

Abstract

Bhutan is well known for its unique cultural heritage and traditions. Such a unique cultural heritage and tradition have been prudently handed down from generations to generations till now. However, with onset of modernization, this unique culture and tradition is in crossroad with much confusion, confusion to follow or not to follow. This study attempts to unravel confusion of ‘what are Bhutanese cultural heritage and tradition; and why it is so important for Bhutan in this 21st century. To do so, the concept of ‘soft security’ has been invoked engaging *lhasoel* as medium of study. Moreover, this study nets all the core cultural components like Shamanism, Bonism and Buddhism. These components are the nucleus of Bhutanese cultural heritage and tradition. Thereby, the cultural heritage has been cementing unity within family, community and nation. This unity is the core of Bhutanese security system- or soft security, for a small country sandwiched in-between two big and powerful antagonistic countries.

In the process, it was observed that with the influx of ‘new culture’ the union of unity has been breaking, which is posing security threat within family, community and to the nation. To dig dipper into the problems, *Lhasoel* was brought into lime light to further re-examine the bigger problem brewing.

From this study, we can comprehend that this essential practice practiced for many generations is being slowly disappearing for many reasons. We can infer that many other similar practices which are the components of Bhutanese cultural heritage and traditions are also disappearing at alarming rate. If, cultural heritage and tradition to Bhutan is the cornerstone for national security- therefore Bhutanese has to refocus its trajectory of conserving, preserving, promoting and implementing before tilting towards tragedy.

Key word: Culture, heritage, tradition, Buddhism, security, unity, nation and lhasoel

Introduction

Bhutan is well known for its unique culture and traditions. Bhutanese culture can be categorized into tangible and intangible culture. These two are greatly influenced by religious belief systems. Many scholars have elaborated meaning of culture in different ways. Most agree upon five definitions - summarized by Robert Boccock, which are culture is structural systems of explanations, rules, norms, myths and rituals. Many may agree with me in saying culture was the main casual factors in the historical transition to modernity as argued by great classical sociologists and scholars. For instance, Weber states that (religious) belief possessed a greater influence on daily life than any other factor. Conversely, Americans' dedication to work and success is still influenced by this ascetic Protestant tradition. On contrary, Asian nations still today possessed by strong *Asian religious belief* which determines daily life.

The worrying fact is that the modern society overarching emphasize on rationalizing all aspects of life brings direct dispute with the traditional cultures where society actions are administered by (religious) belief. As argued by Weber that evolution of modern culture - western culture has not produced the increased in over all human happiness that maybe hoped for - as provided by savage culture in the past and that still do. The notion of western culture superiority over eastern culture - savage thinking is problematic, where western culture represents rationality. In reality, it is simply a fiction used in struggle for power as put up by Nietzsche¹, jostles modern society in dilemma particularly Asian society.

Today, Bhutan enjoys credit of being the cradle of happiness webbed by its rich culture and tradition, some argue a unique culture and tradition; on the contrary, it is confusing to confess the real culture and tradition today. This study intends to clarify confusion – confession may require if in the process my lead to more confusion. This confusion is one of the characteristic of all myth, culture and religion in all race as Lang Andrew (1880) observed. If confusion is the characteristic, than it is of no use in shedding sweets to make is clear. Many a time's lives of human and animals are sacrificed. Indeed, sacrificial is what all about culture and tradition- perhaps many may oppose to.

This study will focus on complexity of Bhutanese culture axing down to *Lhasoel* the annual *rimdo*/Puja being performed by Bhutanese families. Without a proper membrane to resist the invaders, old culture is susceptible to invader – 'western culture' to mutate into new "hybrid culture" – good or bad, a test of time will tell but rather depends on thinking as Shakespeare would agree. A collective conscience to consider otherwise societal reflection outcome perhaps determine the acceptance of the 'hybrid culture'.

¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was a German philosopher, poet, composer, cultural critic, and classical philologist

Finally, involuntary with regret- acceptance is guaranteed voluntary mutation to become a new culture – a Bhutanese culture – is the case with the past and present one - Superficial satisfactory sends daring doubt demanding urgent internally operations to determinate symbiosis in this entwined world of rapid annexation of culture and tradition.

Bhutan

I am not trying to re-write the history of Bhutan. Many Bhutanese as well as foreign scholars had detailed at length – discussed on various valuable subjects like religious, social and political. To diffuse confusion amongst the readers of my confession of confusion on the topic, this might congest your clear thinking – forgiveness to the wisdom of wise reader. Let me put it as plainly as factual, Bhutan is a small geographically hidden country situated in-between two gigantic countries, china in the north and India in the south. With land mass of 47,000 km² with rugged high mountains covered with thick vegetation through which big rivers cascade. Within such geographical genesis, a population little more than 700,000 is settled sparsely on the slopes of mountains thriving on subsistence farming. Until 1907, theocratic form of government governed the country ‘with no political ideas’ (Mathou, T. 1999) which frequented outbreaks of ‘internal civil war’ (Aris, M. 1998). After the long internal civil war, on 17th December 1907, *Trongsa Penlop*², *Ugyen Wangchuk* was unanimously appointed by the people as the first hereditary king of Bhutan. Thence, under the rule of successive hereditary kings, people enjoyed uninterrupted peace and prosperity. The successive kings worked tirelessly for the ‘well-being’ of his citizen - as citizen entrusted all their ‘faith’ to the king for peaceful living. It is accepted datum that ‘everything and anything’ is achievable in times of peace. Seemingly, Bhutanese culture and tradition got major revitalization during this period, what today we called as Bhutanese culture. Bhutanese culture is combination of many mythological, mysterious and enigmatic, Bon religion and Buddhist religious percepts. As observed in all the great civilization, Bhutanese culture initially begun as tribe culture – a savage culture commonly referred to. Gradually grew as community culture and finally as national culture.

Although; Bhutan is geographically very small in size, in term of culture and tradition, it has got vast and varieties to present. It was possible primarily due to its self-isolation policy enriched by natural geographic conditions. Almost every community or a village has their own unique culture and tradition to present today. With opening of Bhutan’s door to the outside world, people are exposed to many different cultures. However,

² Most powerful Eastern governor (before 1907) of the country during theocratic form of government

there are measures in place, with flooding of new culture; there is potential risk for local, community and national culture being dissolved partly or permanently (Sangay Tashi, 2013, p 54).

Such trends are being observed today. Bhutan seems to be fighting losing battle in this front. Without tactical re-enforcements and better equipment provided to fight, we would be watching our comrade die helplessly. From many dying culture and tradition, this study will see through '*lhasoel*' culture and gauge the degree disappearance of Bhutanese culture and tradition.

Conceptual frame work of culture and tradition as core of national security

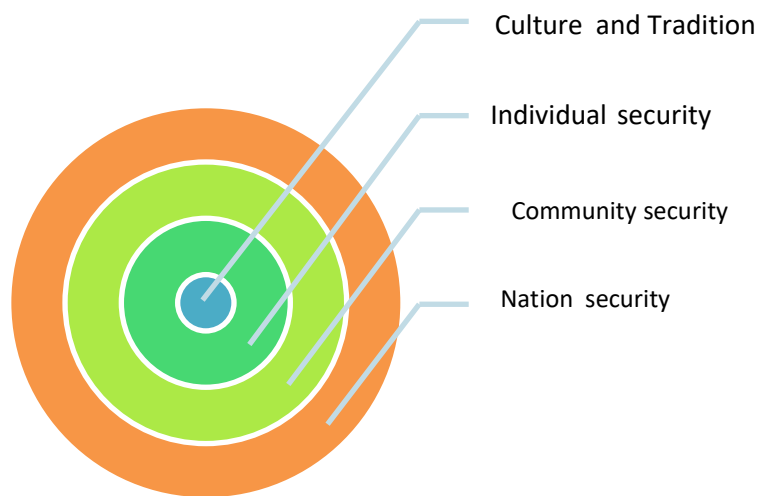


Figure 1.1

The Creation of Bhutanese Culture

There are many cultures and tradition being practiced based on geographic location – each practice is different although, initially could be germinated from same notion of practice –‘shamanism’ see figure 2.1. Dragging Darwin theory of ‘survival of the fittest’ is convergence to survival of not only from its own race but also from nature: sun, rain wind and other tribes. Tribes’ men turn to the nature for its survival- ‘security’. The ‘Bhutanese culture’ and other Asian countries culture lies deep within the rich soil of ‘North Asian Shamanism’. For instance, when the usual herbal medication fails, a shaman is called into. After dancing and

chanting mysterious words, shaman falls into an altered state of consciousness that give access to the world of sprits.

In a similar fashion, the invocation of nature embodied in ‘supper human form’- not exactly ‘god’. For example, praying before planation of seedlings and thanking giving prayer to nature after bounty harvest. It is amazing to witness so many of such practices being practiced by Bhutanese but at very diminishing rate. In the past, all the activities were co-related to such practices – that in way created a fusion between man and nature- a sustainable living. With the passage of time, man became wiser and equally greedy. This ‘greed’ breads all sorts of problems that human beings bear today.

Civilization become civilized and many other rational or advance believes advent into tribes men resulting in building community. Gradually, communities merged to become kingdoms and finally a nation building set forth. The savage culture became an obstacle for development or otherwise human advancement. More institutionalized culture and religion started to flourish. In Asian countries of Himalayan region, Buddhism gained its popularity preached by Gautama Buddha, an Indian prince. In all most same era, when Bon religion flourished into the ancient kingdom of *Shang Shung*- much of today’s Tibetan territory introduced by *Tonpa-Sherub Miwo*.

In Bhutan, this teaching was taught by Tibetan Bon and Buddhist scholars and lama. As the teaching landed in Bhutan, it came with lots of flavor of mysticism, ritualism and exorcisms. Too many ingredients were added to a simple, profound teaching taught by Buddha in India.

Many Buddhist followers may oppose to; but most scholars agree with my proposition that many of representation of wrathful deities or supper being were borrowed from Bon teachings- particularly the *Nyinpma* School, that of the concepts of nine Yana- ways of vehicles. Besides, bon rituals on getting to haven ‘*Sridpa Yesang*’ and three deities controlling the world and the people – past ‘*Dagpa*’, present ‘*Salba*’ and future ‘*Shepa*’. The belief of world conquered by god and evil spirit was associated with Bon teaching thought to originate in the land of *Olmo Lungring*.

It was the *Guru Rinpochhe* who began teaching of Buddhism to the people who was already practicing Bon religion. It was Guru Rinpochhe’s acumen to turn people into Buddhist infusing Bon teaching with Buddhism, which lead to less resistance or no resistance from the Bon followers.

In Bhutan, the practice of *Lhasoel/ Choesung Soelni* became more prominent after the arrival of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal to Bhutan in year 1616. It was Zhadrung’s command to all his followers to perform ritual for the protective deities. This had dual purposes as is made his followers constantly in touch with his teaching and also brought families, communities closer, thus this is how unity of country was further

strengthened- national security. Therefore, this is an invisible thread bonding the unity amongst people in a family, community and finally as a nation see figure 1.1.

Lhasoel and Choesung Soelni

Lhasoel as name suggest is a yearly ‘carnival’- carnival a close term to categorize. The carnival is very important to a family and to the community. This celebration as required to celebrate as per the standard practice practiced by the ancestors- preferably as accurate as initial introducer. Introducers introduce such practice for the wellbeing of tribe’s man’s family - protection from both manmade and natural phenomenon. In some instances, history notes that a misfortune resulted from ‘nature wrath’ to the family and to the community to the extinction. Opposition to such notion is certain, but history holds such incidence in an around the world- even in this 21st century.

Lhasoel celebration can be loosely grouped into Shamanism, Bonism and Buddhism. This categorization cannot be the conclusive as there might be many more, however, generalization serves this purpose. Obviously and my favorite fourth category is hybrid ‘modern practice’ – a combination of all three practices. And for better or worse, the fourth practice is dominant as observed most part of the country. This, thus observed is a natural adjustment with the changing demographic preference – younger generation with different preferences ignited by the intrusion of new practices.

Shamanistic practice

Apparently, there is little line of distinction between Shamanism and Bonism practice in general. Actually, digging deeper into practices, practices in Bonism has its distinctive dimension. This distinctive dimensional practice pretty convergence to Buddhism flourished in Tibet, Bhutan and other Himalayan region. From the four major schools, it has more closed relation to Ningmapa school tradition founded by Guru Rinpoche in 8th century. Whatsoever, the practices such as Lha soel and Lhu soel is commonly widely practice - a practice believed to be borrowed from shamanism practices? In other words, a refined version of shamanistic practices juxtapose to current usage, as I have already suggested earlier as ‘adaptation to change in time and taste’ of mankind.

There is annual, three year and sometimes twelve gap celebration dedicated to particular ‘super being’. The common shamanistic and bon practice are seasonal, conditional and locational based. It is time bound for

instance, if community does not receive rain on time, the offering or invoking of ‘rain making’ super being is carried out. It is done by involving experienced or learned shaman. For extreme cases, even human are being sacrificed for greater caused- for cause of family, community and nation. In Bhutan, today neither human nor animal are being sacrificed to please the super being. However, ‘*torma*’ in form of human or animal according to shaman’s and lama’s advice in lieu is being offered.

Such practices or celebration are carried before and after an event has taken place. The essence of carrying such amazing practice or celebration is for family, community and nation’s security. As witness throughout the globe, with the end of the cold war, the issues of collective identity have become centrally important. For Bhutan, the Bhutanese believe that the collective identity is the right weapon to defend Bhutan rather than normal security arrangements.

In shamanistic practice, there are no textual records for invoking and thanking giving prayers. However, a shaman shaking and dancing falling in to spirit world and communicate with spirit for remedial measures – probably spoken by the spirit itself. Accordingly, than the preparation for performing prayers or celebrations begins. Therefore, a textual record is not possible as different spirit could say different thing depending on situation and location as I suggested earlier.

The situation is even getting worse as the younger generation with many valid reasons have no knowledge or little knowledge on such practices. Besides, not interested in such practices- for such interest reflects its image. Considering such engagements as uncivilized – a savage culture. Today ‘western culture’ has intoxicated Bhutanese, particularly youth. Today’s youth refuses to follow such practice- because it is a ‘savage culture’ looked down by the modern society.

Sadly and slowly, society and the countries are losing such practice, with older generations leaving the world and taking away such amazing practices for good. It is not going to take much time to meet its natural death. Most developed countries around had already lost and now trying all means to revive back for instance.

Bhutan could still follow the path other has already taken - a chase after material wealth or can still strike balance without replacing entirely with materialism. Effort has been made but lack of lucidity and the vagueness of such effort is doing little help in its continuity. Charles Darwin theory would not be applicable as to survival of fittest or one size fit all purposes.

If we let it for ‘self-preservation’, this may lead to imbalance in the family, community and to the country. You may not disagree with me in stating that the men live in three worlds of the physical, mental and emotional. Maintaining close equilibrium within this three world is necessary – disturbances derail the purposes of human existence. To do so, a super being’s benefits have sought – a celebration or practice in

praise of super being's power of protection. Though savage in nature, such practices has created balance between nature and the beast.

Thus, this could be a solution to today's problem of materialistic appetite of men. Economist would oppose this proposition echoed by politicians- where more production of goods and services is the main aim. If I may, I would prefer to use 'creative creation' over 'creative destruction' echoing Joseph Schumpeter believe 'no destruction can be considered creative'. Thus, creative destruction begins on mass scale to fulfill human desire, thereby mugging all super being properties without request.

Buddhist practice

As introduced in the introduction, in Bhutan; Buddhism was introduced in 8th century by Guru Rinpoche in 8th century. From 12th century onwards, five major schools of Tibetan Buddhism made its way into Bhutan. However, during 16th century, on arrival of *Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal* (1616) to Bhutan, other sect could not flourish due to 'survival of the fittest'. Interestingly, the Ningmapa sect existed side by side as it was not with direct confrontation with Zhabdrung political project. Zhadrung Rinpoche propagated Drukpa Kagyud tradition, a sub sect of kagyud School. As Zhabdrung was destined to unify the country and rule, it was under his rule varied, but unique culture and tradition developed. Therefore, all these unique culture and tradition can credit to Zhadrung Rinpoche. It is interesting to note that although Zhabdrung was Tibetan, but he envisioned very different cultural identity for the newly established country known as Drul Yul.

Whatsoever, the practice of *Choe Sung Soel ni* in Buddhist term for similar offering but to a different subject. This practice is carried out by Bhutanese people across the country except for the southern part of the country following different religion, Hinduism? However, these people do carry out practice but in their own religious way. This is a yearly offering to one's own protector deity or deities, to ward off evil force and to bless with health and happiness. Deities is a borrowed from Bon religious practice. This is why such practice is loosely combination of Bonism and Buddhism. Buddha taught is teaching to the mankind in plain and simple way.

The *Choe Sung Soel ni* , invoking prayers for seeking protection by protective deities and thanking giving prayer . It has become an important function under the rule of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. It was as per his instruction to his followers to conduct *Choe Sung Soel ni* for protective deities for protection from: natural and man-made. Bhutanese history records twelve Tibetan invasion to Bhutan was successfully defeated '*with sorcery of Zhabdrung Rinpoche and the protection of his protective deities and divine force*'.

Therefore, everyone became intimidated even at the mention of Zhabdrung Rinpoche which not only prevented future invasion from Tibet and Mongolia, help in settling the long internal dispute within the local leaders in different regions of Bhutan (Drukpa Dorji Gyaltshen, 2010).

To celebrate the victory over Tibetan invasion, Zhabdrung Rinpoche started *Punakha Domche* in 1649 to honor all protective deity *Palden Lhamo, Pal Yeshe Gonpo, Jarog Dongchen or Gonpo Chamdrelusum*. The protective deities are of two kinds, one category enlightened is being who promised to protect Buddha's teachings. The other kind is subdued demons or spirit by the great Buddhist masters and took oath to protect and help in spreading masters teaching in return of their life.

That is the reasons; there are references in *soelkha* prayer in ascending order first with enlightened protector to subdued ones and then the respective locations worldly deities or *Kelha and Yullha*.

Performing ritual for the protective deities

Such performance is carried by the family or a community as an annual activities. Mostly it is performed after harvest- during winter seasons as traditionally family or community doesn't have much farming work to carry out. Generally the main function is conducted in two days. The monks or lay monks or shaman prepare all necessary things as per the written instruction (Buddhist religion) and oral transmission for shaman. On second day, the monks numbering to nine or five perform the rituals as passed down by the older generations. In some cases, the rituals are conducted for five days or even thirteen days record by a family at Paro (Drukpa Dorji Gyaltshen, 2010, p485)

For many reasons raised earlier, family and community in the villages are confronted with confusion. There are merely few people available who can perform ritual. They are confused and worried about continuing such practices. If family and community fail to perform, there is risk of angering protector deities and super beings. The cost of neglecting them is risky business, but without knowledgeable person able to perform is such ritual is frustrating for the family and community. In any case, there is risk worth paying attention.

Coming to my forth trend – the hybrid one. As more and more people migrate from rural to urban, hybrid one is commonly followed. Since it was practiced and followed by the family and the communities for many generations, people are afraid of unseen consequences, for the sake of continuing, ritual are performed according to family's convenience not as it was followed.

With commodification of religion, the expenditure for continuing such practices has gone way and bound. Firstly, it is really difficult get a good (lay) monks to perform really satisfactory ritual. Most have migrated

from village to towns, form towns to cities. Some even migrated abroad perhaps for the benefit of more sentient beings. Secondly, the expenditure to perform is so expensive. An average family is unable to afford such practices. This is one factor leading to natural death of such practices. In the past, it was duty on part of (lay) monk to perform ritual in the family and community's request and in return, family and community happily shared their harvest. Such was the unity shielded a family and community from famine (physically and spiritually). Today, this trend had already changed and it has almost become taxing issue for all the stakeholders.

Creation of Bhutanese Culture and Tradition

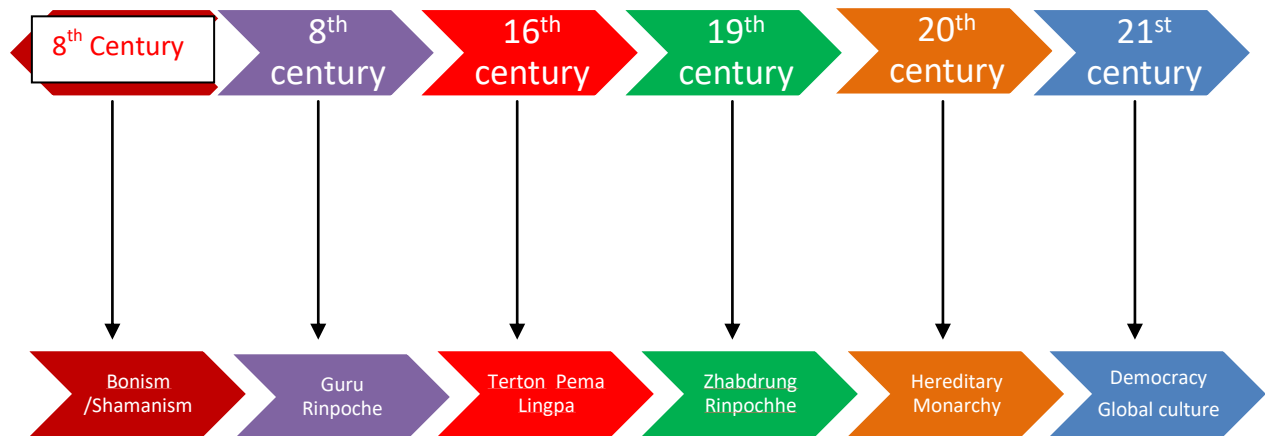


Figure 2.1

Conclusion

Culture and tradition has played very vital role in enhancement of human security in general. In particular, for Bhutan, it is the core of Bhutanese identity. While tangible culture and tradition has been preserved, however, intangible culture and tradition seems to be lagging behind. This is due to the fact that only it is felt only after losing it.

Lhasoel as discussed earlier is heading to same direction without much notice of general public. As I argue that the culture and tradition is main the basis of Bhutan's security, see figure 1.1, without further discussion, re-examination is urgently necessary. Since it is the matter of country's security, compromising would be incomprehensible, which nobody would like venture.

Since there is no comprehensive policy on culture and tradition of Bhutan, losing of such crucial culture and traditions is inevitable. Therefore, I foresee more confusion and confrontation within society- noticeably between older and younger generation, commercial entity and orthodox, village community and town community and so on.

References

- Adam, J. (2003). Anti-globalization: The Global Fight for Local Autonomy, *New political science*, 25.
- Appell, G. N. (1974). Basic issues in the dilemmas and ethical conflicts in anthropological inquiry. Module, 19, 1–28.
- Arias, M. (1998) *The Raven Crown: The origin of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan*, Chicago, Serinda Publication.
- Drukpa Dorji Gyeltshen (2010). *Religious Way of Life- Bhutanese Context*, Thimphu, Bhutan, Kuensel Corporation
- Hardin, G. (1968). “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, 162, 1243-8.
- Hodge, H.N. (1992). *The pressure to modernize and globalize the future of progress*, Green book, Dartington Devon, UK.
- Mathou, T. (1999) *Bhutan: Political Reform in Buddhist Monarchy*, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Vol. 1. p 114-145
Retrieve from <http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt>
- Sangay Tashi (2013). *The Role of Water Governance in Bhutan: A Case Study of Mangdechu Hydroelectric Project*. Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
- Stiglitz, J.E. (2002). *Globalism’s Discontents*. In: Lechner and Boli (2004). *The Globalization Reader*. Blackwell, Oxford. P.200-207