

TIBETAN DIASPORA IN BHUTAN

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ABSTRACT

Bhutan is bordered by India to the south and Tibetan Plateau to the north. Having being bordered by Tibet on its entire northern and most of its western frontier, Bhutan received several influxes of Tibetan settlers at different periods of time in the annals of its history. Some were Buddhist masters, mystiques and monks who had considered perfect place for Buddhist missionary activities while others say that it is the merchants and traders who opted to stay back due to the serenity of the natural environment. While the Tibetan Diaspora that settled in Bhutan until 19th century were due to wars, political turmoil, transhumance and serenity of the environment ideal for practicing Buddhism, the mid 20th century saw a huge number of Tibetans refugees evading the Communist Chinese Invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet between 1950-1961. Many Tibetans who were on their way to India had chosen to remain in Bhutan as they wanted to avoid the oppressive heat and humidity. This study presents the advent of Tibetans in Bhutan, how they have been able to adapt to changing conditions in Bhutan, their economic pursuit and the relevant markers of Tibetan identity in Bhutan.

INTRODUCTION

This is the first ever attempt to write about the Tibetan Diaspora in Bhutan. As a result, there is a lack of written resource on Tibetan Diaspora in Bhutan which inhibited the drawing of certain inferences. However, the researchers have relied heavily on literature on history of Bhutan, folk culture of Tibet, legends, folklores and on the words of the people of the Tibetan communities scattered across different geographical locations of the country through in-depth interviews. Given the general reserved nature of the Tibetans in Bhutan towards inquisitive strangers, the researchers had to make several visits to the settlements in order to gain trust and confidence in sharing information required for this study. This study was carried out with the objective of gaining first-hand perspectives that will further our understandings of Tibetan Diaspora in Bhutan. This being a preliminary study is intended to provide a basis to the future researchers in carrying out a comprehensive study of Tibetans in Bhutan.

LOCATION OF THE COUNTRY – Bhutan

Bhutan is a small landlocked, independent Buddhist nation in the eastern Himalayas. It is bordered by India in the South and South-East and by the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China in the North and North-West. It lies at an altitude ranging between 162 meters to 7554 meters above sea level. The population is estimated to be about 720,679 and occupies a total land area of about 38,394 sq kms with a total of 70.5 per cent of the country's area under forest cover (NSB 2012). Thimphu, located in the western region, is the capital of Bhutan.

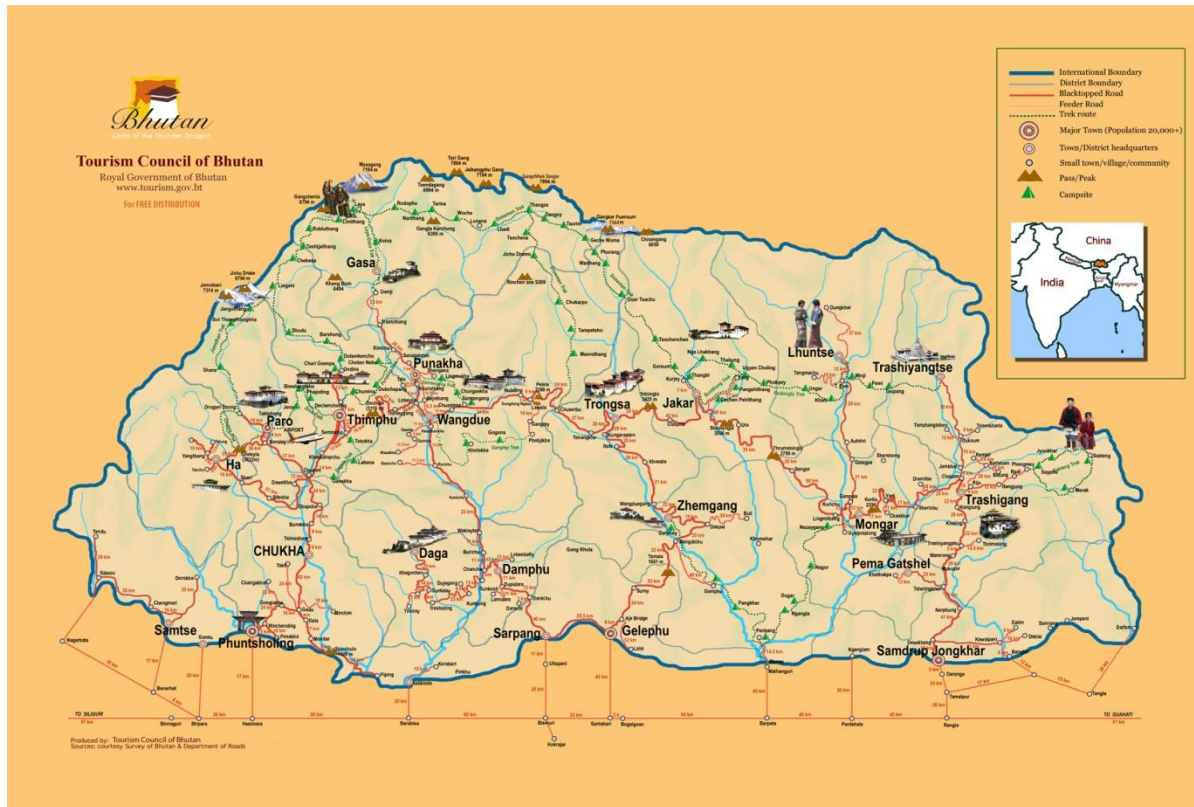


Fig.1. Bhutan map. (Source: Tourism Council of Bhutan; www.tourism.gov.bt)

Since ancient times, the Bhutanese have settled and used the land in the south of the crest of the Eastern Himalayas which also mark the international boundary with the Tibetan Province. The watershed range has served to separate the spheres of influence of the Bhutan principality from that of the Southern Tibetan tribes. Thus, this water shed range served as a frontier with Tibet.

There are different tribes of people in Bhutan. The original inhabitants of Bhutan are the *Monpas*- mongoloid stock. According to Sinha (2003), Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern Bhutan are claimed to be the earliest settlers of the Mon. Tibeto-Mongoloids inhabited the North and Western part of the country while *Lhotshampas* (Southerners) cultivated the South (C.T. Dorji

2008: 6-7). C.T. Dorji (2008) argues that Europeans mistook Drukpas inhabitants of Bhutan for Bhutias. He states that the Bhutias were a stock of the Tibetans who came from Tibet and settled down in Northern India (Darjeeling District), Sikkim, and Nepal while the inhabitants of Bhutan are known as *Drukpas* - in other words, Bhutanese.

The principal religion of Bhutan is Buddhism, which is claimed to have been introduced in the seventh century and now considered the official religion of Bhutan. According to the linguistic survey carried out by the Dzongkha Development Commission in 1991, there are twenty different languages spoken in Bhutan including Dzongkha which is the official and national language of Bhutan. Except Dzongkha, the rest of the languages do not have scripts of their own. English is also very widely spoken and is the preferred medium of education from the primary to the tertiary level.

DIASPORA

Cambridge Advanced Learners 'Dictionary defines the word Diaspora as "the spreading of people from one original country to other countries". Although Bhutan enjoyed independent status throughout its history, like many other countries around the world Bhutan too experienced the influx of immigrants from neighbouring countries like Tibet, Nepal, and India at various phases of its history. Since this paper discusses only about Tibetan Diaspora in Bhutan, it identifies who are the Tibetan Diaspora and traces their first entry into Bhutan and examines their situations in Bhutan. Reference to Tibetan Diaspora from ancient times is made as a part of historical development. The main argument dwells on those settled after the invasion of Tibet by the Communist Revolution.

HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND ADVENT OF TIBETANS IN BHUTAN

Little information is available concerning the historical origin and advent of Tibetans in Bhutan as native sources are believed to be destroyed by natural calamities like earthquake, fire, flood and internecine warfare. One example could be the burning of Punakha *Dzong*¹ (fortress) in 1832 and the devastation of the earthquake in 1897, and few subsequent fires have taken a heavy toll on the records, annals, and anecdotes which were available in Bhutan, making the early history extremely difficult (Chakravarti, 1979: p. 29). What survived and are accessible consists mainly of old manuscripts found in the monasteries, and many books on history and culture of Bhutan

¹ Dzong – a fortress that serves as a center for both administrative as well as center for learning in Bhutan.

written in 1960s and onwards. In absence of any reliable recorded early history of Bhutan, we may also rely on the well known legend of the 7th century A.D. when King Sendha Gyap conquered the countries of Bengal and Bihar, and subdued Bhutan, fighting against Raja Keda of Guar.

The two *Choejungs* (religious history) written by Tenzin Chogyal and Gedun Rinchen in 1731-59 and 1972 respectively are authoritative works on Bhutanese history. The writings on secular history of the country by Lopen Nado (1986) and Lopen Pema Tshewang (1994), and equally insightful works in English by historians such as Michael Aris, C.T.Dorji, Yoshiro Imaeda and Karma Phuntsho among others, are some other few reliable sources of Bhutanese history.

According to K. Phuntsho (2013), since ancient times, Bhutan has been a well-known destination for Tibetans who were banished from their country, escaping into exile, searching for Buddhist devotees or simply seeking to start a new life. Since the advent of Tibetans in Bhutan began because of the various reasons and in different times and with a view of identifying and highlighting the dominant reasons of the historical origin, this section is divided into the following:

- a) **Historical linkages through Buddhist Masters**
- b) **Tibetan Soldiers and Merchants**
- c) **Arrival of Zhabdrung Rinpoche**
- d) **Tibetan Diaspora in 19-20th Centuries**

HISTORICAL LINKAGES THROUGH BUDDHIST MASTERS

According to Chakravarti (2003), before Tibetan settlers came down, Bhutan was a cluster of small principalities of many regions having separate center of power headed by local chieftains who were either a political or religious head. Bhutan was believed to be plagued by a series of petty civil wars as the chieftains of the various territories contended for power and influence. A.C Sinha (1991) points out that when certain communities lost their seat of power in the political struggles, they simply disappeared in the hills and forests of Bhutan. The mystiques, monks and saints had considered caves and northern valley of Bhutan ideal abodes for their meditation. This phase can also be considered as Mediaeval Theocracy with religious feuds and establishments of the monastic principalities.

It was Songsten Gampo² (reign 617-650), the 32nd King of the Yarlung Dynasty in Tibet who first brought these people under the aegis of a Buddhist inspired culture with well defined religious and civil laws. He inculcated a sense of high civilization based on Buddhist principles of non-harm and non-violence together with a great emphasis on universal values of compassion and sensitivity to all living and non-living beings.

King Songtsen Gampo undertook great religious and cultural initiatives by building monuments that were unseen till then in Tibet to convert the people who were already under the influence of an animistic religion called Bonism. One of his greatest legacies is the building of 108 temples on strategic locations of his land Empire that stretched from China in the north to India in the south. Till date, Bhutanese believe that King Songtsen Gampo built 108 *chortens* (stupas) in a single period of his reign, falsely believed by few as being built in one day. Of the 108 *chortens*, two were built in Bhutan. One built in Paro in Western Bhutan called Kyichu and another one in Bumthang in central Bhutan called Jampa *lhakhang*. The legendary version of this fact is that a malignant demoness used to cause fear and suffering to the ignorant people of Central Asia, thus the King got her nailed to the ground with the help of *Phurba* (ritual dagger). The story of the foundation of these temples by the King Songtsen Gampo is well known to the Bhutanese that Bhutan's known history effectively begins with this event. However, the founding of these two temples in Bhutan, does not presuppose Tibetan rule over Bhutan. Bhutanese historians go to some length to explain that the temples were works of religious piety rather than a mark of political domain, much like the fabled Buddhist temples built by the Bhutanese themselves at Kailash in Tibet, in Ladakh, and Nepal (K. Phuntsho, 2013: 76-77).

From some of the sources, such as the history of Bhutan text by Karma Phuntsho (2013), a cultural history of Bhutan by Chakravarti (2013), and a book on Tibetan wars through Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal by M.N. Gulati (2003), one can see the long and intricate relationship between Bhutan and Tibet that dates back at least one thousand years. Tibet was a vast and largely uninhabited region with disparate tribes living in isolated communities before the first religious King of Tibet. Tibet being situated to the north and north-west of Bhutan, Buddhist masters and saints from Tibet came to Bhutan especially from 7th to 18th century which has left strong religious influences between the two countries. However, B.Chakravarti (2003) states that some Tibetans came to Bhutan and India much earlier than 9th century A.D., though small in numbers and similarly some Indians and Bhutanese also reached Tibet much before 9th Century A.D. It is believed that there has been a long tradition in which both lay people and monks had been undertaking journeys to the Tibetan monasteries with a view to attaining merits and knowledge. Similarly, such personnel considered one of the most desirable acts in their lives was to go on pilgrimage to the land of Buddha in the south. All these who came to the south were

² King Songtsen Gampo is the forefather of Buddhism in Tibet and is the 32nd King of the Yarlung Dynasty in Tibet.

known to have brought their legends and mythologies, which have become now inseparable parts of the Bhutanese folklore.

The relation was further promoted through the great deeds of successive Tibetan Kings; most notably Thrison Detsen (742-797), 37th Tibetan King who invited learned Indian scholars and practitioners to develop the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. One of these invitees was the peerless Indian Mahasiddha, Guru Padmasambhava. The great tantric master was believed to be originally from Uddiyana, India visited Tibet for the propagation of Buddhism and preached Buddhism there. He performed many miraculous deeds which led to the conversion of the Tibetan populace and enhanced their faith and belief in Buddhism and its associated culture. He, with his spiritual power, is believed to have subdued almost all the evil spirits and divinities of Tibet and bound them under oath to serve and protect the Buddhist doctrine. However, he is best remembered in Bhutan as the person who brought Tibetan Buddhism to Bhutan in all its purity and nobility. Today he serves as the critical link between the Tibetan and Buddhist culture.

On his return to India, Padamashambhava, also popularly known as Guru Rinpoche in Bhutan visited Bumthang in 747 A.D on the invitation of the Sendha Gyab (Sindhuraja) of Bumthang. It is believed that the Sendha Gyab was a prince from Kingdom of Sindhu in India who was banished from the country by his father, came to Bhutan and established a kingdom in Bumthang, Bhutan in the 8th century A.D. The legendary accounts reveal that Sendha Gyab was an adherent of the shamanic Bon faith. He adhered to the worship of local deities. He was believed to be engaged in a battle with King Nawoche in the Indian plains during which he lost his only son Tala Mebar. In retaliation, he burnt down thousand settlements in Nawoche's domain. Karma Phuntsho (2003) states that after losing his son in the battle, he gave up worshipping his tutelary deities, which made the angry spirits hit back by stealing his tutelary deities. There is a strong Buddhist belief that once one gives up worshipping ones tutelary deities, deities whom is supposed to have been protecting one gets upset and will cause misfortune in ones life. Consequently, Sendha Gyab falls seriously ill. While his ministers were looking for a solution to cure their king, a minor ruler from a border area suggested that Padmashambhava, who was also Nawoche's spiritual guru, may be able to help the king. Arriving in Bumthang, Sindh Gyab promised that he would fulfill any command of Guru Padmashambhava, if the latter could cure him. But Guru Padmashambhava desired nothing expect that the king should heed his command and follow the path of virtue, never to fight wars and cause suffering to sentient beings. Sendha Gyab accordingly agreed to abide by his command and was believed to have cured . Following the miraculous events, King Sendha and his subjects were converted to Buddhist faith, and undertook to propagate Buddhism as their new religion.

To most Bhutanese, he is both a precious teacher (Guru Rinpoche), and the quintessential divinity. He is often described as the second Buddha and perceived as the embodiment of the

enlightened wisdom, compassion, and power of all Buddha. A great number of Bhutanese religious festivals, ceremonies, and prayers have him as their focal point of worship and meditation. According to K.Phuntsho (2003), traditional historians unanimously claim that Bhutan is the destined field of activity for Guru Rinpoche just as Tibet is for Avalokitesvara (God of Compassion). Guru Rinpoche is known to have come to Bhutan on at least three occasions. He is said to have travelled all across Bhutan to bless every inch of Bhutanese landscape and of the Himalayas in general. Many valleys and villages across Bhutan have local legends about Guru Rinpoche's visit and often explain their existence and cultural behavior in relation to such legendary events as we have already seen. One of the most prominent legends Guru Rinpoche's visit is *Taktsang* (Tiger's nest) perched on the cliff in Paro. According to some oral accounts, he is believed to have come on flying Tigress to subdue all the malevolent forces to make way for teachings of the Buddha. Bhutanese claim that on each of his visit in Bhutan, he consolidated the hold of Buddhist culture.

Further, among the celebrated legends of Guru Rinpoche is his mystic consort Yeshe Khando (popularly known as Kha-dro Yeshe Tshogye). Yeshe Khando was believed to be a beautiful Tibetan maiden who had acquired the wisdom and knowledge of Buddhism. Her legend has it that the monarch of Lhasa, having heard of her sublime beauty and wisdom became desirous of marrying her. Although she hid herself in a mountain cave and stayed engrossed in deep meditation, the royal messengers found her and brought her back to Lhasa. Guru Rinpoche, however, saved her from the ordeal, and made her his spiritual consort. Many believe that she came to Bhutan with Guru Rinpoche and sanctified many monasteries in the Kurtoe, Paro and Bumthang regions.

The next visit which is of considerable significance is that of Gyalwa Lhanangpa (1164-1224) who came to Bhutan in 1193. He belonged to the sub-school of Drukpa Kargyu – *lhapa Kargyu School*. He is believed to have established a number of religious centres like Chalkha Dzong in Paro, and Do-ngon Dzong in Thimphu.

The other visit of importance is the arrival of Lama Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo (1184-1251) from Kham, Tibet where the Drukpa School began to spread into the western valleys of Bhutan after his visit in 1222. The legendary tale has it that the reason for his visit to Bhutan was as per the prophecy which indicated that he should head southward to spread the teachings of the Drukpa school. From the biography of Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo, his four sons became spiritual as well as temporal heads of their respective places. Consequently, the Drukpa Kargyu School was established through their efforts. Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo was considered as the fore-runner of the present Drukpa Kargyu School of Buddhism in Bhutan.

Chakravarti (2003) states that there were Buddhist preachers who built many monasteries and sometimes indulged in inter-sectoral rivalries. Some of them are Lama Karthogpa, and Lama Neningpa who came to Bhutan but could not create much impact amongst the Bhutanese masses. Drubthob Thangtong Gyalpo (1385-1464) popularly known as the Iron Bridge Builder,

displayed many engineering and architectural skills for which he is best remembered by both Tibetan and Bhutanese people. He had built several temples and bridges in Bhutan. Some of them are *Dumtse Lhakhang* in Paro, *Chagzam* (Iron chain suspension bridge in Tashigang) and Tamcho Gonpa bridge in Paro. His descendants were believed to have settled in Tamcho Gonpa, Paro which can still be seen in present day.

These masters, while establishing themselves among the natives, replicated many of the Tibetan secular and religious laws and norms in the Bhutanese society. The Tibetan lamas that are not mentioned above but who still household names among Tibetans that left tangible traces in Bhutan are Milarepa (1040-1123), who is revered as Tibet's greatest poet saint, one of the founders of Kagyupa "School of Oral transmission"; Longchenpa (1308-63) was the great synthesizer of the doctrines and methods of the Dzokchen "School of Great Perfection"; and Drukpa Kunley (1455-1529) was the best known in the West as "The Divine Madman" of Tibet who came from the main lineage of the school that was ultimately to win political supremacy in Bhutan. (Aris, 1994: p.20).

TIBETAN SOLDIERS AND MERCHANTS

Certain sources such as, a Concise Cultural History of Bhutan by C.T. Dorji reveals that, to some Tibetans, Bhutan was a land of marvels with serene environment where this imagination of perfect place of the establishment of Buddhist monasteries and political asylum had made them curious and eager to visit Bhutan. The reality behind this fantasy is probably that Bhutanese culture and civilization do differ, to a greater extent from the other civilizations especially prevailing in the neighboring countries in the North and South.

Further down the line, many Tibetan masters began wandering in the sacred land of Bhutan. According to S.C. Sinha (1991), incidentally, all lamaists alike, be it farmers, monks, laity, royal and commoners have by tradition been traders and businessmen, in which they had been taking long and arduous journeys within and beyond their country. Some of them like Phajo Drugom Zhigpa and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel even started settling down in Bhutan. Later their number was augmented by the arrival of more Tibetans. Many Tibetans seem to be born merchants and they travelled to Bhutan to barter salt and wool with rice. It is claimed that Tibet had plenty of salt, wool, woolen blankets and garments, and furs for export. Salt is believed to be in great demand by Burma, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan.

According to Sinha (1991), inhabitants of Chumbi valley is ethnologically Tibetan in origin; and it is known for its dry land and pasture economy, daily farming and herdmanship, and practice of transhumance. According to oral accounts, they used to bring their yaks and sheep down to Bhutan for grazing in winter and also to barter their butter, yaktail, blanket in exchange of their daily necessities like salt and rice from Bhutan. Since Tibetans were known for their expertise in herding yaks and sheep, some cattle owners of the nomadic tribes of Bhutan would entrust their

cattle for tending. The nomadic tribes of Bhutan who live at high altitude wander about tending cattle between their summer and winter pastures that has developed a close association with some of the Tibetans. Chakravarti (1979) points out that the Bhutanese and Tibetan merchants travelled for weeks to bring mule-loads of rock-salt, woolen blankets and other commodities. Ponies and mules were used to carry their load and some of them were used for riding.

Since then, further interactions occurred between the two countries, some practical, some spiritual, while others were not so pleasant. According to C.T. Dorji (2008), some Tibetan soldiers liked Bhutan so much that they refused to go back to Tibet. Some sources claim that early settlers of parts of western Bhutan were Tibetan soldiers who came in looting trips to the fertile lands that Bhutan provided compared to their own inhospitable homeland. The soldiers found the land so perfectly suited to their long term designs that they decided to abandon their command and settle in the new land. These people are sometimes called *Melog* which literally means those who do not want to return. Sometime in the 9th century, during the reign of King Relpachen (805-836) in Tibet, the Tibetan army invaded Bhutan. That was one such occurrence where some of these soldiers liked the country and decided to settle down in Bhutan.

ARRIVAL OF ZHABDRUNG RINPOCHE

In the midst of stifles, many Tibetan people are said to have moved to the southern valleys of Bhutan. K.Phuntsho gives a fairly detailed history of how the Tibetan ruling elites created their own fiefdom and ruled them from their bases in fortified houses on hilltops in Bhutan. K.Phuntsho (2013) said that such a distributed polity of hereditary rules based on the notion of Tibetan kingship continued in eastern Bhutan until the unification of the country in seventeenth century by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel.

The biggest and the most sustained interaction, both politically and culturally, however occurred with the arrival of the Religious Hierarchy of Druk Ralung, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651). Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel was believed to be the incarnation of Tsangpa Gyare (1161-1211), the founder of Drukpa Lineage. He was 12 years old when he was enthroned as the eighteenth Drukpa throne-holder of the Drukpa seat and recognized as the immediate reincarnation Pema Karpo, the prince abbot of Ralung.

At that time in Tibet, his recognition and enthronement was opposed by the Lhatsewa Ngawang Zangpo. Ngawang Zangpo was believed to be an influential follower of Drukchen Pema Karpo who recognize Pagsam Wangpo as the reincarnation of the fourth Gyalwang Drukchen and Kunkhen Pema Karpo. The Chongje Depa, who is believed to be an illegitimate father of Pagsam Wangpo then persuaded the Tsang Desi, the most powerful ruler in Tibet to support the recognition of Pagsam Wangpo as Gyalwang Drukchen and the incarnation of Kunkhen Pema Karpo. However, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel continued to live as the head of the Drukpa seat irrespective of who was considered as true incarnation of Khunkhen Pema Karpo.

It was believed that Tsang Desi had demanded *Ranjung Kharsapani* (sacred religious relics of Ralung) to give it to the rival Pagsam Wangpo. Eventually, Zhabdrung had to leave Tibet because of his irreconcilable rift with the supreme ruler of Tibet, the Tsang Desi.

According to G.Dorji (2012), it was believed that Songsten Gampo built Kyichu and Jampel Lhakhang in Bhutan as a prophecy of his coming to Bhutan as Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. While Songtsen Gampo was revered to be the 3rd embodiment, Zhabdrung was considered the 12th reincarnation of Avaloketeshvara as per *Phunsum Tshogpa*, affirmed by the omniscient Pema Karpo.

Zhabdrung, as he travelled from the border through Gasa, blessed local patrons and devotees, and gradually made his way to Thimphu. When he reached Pangrizampa monastery in Thimphu he realized that was the place he saw in his dream in which, the guardian of Ralung, Yeshey Goenpo (Mahakala) appeared as a raven and directed him to Bhutan.

Tibetans tried to invade Bhutan with their organized armed forces on several occasions during the reign of Zhabdrung in Bhutan but they were defeated on all occasions. This is where Zhabdrung had to raise a reliable fighting force by pulling in the ordinary people and made his move in an organized manner from his north western base to the south and eastern areas. At this time, he developed a system of *fortresses* (Dzongs) which became the spiritual and administrative centre of every district. These fortresses can be still seen in present day and are located on the strategic significant locations to avoid an easy attack. These fortresses are the architectural monuments of Bhutan and unique features of the landscape. In their most ancient forms, the fortresses are mostly built on mountain spurs and have a round tower and are surrounded by watch –towers like Ta-Dzong in Paro which can still be seen in the present day. N. Ramphel (1999) compares these fortresses to medieval castles which have an important fortification, and seem always ready for defense and sally. Simtokha Dzong built in 1629 is the oldest *drupka* fortress erected in Thimphu, Bhutan.

The first one of many such battles was the sudden attack by the Tsangpa ruler in Tibet to vex out the growing popularity of Zhabdrung in the western region Bhutan. Zhabdrung defeated another Tibetan invasion of the Gelug-Mongol forces from Tibet in 1644 and built Drukyl Dzung in Paro to commemorate the victory. Sinha (1991) mentions at least five frontier conflicts between the Tibetan and Bhutanese in the 17th century itself. Again in 1714 Bhutan was invaded by the Lhajang Khan (reign 1697-1717). However, all invasions were successfully tackled by the Bhutanese, and thus, their separate political and cultural identities remained intact.

Sinha (1991) points out that a number of Buddhist Schools like Nyingmapa, Gelugpa, Sakyapa extended their missionary activities from their Tibetan strongholds to Bhutan before the seventeenth century. It is claimed that Zhabdrung established and consolidated all the Buddhist Schools into one. Ever since the arrival of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in Bhutan in 1616, the laws of the country were based on the principles of Buddhism which are analogous to Ten

Commandments of the western world. Buddhism then became the basis for development of many aspects of Bhutan's unique culture and tradition. Soon he was able to establish himself as the religious leader of Bhutan with the influence of his political and religious teaching. Bhutanese claim that he developed a distinctively unique Bhutanese identity for the state and the people under him. Gradually, he not only unified the country but also strengthened and introduced the dual system of government known as *Chhosid Nyidhen* which has been the main form of governance till present day. Thus, he is also known as the founder of Bhutan. It was believed that he brought a loosely organized group of petty local leaders in Bhutan under his control.

While Zhabdrung was busy strengthening his base in Bhutan, Tibet was going through a tumultuous political period. K.Phuntsho (2013) points out in his book that at the invitation of the Gelugpas, who suffered immense damages at the hands of the Tsangpa government and their Kagyupa allies, the forces of Gushri Khan of the Khoshot Mongols swept through Tibet taking full control of country and putting the Tsangpa ruler under arrest. In the midst of such problems in Tibet, Bhutan was once again, as it was often in the past, provided a safe haven and place for some Tibetans. Zhabdrung's biographer and Karma Kagyu monk, Palden Gyatsho, and his sister journeyed to Bhutan from Tsang in Tibet in order to escape the sectarian strife under the new Gelugpa³ rule. Even during those times, Tibetan refugees or travelers were not allowed to enter freely in the southern valleys. While Palden Gyatsho and his sister were allowed to enter, the others were refused entry by Zhabdrung (K.Phuntsho, 2013 – p. 238-239).

It was also believed that Zhabdrung invited renowned artists and craftsmen from Tibetan to pass on their skills to local inhabitants. One of them was Karma Kagyu artist named Trulku Zing who worked under Zhabdrung's supervision. Zhabdrung also felt the importance of close links with the Nyingma School, through which the teachings of Padmasambhava are mainly passed down. After realizing the importance of passing on the tradition and benefitting from the religious wealth of the Nyingma, Zhabdrung invited Pema Thinley, the grandson of Pema Lingpa and the first Gangteng Trulku to Bhutan in 1642. Later on, Zhabdrung retired to spiritual activities after the celebrations which followed the victory over Tibetan forces in 1649.

One can see from the above that the earliest surviving records of Bhutan's history show that Tibetan influence existed from the 6th century during the reign of King Songtsen Gempo, who ruled Tibet from 627 to 649 AD. Settlement in Bhutan by people of Tibetan origin started by this time. Thus, the Diaspora that occurred during the 7th century until 18th century was mainly because of Buddhist missionaries, wars, political turmoil and labor migration.

³ Gelugpa – followers of one of the Buddhist Schools to which the Dalai Lama officially belongs to.

TIBETAN DIASPORA IN 19-20th CENTURIES

It can be clearly observed that those Tibetans who came to Bhutan much earlier than the 18th century were in small numbers and were more of individual choice. The other reasons are attributed to wars, political turmoil, labor migration and serenity of the Bhutanese's environment for practicing Buddhism. However, Bhutan saw a remarkable flow of Tibetan immigrants in the 20th Century especially following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950s. It is claimed that approximately 80,000 people fled into the neighboring countries of India, Nepal and Bhutan.

By the early 1950s, many Tibetans were faced with the choice to either remain in Tibet under Chinese government, or embrace exile where benevolent host countries were ready to allow them to live with their culture and dignity. Thus, along with their leader, hundreds of thousands of Tibetans left their homeland for good. Among them, thousands of Tibetans left for India via Bhutan and few took shelter in Bhutan owing to the hospitable Bhutanese and the beautiful place.

If ever some one wonders how Tibetans got into Bhutan, they said that they came through the ancient trade routes. From ancient times, Bhutan had extensive trade relations with Tibet. It carried out commercial transactions with Lhasa from Paro, Punakha and Tashigang. The traders used alternative trade routes at different period from Paro through Tremo La to Phari; from Punakha to Gyaltse and Shigatse in Tibet through the Mo Chhu Valley to Lingshi La; Bumthang via Monla Karchung to Lhasa; and from Tashigang in eastern Bhutan through Dozam valley to Shingbe, Lhasa. Indo-Bhutanese trade in ancient times was carried on through the Chumbi valley in Tibet (Hasrat, 1980: p. 15). From early times, Paro was an important population center of one of two major trade routes between Tibet and India funneling through the Chumbi valley. Chumbi Valley divides Sikkim and Bhutan as if a dagger is thrust half way between the two to within 25 miles of the plains of Bengal. Chumbi valley is considered to be an inseparable part of the religio-cultural and political structure of Tibet. Western Bhutan had intimate links with the valley in terms of trade and commerce, social intercourse, political affiliation, religion and culture. The ancient tracks run up the valley, past Kyichu Lhakhang in Paro (7th Century temple) and ascends to a ridge south west of Mount Jumolalri , beyond which it drops to the regional centre of Phari in the Chumbi valley of Tibet. Phari was an early focus of settlements and religious activity along Tibet's southern frontier. Of all, for the British-India, the Bhutan route was more important since it led to Tibet from India which proved to be a suitable land route for trade with China.

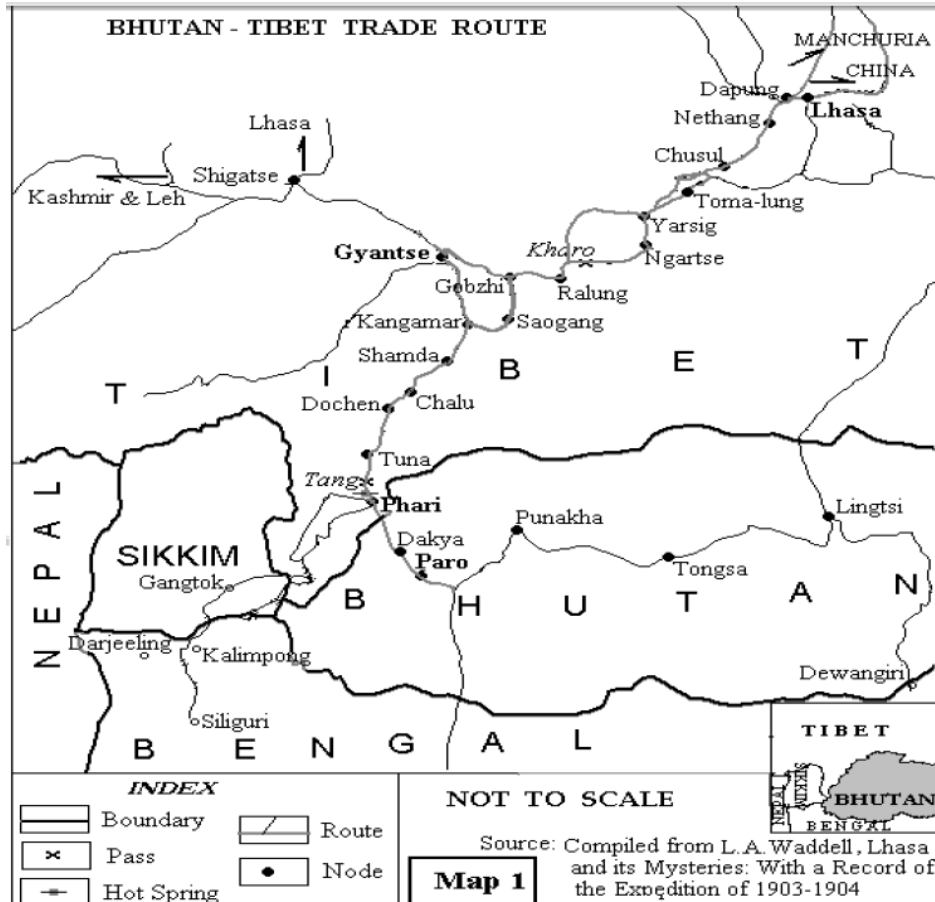


Fig. 2. Map showing the alternative Bhutan-Tibet route. (Source: Sarkar, R. and Ray, I., (2006): pp. 65)

Tibetans trying to escape from Tibet have stopped using these routes because of the Chinese border guards who, after capturing the escapees, either sent them back home or confine them to prison life. For this reason, they (potential escapees) explored alternate paths in the thick forests with many added difficulties posed by the snowcapped mountain passes. They faced severe physical hardships while trying to escape from Tibet. Some of them said that they avoided walking during the day due to the fear of encountering Chinese border guards, and chose to travel only at night. They had gone through considerable risks and hardships to escape. It took them almost three weeks to one month to reach Bhutan through the treacherous Himalayan ranges. It was also reported that many people who tried to escape could not survive due to harsh climatic conditions and difficult terrain.

While some Tibetans, especially from the Southern part of Tibet fled to Bhutan from the Chumbi Valley on their way to India, rest followed the border through Gasa, Soe and Lingshi. Some of them who had domestic animals with them chose to remain in Bhutan as the climate of the northeastern plains of India was not at all conducive to Tibetan's visit to Bengal and Assam. They were afraid of the oppressive heat and humidity. The people of Bhutan sympathized with

the refugees and extended whatever assistance was possible within their capacity. While many of them requested the Bhutanese authorities on their wish to return to Tibet eventually, many of them who renounced their right to return to Tibet were granted Bhutanese citizenship.

By the grace of the Kings of Bhutan, the refugees were resettled in some of the best farming lands in various parts of Bhutan. Bhutan and Tibet share many cultural and traditional linkages. Thus, those Tibetans who settled in Bhutan were made to feel at home in the Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan. In the host country, they could not only preserve their religion and culture, but also promote them in many ways. A study by T.M. Murburg points out that since 1959, fifty four Tibetan refugee settlements have been established in India, Nepal and Bhutan out of which seven are in Bhutan.

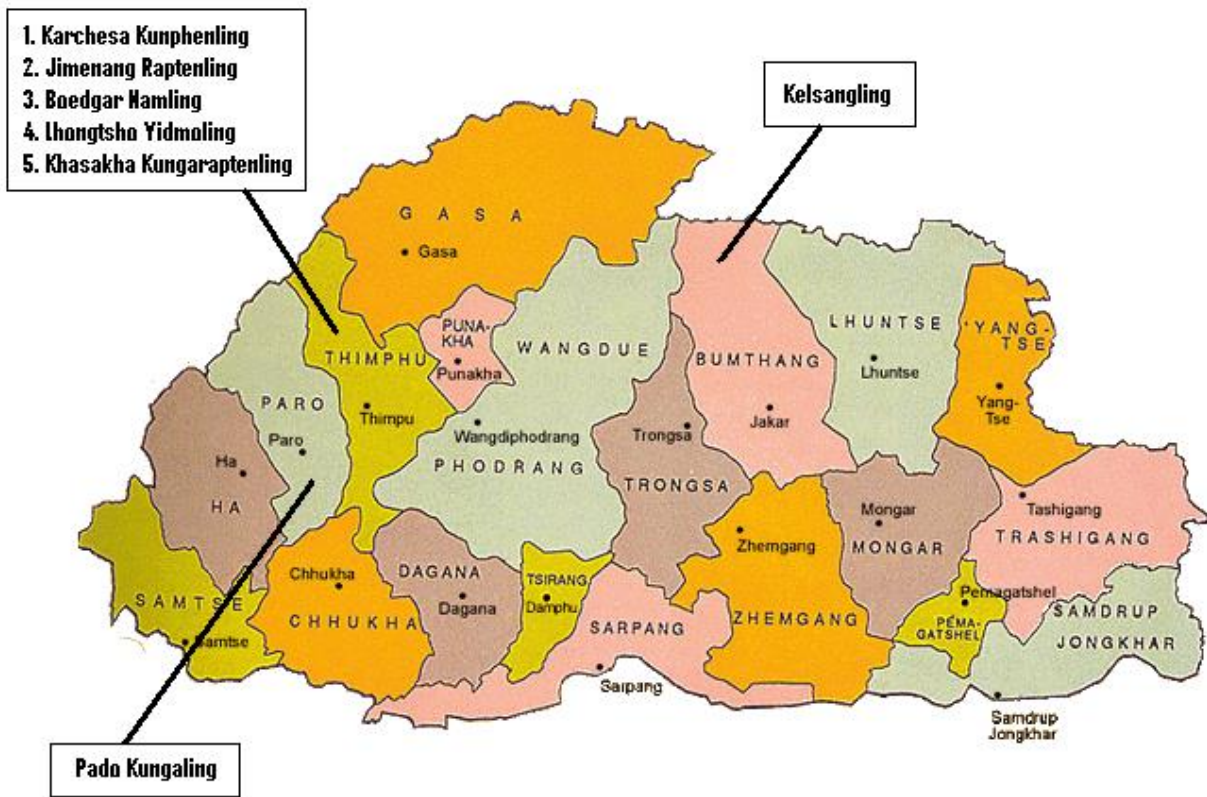
TIBETAN SETTLEMENTS IN BHUTAN

According to a survey conducted by Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in 2009, there are 1,450 Tibetans registered in their Diaspora in the Bhutan. These 1,450 Tibetans in Bhutan are resettled in the following seven settlements that are dispersed throughout the country as shown in map below.

1. Pado Kungaling settlement
2. Karchesa Kunphenling settlement
3. Jigmenang Raptenling settlement
4. Khasakha Kungarabtenling settlement
5. Boedgar Namling settlement
6. Lhongtso Yidmonling settlement
7. Kelsangling settlement

Pado Kungaling settlement

Kungaling Tibetan settlement, locally known as Gishigang in Paro is the first of Tibetan settlements in Bhutan. It was established in September 1963 on the total area of more than fifty acres of land provided by the Royal Government of Bhutan during the initial setup of the settlement. It is located at an altitude of 2200 meters above sea level and total population of 211. It is seventy five kilometers away from the capital city of Bhutan and ten kilometers away from Paro main town. This settlement has access to free modern education, monastery and free medical services and medicine.



Seven major Tibetan settlements in Bhutan

Karchesa Kunphenling settlement

Karchesa Khunphenling settlement, known to local as Kabisa in Thimphu was established on 22nd October 1963 on an area of 50 acres of land granted by the Royal Government of Bhutan during the initial setup of the settlement. This land is distributed among the Tibetan refugees and legally registered in the name of the head of the family. This settlement is located at an altitude of 8000 feet or 2400 meters above sea level located on the northern outskirts of Dechen Choeling satellite town. The settlement is about eight kilometers from the capital city of Bhutan and has a total population of over 252. It also has access to facilities like to access to monastery, school and free medical services and medicines to the settlers. Department of Education in Bhutan provides free education including free learning and teaching materials to the students of the settlements.

Jigmenang Raptenling settlement

Rabtenling Tibetan Settlement (known as Jemina to locals) in Thimphu was established in 16th March 1967. This settlement is the second largest of all the Tibetan settlements in Bhutan occupying total area of about ninety seven acres of land and the population over 482. This land, granted by the Royal Government of Bhutan during the initial set up of settlement was distributed amongst the Tibetan families living in this area and legally registered in the name of the head of the family. It is located at an altitude of 8000 feet or 2400 meters above the sea level and is twenty eight kilometers away from the capital city of Bhutan – Thimphu. This settlement has access to free modern education, free medical consultants and medicines, and monastery.

Kungarabtenling

Kungarabtening Tibetan Settlement (known as Khasakha to locals) in Bhutan was established on 2nd March 1967 with a total area of forty one acres of land and holding a population of 347. It is located at an altitude of 8000 feet or 2400 meters above sea level and is twenty kilometers away from Thimphu, capital city of Bhutan. This land granted by the Royal Government of Bhutan during the initial setup of the settlements was distributed among the settlers and is legally registered in the name of the head of the family. The facilities available to the settlement include a primary school. Department of Education of Bhutan provides free education inclusive of free learning and teaching materials to the students of the settlements. Royal Government of Bhutan also provides free medical services and medicine to the settlers. The settlement has a place for religious activities at the Rewo Gadhen Schools Monastery.

Boedgar Namgyaling settlement

Boegar Namgyaling Tibetan settlement, commonly known as Begana in Thimphu was established on 1st April 1970 with the total area of about thirty nine acres and over 94 populations. This land granted by the Royal Government of Bhutan during the initial setup of settlement was distributed amongst the settlers and legally registered in the name of the head of the family. It is located at an altitude of 8000 feet or 2400 meters above sea level. Facilities available to the settlement are free modern education, and free medical services and medicine provided by the Royal Government of Bhutan. They also have the place to worship and pray.

Yidmonling Settlement

Yidmonling Tibetan settlement (known as Hongtsho to locals) in Thimphu was established on 6th March 1970 with a total area of 207 acres of land and the population of 199 Tibetans. It is the largest settlements of the seven Tibetan settlements in Bhutan. It is located at an altitude of 8000 feet or 2400 meters above the sea level and is eighteen kilometers away from Thimphu- capital city of Bhutan. The land granted by the Royal Government of Bhutan during the initial setup of

settlement is distributed among the settlers and is legally registered in the name of the head of the family. Facilities available to the settlers are free modern education, and medical services and medicine by the Royal Government of Bhutan. They also have a monastery to pray and congregate.

Kelsangling settlement

Kelsangling Tibetan settlement, commonly known as Samtenling in Chumey, Bumthang was established on 1st May 1971 on 500 acres of land granted by the Royal Government of Bhutan during the initial setup of the settlement. It is located at an altitude of 2550 meters above sea level and with over a population of 201. This land is distributed among the settlers and is legally registered in the name of the head of the family. The settlement has a school where the Royal Government of Bhutan provides free modern education. The settlement also has access to free medical services and medicine.

According to Strom (1995) when a group of people are displaced and transferred to a radically different natural and social environment, the threat of social disintegration and cultural discontinuity are strongly imminent, and the task of establishing new, viable communities is therefore a great challenge. However, The Tibetans in Bhutan have been extraordinarily successful in dealing with this new change and challenge. Their lives in these settlements are characterized by successful establishment of Tibetan society in Bhutan. This success, we believe may be attributed to the similarity in culture of the Diaspora and the host country. After the establishment of these settlements, most of them have been living in communities where their way of life has continued more or less as in Tibet. In the beginning, especially for the older generation, it was very difficult to live with the thought that they were not in their homeland, and Tibet was embedded in their minds and memories. Tibetans are overwhelmed by Bhutan's generosity towards them which can be attributed to the close religious and cultural similarities the shared historical links between Bhutanese and Tibetans being deep-rooted.

CULTURE

Bhutanese culture is regarded as one of the most ancient cultures deriving inspiration principally from the Buddhist doctrinal lore and the ethical concepts of the *Buddha, Dharma and Sangha* (Triple Gem). The Cultural heritage of Bhutan and Buddhism are intricately interlinked and it is for the development of the inner attitude and outer character, which becomes custom, that can be further refined according to the changing times and situations.

Bhutan being landlocked and influenced by its topography of rugged contour of valleys and hills, remained isolated from the outside world for most of its past. This has attributed to maintaining a

rich cultural heritage of the country, largely unblemished. Initially, the main cultural centers were Monastic bodies.

While Bhutan has its own distinct characteristics of culture, some of the cultural norms and practices of the Tibetans and Bhutanese are uniquely compatible to each other, in comparison to the cultural and customs practiced in neighboring countries like China or India. Buddhism has definitely played a very significant role in the cultural currents of Bhutan. It is linked, due to the historical fact that influence of Buddhism flourished and passed on from Tibet to Bhutan. This had a direct bearing on the social and culture landscape- in that it led the development of art and literature, social systems, habits and customs of the country.

It is beyond doubt that the majority of exiled Tibetans residing in Bhutan have been able to adapt well to the environment of Bhutan. Tibetans in Bhutan believe that they share the same religion and many Tibetans claim that tradition and culture are also almost similar to each other. Tibetans in Bhutan have been extraordinarily successful in dealing with the challenge of coping up with the new environment and continuing their cultures. This cultural continuity could be attributed to the same religion that they share with the host country.

RELIGION

Both Tibet and Bhutan are considered to be the strongholds of Vajrayana Buddhism which is popularly introduced by the same Indian saint –Guru Padmasambhava in the eighth century A.D. Many writers on Bhutan consider that Buddhism came to Bhutan from Tibet because they try to trace the history of Bhutan from the Tibetan sources which record the construction of two temples in Bhutan in the 7th Century A.D. as the pioneering act of propagation of Buddhism in Bhutan. However, Chakravarti (1971) points out in his book that from the Indian sources like *Rajatarangini* (a chronicle of Kashmir kings, written by Kalhana) records that a learned man from Bhutan – *Lho Yul*⁴ named ‘Stonpa’ was the preceptor of the King of Assam in the 5th Century A.D. ‘Stonpa’ means a ‘Teacher’ in *Sharchob Kha* – the language of the Eastern region of Bhutan. Stonpa had claimed to have built a stupa named *Lhotshonpa* which means, stupa from the South, in Kamarupa, India. This suggests an indication that Stonpa hailed from Bhutan and can be legitimately presumed that Bhutan might have received initiation to Buddhism much earlier than Tibet.

This was followed by many more visits by Buddhist teachers and *tertons* (treasure discovers) from Tibet and India. The teachings of Buddha based on wisdom and compassion became an integral part of the life of both Bhutanese and Tibetan people. These religious factors and a certain degree of national consciousness have gone a long way in maintaining a certain degree of “historic and cultural’ unity. Nonetheless, geographically and ethnically, Bhutan has a distinct

⁴ Lho yul – Southern land – *lho* means ‘south’, *yul* means country which means Southern Country – i.e Bhutan. One of the names of Bhutan known in ancient times.

personality of its own, and her customs, traditions and religious beliefs impart a special character to the people and the country. Like Tibet, Bhutan too has a number of monasteries.

Bhutan accepted Buddhism in its own characteristics ways. Bhutan had its own indigenous religion even before the shamanistic religion, so called 'Bon' known as Pre-Buddhist religion. In ancient time, the people of Bhutan worshipped Sun, Moon, stars and gods of earth, gods of mountain, gods of sky and gods of under water. Then, during 500 B.C to 600 B.C, the Bonism infiltrated into Bhutan gradually from the snowy ranges of Tibet. Bonpo priest invoked the benign spirits by chants and offering spells and magic formulas. We see some of the practices of Bonism infiltrated into the tantric core of Buddhism. Tibetan influence is seen mostly in the religion and its practices since both Tibetans and Bhutanese practice the Vajrayana form of Buddhism. Many writers on Bhutan considered (took for granted) that Buddhism in Bhutan came to Bhutan from Tibet. This is due to the fact that they try to trace the history of Bhutan mostly from the Tibetan sources like Tibetan Buddhist manuscripts which record the Tibetan King Songsten Gampo's construction of two temples in Bhutan in the 7th century A.D. as the pioneering act of propagation of Buddhism in Bhutan. The legend says that Songsten Gampo took a vow to propagate Buddhism throughout Central Asia. Bhutanese Buddhism, though belonging to the larger family of Tibetan Buddhist traditions, has a unique character.

Buddhist beliefs

Both the Tibetans and Bhutanese hold the same Buddhist beliefs. For instance, both Tibetan and Bhutanese believe in life after death or 'reincarnation'. This reincarnation system is based on the belief that Buddha and Guru Rinpoche's (Precious Master) soul never vanished but reincarnated in succession to lead their followers to accomplish their mission.

To the Tibetans and Bhutanese, Buddha and Guru Rinpoche are still alive. Both Tibetans and Bhutanese believe that all beings in the universe are capable of being enlightenment and *nirvana* is not the end of the path, for the ultimate goal is to lead all beings to that attainment. This is the reason why the potential Buddha renounces enlightenment for himself and returns to the world by reincarnating to teach until all beings are liberated.

Religion indeed had played and continues to play an important role wherein, Buddhism has penetrated into each and every aspects of life. Buddhism, if it can be described at all in brief, then is to see the universe "as it is", to experience the harmony of life, to be free from our concepts, biases, and opinions. Both Tibetans and Bhutanese view all life as sacred as all beings – gods, human beings, animals, or insects – are considered as part of the whole. In this connection, many Tibetans living in Bhutan shared that they really did not have much difficulty in coping up with the ways of the Bhutanese way of life.

Another important factor which has been instrumental in creating rapport between the Bhutanese and Tibetan is that, intrinsically, the religion that both the parties uphold and identical views and

values. One of the elderly men, in his 80s now, who came to Bhutan when he was 25 years old, said that he is very happy to be in a Buddhist country. He proudly claimed the reason for his being alive till this date is because he is very happy to be in Bhutan. He also mentioned that there was no need to find another place to go given the warmth of the hospitality of the host country.

They had continued to maintain their faith in the religion by building temples and monasteries in their settlements. Every Tibetan community has a temple each, namely, Namling Ugyen Donga Choeling in Begana, Ralung Goen Deychen Choekorling in Kabisa, Yoedmin Lhakhang in Hongtsho, Nyedey Rabtenling in Jemina, Lek Drup Dratshang in Khasakha, Kuengaling Lhakhang in Paro and Kesangling Lhakhang in Bumthang which are mainly devoted to ritual practices. They also use temples and monasteries to congregate amongst themselves to observe auspicious days like descending day of Lord Buddha. One could see the *thangka* paintings of their patron deity and protector, murals and frescos all around on the walls- symbolizing their freedom of personal devotion reflected in a common place of worship which was important objects of devotions for the people in the community. Further, almost every house has a separate room designated as altar or shrine room with statues of the Buddha and the great *gurus*. It is also a common sight to have the portrait or the posters/framed picture of the Dalai Lama on the wall of every Tibetan residence. Every house has sculptures representing great Buddhist masters and saints made of brass, bronze, silver or clay, *thangkas* (gouache paintings on cotton, usually mounted on silk brocade scrolls wall hangings), and a few tapestries. The altar has also ‘water offering bowls, and incense smoke curling around it. The altar rooms are lighted with light from the butter lamps, arranged neatly on a low table in front of the shrine.

Further, almost all of them have a *mandala* (Buddhist graphic symbol usually in circle) made of any material such as wood, clay, sand, copper, silver, gold and coral depending on the economic capability of the family of various sizes. Some are drawn and painted on the walls in the altar room. It can also be drawn on the ground with colored rice or pebbles.

This *mandala* is read, and memorized as the text for visualization during meditation. They believe that the mere act of *mandala* offering and viewing brings inner peace, and transcendental wisdom. H.H the twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa underscores the reason for *mandala* offering:

We should understand that the whole universe, including ourselves, forms the mandala. When you offer this, you have to imagine that you are offering the things which are most attractive to you. This is very helpful in breaking the clinging attitude of the subjects towards the object. It is always the subject that clings to the attractive object. This indicates that you are offering the universe; you are offering everything, including your body, speech and mind. This offering is a method to cut off the very strong clinging and painful grasping thought. That is the real reason for offering the most attractive things. (H.H. the twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa 1997, 24). The Mandala has achieved its fullest and the most complex development for both as an artistic form and as a meditative ritual emphasizing cosmic integration for the Tibetans.

It is observed that both Bhutanese and Tibetans are usually regarded as religious people whose lives revolved around the teachings of the Buddha, as expounded by the great gurus and saints who had achieved the ultimate state of enlightenment. The favorite place for the old people is a shrine room and it is a common sight to come across most of them with the beads of rosary moving through their left hand fingers as they slowly repeat the prayer of *Chenrigzik* (God of compassion) OM MANI PADME HUNG or the mantra of Guru Rinpoche, OM HA HUNG BADZA GURU PADME SIDHI HUNG. Thus religion, still to this day, plays an important role wherein, Buddhism has penetrated into each and every aspect of life.

One of the prominent similarities of the tradition of the Tibetans to Bhutanese are the festivals. Tibet has various festivals such as *saga daw* (auspicious month), *lha bhap duenchen* (Decending day of Lord Buddha) which are associated with Buddhism. Similar traditions are also practiced in Bhutan with its own uniqueness.

Tibetan Religious symbols like eight lucky signs or eight motifs were also noted similar to Bhutan religious symbols while visiting their houses and the Tibetan monasteries and in the country at large. These eight lucky signs symbolize the progress to Buddhist path. Other common symbols like *swastika* (Emblem of infinity, universe and sometimes sun and moon), poster of Wheel of Life, also in murals on the wall of the monasteries were also seen on the home walls and monasteries. Each of these symbols has its own meaning and benefits.

As said by one of the interviewees, so much of the Tibetan culture and natural environment, in Tibet, have been destroyed and people's lives have been turned upside down by the Chinese. Nevertheless, the timeless tranquility of the similar environment and culture preserved in Bhutan make them feel at home. Although Bhutan and Tibet have almost the same heritage, they have developed on different lines due to isolation by their inhospitable rugged terrain and watershed range (the crest of the Great Himalayas), thereby preventing frequent mixing of the two societies.

TIBETAN IDENTITY IN BHUTAN

Despite many similarities in customs and practices, it is important to formulate the Tibetan identity in Bhutan to distinguish them from the host country and how far they have been able to manage to keep their identity intact over the years. They had domesticated the new environment by constructing their own houses and buildings, made the land cultivable, community marked by prayer flags and *shambu*. The monasteries built in their community are built in their traditional style.

Generally, Tibetans in Bhutan could be identified or recognized by their distinct cultural identity like food habits, dress and festivals as they have been able to maintain these aspects in their community and within themselves. There are mainly two kinds of responses amongst the older generation, and middle and younger generation. The older generation born in Tibet and grown-up in Bhutan said that they keep their culture intact by wearing *boed gho*, hoisting Tibetan prayer

flags especially the *shambu hung* on the door and celebrating *losar* (Tibetan New Year). We shall discuss about it in detail in the following sections.

TIBETAN PRAYER FLAGS

Prayer flags are very significant in, and symbolic of the Tibetan culture. They can be seen flying all around in the Tibetan plateau and have become symbols of Tibetan settlements all around the globe. For the Tibetans, stringing up prayer flags is a virtuous deed and can be done anywhere practically possible, but holy sites and significant landmarks are largely favored. The flags are richly colored and highly venerated as they are believed to have the potency to spread positive energy in all directions. “*..prayer flags flying high with the wind help to bring radiance and clarity of thought. Prayer flags are messengers from the heavens to remind the world to move towards peace, harmony and happiness. They also act as invitation to the heavens to bring benefit both to the living and the dead. Prayer flags bring energy, health, good luck and success and each flag is like a star on the earth.*” (Dru-gu Choegyal Rinpoche, Head of the Dru-gu region, Kham, Tibet).

The flags come in a variety of colors, shapes and sizes. The five prominent colors used are white, yellow, red, green and blue representing the five Buddha families, five elements, five directions, five wisdoms and the five mental attributes. There are horizontal shaped *lung-ta* flags which are strung across as well as vertically hoisted *darchens* on bamboo or wooden poles. Long horizontal yellow *serzams* (golden bridge) make a third variety, which are hung over roads and across rivers and streams to benefit people passing below as well as *nagas* and spirits. Finally, there is the *darjung* which is strung in pyramid or tent shape from a central pole. This allows for maximum hoisting for a small area and a single pole. They are sometimes erected to mark on an accident spot where someone had died, an important person was cremated or a great lama had preached. (Barker, p 17).

The other unique type of flag hoisted by every Tibetan settlement in Bhutan is *shambu*. One could easily recognize or identify Tibetans in Bhutan by a mere sight of the houses and buildings by *shambu hung* on the door of every Tibetan houses. They change *shambu* annually especially during the big event such as *losar* and marriage celebration. Whether hoisted on a high mountain pass to secure a safe journey, or strung across bridges and streams to benefit people and spirits alike, either hung for self and others or for the dead and the living- the effective kaleidoscope and purpose of Tibetan prayer flags is as myriad and transcending as their unique beliefs and customs. The flag fluttering in the wind is believed to carry the inscribed prayers and recommendations to the ears of the powers involved in deciding on the fate and fortune of all sentient beings.

TIBETAN APRON

Unlike the cooking apron used elsewhere in the world, Tibetan apron (called *bang den*, also known as *pang den* in Tibetan language and *dong khep* by the Bhutanese) is a wide, beautiful piece with colorful motifs of flowers and animals traditionally tied around the waist and sometimes hung from front waist to lower hem of the *chupa* (Tibetan women's traditional dress). It has a strong contrasting mixture of colors including red, green, white, yellow, skyblue, purple and pink displayed together. It is a beautiful hand-woven fabric woven by women. Traditionally, the main raw materials of the apron were wool from yaks and sheep and cotton, which were coloured and dyed with natural dyes using traditional methods. However, with sweeping in of modernization and easy access to market, synthetic materials are replacing the original woolen fabrics. Three vertically small pieces of the colorful horizontal stripes patterns of various colors are sewn together to form an apron. Tibetan apron is known to be one of the favorite dresses of the Tibetan women.

While it is also seen that few Bhutanese women, especially nomadic highlanders of the northeastern and northwestern part of Bhutan, wearing the apron, although it is not common as in the Tibetan women. According to their customs, it is believed that only the married women wear the apron as they are believed to be a *la sok* (life force) of their husbands. Another belief is that one is not supposed to walk over or step on it as it is considered to bring ill luck to the husband. However, with change in time and by its outstanding mixture of colors and attractive piece, unmarried and even the younger Tibetan girls have started wearing it. Some of the Tibetan women who we met shared that they used it as a mat while they go to witness festivals and makes it more convenient to them for not having to carry a mat separately. One could easily identify their country of origin by mere looking at the Tibetan women wearing their beautiful aprons and their beautiful long hair in their twenties; some in hundred plaits gathered into a single braid and interwoven with colorful ribbons and ornaments with turquoise and coral in the traditional style of the region. Those who wear this say that this is one way of maintaining their spiritual bond and feel a strong sense of connection to their home country.

TIBETAN ROBE

Generally, the Tibetan dress is loose fitting, with long sleeves and a wider-than-usual waist, and its front is opened from the right side. The waist belt is necessary for the Tibetan robe. Tibetan men's robe is broad and is normally fastened under the right arm, while the robes worn by women are slightly narrower with or without sleeves. Traditionally, depending on their occupational mobility, and deeply influenced by the climate, their robe is made up of leather among herdsmen, and woolen fabrics among farmers.

Robe for men is designed in a loose form with the black edge at the bottom while robe for women has an edge of various colors like black, blue, green and red. The traditional homespun and handmade materials for robes are being replaced by ready-made garments that have entered into the markets. Traditionally, the raw materials of Tibetan robe were wool from Yak and

sheep, and cotton but today, with easy access to market and cheaper raw materials, robes are increasingly made from factory produced cloth and synthetic yarns.

Tibetan robe is worn to knee length in case of men and to ankle length in case of women, fastened by the belt at the waist forming a huge pouch above the waist in men compared to women. This pocket is used to hold various things such as money, goods, water. However, older generation of Tibetans said that it is saddening to see many young Tibetans onto other dresses than their own. They shared their concerned that traditional clothes are disappearing and being replaced by modern westernized dresses like jeans, skirts and jackets. On the other side, the young Tibetans that we talked to say that they are more comfortable wearing other dresses than their own. Some of them shared that they do not even know how to wear their traditional dress. While older generations of Tibetans are sighted with their robes, it is a rare sight of younger Tibetans wearing Tibetan robes. Younger generation prefer western dresses over their Tibetan dress. It is also observed that office going Tibetans and many Tibetans visiting town are noted with other dresses than their own dress.

TIBETAN FOOD

There are also major differences between the Tibetans and the Bhutanese in their food habits. Bhutanese are primarily dependent on rice while Tibetans take *tsampa* (barley flour) and rely more on meat and flour based foods. *Tsampa* being easy to carry, it is normally favoured by nomadic people. Generally, Tibetans carry *tsampa* in their bag hung around their waist. One of the older respondents, an elderly woman in her 70s seemed very nostalgic while sharing information on *tsampa*. She said that *tsampa* is eaten with hands after kneading it with butter and salted tea in the bowl. It is a customary practice to carry a bowl to drink and eat where ever they go. While the younger generations prefer using spoons, the older generations still prefer to use their fingers while eating meals.

Although *Tsampa* is the main food for Tibetan people in Tibet, they have adapted to rice and wheat flour in Bhutan. Barley flour is not as prominent as it is in Tibet. Therefore, they use barley flour during New Year celebrations, and marriages.

Salted Butter Tea

Butter tea is consumed by both the Tibetans and Bhutanese. It is also known as *bod ja* in Tibetan language and *suja* in Bhutan. It is considered to be one of the favourite drinks of both Tibetan and Bhutanese alike. It is made from special tea leaves, cow butter in Bhutan, and yak butter in Tibet and salt. It is usually consumed as a beverage with food. Some sources reveal that tea first came into view during 8th Century AD. Tea was supposed to be light and easily portable to over difficult mountainous terrain, and is known to be comparatively cheap and easily available. A well-to-do affluent Tibetan may consume thirty to seventy cups of tea per day. While the older generations still consider butter tea as one of the most important drinks for Tibetan people, the

younger generations have embraced milk tea and coffee culture in recent years. They also shared that they eat *tsampa* after dipping it to the butter tea and also by mixing well with the barley flour.

There are also some famous Tibetan influenced food like *momo* (dumplings filled with meat, and also with vegetables and cheese), and *thukpa* (Noodles dipped in a hot soup). Momos and Thukpa are mostly sold in the Tibetan restaurants in Bhutan and considered to be very popular Tibetan delicacy in Bhutan.

TIBETAN CALENDAR

Tibetan calendar is lunar-based that the Tibetan year consists of either twelve or thirteen lunar months, each beginning and ending with a new moon. The fresh month starts with the new moon. It is said that a thirteenth month is added every two to three years to make an average Tibetan year equal to solar year. Although Bhutan also has a lunar calendar, it is different to that of the Tibetan calendar as it has different values for some of the main variables like the mean longitude of the sun at any given time. . Based on the *kalachakra tantra*⁵, Bhutanese day and date is ahead of Tibetan date by one day and date. It also has a system of using *tsi la* (skip days) and additional day (*tsi lhagpa*).

Each year is ruled by one of the five elements⁶ and one of the twelve animal signs⁷.

Although both the Tibetan and Bhutanese years are associated with five elements and twelve animal signs, and follow the twelve-year animal cycle, the start of the year and the length of the months are different from each other. When asked if they follow the Tibetan calendar or Bhutanese calendar, they said that although they follow the same day that of the Bhutanese, they follow their Tibetan calendar for astrological guidance and advice.

⁵ Kalachakra Tantra - Kālachakra is a Sanskrit term used in Tantric Buddhism that literally means "time-wheel" or "time-cycles". The spelling Kālacakra is also used. The word Kālachakra is usually used to refer to a very complex teaching and practice in Tibetan Buddhism.

⁶ Five elements of the Tibetan calendar – Fire, Earth, Iron, Water and Wood.

⁷ Twelve Animal Signs - Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig. Oral tradition has it that before Buddha Sakyamuni passed into *Mahaparinirvana*, he summoned all the animals (wild and domestic) on the earth to bid farewell to them. The Mouse responded first and therefore received the first audience followed by the other eleven animals. It is believed that only these twelve animals appeared for the audience. As a mark of appreciation, the Buddha allocated the names of twelve months to each of them in sequence of their appearances before the enlightened one. Thus, the reason for have only twelve animals assigned to the years,

Tibetan Losar

Unlike Bhutanese holding an annual ritual at least once a year, Tibetans are confined to *losar* (New Year) celebration. The word *losar* is a Tibetan word which means New Year. The word is composed of two characters: *lo* and *sar*. *Lo* means 'year' and *sar* means 'new'. New Year is considered to be *dues chen* (great time) for communal celebrations and performing important rituals. The main purpose of performing rituals during the New Year is an expulsion of evil forces that have believed to have been accumulated throughout the year.

The Tibetan New Year is celebrated on the first day of the first month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, which usually falls in the month of January or February. For the Tibetans, *Losar* is the most important festival. Although celebrations of Tibetan New Year lasts for 15 days (or more depending on affluence), the first 3 days are considered the most important days of the *losar*.

Prior to two days of the start of the New Year, which is called *Gutor*, Tibetan people begin to prepare for the New Year. The preparation for *losar* basically consists of collecting fresh roasted barley to symbolize good wishes, a small dried sweet potato, a young sprout or wheat or barley (symbolizing the birth of the new year), tea, butter, butter lamps, *khapzey* (assorted cookies), fruits and sweets. A complete set of all these delicacies will be arranged on the altar. These are usually prepared on the last day of the year before the first day of the *losar*.

The first day of *Gutor* is spent cleaning the house and putting up colourful decorations in and around the house especially the altar room. Tibetan New Year is also considered to be the time for the family get-together; it is an extended feast for families together. They prepare a special dish called *Guthuk*, a soup served with small dumplings. The soup is made from meat, wheat, rice, sweet potatoes, cheese, peas, green peppers, vermicelli and radishes. The fillings for dumplings include scraps of wood, paper, or pebbles. The ingredients that one finds hidden in one's dumplings reflects one's character. For example, if white-colored ingredients such as salt or rice are hidden, it is believed as a good sign. If someone finds coal in his dough, it means that one has a "black heart".

On Tibetan New Year's Day, they get up early in the morning- as early as 2 am in the morning. It is believed that their year should begin by taking bath and wearing their finest clothes to signify the beginning of another fresh year. The event begins with the housewives serving *changkey* (fermented rice wine) to every member of the family. They then say their prayers by lighting butter lamp, prostrating and reciting prayers, followed by exchange of gifts amongst the families. The first day of the *losar* is strictly celebrated within close family members only.

The Tibetans mark the second day of the *losar* by visiting friends and relatives. They invite each other for reunion feast and the male members of the family play *sho* (dice). As the male members keep themselves busy playing *sho*, the housewives serve hot *suja* (salted butter tea) with *kabsey* (cookies). The others dance and sing songs. People raise prayer flags if the calendar predicts a favorable day for hoisting prayer flags.

On the third day of the Tibetan *losar* the Tibetans visit local temples and make offerings to thank the deities for the passing of the year successfully and welcoming the year with happiness, good health and success. The celebration goes on for a week.

Like *losar*, it is claimed that all Tibetan families celebrate marriage with a grand ceremony and it is the wife who generally comes to live with the husband's family unlike the Bhutanese.

However, many of them acknowledge that *losar* celebration, *shambu* on the door are some of the vital elements of Tibetan culture and their identity in Bhutan.

The purpose of celebrating the *losar*, for older generation, is done to uphold their tradition of renewing their allegiances to their lord, reaffirm their goodwill and friendship. One of them said that they have done away with singing and dancing to pay respect to those Tibetans who have lost their lives after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950s. For the younger generation, it is just a marker of time, the beginning of another year and farewell to the successful previous year.

The older generation believes that keeping the cultural traditions alive was an essential tool for keeping the Tibetan identity alive. Tibetan schools and monasteries further aided in the process of identity maintenance by upholding cultural traditions. However, with the sweeping in of the modernization, the new generations opt to go to modern school thus leading to the disappearance of the Tibetan schools. Many Tibetan youth go to India to do their higher studies leading to the social mobility, and equal opportunity in the job market. The middle and younger generations of Tibetans born and brought up in Bhutan were so much assimilated with the ways of Bhutanese lifestyle that they could not name the differences between Tibetan and Bhutanese culture. Folk knowledge of the original homeland of this new generation is acquired only through oral tales from their elders. Some of them said that they are beginning to accept that they would never be able to return to Tibet or it would be like starting everything from scratch. For the old Tibetans who had come from Tibet, they are happy in the land that is blessed by so many great scholars and saints. For some new generations born in Bhutan, the Tibetan homeland has become more of a mythical place which is separated, isolated and coveted. One of them who was not sure of even having any relatives living in Tibet said that they do not know where in Tibet they come from and they certainly do not like to undergo another task of establishing a new life. As long as they have a place to live and something to eat, they are happy. Those raised in Bhutan are oriented towards Bhutan. For some of them, who have assimilated into the Bhutanese culture, they do not see any separate culture as well.

Since few years, Tibetan dancers have entered into the cultural marketplace. Tibetans in Bhutan have started to present their traditional dances in the National event like National day, coronation day celebrations.

One additional festival observed by the Tibetans in Bhutan are *Ongkhor* (also known as Harvest Festival) which is observed by the farmers praying for more harvest. They usually carry *Kanjur* (words of Buddha) which consists of 108 volumes on their back, and walk around the vicinity of places literacy carrying the blessing around. It is also done for seasonal rain for timely farming.

This festival is celebrated towards the end of the seventh Tibetan month just before they begin to reap their crops.

LANGUAGE

Similarities in Tibetan and Bhutanese language can be found in both written scriptures and spoken language. Although there are no concrete written records, it is believed that the history of *Dzongkha* (National Language of Bhutan) which literally means language of the *Dzong* and Tibetan languages date back to the times of the Buddha. *Dzongkha* is said to be related to *choekey* (Religious language or Classical Tibetan). It is said that *choekey* is to *Dzongkha* as Latin is to Portuguese. Just as the Latin has a great influence on the vocabulary of Romans languages, *choekey* especially its liturgy, has continued to influence both spoken and written Dzongkha. When the Tibetan scripts was believed to be invented by the King Songtsen Gampo, some written source claims that there was no written language in Bhutan until the Tibetan scribe Denma Tshemang developed a script called *Lhoyig* (literally means “Southern Script) with the arrival of Guru Rinpoche in 8th Century AD. According to Tshering Tashi, the scribe who travelled to Bumthang as part of Guru’s entourage has written down some of the important teachings of his master and taught the Bhutanese how to read and write in the new script.

Although the language origin may be dated back to the 8th century AD, *Lhoyig* is different from *Uchen* (script used for classical Tibetan). *Lhoyig* is analogous to *Juyig* (script used for ordinary correspondence in Bhutan). According to Lopen Nado, there is a similarity between the form of writing used by Denma Tsemang and the actual Dzongkha script in use today. He said that writing model of Denma Tshemang can be used as evidence of the origin of today’s *dzongkha* scripts. Tshering Tashi, in his article points out that the Dzongkha script differs slightly from the ancient Tibetan script used for writing *choekey*. Although Dzongkha may have its origin in classical Tibetan, it varies greatly in pronunciation. According to N. Ramphel (1999), the difference between the *dzongkha* and the spoken Bhutanese language and dialects, and high Tibetan is as wide as the difference between the high-German and Swiss-German, or even School-German and Dutch.

However, owing to some language similarities, Tibetans in Bhutan had no language barrier and for them to communicate with the local people was the least of their problems. Most Tibetans in Bhutan can speak *dzongkha* fluently. Although they spoke only Tibetan when they initially migrated to Bhutan, they are gradually mixing with the Dzongkha. Most of them are bilingual. Although older generations of Tibetans in Bhutan converse in Tibetan language amongst the family, the younger generation said that their *dzongkha* is better than their Tibetan language. The Tibetan children losing their grip on their language are, however a matter of general concern especially amongst the older generations of Tibetans living in Bhutan.

ECONOMIC PURSUIT

Tibetans residing in Bhutan lead a progressive life because of their high potential adaption to the host country. They have shown a remarkable occupational and spatial mobility. Tibetans have as far as possible strived to perpetuate whichever trade and livelihood they were pursuing in the homeland. Many of them have found new occupations that paved them to new ways of social interaction. Professionally, Tibetans settlements in Bhutan can be broadly divided into two main categories based on their main economic base 1) The Sedentary Agriculturist and 2) Business/the land/building owning elite.

Agriculture is one of the major occupations of Tibetans living in Bhutan which makes up to 75% of the Tibetans living in Bhutan. They are engaged in agricultural activities of various types. They have developed their area of dwelling into the most productive region in the country. This could have been attributed from their host country where agriculture plays an important role in the country. 69.1% of the rural population depends on agriculture as a source of livelihood, employment and income (Socio-Economic and Demographic Indicators of Bhutan). Although the main occupation of the people is agriculture, animal husbandry and horticulture are also considered important part of the lives of the people. After the Government of Bhutan had given sufficient attention to the nurseries to produce seedlings of major horticultural crops such as apples and oranges, these fruits have become a great sustained source of income not only the farmers of the Bhutanese origin but also the Tibetans living in Bhutan. They built their own houses, roads and worked the land to make it cultivable. They grow various cash crops like spinach, cauliflower, potatoes, apples and chilies that have entered into the local market and farmers of Tibetan origin are doing a lucrative business. The apple trees that they had planted many years ago have started bearing fruit, which is one of the chief source of income for the community. Of all, potato and apple have proved to be the most productive and economically viable products in most of these settlements. Their farm produce are considered to be contributing to the development of small scale industries such as fruit preservation factory and distillery. Many of them said that they are happy by the income derived from their agriculture produce.

The other 25% of the total Tibetans in the country are engaged in some kind of private business enterprises like restaurants, garment and handicraft shops. Conversely, Tibetans restaurants have also been welcomed by local community. In recent years, Tibetan restaurants have become so popular that some Tibetans have been keeping the name of their shops such as Dekhang Handicrafts, and Lungta. They said that these names used to be the name of their house in their home land.

Some of them even own big buildings and rent out to the locals. At the beginning, they built very small and light structured temporary homes despite their comparatively higher income from the more intensive form of mixed farming systems, indicating that they would go back to Tibet someday. When the wait become too long, they started building more permanent structures on

the land granted by the Royal Government of Bhutan, and some on the land bought from the locals. Some of them are proven to be faring well and living a high standard of life compared to the average local population. Generally, Bhutanese feel that Tibetans in Bhutan are doing well in Bhutan. On the whole, it is observed that Tibetans in Bhutan enjoy a very successful economic pursuit.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, one could see from the above that there has been association between Tibet and Bhutan as early as the seventh century AD. Further, Tibet and Bhutan having the almost same topography, the Tibetans in Bhutan really did not have to undergo many hurdles and challenges in coping with the new environment of the host country. In fact, they have been successful in either continuing with own culture or assimilating in the host country. The cultural continuity could be attributed to the same religion that both the parties share identical views and values. Despite many similarities in customs and practices, they had kept their Tibetan identity intact over the years to distinguish them from the host country. They can be easily identified from their distinct cultural identity like food habits, Tibetan robes, and the apron they wear, Tibetan prayer flags especially the *shambu* hung on the doors of their homes. The study also found out that Tibetans residing in Bhutan lead a progressive life because of their high potential adaption to the host country. They have secured meaningful lives for themselves. They have shown a remarkable occupational and spatial mobility. However, there is a general concern from the older generations that younger generation are losing grip of their culture.

It is a hope that the perspective gained from this study will sharpen our understandings of Tibetan Diaspora in Bhutan. This result may also prove useful to anthropologists and sociologist. Further, this being a preliminary study, is intended to provide a basis to the future researchers to carry out a comprehensive study on Tibetan Diaspora in Bhutan.

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