dzongkha*. However, most traditionists saw the efforts to promote *Dzongkha* as a modern endeavour to assert political and cultural uniqueness and even questioned the feasibility and need to develop *Dzongkha* in place of *Chökey*, the then medium of scholarship.

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw yet another chapter in the history of traditional scholarship, when hundreds of Bhutanese monks travelled to India and Nepal in pursuit of training in Buddhism in the newly established Tibetan academic centres and monasteries. Just as the Bhutanese scholars in old days ventured to Tibet, young Bhutanese scholars travelled to Tibetan monasteries, many of them as peripatetic students learning different aspects of Tibetan Buddhism from different masters and monasteries. This perforce was made easier than in former times by the easy access to and free training in the monasteries granted by the exiled *Lamas*, and by the availability of modern conveyances. This outflow of students from both monasteries and schools to Tibetan centres has continued for the last two decades and has borne remarkable fruit. By the end of the last millennium, this movement had produced an unprecedented number of Bhutanese religious virtuosi, many of whom have also become respected abbots and well known authors in Tibetan scholarly circles. As the adepts of the last century are dying out, Bhutan is beginning to see another wave of scholarship in the field of Buddhology and related fields through a large number of *khenpos* (*mkan po*) and *lopens* (*slob dpon*) of outstanding calibre and experience.

Having briefly looked at the historical development of the two systems, let us now turn to study the interaction between the two systems, their initial encounters and the changing phases of their relationship during the past four decades. As mentioned earlier, modern education during its inception was viewed as an alien system embodying heretical doctrines, *phyi pa'i chos*, impinging on the established system of sacred Buddhist tradition. While some, especially among the clergy, shunned school education, viewing it as opposed to monastic hegemony, others were simply indifferent because they were reluctant to change and preferred the status quo. A few may have seen modern education as a threat to their social position and privileges, having predicted the changes modern education would bring to the social structure and stratification. As modern education spread steadily in the next two decades, many parents were bewildered by the dilemma of whether they should, on the one hand, send their children to schools or, on the other, send them to monasteries or keep them at home on the farms. Thus, the tension

between the two systems as felt by many people then was very much an internal conflict of the choice of education.

However, neither the indifferent attitude nor the dilemma outlasted the swift proliferation of school education. By the beginning of the 1980s, the sceptical reception of the 1960s was long gone and modern education had started to gain the upper hand over monastic training in the choice of education.¹⁸ Although both modern and traditional learning were progressing as distinct systems in their own domains, on the national level, modern education gained predominance both in the number of institutions and adherents and in the priority placed by the government. The dominance of modern education transformed the general patterns of education in the country. The change, as discussed earlier, was not merely that of pedagogical technique but also of purpose, content, perspective, and approaches. It was a shift of focus from the endogenous, sacred religious training, which emphasized spiritual development, to the exogenous, secular and technical education, which aimed at enhancing material and economic development.

With this change, people's concept of education and literacy also began to change. Linguistically, English supplanted *Chökey*, inasmuch as most educated Bhutanese could read and write fluently in English but not in *Chökey* or *Dzongkha*. To a large number of the modern educated Bhutanese, literacy came to be equated with knowing English, and education and scholarship came to be judged by western standards. By the 1980s, conflicts between the two institutions became more apparent and vehement. While the traditionists continued to see modern education as a profane non-Buddhist pursuit, the new class of modern educated youth looked down on the traditional system as a resilient leftover from the past, rendered inefficacious by time. Monastic communities were viewed in economic terms as non-productive consumers and as social parasites hindering the material progress of the nation. Traditional education as represented by monastic learning, from their viewpoint, was a repetition of rituals and non-reflective chanting. This perhaps was influenced by the then typical view espoused by western modernists, the view that traditions, especially non-western ones, are static and repetitive sets of unthinking habits.¹⁹

Moreover, many of the educated youth developed little or no faith in Bhutanese Buddhism, which in their eyes was at best very deteriorated form of Buddhism and at worst a superstitious and ritualistic dogma based on blind faith, an empty house whose existence previous generations did not question, as Prakke puts it.²⁰ Beguiled by their adoration of modernity and by a prima facie impression of some of the wayward monks in the *dratshangs*, they overlooked the profound philosophy and principles enshrined in the Bhutanese religion. This misunderstanding is very similar to the misconception the early travellers and western scholars at the turn of the twentieth century, who lacked the linguistic skill to acquire a proper understanding of Tibetan Buddhism, had of Tibetan Buddhism, which led them to give it the rather derogatory name of Lamaism.²¹ But it is matter of deep regret that many educated Bhutanese, even at the end of the century, had similar misconceptions regarding their own heritage, and ironic that this occurred when the western world was coming to appreciate Tibetan Buddhism both for its exotic nature and for the role it performed as a repository of original Indian Buddhism, preserved in precision and detail in the translated corpora of *Kangyur* (*bka' 'gyur*) and *Tangyur* (*bstan 'gyur*).

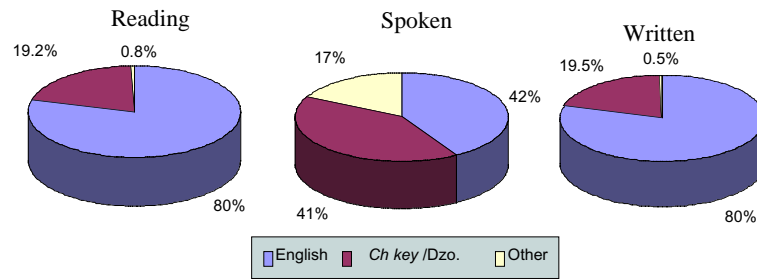
In spite of good progress on both sides, and the nationwide reinforcement of tradition in the middle of 1980s to accentuate the cultural and religious identity of the country, the rift between the two systems in Bhutan remained as wide as ever. The endeavours of the King to blend the two by recruiting monks from schools in 1986 failed to yield the expected results, and the proposed university of traditional studies did not see the light of the day.²² This lingering rift and failures to bridge the two systems despite earnest wishes and frequent attempts could be ascribed to two major educational factors, which I shall call here (1) the linguistic gap and (2) the cultural gap. It was mainly the disparity in the medium and mode of communication and the lack of common ground and mutual respect that polarized the two worlds of the traditional and modern and made the type of sparking dialogue, which Prakke suggests,²³ difficult if not impossible to bring about.

Since the beginning of modernization, English has surpassed *Chökey* as the medium of written transaction in both government administration and private communication.²⁴ In schools, learning in *Chökey/Dzongkha* formed only one eighth of the entire education. This can be largely attributed to the unavailability of *Chökey/Dzongkha* textbooks and terminology for scientific and technical subjects, which were new to the Himalayan world. Besides, Bhutan, unlike some of its neighbours, had no residues of colonial resentment and hatred, and thus embraced English with no reluctance or misgivings. Moreover, a lot of Bhutanese youth received their education outside Bhutan and returned home only able to communicate fully in English. Thus, several causes contributed to the emergence of English as the dominant language in both education and administration.

While English was gaining prominence, the government took the initiative in promoting *Dzongkha* as the official language and make it the lingua franca of Bhutan, although in reality English was beginning to play that role. By supplanting *Chökey*, which was already suffering due to the proliferation of English, with *Dzongkha* in schools, the last link between the traditional and modern came to an end. With no English in the traditional centres and no *Chökey* in the schools, the thin linguistic connection they had in the written language was severed. The reconciliation of the two expected in the development of *Dzongkha* and the implementation of *Dzongkha* itself became difficult. Although the introduction of *Dzongkha* in written form and its promotion as the national language embodies a nationalistic imperative to accentuate linguistic independence and national uniqueness, it still remains an uphill task. Beside the daunting problems faced in inventing a standard set of grammatical rules for a language diversified by numerous dialects, people could not be inspired to use it. Instead, many traditionists viewed it as a superfluous effort and criticized the initiative, while modern scholars had no intellectual spur to learn it because of the hegemonic presence of English. Some western scholars began to worry that if *Dzongkha* fully superseded *Chökey*, the literary charm of the Bhutanese tradition might be lost.²⁵

Against all these odds, the development of *Dzongkha* has endured under the directorate of the *Dzongkha* Development Commission, which continues the promotion of *Dzongkha* to this day. However, the preponderance of English among the modern educated elite is yet unchallenged, while the use of *Chökey* remains limited to the monastic compounds. A recent survey shows that around 80% of the educated Bhutanese can read, write and speak good English but, in the case of most of them, their knowledge of *Chökey* or *Dzongkha* can only be ranked as semi-literacy.²⁶ On the other hand, in traditional *shedras* and *lopdras*, almost all written communication is in *Chökey*, and *Dzongkha* and other vernaculars are often used as spoken media of instruction but English is only beginning to be studied. The following pie charts show the average usage of languages by literate people from diverse background.

Language Usage in Bhutan-2000



The second gap I wish to discuss is a cultural one, particularly in the field of educational and pedagogical practice. The linguistic gap, one can argue, is to a large extent of Bhutan's own making. Modernization and development, even in the sector of education, could have happened, perhaps at a slower pace, without the introduction of English as a major language, as it did in Japan and parts of Europe.²⁷ In contrast, the differences constituting the second gap, which I call "the cultural gap", are ingrained in the two systems due to their disparate cultural backgrounds. It is a conflict of ideological and methodological differences, as shown earlier, between the modern and the traditional, and between what is global and local or between what is Eastern and Western. Hence, in a society where the two systems are vying with each other, this gap is inevitable unless the two are bridged through a meaningful dialogue.

Unfortunately, neither traditionists nor modernists have made any significant effort to engender some substantial initiative to promote such a dialogue. Maintaining their status quo with rigidity and stubbornness, most traditionists, especially among the ecclesiastical institutions, have made no effort to modernise in tune with the currents of changing times. Among them, *dratshangs* such as the Central Monk Body remain bastions of religious ritual and art, but offer merely basic, if any, training in Buddhism. Most of the monks are doubtlessly good artists, forming what could be considered a grand state choir, but, engaged in constant performance of ceremonies which the state and public sometimes demand as an obligatory service, most of them know very little about the Buddhism of

philosophy and principles, and also lack the opportunity to obtain the learning and practice their status behoves.²⁸ The liturgical rather than pastoral role that *dratshangs* perform in society was sufficient for most of the old generation, who out of their piety accepted the religion without questioning, but to the majority of modern educated youth, who, unlike their parents, approach everything with a rational inquisitiveness, the *dratshangs* no longer appear attractive.

In comparison, the *lopdras* and *shedras* are usually better for they teach courses, often, intensive ones, in language and Buddhist philosophy. As the main custodians of traditional learning and scholarship, they not only contribute through the preservation and dissemination of moral and philosophical teachings enshrined in the Buddhist canon, but also fulfils some liturgical and pastoral roles. In these centres, one can also see sporadic changes in pedagogical techniques with inclusion of modern methods such as systematic curricula, written examinations, etc., although no deliberate effort is being made to blend the traditional with the modern method of learning. Most of the traditional scholars remain enclosed in monastic compounds (some still insisting that the earth is flat) and have no intellectual interaction with the modern scholars. As a result, they lack the communication skills to articulate their erudition in a manner comprehensible and convincing to modern educated youth.

Simultaneously, the modernists, with an air of self-importance (some inflated with pride for knowing the earth is round), did no more to close the gap, although it has been the judicious intention of the government to incorporate Buddhist values into the liberal and technical training given in modern education. School routines include morning and evening prayers, and syllabi cover some Buddhist lessons and texts such as *rGyal sras lag len*. These facets of school education have significantly influenced the lives of some students. However, on the whole, the study of secular subjects in English has dominated school education and the training students have received in their own language and religion has been too slight to have any strong and lasting impact. Moreover, as modern university degrees became a major asset for career prospects, western education came to be portrayed as superior to traditional learning.

Carried away by adoration of the modern education associated with the West, they have failed to recognize the erudition of the traditional scholars. Some would even treat the learned *khenpos* and *lopens* with contempt as know-nothings, partly because they cannot speak English.²⁹ Besides showing contempt to persons, some of them, out of ignorance or misunderstanding, have also viewed Bhutanese Buddhism as degenerate and ridiculed the religious institution as a whole.³⁰ This attitude has begun to change during the last decade and interest in Buddhism has begun to grow among the educated Bhutanese, although it has also come as an influence from the West, where Buddhism has become popular. Unfortunately, instead of turning to the Bhutan's own traditional adepts, many English-speaking Bhutanese started to turn to the West for Buddhism. While western Buddhologists stride to Thimphu to lecture on Buddhism, and their books fill the shelves, the real upholders of *Buddhadharma* – *Lamas*, *khenpos* and *gelongs* – and their teachings remain unrecognised and unheard, except when required to read a prayer or burn a corpse.

However, whether in imitation of Western interest in Buddhism or inspired by a genuine quest for spiritual edification, as is the case with some, this growing interest in Buddhism among the educated Bhutanese is generally a positive trend. The recent proposal by college students for a degree program in Buddhist studies at Sherubtse College, for instance, is a sign of the growing interest, although it would be outrageous if western literature on Buddhism were to take the place of Buddhist classics in *Chökey* for this program. We can at least hope that such developments may create some common ground on which modernists can recognize the value of traditional thinkers and traditionists can quench the spiritual thirst of the modernists.

Finally, both traditional and modern education is thriving in Bhutan beyond all precedent. On the modern front, education is free and enrolment is increasing every year. The government aims to achieve universal enrolment in primary education by the year 2002 and on the secondary level by 2007. Bhutanization of the school curricula is progressing and a national university is to be established by 2007.³¹ Although voices are heard that the quality of school education is deteriorating while the quantitative coverage is increasing, old

systems are being reevaluated and new approaches introduced to further quality education.³² On the average, around 10% of national budget was expended on modern education during the seventh and eighth five year plans.³³

In comparison, the government has contributed financially less towards fostering and promoting traditional education. Many of the centres of traditional training in the country are privately funded and most scholars receive no state support. The total sum allocated to the Council for Ecclesiastical Affairs, Special Commission for Cultural Affairs and *Dzongkha* Development Commission during the eighth five-year plan amounts to 1.78% of the total budget.³⁴ State policies and planning on the preservation and propagation of tradition seem to lack clear definition of objectives and strategies, compared to other sectors. However, traditional education is thriving in Bhutan, mainly driven by the strength of faith in Buddhism and Buddhist institutions. The total number of clerics, including Sanskrit pandits in southern Bhutan, at the beginning of this century is estimated to be 15,000.³⁵ With the establishment of numerous *shedras*, and the emergence of a large number of Buddhist scholars from monasteries both inside and outside Bhutan, traditional education today has found renewed expression.

With the growing interest in Buddhism and Bhutanese culture among the modernists and increasing exposure to the modern world among the traditionists, prospects for a successful marriage between the two systems are certain, although compromises may have to be made. Modernists may have to give up their domineering attitude and the view that tradition is a degenerate system to be superseded by more technologically advanced modern system, and turn to the traditional experts to learn more about their language, religion and culture. Unless the current prevalence of English and modern education are balanced by what is really Bhutanese, the *Drukpa* tradition, amid the rhetoric about traditionalism and patriotism, would become what Prakke calls, “Buddhist topping on an essentially western pizza”.³⁶ Besides, there is a growing concern among the Bhutanese about declining moral values in schools leading to youth delinquency and other social problems. Incorporating more traditional features of

Buddhist values and philosophy in modern education, as Priesner proposes,³⁷ may help curb such unfavourable social trends.

The traditional institutions, on their part, may have to come out of their conservative isolation and open up for a meaningful dialogue with the modernists. A lot particularly can be learnt from modern systems in terms of pedagogical technique. It may also be humbly suggested that religious figures who give enlightening discourses on Buddhist theory and practices elsewhere also bestow such philosophical teachings on the local devotees. Today, there is great number of educated Bhutanese, armed with modern intellectual curiosity and methods, who seek real meaning in Buddhism and are searching for spiritual guidance. It is also important that educated Bhutanese devotees, unlike most people in the past, who, being illiterate and faith-driven, were satisfied with the *wang (dbang)* of a mere touch on the head and the *lung* of recitations they did not understand, seek the true Buddhism of philosophy and principles.

At this juncture, one can only say with the utmost optimism that the “sparking dialogue between Bhutan’s modern and traditional heritage, making the best of both available in modern terms”³⁸ that Diederik Prakke suggests may soon happen, and Michael Aris’s anticipation that Bhutan will begin “to produce scholars who combine a knowledge and appreciation of its traditional heritage with the new perspectives and methodologies of our own age”³⁹ may soon come true. Then may arise a time when bat-like students like me can benefit a lot more from both modernist beasts and traditional birds.

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Notes

¹ I am not discussing here the traditional education in southern Bhutanese communities, which consist of Nepali culture and Hindu religion. This topic deserves a case study on its own and I am unfortunately not capable of doing this at the moment. Hence, the scope of traditional education here is deliberately confined to the northern Bhutanese communities, which share a Buddhist culture.

² This ethos of traditional education is explicit in the common practice of citing the following verse by Maitreya before the lessons. *Maahyana sutra lan kara / Theg pa chen po mdo sde rgyan*, XII/58: rig pa'i gnas lnga dag la

brtson par ma byas na // 'phags mchog gis kyang thams cad mkhyen nyid mi 'gyur te // de lta bas na gzhan dag tshar bcad rjes bzung dang // bdag nyid kun shes bya phyr de la de brtson byed // If [one] does not persevere in the fields of five sciences, even the supreme exalted beings will not become omniscient. Therefore, one should persevere in them in order to refute and lead others and to become omniscient oneself.

³ Common in the sense that these sciences are cross-religious topics, not confined to one particular creed.

⁴ The five sciences are arts and crafts (*bzo*), medicine (*gso ba*), language (*sgra*), logico-epistemology (*tshad ma*) and soteriology (*nang don*). The ten sciences are the previous five and poetry (*snyan ngag*), synonymy (*mngon brjod*), prosody (*sdeb sbyor*), dramaturgy (*zlos gar*) and astrology (*dkar rtsis*), which are considered sub-categories of language and soteriology.

⁵ Semtokha (*Sems rtogs kha*) for instance provided what is primarily a linguistic training giving intensive courses on grammar and poetry; Tshangkha Shedra (*Tshang kha bshad grwa*) at one time was the centre of astrological studies under the aegis of sLob dpon Nor bu dBang phyug.

⁶ On the dos and don'ts during lessons, see dPal sprul Orgyan 'Jigs med Chos kyi dBang po, *rDzogs pa chen po klong chen snying thig gi sngon 'gro'i khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, preliminary chapter on the ways to listen to the dharma, p. 6-24; Tsong kha pa Blo bzang Grags pa, *Byang chub lam rim che ba*, preliminary chapter to actual teachings, p. 20-32; Bu ston Rin chen grub, *bDe bar gshegs pa'i bstan pa'i gsal byed chos kyi 'byung gnas gsung rab rin po che'i mdzod*, Chapter I, p.43-51; Kun bzang dPal ldan, *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa'i tshig 'grel 'jam dbyangs bla ma'i gzhal lung bdud rtsi'i thig pa*, Part I on exposition of subsidiary features, p. 152-58. On the rules of teaching, see the fifth chapter of *Bodhicaryavatara* and the sections in *vinaya* texts on the twenty faults of teaching within the category of a hundred and twenty faults.

⁷ *Gaavy hastra* as cited by dPal sprul O rgyan 'Jigs med Chos kyi dBang po in *rDzogs pa chen po klong chen snying thig sngon 'gro'i khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, preliminary chapter, p. 19-20: rigs kyi bu / khyod kyis bdag nyid la nad pa'i 'du shes bskyed par bya'o // chos la sman gyi 'du shes bskyed par bya'o // dge ba'i bshes gnyen la sman pa mkhas pa'i 'du shes bskyed par bya'o // nan tan nyams su len pa ni nad nye bar 'tsho ba'i 'du shes

bskyed par bya'o // This is cited and commented on by several Tibetan authors including the above authors in the sections of the books already mentioned.

⁸ I have dealt with this matter in my paper *A Comparative Study of the Methods and Presuppositions in the Tibetan with those in the Western Study of Buddhist Texts*, a paper on methodology submitted in partial fulfilment of M.Sc at Oxford, 1998.

⁹ *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000*, p. 30. See also *Human Development in South Asia 1998*, p. 65-66.

¹⁰ The term *phyi pa'i chos* (literally, outsider's religion) can be understood as "a foreign system"; the modern system can rightly be called so because it came from foreign countries (*phyi rgyal*), but this was obviously not the case here.

¹¹ Bass (1998), p. 2.

¹² *Kuensal (Dzongkha)* 6 June 1999 issue, p. 3.

¹³ See Haq (1998), p. 65-66; Government sources however vary and give slightly different figures.

¹⁴ *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, p. 17, 19 gives 17.5% in 1977, 28% in 1984 and 54% in 1999 while *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000* has an estimate of 10% in 1970, 21.1% in 1984 and 47.5% in 1994. *Kuensal (Dzongkha)* 5 June 1999 issue, p. 3 gives 23% in 1985 to 54% in 1999. *Human Development in South Asia 1998* gives 42% in 1995. See Haq (1998), p. 179.

¹⁵ The stratification of Bhutanese society into educated and uneducated can be argued to be the outcome of the introduction of education. Bhutanese society was earlier stratified according to social status and religious roles.

¹⁶ See Padma Tshe dbang (1994), 44-45.

¹⁷ For a synoptic survey of their works, see Aris (1990).

¹⁸ However, it must be noted that parents still sent their children to monasteries for religious training, which they saw as a source of benefit in the long term future.

¹⁹ See E. Durkheim (1961), p. 52; Dreyfus (forthcoming book), p. 7.

²⁰ Prakke (1999), p. 66.

²¹ See Lopez (1998), p. 15-45.

²² Most of the monks recruited from schools under His Majesty's initiative and placed in Tango, Cheri and Phajoding have dispersed now, finding their own paths. The university plan is still on the government agenda, but this time it is planned to be in Taktse in Tongsa district after considering several venues such as Taba, Wangdichoeling and Domkhar.

²³ See Prakke (1999), p. 60, 90 for his suggestion of sparking dialogue between the traditional and modern factions.

²⁴ Hindi was also adopted as the medium of instruction until 1964. Since then English has become the main medium of instruction.

²⁵ See Aris (1990), p. 1; Prakke (1999), p. 104. John Ardussi, a historian of Bhutan, reiterated this point in a personal conversation.

²⁶ Their weakness in *Chökey* or *Dzongkha* is evident in many areas. The DDC chief said to me in a personal conversation that one important official, in a desperate search for a certain *Dzongkha* term during a speech, resorted to English saying "*nga bcas English nang 'bad ba can'*" (in our English), considering English rather than Bhutanese as 'his language'. This Freudian slip betrays how deeply rooted English is in the minds of some of the modern educated Bhutanese. Such an instance lends credence to allegations from some traditional scholars that the government resolutions on implementation of language and culture are games with double standards, played scrupulously with hypocrisy. However, a large number of modern educated Bhutanese sincerely wish to master their language but get carried away by the currents of dominant English.

²⁷ I do not mean to insinuate that the introduction of modern education and English is altogether negative. It has come with lots of blessings, but as far as

Bhutanese languages and traditional education are concerned, it has an undermining effect.

²⁸ There is a story that when an old monk in the Central Monk Body was asked what are the Three Jewels (*dkon mchog gsum*), he is said to have answered, Gonpo (*mgon po*), Lhamo (*lha mo*) and Legon (*las mgon*), the trio of Bhutanese Dharma-Protectors (*chos srung*). Another story has it that when *shedras* teaching such things as *Gyelselaglen* (*rgyal sras lag len*) began to spread and monks in *dratshangs* started to leave for *shedras*, an old monk in Thimphu remarked: “There is this thing called *Gyelselaglen* spreading from Tongsa nowadays. It must be a sign of decline in the Buddhadharmā.”

²⁹ Stories of contempt shown by modern educated youngsters towards scholarly monks, out of their abhorrence for monasticism as a whole, are often heard in the monasteries.

³⁰ A striking example of this is a reference by a certain modern graduate to Nagarjuna’s *Malamadhyamakakarika* as fools’ book, unaware that this classic forms the source of two thousand years of Middle Way philosophy.

³¹ *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, p. 52-56.

³² NAPE or New Approach to Primary Education is the major innovation for improving the pedagogical system in primary education.

³³ *Ministry of Planning Report, Eighth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002)*, p. 43.

³⁴ *Eighth Five-Year Plan 1997-2002: Ministry of Planning Report Presented to the 75th Session of the National Assembly*, p. 54.

³⁵ *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000*, p. 30.

³⁶ Prakke (1999), p. 66.

³⁷ Priesner (1999), p. 42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 66, 90.

³⁹ Aris (1990), 27.