

Situation of Children in Bhutan

An Anthropological Perspective

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The Centre for Bhutan Studies

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Editor's Note

In 1989 UNICEF (Bhutan) assigned Unni Wikan and Fredrik Barth who are both anthropologists to study the situation of children in Bhutan, and *Bhutan Report: Results of Fact Finding Mission* was submitted in 1990. That UNICEF employed anthropologists instead of medical consultants for the job in Bhutan not only reflected the sensitivity and respect of the organization towards the local culture, but also a novelty of achieving holistic understanding of the issue. Everywhere the trend has been to force a bundle of prescriptions ill-suited to the local context.

This monograph is a reproduction of the above report. The publication of a 21 year old report in no way suggests a dearth of information on the situation of children in Bhutan and related issues. While much has changed after the consultants' field visits to the villages, most of their observations and description of the underlying Bhutanese values are relevant. Despite their short interrupted field visits in Bhutan, they have succeeded the most, within the context of their assignment, in understanding Bhutan, and penetrating the deeper recess of the Bhutanese culture which otherwise does not yield easily to outside observers.

The Centre has taken the liberty to change the spelling of some Bhutanese words, terms and concepts according to the standard Dzongkha Romanization.

Fredrik Barth (born 1928), a Norwegian social anthropologist, was educated at the Universities of Chicago and Cambridge, and is currently a professor in the Department of Anthropology at Boston University. Unni Wikan (born 1944), Barth's spouse, is also a Norwegian professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo. Barth is perhaps the most well-known anthropologist to visit Bhutan and conduct fieldwork although most of his writings on Bhutan remain unpublished.

June 2011

INTRODUCTION

The data on which this report is based were collected in Bhutan during the periods: 14-27 March 1989 (Wikan), 14 March to 24 April 1989 (Barth), 28 July to 21 October 1989 (Barth), 24 August to 12 November 1989 (Wikan), from published sources, reports etc., and during the remaining periods between 1 March 1989 and 15 January 1999. The field study has comprised of survey visits covering all districts except Samtse and Dagana; while visits of longer duration and repeated revisits, have been made in Paro; Punakha; Phobjikha and Rukubji in Wangdi Phodrang; Chendebji in Trongsa; Jakar and Ugyencholing in Bumthang, as well as Thimphu and environs.

Anthropological methods of participant observation and unstructured interviewing have been used, apart from brief structured interviewing for local censuses and recording of certain household features. During our work we have been assisted by Singye Wangmo, Ugyen Dema, Chimi, and Cigay Dorji as interpreters. We have largely lived with local families approached through introductions from relatives in Thimphu or fortuitously contacted with the request that we be allowed to spend some days in their homes. The responses to such startling

requests have been warm and gracious, and place us forever in debt to our hosts. We have joined these households in their normal eating and sleeping arrangements, participated and observed every day activities and household routines, conversed and relaxed with our host, and visited and interviewed other households in the community. We have also consistently sought to revisit the places we have contacted, so as to show our appreciation, and develop an enhanced degree of familiarity and trust. In part, we have also made use of our interpreters' personal contacts to enhance such access and trust. Much of the time, Wikan and Barth have worked independently during the day, and part of the time we have also travelled and lived separately.

CULTURE VARIATION

As Bhutan shows marked regional variation, we have sought to acknowledge and record some of its distribution without over-extending our area of work unrealistically: our description must be based on a core of relatively intimate and contextualized information and certainly cannot build on survey data alone. We suggest the following regional framework to summarize the relevant variation. Roughly, the country can be divided into

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three distinct ecological/altitudinal major zones; the high mountains and valleys of the North; the middle inter-mountain zone of habitation ranging from 1600-3500 m altitude; and the low zone in the South. From West to East in the middle zone, three sectors can be distinguished in terms of linguistic and cultural affinities:

Ngalong-Speaking (i.e., Dzongkha-related) areas from Haa to Wangdi Phodrang. These show only dialect-level variation, are clearly related as regional cultural variants, and constitute the core area of the Drukpa Kagyu celibate monk organization (*gelong*). Our work among them has focused on the Paro valley, the Punakha valley, Thimphu, and Gangtey Gonpa/Phobjikha valley as a transitional area.

A central sector is composed of people speaking languages of the Bumtap/Kheng/Kurtoe group, but also smaller language groups that may be quite distinctive, and throughout characterized by very considerable dialect variations. The religious affiliations of this sector are both to the Drukpa monastic system and to schools found in East. Culturally this is also a considerable more diverse group, for which the focus of our data collection has been Bumthang.

To the East, the population is predominantly Sharchop (Tsangla-Speaking); there is more emphasis on shifting agriculture or at least swidden techniques to maintain soil fertility; houses are less substantial; butter tea is rarely used whereas fermented drinks predominate; and the Nyingma school of married lamas (*gomchen*) forms a widely distributed religious community. In this zone, only brief visits in the Trashigang-Radhi valley, and in Pema Gatshel, have been made.

In the lower zone from Samtse to Samdrup Jongkhar, populations of Nepali descent, both Buddhist and Hindu, are widely dispersed among older population elements of rather variable cultural backgrounds. These areas have been superficially surveyed.

Finally, the highest zone of mountain and high valley habitats is only sparsely populated, but so extensive that it is not without importance. Communities here are Ngalong-, Bumtap-, or Tibetan-speakers, and practice marginal agricultural and stock-breeding, with the yak as an important domestic animal. We have not as yet worked in this zone.

Besides the territorial variations in habitat, language, and culture one must also bear in mind the stratification of the population in terms of variables of descent, economic prosperity, social ascendancy, modernization and schooling, and religious scholarship. But the vast majority of the populations in all areas are farmers practicing mixed agriculture and stock breeding, and embracing a vigorous folk culture linked to the administrative and religious institutions provided by the higher elite group. Our data collection has focused on this numerically predominant folk stratum of the population.

A SCHEMATIC OVERVIEW OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND WORLD OF THE CHILD

Physical Features

The foci of the environment and identity of the infant and child are provided by the house: a large, elaborate, and permanent structure. Houses in the eastern area among Sharchop are, as noted, less solid and occasionally built on stilts; those of Nepali-speakers are often quite flimsy and temporary. The following description will focus on the houses of Ngalong-speakers in the western area, which can also serve as a general model for houses in the central Bumtap-speaking areas.

The characteristic West Bhutanese family house is built on three floors, with the main dwelling area on the middle level. Since the lowest floor is only superficially excavated we may call it the ground floor, the dwelling area is only on the first floor, while the third level forms an open loft. The ground level has an earthen floor and stamped earth or stone walls. The rest of the house has a timber frame structure supporting panelled or stucco walls, broad plank floors, and large, elaborately carved window frames. The window openings are without glass panes but with sliding blinds. The attic or loft has no walls, but is protected by low, projecting eaves. The roof is covered with wooden shingles, held down by stones. Houses are very sturdy, and regularly attain an age of 100 or more years.

The dwelling area on the first floor is divided into minimally three rooms: an entrance and storage room, a kitchen and living room, and a shrine room (*chosham*). Larger houses will be subdivided into 4-6 rooms, separating the functions of entrance from storage room, and kitchen from the living area where normal visitors are more properly received. Only very distinguished visitors, and visiting lamas, will be placed in the shrine room.

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The entrance normally has no window opening; all other rooms are equipped with windows. Very large houses may have an additional second floor with further rooms, and the attic on the fourth level. In such cases, the kitchen will be on the first floor and the temple room on the second. Alternatively, a certain number of houses are built with a separate, single-floor kitchen annex.

The first floor is reached via an outside step ladder or notched log leading up to normally unroofed landing; upper floors likewise by ladder placed in the entrance hall. A separate door gives access to the ground floor storage room where the year's crops are stored. Older houses invariably also use the ground floor for stabling animals, while newer houses tend to have a separate cowshed and/or pigsty. In many areas, the access steps to the dwelling are placed in the pigsty, so the arriving person climbs a low fence into the pigsty and then comes up the stairs. Other houses have a small walled courtyard with an outer gate and the access stairs to the house from this courtyard. In such cases, the animals generally spend the night (except during extreme cold) in this courtyard.

The temple room contains, usually behind a slight partition, an elaborate (altar) (chosham) with figures of the Lord Buddha, Guru Rimpoche, and other deities as well as photographs of famous lamas and holy sites, and sometimes the king and other secular notables. Before the altar stands an altar table (*chothri*) supporting seven or two, three or four times seven brass water cups, which are filled with fresh water every sunrise and emptied at 4 pm. The water offerings are considered as homage to the Buddhas and an aid to the souls suffering in the hot hell/purgatory. The altar table also supports three butter lamps, which should be alight during night, again as a pious offering to the Buddhas and as an aid to the wandering souls of the dead. Other ritual equipment is kept on the table, or in the cupboards below, including an incense burner with chain, used in the morning to purify the altar room. In the immediate surroundings of the house is also a range of other ritual installations: often prayer wheels on the landing and/or sacred texts, thorny branches, yak-horns, and eggshells over the door. Besides the landing is a small outside stove (*sangbu*) for burning pine/juniper as incense in the morning, and frequently a slightly larger one (*sabum/lubum*) at a slightly greater distance for apparently similar purposes. On the close grounds is also

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generally a shrine to the water spirits (*lu*), and in the kitchen often a small, high shelf for sacrifices to deities of the place.

The kitchen is traditionally equipped with plaster 3-6-hole wood-burning stove/fireplace without chimney. There may be a small hole in the ceiling above it leading up to the attic, but most of the smoke circulates in the room and seeks escape through the window. As a result, the kitchen and, in due course, the adjoining rooms, are soon blackened with soot and tar. Over the last years, an intensive programme of installing subsidized smokeless stoves has achieved considerable coverage. Kitchens are generally equipped with shelves and racks for pots and pans and a few spoons and dippers. In one corner is a water-container, variously carved of wood or cast in brass, which is refilled as needed and very rarely emptied or cleaned. Plastic jerry cans are being adopted in many areas as a far more convenient arrangement both for fetching and storing water. Plates and cups, kept in a cupboard in the kitchen, are washed in a pan and water temporarily disposed in a slush bucket.

The immediate environment of the house should contain an area for drying crops, preferably inside the compound (smaller crops, e.g., chillies are regularly dried on the roof), and there may be a

small kitchen garden. By order of the district administration, many houses have also recently constructed a pit latrine, a concrete-topped hand flush latrine, or long drop latrine from the first floor level. There is no structure for facilitating personal hygiene, but an area of the landing is often set aside for this purpose, in which case a wooden trough for a child's tub is generally kept there.

The newborn child receives specially prepared clothes (a tunic/shirt, a knitted cap) and is bundled in baskets or other pieces of cloth. Smaller squares of cloth are used for diapers. Very small infants or toddlers in deep sleep may be placed on a mattress in a corner of the room where the mother or other caretaker is, and covered with blankets. But as soon as the child can hold its head moderately erect, it spends most of the day on its mother's back: slung in a double loop of a long scarf tied in front over the mother's chest, with head peering over her shoulder and naked legs hanging out along her back.

When children start crawling and walking, new cloths are sewn for them in a design different from adult clothing since the traditional Bhutanese *gho* for men and *kira* for women is quite cumbersome to put on. Small children's cloths are thus

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distinctive, but unisex, and not differentiated till they assume miniature male and female dress around the age of 4-6 years.

Though settlement in Bhutan is very dispersed, most houses are located in clusters of two-ten, and occasionally nucleated villages are also formed. Whether scattered or nucleated, groups of 20-60 houses are united for ritual purpose around a shared village temple, located among the houses or on the top of a close by ridge. Generally, houses will be surrounded by cultivated fields, pastures, and forest areas. There is usually a wide, and often breathtaking, view of valley and surrounding mountains, scattered with shrines, prayers-flags, *chortens* and monasteries, and a sprinkling of distant communities and cultivated fields. A view which also overlooks a length of flowing river is considered particularly beneficial in promoting a peaceful and detached frame of mind.

With regard to utilities, most settlements are poorly equipped. A small minority has access to electricity; for working light at night there is only the kitchen fire and light from burning resinous wood splinters, supplemented by purchased wax candle, while paraffin lamps are rarely used and butter-lamps are for religious purpose only. Many more houses have access to piped water,

with a public tap within 100 metres from the houses. Where such facilities are lacking, some have arranged a hosepipe from a close spring or stream to a point close to the house, or they fetch water from a spring, open stream, or near-by river. Whereas roads are few, a network of footpaths and horse-trails connect communities. Public transport is only available on the main through roads. The average distance to centres is considerable: unless one has access to one of the through roads there will be anything from a several-hour to several-day walk to the nearest medical post or elementary school, and even further to administrative offices.

The yearly round of activities is governed by climate and the rhythm of agricultural work. Bhutanese schematize the year into summers of work and winters of ceremonials: starting with the harvest festivals held by each house in many areas the autumn and winter months are the time for most annual house rites (*locho*), village temple festivals, and grand tshechus and other annual festivals of monasteries and dzongs. The rest of the year, on the other hand, is filled with a heavy regime of labour in ploughing, planting, weeding, and harvesting. Since the production of permanent fields is heavily dependent on manuring, domestic animals are a major component in all

farming enterprises and require herding and other labour throughout the year. Many communities are also located so they migrate annually to lower-lying areas to escape severe winter conditions. Other families conversely base their economy more on herding cattle (generally tending animals belonging to others). Those tending common cattle perform long, scattered migrations into the mountains to summer pastures and down into the subtropical forest belt for the remainder of the year. Those tending yaks mainly utilize the higher zone, but move down to the middle altitudes during the most severe months, though they prefer to keep the herds at considerable distance from settlements.

Social and Organizational

Households are generally based on an extended family group. Whereas a few very large old houses have been divided between heirs and thus are occupied by two separate households, the overwhelming pattern is one where every household occupies a house of their own.

Houses being so durable and valuable, succession to ownership of the house is an important factor in determining the

composition of the co-resident household. There is common agreement that parents/owners are free to allot inheritance rights to a house to any child or children they wish. In the Sharchop area, the customary expectation is that this will be the eldest son, and deviation from this generally leads to litigation after the death of the parents. In the central and eastern areas, on the other hand, the general view is that the house should go to the daughter/daughters, since women are weaker and need support whereas men can better fend for themselves. Various particular arrangements are made to assure that a married daughter, and preferably only one, remains in her natal house and contracts a *map*, uxorilocal union, while sons move out, preferably to wives who will inherit a house; whereas additional daughters are ideally married in virilocal marriages (*nam*) to men who have no sisters and thus will inherit their own house. A considerable number of boys, even if they are the only son in the family, are furthermore given to a monastery at the age of 6-8 and become *gelongs*. Perhaps a fifth of the male population lives as celibate monks in the western and central regions.

A census of households in western and central areas thus gives an overwhelming proportion of matrilineal stem families: a senior couple where the wife was born in the house, a married daughter

and her husband, and the children of this daughter. When this composition is achieved so frequently despite the informality and instability of marriage arrangements, there must be very strong pressures and conventions supporting the pattern.

In addition, other persons may be attached to such a stem family, on a long-term or semi-permanent basis: widowed or single collaterals of the senior generation; an unmarried brother or sister of the house-heir, or even her married sister on a semi-temporary or unresolved basis; a more distant relative or a lama or *gomchen* on a temporary basis; and distant relatives or unrelated persons of employed or servile status. The average number of household members in our census is 6.7 (including children attending boarding school). This reflects a relatively low fertility and high infant mortality.

Thus, an infant or small child will usually be surrounded by a number of adults in the household, but often no or few other children. Among the adults, there will be clear role differentiations and authority relations. The senior male, if he is not enfeebled by old age, holds controlling authority, symbolized by the leather whip which generally hangs on the pillar by the archway to the altar and is similar in form to the

whip carried by the monk bailiff controlling the crowds at the big festivals. The senior woman of the family is responsible for nurturing, symbolized by her daily role in serving up the individual portions of cooked rice at mealtime. The in-marrying young husband only slowly builds up a position of autonomy and authority. Everyone's position is clearly expressed in seating and precedence at mealtime: highest rank is served first, lower-status and marginal persons are placed outside the core circle of the family, and servile persons of particularly low status may have to wait, and eat afterwards. A toddler in the family will generally be seated in the mother's or grandmother's lap or to her left.

The daily routine starts at light at dawn. Persons working in close by fields go directly off to 1-2-hours work there, while the senior woman of the family milks the cows and prepares breakfast. The first meal is taken at 7-8 AM. Only when the pressure of work is extreme do members absent themselves from breakfast and people even prefer, if possible, to return to the house also for the noon meal, rather than carrying food with them to the work site. During the afternoon, houses are often empty because the senior woman will also be off on some task or longer errand. At such times, children will be carried along,

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slung on the back of the mother/grandmother, while the woman does her work inside the house. Only when they approach the age of four or so will they be expected to walk and move on their own. An older child may, on the other hand, be left behind to look after the house, or even to look after a smaller sibling, in the woman's absence. But the housewife will return in good time to prepare the evening meal, and around dusk the whole family will be reunited for the most leisurely, main meal of the day. At this time there will also be much conversation and socializing, and informal neighbourhood visitors may drop in, usually after the meal is completed. As soon as the light fails outside, all shutters will be closed, and the family gathers emphatically around a single focus. Indeed, it is thought to be dangerous for children to look out into the dark, as they may see spirits and ghosts who may harm them.

The family group will generally remain in the kitchen where there is heat and activity, and the smaller children will eventually fall asleep in somebody's lap. At bedtime, quilts and blankets are rolled out and the family beds are made in one or two rooms, often including the kitchen. Clothes are reduced but not changed for sleeping, and no special night clothes are worn. Slightly older children often prefer to sleep with their

grandmother rather than mother. Apart from such companionship, there is no double-bedding arrangement, though quilt mattresses may be lined up quite compactly. In larger houses and in more compound households, young couples or the senior may choose to retire to separate rooms.

The child's caretakers thus generally form a whole cluster of adults, as well as elder siblings, and fathers and senior men take an active part in the cluster. The child addresses all these persons by kinship terms. Ngalong kin terms are bilateral and merge mother's and father's side relatives. Sibling terms are extended to all cousins, although there are also category terms for 'cousin' and 'second cousin'. Relative age, on the other hand, is distinguished as elder brother/younger brother and elder sister/younger sister, and between uncles and aunts elder than/younger than father and mother. Shar chop kin terms, on the other hand, distinguish between father's and mother's side in the parental generation, and between parallel and cross cousins, including a very different basic kin organization with more emphasis on patrilineal descent.

Moving out of the household in the surrounding community, on the other hand, the child meets a world that is not particularly

structured by kinship. Hamlets and neighbourhoods are rarely composed of kinsmen: each house has its own unique history of succession, usually through several known re-buildings, and can also be sold to a new unrelated owner. Collaterals only rarely build new houses, an adjoining lot, and there are no selective marriages with neighbours. As a result, hamlets do not compose kinship segments, and though a sister, or uncle/aunt, or cousin may be residing in the neighbourhoods, most families will be strangers. The relations to neighbours, though many of them will have grown up together, are mostly quite distant and reserved; and cases of particular intimacy and frequent inter-visiting will reflect a personal choice and compatibility, not commitments and ideals arising from the fact of neighbourhood. As a result, neighbourly co-operation even in matters of shared interests rarely arises spontaneously and usually requires administrative initiatives from above. The exceptions we know concern house-building, and the traditional pattern of reciprocal labour in transplanting and weeding of rice fields in the rice-growing areas. In these tasks, neighbouring houses assist each other in a reciprocal pattern where houses provide each one labourer (usually a young woman) and the whole group works each member's field in turn. For house building, labour gangs

are composed in a similar fashion. These work groups, incidentally, generates an expected atmosphere of banter and gaiety which participants seems to enjoy greatly.

When children are old enough so they start moving about more autonomously, they will inevitably seek the company of neighbouring children, and tend to form small peer groups from a few neighbouring houses. Compared to village life in most other places, such groups are characterized by their small size and relative heterogeneity in age and sex. Clearly, the total social network of a child both contains a greater proportion of adults and is more influenced by the child's caretaker than would be usual in other cultures.

This changes radically if and when the child starts attending school: here large classes are formed, and children associate continuously with classmates. Because of the scattered population, few pupils are day scholars and most will live in boarding schools from first grade. Children seem to adjust easily to this and enjoy the company. On the other hand, the scholastic requirements are not so easily achieved, with teaching in Dzongkha and English medium by teachers who do not command the local dialect and are often complete strangers to

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the local culture. There is also considerable pressure in many homes that a child of 7–8 should start assuming a variety of household duties. As a result, the enrolment rate is below 50 percent in many places, and the drop-out rates are high, particularly for girls, as UNICEF Bhutan is only too well aware. Our point in this connection is only to stress that, for most children, school will be a brief episode at best.

Children's tasks in household work tend to be diverse and ad hoc: assisting and accompanying, doing small errands, tending and controlling animals, caring for younger sibling, etc. Such tasks develop in due course to full-time work of herding the animals or participating in agriculture, and prepare the child rather effortlessly to the adult roles as women and men.

An alternative life trajectory results if the child is enrolled in a monastery. Though the pattern seems to be to ask the child formally whether he wishes to be thus enrolled, the decision is usually made when a boy is 6-7 years old, and monks usually observe retrospectively that they were too young at the time of entry to understand and make a personal decision, and simply complied with their parents' wish. Parents may have a range of reasons to make this decision: it gives religious merit to give a

son to the monastery; one can expect advantages in the future from having one's son to represent one's interests among the *gelongs*; it means one mouth less to feed at home; it opens a life career for the child which does not require private land or other resources. In the eastern and to some extent in the central areas, there is also the option to apprentice a son with a *gomchen*, especially in families which have a senior relative already in this position. But in both the case of *gelong* and *gomchen* apprentices, there is a realistic option to withdraw at a later stage: either because the discipline is experienced as too severe, or the scholarship too demanding, or else among the celibate orders, or because the boy as a young man falls in love and wishes to marry. In such cases, a payment or fine is demanded to free the youth from his vows.

As a result of these escape clauses, there is not an inconsiderable return flow of persons with significant religious training into the lay population. Another pattern whereby monks are partially reintegrated into the wider community is through retirement to duties as caretaker (*kon-nyer*) of small shrines or community temples, frequently close to one's natal family and often in a quite early phase of adulthood. Such caretakers provide a much-used service in foretelling the future (*mo*) from casting dice, and

children will have become familiar with them while still on their mother's back. Thus, whereas celibate monks within the larger monasteries live a life very insulated from contacts with family and the wider community and are rarely met by children except during occasional rather constrained visits, formal rituals in the homes, and at public festivals, there are also a diversity of religiously trained persons who articulate much more closely with the life world of children. These also include, as perhaps their most conspicuous members, the lamas proper-reincarnate persons of near divine status, who are widely sought for blessing, spiritual comfort, and advice.

Finally, institutions with a certain visibility for children are the occasional extension clinics of the Basic Health Units (BHU), visited by some mothers on a semi-monthly basis, and the clinic itself to which the child may be taken when sick. Beyond these, there will be few outside forces or institutions that intervene visibly within the horizons of rural children.

Cosmology

Cosmological ideas embraced by different Bhutanese span the range from the most subtle and refine to the unsophisticated and

credulous. Our interest will be to sketch some widely applied images and perspectives which are used as premises for folk judgements and actions in the fields of health in its broadest sense.

A fundamental duality of good and bad seems to reign, variously conceived as primarily enlightenment opposed to ignorance, in the more sophisticated levels to protective versus dangerous on the folk level. One's condition in life will be deeply determined by the ever-changeable balance between these two forces. Thus, the whole history of Bhutan/mankind is depicted as a sea change from the pre-Buddhist era of ignorance, evil, and grossness to the introduction of enlightenment and the subjugation of evil forces affected by Guru Rimpoche and other Buddhist luminaries. Powerful kings and gods were thereby subdued and forced to submit, and ancient ruling demigods were controlled and to variable degree enrolled in the service of Buddhism. Most temples, indeed, are associated with deities who are the ancient "owners" and who have been forced, more or less reluctantly, to serve as protectors of the shrines; homage should be paid to them lest they become angry and destructive. Great lamas are similarly active, throughout historical time and still today, in subduing and controlling violent and evil demigods and ogres,

opening the high passes for travellers by smiting them and driving them underground, binding and compelling them to refrain from evil and leave the innocent alone.

In every place and area, there are similar spirit forces: *sadag* spirits of the ground (who also lives in trees), *lu*, water, or serpent spirits, mountain gods, etc., who are kept at bay with *chortens*, prayer wheels, flags, and sacrifices.

Every household is likewise under a variable siege from intrusive spirits, demons and ghosts, and need protection obtained from the perpetual rites and worship performed before the house altar; the constant care and circumspection of all household members; and the use of amulets and protective devices such as the crossed symbols of phallus and knife, fashioned in wood, that are suspended from all four corners of every house. Sometimes, when a neighbourhood or house is particularly harried by a ghost, family members (two together) will venture out on the landing every evening to burn incense to drive that ghost away, or burn offerings and entreat the ghost to pass the house by. An element in the annual celebration in every village temple is the ceremonial cleansing of community and neighbourhood of ghosts and demons, driving them out with burning torches.

This perpetual struggle of confrontation is a basic theme vividly enacted in the idiom of the great ceremonial dances in dzongs and monasteries at the annual tshechu.

Festivals: It is also enshrined in the sacred geography of every region and locality, with myths retelling the events, and local signs indicating the outcomes: broken rock where the ogre was smitten, poisonous springs where the demon perpetually bleeds from the mortal wound that killed him.

People are also inadvertent or intended agents of these bad forces. Everyone is prone to be surrounded and followed by a swarm of harmful spirits, and will tend to pick up such spirits while walking through the landscape. Consequently it is desirable that visitors, particularly strangers, spend some time on arrival to a house to cool their feet and let the swarming spirits drop off. Houses in which there is serious illness – a condition of weakness when such mischievous spirits are particularly dangerous – will erect a young sapling by the corner of the house, that visitors should stop at a distance and not bring danger into the house.

But people may also intend to do such harm, spurred by envy, bitterness or a lust for evil. For this purpose they may employ curses or other sorcery (*ngan*). The skill to do sorcery is more freely ascribed to strangers than to neighbours, and the reputation of eastern groups is greater than that of the western groups – but any person who wishes to, can learn the art. Evil persons, like evil spirits, tend to be more active in the dark than during daytime; and one should be particularly careful of unnatural lights and other lures which they employ. The best protection against active sorcery is inconspicuous avoidance, amulets, and in truly critical cases, scapegoat rituals (*lue*). Some lamas and great monks, incidentally, command a far more potent form of sorcery/magic (*thu*), which will primarily be used for positive purpose such as overcoming the enemy in war, but can also be a threat towards ordinary people who have given the lama cause for anger.

A danger of an entirely different kind arises from ritual circumstance or condition, and is of the greatest importance for conceptions of health. This is called *drip* and arises from association with birth (*kay drip*), death (*shi drip*), the death of one's spouse (*par drip*), or from taking life (as butcher as well as

murderer) (*ma drip*). Neither pollution nor inauspiciousness seems satisfactory as a translation.

The danger of *drip* is that the person affected becomes invisible to beneficial divine forces and therefore inaccessible to them, and thus unprotected from the destructive forces. *Drip* is thus figuratively described as a cloud or cloak, which covers the person.

Birth *drip* is supposed to affect the whole valley, but only weakly; its main effect is on the persons who stay in the house of birth or visit it; its effects last for three days, and are removed by a *lhabsang* cleansing ritual done preferably by a monk or lama on the fourth day. Death *drip* similarly affects the house of the dead, but particularly any person who touches the corpse, as at least one person must, to prepare it for the mortuary rites. The person whose spouse is dead suffers the *drip* condition till the sun turns, i.e., till the following summer or winter solstice. Until then, people will be reluctant to touch you and you must not have touched any food or drink to be taken by another person. The *drip* resulting from committing a murder can only be removed by elaborate rituals, including the burning of 1000 butter lamps and raising 1000 prayers flags. The cosmological

function of *drip* in relation to transmigration and reincarnation of souls will be discussed below.

The human agencies that can assist people in the dangers inherent in such a cosmos are mainly the following. Above all, reincarnate lamas (*trulku*) are extremely powerful, and protect people by giving blessings as well as by more specific acts and advice. Fully ordained monks, and the upper grades of *gomchen* (*tshampa* and *drupthop*) are also very powerful, and can perform the mortuary rituals and other cleansing rituals. Astrologist (*tsipa*), whether monks or lay persons, are necessary to diagnose the ritual conditions and appropriate remedies, except for the great lamas, who simply see the true facts spontaneously and need no astrological information or analysis. Finally, ranges of shamans are found (*paw*, *pamo phajo*, etc.) who in trance become possessed by a range of different powerful demigods (particularly Chungdu, a mountain god originally from the Haa valley; Gesar, a warrior King from Tibet; and *gep* of unrecorded origin). These supernatural agents can both provide information/identification of the causes of difficulties, and have the power to act and eliminate difficulties and hardship. The shaman medium wakes from his trance without any knowledge of what the possessing god said, but together with senior persons who have been

present during the session, he interprets the message and checks on its veracity by magical means, and either performs the needed rituals himself or specifies the rites which should be performed by ordained monks.

A final cosmological premise that must be specified is the idea of the transmigration and repeated reincarnation of immortal, individual souls. Such souls can be incarnated into any kind of sentient being in one of the six worlds of rebirth: as gods (who are ultimately reborn as lower forms when their merits has been exhausted), as greedy/thirsty ghosts tormented by unrequited desires, or as demons in hell (or more properly: Purgatory, since this also is not a final location but only a stage leading to further rebirths), as animals in ignorance, or as humans. In connection with the birth horoscope which astrologers prepare for infants, parents are generally told of the child's last preceding incarnation, and it may prove variously to have been as an elephant, or a Buddhist person or a person in a distant land, or a unrequited ghost. The fundamental abhorrence of killing any sentient life forms is intimately linked with their basic spiritual unity with mankind: relatives, friends, even mother and father may have been reborn in these forms. The fact of reincarnation also provides the basic premise and sanction for morality in the

belief in karma: the consequences or fruits of your acts, which will determine your conditions of rebirth. A philosophical point, subjectively in agreement with the importance people inevitably place on their present, human life, is that human existence is in a sense the most privileged, more so than an existence (it also temporary) in heaven: only as a human do you face the moral choices and opportunities whereby you can enhance your good *karma* and progress towards your final liberation from rebirths and sufferings. A further implication of the karmic ideas is a segmentation of various kinds of merits and remedial actions, differentially relevant and not relevant to the karma of the person. These aspects are, however, most fruitfully discussed in connection with the Bhutanese concept of the person.

The Person

The person in Bhutanese culture is conceptualized in complex ways, which deeply affect daily life and the pursuit of long-term objectives. A number of these complexities can be read from quite explicit cultural idioms. Firstly and most basically, there is a fundamental emphasis in the individuality and autonomy of every person. Naming customs lay down some of these

premises. At birth, every person is given a birth name which however remains secret to protect the person's autonomy and independence from magic and evil influence. Parents generally will develop a nickname for the new baby, based on some visible characteristic: Whitey, Darkly, Broad-forehead, etc., which is used until a formal public name is allotted by an astrologer, and sometimes continues to be used by intimate members within the family. Around the age of 3 months, an astrologer or lama gives a proper name. This contains two elements, but both are individual, not family or clan names: the first element, which is the one normally used in addressing the person, does not even indicate the sex of the bearer, and neither of them reveal descent, filiations or birth place. Normally, this will remain the person's public name throughout life; but to affect a cure from a grave illness it is sometimes advisable to change one's name.

A basic distinction is made between the body (*zbug*) and soul (*sem*), respectively the material component and the consciousness. In a formal and spiritual context, these are often referred to as *lu* (*lue*) and *sok* respectively. The soul (*sem*), or perhaps more philosophically informed, *namshe* is immortal and the unit of transmigration; the body of ordinary people will disappear with death. At the same time as death, the soul escapes

with the breath (*bu*), for lamas and other particularly holy persons often divided between an outside and an inside breath (*chi* and *nang* respectively) of which the inside breath which leaves last, is the true indicator of death. The soul, however, is not to be confused with this breath, and often leaves the body by a different course than the breath.

The condition of the body is mainly determined by spiritual factors, affecting the soul. Firstly, various bodily impediments or defects, which need not be noticeable from the time of birth, are caused by karma, i.e., the effects of immortal acts in previous incarnations. Events which affect the body during life can also be the effects of karmic pre-determination. Such effects can, however, be avoided, if one is warned and the proper remedial acts are performed. It should be remembered that karma is determined by acts in a previous existence, and cannot be changed during life by good acts in this life, whereas benefits from good acts will accrue and change your karmic fate in your next life.

Distinguishable aspects of the person are interestingly revealed in the case of reincarnate Buddhas and lamas. To enhance their effectiveness as teachers—the purpose of their reincarnation—

such persons may choose to have the separate aspects of their person incarnated separately. Thus the reincarnation of the 15th century sage Pema Lingpa (1450–1521) has been divided into three: the body (*ku*) producing the Trulku Rimpoche who is the head of the monastery of Gangtey Gonpa; the speech/teachings (*sung*), and the mind (*thug*) embodied in the Sungtrul Rimpoche and the Thugsay Rimpoche, who are abbots of their respective monasteries in Bumthang. The demigod Gesar* on the other hand, who temporarily possesses a number of shaman/spirit mediums, does so in any one of his five aspects of body, speech, mind, action, and knowledge.

More important than these separable aspects of personhood to the ordinary person are what we might call the components or constituents of the normal person in terms of which one's spiritual condition is measured by astrologers and other spiritual advisors. In their terms, a person has five such constituents, the vitality of each being subject to dramatic and dangerous variations. A kind of analogue would be the complex

* Described by local informants as 'a Tibetan warrior', etymologically 'Gaesar', but in Central Asia usually identified as King of legendary kingdom of Ling in Eastern Tibet.

constituents of the human vascular system with which Western physiologists operate, giving indicators of health such as blood pressure, blood sugar content, red blood cell count, etc. The five salient components of the person according to this model are: *sok* (intelligence, consciousness, vital principle); *lungta* (luck, historically, this seems to derive from a Chinese astrological concept referring to circumstance, variables of context, but because of homonyms in Tibetan and Bhutanese it has come to be understood more as 'inner force of luck'); *wangtang* (force, an attraction within your body for wealth objects and command); *la* (the semi material shadow, or container, of the *sok* during life, an aspect of vitality which plants also have, though they have no soul in the proper sense of *sem* and *lu* (body)).

To stay healthy and protect life, most Bhutanese will solicit a *lomo* (year's divination) as an annual reading or check-up on their condition and prospects, or they may seek such a reading when they experience a persistent run of difficulties in life, or feel particularly down. There are various remedial acts you can perform if one or another component of your constitution on these five components is weak. If your *sok* is low, it is advisable to enhance it by particular meritorious acts: saving the life of animals (e.g., buying chickens offered for slaughter and letting

them loose in the jungle; releasing captive fish into the stream, etc.), making *tsha-tsa* votive offerings, or performing particular rituals (*tshewang*). If your *lungta* is low, you should raise prayer flags (*lungta*) with your name and year of birth specified, which will pray for you with each flutter in the wind. A weak *lungta* makes you particularly prone to spirit attracts. To enhance your *wangtang* you should do good works (construct a *chorten*, repaint a shrine). And if your *lu* body is weak, you should observe a careful and restrictive diet.

Luck constitutes a diverse component of great importance in the constitution of the person. One aspect is that formulated by the astrologers as part of their birth horoscope (*kaykar*) based on evidence from the year and day of the person's birth. From this, the person can be assigned his or her particular set of auspicious and inauspicious days for different components of the person. Thus, a particular day of the seven-day Tibet week will be your *sok-za*, your special day for your *sok* component, when you must be careful of physical risks—climbing mountains, crossing rivers—but when you can be very successful in your endeavours if you are careful. On your good *la* day, things connected with your intimate self and your body will be favoured, while on

your *shi* day your practical work and business have the optimal chance to prosper.

Other aspects of luck depend on your actual behaviour. Thus there is your *yang*, the material luck of yourself and your house which prospers if you show proper care and respect for what you receive of material benefit from life. Particularly important is the respectful treatment of such wastes that have served good purposes, i.e., various kinds of refuse: the husks that have protected that growing rice, spilled rice which is the fruit of hard work, or the skin and peel of fruits etc., which should not thanklessly and carelessly be thrown away. Likewise, the water from your seven votive cups on the house altar should be poured on beneficial or beautiful plants, not thrown away in a dirty place, lest your luck is thrown away with it. In some few particularly blessed houses; a *yang-bur* may even start growing out of the kitchen floor: a strange, black, fairly solid concretion like a hard fungus, which may grow to 50 cm diameter and 20 cm high. If such a *yang-bur* continues to grow, the family prospers materially, while if it starts diminishing they will face hard times, and pieces breaking off it will warn of deaths in the family.

The other major component of luck is *sonam*, related to spiritual merit but of immediate consequence in this life. This kind of luck is enhanced by consistent behaviour of being good to others and respectful to elders; but it adheres only loosely to your body, and so is easily lost by being wiped off, or taken away when personal objects are transferred to others and removed by them, or even through a hand-shake.

Illness

Illness of the body is regarded as an immediate consequence of imbalances in these components of the person, caused by failure of luck, or by attacks from evil forces. To understand the environment of the Bhutanese child as conceptualized by its caretakers, we need to review the major causes of illness, and the precautions to protect the child's health which these cultural beliefs entail.

The prevalent folk premise is that most illnesses are caused by spirit agencies. This is particularly indicated when the onset of the illness is sudden. Following such a premise, it is a plausible conclusion that remedial action is best directed towards the spirit that is causing the harm rather than aiming to cure the particular

physical condition that has been caused. This is in agreement with an abbreviated version of scholarly Tibetan medicine. According to Tibetan medical taxonomy, there are 360 distinct kinds of spirit-caused illnesses (*don*), and 18 kinds of illnesses from mystical light rays (*ze rig*), and many illnesses caused by witchcraft and sorcery, besides the 424 kinds of diseases with purely physical causes (*ped rig*). The particular occurrence of any illness may however, according to this philosophy, derive from any one of 21000 *ken*, immediate causes.

But we should not attempt to link folk beliefs and Tibetan medicine as one single and integrated tradition. The complex and sophisticated body of traditional medical knowledge is found in the whole Himalayan area, and also has its exponents in a few medical experts (*drungtsho*) within Bhutan. Such indigenous doctors have, however, been very few, and they have never dominated in the treatment of the illnesses of the Bhutanese population. Lately, the Bhutanese government had launched an innovative programme to train and supply more indigenous doctors and integrate them in the modern health services, but they are still not widely represented.

Furthermore, indigenous medical theory and taxonomy has a complexity of knowledge which is far beyond that entertained on the folk level. In no sense does it provide the general cultural premises about health and illness which are known and embraced in the population. Nonetheless, the folk belief that many/most illness conditions are caused by the action of various spirit agencies obtains support from the fact that it agrees with the teaching of *drungtsho* and sacred medical texts; and it constantly receives reinforcement from the fragments of such knowledge which are applied by monks and lamas in their curative work.

The system of folk beliefs however, can be outlined independently of this more complex Tibetan medical system, and has proved unequal to the task of assimilating its elaborate scholarly disease taxonomy. On the contrary, folk knowledge focuses not on any taxonomy of illness, but almost entirely on concerns about the spirit agents causing the illnesses, and taxonomy of these different spirits agents. A few particular diseases are nonetheless identified, among them leprosy, which is also known to be physically contagious.

The agents usually mentioned as causes of illness are the following.

Firstly, there are the very numerous members of the *lu, sadag* category: the various snake/water spirits which live near water and springs, and underground in damp areas, and the owners of the soil who are ubiquitous in the ground and in trees, and resent any disturbance of the earth's surface, or the numerous demons (*do*), which are thought of as actively evil agents, and which in Tibetan medical theory are the causes of the 360 *don* diseases. In Bhutanese folk belief, they cause diverse conditions and are not particularly and individually related to specifiable illnesses. The exception is the demon *sondey*, who enters the body and claws its inside, giving general body pains. A special ointment can be used to make these invisible lesions come up to the surface and break out on the skin, where they can be treated. Another kind of spirit who may belong to this category is the *tseñ*, who looks like a *gelong* monk and is consequently both deceptive and widely regarded as particularly powerful.

A further large category of agents is composed of ghosts (*dre* and various other terms). These may cause a variety of conditions. Sometimes they possess their living descendants and make them

perform sorcery against innocent neighbours to bring on whatever illness condition the dead person once suffered. Sometimes they hover about habitation and cause general evil because they envy the living; some of the harm they work is even more unprovoked and random. Further, there is the phenomenon of *thu*, evil magic occasionally visible in the form of a lizard, but really the double of a witch, who enters the body and causes sickness and death. Such witchcraft often accompanies valuable objects which have been obtained through violence or trickery, not necessarily by their present possessors, but sometime in the unknown past.

And finally, there is the sorcery (*ngan*) and curses of ordinary fellow villagers, who from envy or offence cause illness and misfortune. Though the fear of such agencies seems to be quite ubiquitous, it is rarely, hesitantly and only privately broached as an explanation, unless a child has been exposed to a meeting with strangers, particularly of Eastern origin.

Of these multitude agents, spirits of the soil (*sadag*) seem to be most readily suspected of causing suddenly occurring illness in an infant or child. The expected reason for their aggression is that the child has strayed into one of their favoured areas, or has been

left exposed in the shade of a tree. Water spirits (*lu*) are often evoked to explain a longer run of misfortunes or troubles, or an intermittent or chronic condition: they may be located in a stone in the foundation of the house, or dwell under a corner of the building; or their local shrines have fallen into disuse and offerings are no more made to them. Most persons will also have had occasional attacks of *sondey*. Or if no special exposure is recollected, ghosts or only vaguely identified spirits are thought to have entered the house unnoticed and attacked the child.

The response of the parent or caretaker in such cases is to consult an expert to identify the cause and the proper remedy. Our data are inconclusive and contradictory as to how frequently this is actually done in the ordinary family, and also on which experts are favoured and most often used. There seem to be important regional variations in this. Haa people are famed for harbouring and using particularly many female shamans (*pamo*). A few famous reincarnate lamas are widely sought and respected, but especially much used by the local population with easy access, as in the case of the so-called Changju Lama on the outskirts of Thimphu. Typically, shamans (*paw*, *pamo*, etc.) and local astrologers (*tsipa*) seem to provide the first line of appeal. The latter, incidentally, are mostly practitioners of rather modest

training (a few months of study with a prominent lama or astrologer at one time) but a large local practice – though they will tend to deny this if approached directly on the question in an interview situation. Many astrologers are monks (mainly *gomchen* but also *gelong*); but especially the latter may be somewhat less favoured for an initial approach, as they for doctrinal reasons are or should be, unwilling to provide *lu, sadag* spirits with the formal offerings that will effect a cure. As for the frequency of consultations, a guess that mothers will seek one visit with a curer every three months for her infant or child is probably not in excess of the average.

When it comes to the most favoured remedies, however, the *gelong* monks are in the ascendancy for performing the basic *rimdo* rituals which are essential to counteract most illness incidents. Some *paws* will also perform formal rituals; but mostly, the patients will be referred to the monks – or, of course, reincarnate lamas – for this purpose. Lamas are also adept at performing scapegoat (*lue*) rites, involving the construction of elaborate representational and symbolic models of the person, followed by a driving-out ceremony in which the scapegoat is taken away and disposed. These ceremonies, however, seem most frequently to be performed for adults, and often as

precautionary measures following divination rather than an after-the-event cure.

Patients, and the child's caretakers, are pragmatic about diagnoses and cures, and quite prepared to try one after another until a cure is effected. There is also a clear conception that a favourable relation of harmony or trust (*khamthral*) should obtain between healer and patient, and this depends on idiosyncratic factors that do not reflect on the general competence of the healer. But there is a widespread belief in the incompatibility of modern medicine and spirits whereas traditional healers intervene and establish a better relationship to the harm-causing agent. Modern medicine, and particularly injections, will anger the spirits. In any sequence of successive approaches to different healers, the facilities offered by the Basic Health Unit will therefore tend to be the last appeal when all other measures have failed.

THE LIFE CYCLE

Conception

For conception to take place, three components must combine according to Bhutanese belief: substance from the mother and

from the father, and an immortal soul ready to rebirth. After death, every normal soul (*sem*) must serve its fixed time in purgatory for the sins (*dig pa*) it has committed. When this time is up, it will be ready for rebirth, looking for a 'house' for its next life. Once it enters, and there is will and intention, life is formed with all the other components of the person coming into being.

Infertility in certain couples comes from a mismatch in their respective birth years and constitutions, whereby the right conditions for the re-incarnating soul are not created. There must be a proper path for the soul to enter and intercourse only leads to conception when this path is clear. If husband and wife are mismatched, it will be like a country engaged in a war: no stranger or traveller will choose to enter under such conditions.

Once life is formed, the bony parts grow from the father's contribution, the flesh, blood, and soft parts from the mother's contribution. But the child's soul components may yet have a variable degree of harmony with the mother; and for the proper horoscope of a person this degree of compatibility of mother's constitution, as read from her birth moment and year, and that of the child continues to provide a fundamental premise. The

person exists from this moment of conception, which is why children in Bhutan are a year old at birth.

Birth

The main determinants of one's life are laid down at the outset. A reincarnate lama put these shared premises particularly succinctly to me as follows. The soul carries its karmic destiny with it, and this destiny is entailed in the moment and circumstances of the child's birth. This is why the astrologer can foretell a person's future from data merely on that person's birth and that of his/her mother. These embody the karmic predestination which the soul's previous acts have produced. The concept of karma resolves the moral enigma of the apparent injustices of life. In Lord Buddha's own words, "Deeds (good and bad) of one's previous life can be seen in one's present state; the state of your next life can be seen in your present deeds".

The condition of *drip* surrounding birth, which separates the parties involved from god-head under a cloak of invisibility, impairs the consciousness of the infant so that the recollections of earlier experiences, in purgatory and in previous lives, are wiped away. Only those souls that have reached a very high level of enlightenment, i.e., high lamas, have the degree of

inherent sacredness so they can withstand the *drip* on their own, and retain the memory of their previous existences to greater or lesser degree, and thus become knowing reincarnations.

The event of birth is thus a very dangerous occurrence for all who come under the cloak of *drip* and are cut off from the protection of the sacred. Therefore, in many districts all who can flee the house of birth and do not return until after the cleansing rites on the fourth day; and neighbours and kinspeople who might otherwise have functioned as birth assistants or midwives, avoid any association with the birth.

Our interviews indicate that the majority of women have given birth with assistance only of their husband, unless even he is absent, on work or trade. The topic of childbirth is also little discussed and explained, even among women. As a consequence, knowledge about birth procedures and precautions is poorly distributed, and show great local and individual variation. Thus, for example, birthing positions vary: prone on her back, squatting, on the hands and knees, and grasping a rope suspended from the roof are all reported.

Situation of Children in Bhutan

In some communities we find an extreme emphasis on discretion. Shutters and doors are closed with onset of labour, and the woman is encouraged to be quiet, so neighbours and local spirits will not hear her, and know what is taking place. The woman is covered with quilts and blankets to prevent any air from entering, as this is thought to prolong delivery. In cases of protracted labour, the husband may run into the closest monastery and obtain sanctified butter, or 'mantra-water' (*ngagchu*), water into which appropriate prayers have been whispered, or which has been poured over inscription in slate or stone. During the birth, the mother is served hot butter, meat broth, or alcoholic beverages. This is reported by some to increase the pain, but hasten the delivery, whereas others say it reduces the pain. The umbilical chord is traditionally cut with a bamboo knife, but today knife or scissors are increasingly used after tying with string above and below the place of severing. The afterbirth is thrown in the river, or buried in the ground so dogs will not find it and eat it.

In most areas, the woman is expected to bathe in scalding hot water immediately after giving birth. Such water should be boiled over the fire and allowed to cool slightly by heat loss, but must not be mixed with cold water. It should be so hot that a

bamboo ladle cracks in it. All parts of the body, including the eyes, should be washed, and the whole operation is described as quite painful. Since there is no place within the house where it is appropriate to wash, this must be done outside, or in the cowshed. The purpose of the washing is to heal the body, contract the stomach to normal size, and to prevent lumps of blood from coagulation within the womb. Unless this is done, and the water is painfully hot, the mother's body will ache in all its joints throughout life. The bathing should be repeated once or several times a day for anything from 3 days up to one month, according to different informants. The infant is also washed after birth, but in mixed, lukewarm water, and swathed in cloth and a blanket.

The child is welcomed into the world by being offered a lump of butter. This is repeated before every feeding from anything from 3 to 15 days, and one proud mother with a particularly healthy child claimed to have done so regularly till the child was past two. The mother should drink alcoholic beverages during and after birth to enhance milk production. She should also eat eggs, and butter, but not meat, or at least not pork's meat.

Infants and Children

Customs with regard to supplementary feeding vary. A supplement of butter and rice flour may be introduced as early as the fourth day of life. Rice flour-paste or wheat flour-paste are introduced into the diet quite early, feeding the child with unwashed fingers or from the mother's or other caretaker's mouth. During the first weeks, or as long as 5-6 months of nursing, the mother should refrain from eating fruits and green vegetables, as these are thought to cause the child to have diarrhoea.

Nursing is done on demand; feeding, or snacks, if available, also largely follows demand, and crying on the part of the child, for whatever reason, will normally elicit responses to satisfy, distract, or console the child. As noted, the mother carries the child much of the time slung to her back. This is also practiced within the house a good deal of the time, and the child is only unfastened when it requests so itself, or when the mother is planning to remain seated and inactive for some time. While slung on her back, it is notable that the child will automatically be turned in whatever direction the mother turns, and thus always has its attention directed towards the persons, objects or

activities with which she herself is engaged. Quite clearly, the child finds this satisfying and stimulating, and it becomes a passive participant in whatever the mother is doing and whatever interaction she has.

To a toddler, western Bhutanese houses provide a good environment, in that the floor planks are wide and solid, rooms quite spacious, and thresholds so high that a toddler will not readily leave the room on its own. The fire in the stove is kept within, or at the edge of the front opening of the stove and is not much of a hazard. There is a general unconcern about spills and dirt, and few objects that can be broken. A toddler is thus relieved of many of the caveats and constraints they would experience in other societies. Yet, there seems to be a rather low level of activity and exploration on the part of small children; and most of the time they spend on people's laps or in the arms of caretakers, when not strapped to the back.

Weaning normally takes place after two but before three years age; if it proves difficult, mothers sometimes resort to various standard known tricks: pasting feathers to the breast and thus frightening the child by suddenly exposing it, or smearing evil-tasting paste on the nipple. If the next child is born before the

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normal nursing age is out, the elder child is often allowed to continue to have a share of nursing. If the mother's milk fails, cow's milk is used as replacement. There is no protracted period in which the child is expected to eat only 'children's foods'- rice, tea and stew becomes normal fare while the child is still actively nursing, though strong chillies are introduced only gradually and usually resisted for a while by the child.

With small sibling groups and relatively cool neighbourly relations, the child's company during the first few years is mainly composed of adult caretakers, who create a safe and nurturing environment for the child. Hygienically, however, this environment leaves considerably much to be desired. House floors are never washed, only swept; much dirt and waste is produced, especially in the kitchen where most daily activities are focused; and trash accumulates in an open pile inside the kitchen door over the days until it is disposed. As a result, the house supports a great deal of flies and other insects (especially in the monsoon season), as well as vermin. In the winter months, on the other hand, the houses are extremely cold and open to drafts and wind; through much of the year, children suffer from colds and constantly running noses. There are also numerous flees in clothes, bedding and floors, as well as body and head lice;

and religious sensibility prevent the killing of such body parasites. Both adults and children also support a variety of intestinal worms.

Neither clothes nor bodies are regularly washed. Though most persons have some especially attractive clothes used for religious ceremonies which are kept relatively clean, everyday clothes are allowed to become very dirty and are rarely washed. Personal hygiene is likewise indifferent – dirt and big smudges of soot on face and hands are not considered to be particularly ugly or discreditable. Whereas children may occasionally be washed in the summer, this seems rarely to be done in the winter season. Yet there is an active concern for the health of small children, and efforts are constantly made to protect their health by ritual and magical means, and by dietary precautions.

There is thus a general ambience of care and love, associated with few imperatives and demands. Indeed, until about 5-6-years of age, children are regarded as entirely innocent. This is most clearly revealed by the fact that such children, should they die, are not cremated. This follows from the philosophical premises of Buddhism, as due to their innocence and lack of responsibility for their acts, their karma has not yet been affected by their life.

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Only a brief ceremony (*monlam* rite) is performed before the child's body is disposed in the river; there, it will be useful in feeding the fishes, who are also sentient beings, and thereby merit will accrue to the child's soul. Also, it is explained, from the social point of view it is unnecessary to perform protective rites, since the child's soul is not threatening as a ghost, it does not yet feel attached to property, wealth or spouse, the attachments that would make the ghost linger and make trouble because of jealousy, envy or displeasure with the living.

Even up to the age of about twelve, a child who dies need not receive a full cremation, for these reasons; and in many of the western areas of Bhutan, an originally Tibetan custom is practiced of exposing such dead to be consumed by vultures. Re-circulated into the bodies of the birds rather than the fish they achieve merit, and their substance is incorporated into birds of the air, close to the heavens.

During the years up to their teens, children are given more responsibilities, however. Many children attend school – and this is eagerly desired by some children – and in the homes boys are progressively given more tasks of herding and working in the

fields, while girls are made to assist their mothers in the house, and in the fields.

Courtship and Marriage

Courting and marriage are matters mainly for young people to decide for themselves, and little regulation is exercised by parents. Great sexual freedom is practiced, though girls, and especially upwardly mobile girls, may be quite concerned about avoiding gossip in a wider social circle, and they give the impression that considerable social sanctions are exercised in the girls' peer groups.

The traditional customs entail nightly visits by the boy, who sneaks into the house after the parents have fallen asleep and spends some time there before stealthily leaving again. In the epigrammatic style of one male informant: first you sleep with the girl – then you start talking to her, and may get to know her a little.

In many areas there is indeed no formal marriage ceremony, and cohabitation simply develops out of such nightly visits through somewhat ambiguous stages. A traditional scenario for how this may happen is that the parents of the girls will become aware of

what is going on, and then lie in wait, and surprise and catch the boy in the act. The girl's father will then demand of the stealthy visitor that he makes a public acknowledgement of his commitment as a husband – indeed the term we would translate as “marriage” could properly be translated idiomatically as “going public”.

But a boy caught in this situation can also plead leave, saying no, please excuse me, I am still too young/I will be attending school still for many years/I am not in position to support a family – and then simply discontinue the relationship. Alternatively, the cohabitation may prove unstable because of growing incompatibility and conflicts between the young persons, or between the young man and his parents-in-law. In such cases the young man may simply disappear, resuming residence in his natal home or disappearing on an extended visit to relatives or an acquaintance elsewhere.

Indeed, even where the union provides stability for quite some years, it may terminate later in divorce – either as a result of deteriorating relations, often precipitating violent confrontations, or because of a new infatuation or passion, or as a result of economic and political pressures or opportunism.

The result of these customs is high frequency of promiscuity and instability, resulting in a large number of children without a resident father. Household censuses thus turn up numerous mothers with two or even three children but no stable resident husband, or where the husband is father to the youngest children but not to the first one or two.

There seems to be little shame attached to such circumstances; and the fact of previous relations, and of having one or several children, is not for a woman a serious impediment to a new marriage. But despite some recent national legislation to the contrary, the overwhelming pattern seems to be that an unmarried mother is solely responsible for the practical and financial support of her children; while if and when she remarries, the new husband assumes the normal responsibilities for the whole family group, and not just for the woman and his own children with her.

These patterns also have implications for the arrangements of property and succession. Where women live in an extended, stern household and own the productive land, such instability represent much less of a hardship for mother and for children than in cases where house and land are owned by men or pass in

male line, not to speak of the emerging classes that are dependent on governmental employment, where men form the overwhelming numbers of wage earners. But also in those cases where men accumulate property through life in their own name, litigation and bitterness tend to ensue in connection with inheritance. Neither custom nor modern legislation provides clear guidelines and expectations for such cases.

Old Age and Death

Old age and death are anticipated and prepared through a phased withdrawal from active life. The time and attention of old people shift progressively to religious activities and topics. Work and other responsibilities are reduced – (I am back to herding the cows, where I started as a boy!). In the battle for authority, the son-in-law increasingly takes over, by virtue of being the more effective worker. Daily attention is taken up with praying – counting the prayers on the rosary and working toward the goals of reaching ten thousand, one million, and ten million repetitions. Pilgrimages are also made, with their circumambulations, and other acts to enhance one's karma.

At death, *drip* or pollution/inauspiciousness sets in for the spouse, the person who touches the corpse, and the house in

which the death occurred. One person must inevitably expose himself to the acute *drip* of touching the dead, as the corpse should be tied up in a semi-foetal position in preparation for cremation. Thereupon, it is carried on a stretcher to the cremation ground, where prayers and offerings are made and the pyre is lighted by a monk, not by the dead person's family. The exception is a person who dies during the 81st year of life in which case the smoke from the cremation is deadly for people, animals and crops; and the corpse is boxed in and carried into a cave in an uninhabited place, to become naturally mummified there.

The universal belief seems to be that the dead soul, however, is unaware of the fact of death, and will seek to join and participate normally in the life of the family. It naturally becomes resentful when they do not respond and answer, ignore its presence, serve it no portion of the family's meals, etc. Religious rites and services are therefore necessary to instruct the dead, and direct it on its way. Even though the more intelligent souls will suspect what has happened (and are thought to ascertain it by going down to the river and stepping on the riverside mud, to see for themselves that they no longer make footprints and so must be ghosts and not living persons), they will in any case need help

and instructions. The most important is to have a competent astrologer divine the auspicious cardinal direction in which the corpse should be removed from the house, and the soul should be sent off on its way, so it will avoid being swallowed by the nine-mouthed black demon (who would otherwise also have its appetite awakened, and demand eight more deaths from the family).

The best is to buy the services of a great lama or senior monk with assistants on drums and thigh-bone wind instruments who reads for the subsequent 49 days the parts of the book of the dead, explaining step by step to the dead soul how it should proceed. But most families can only afford such rites on the 1st, 7th, 14th, 21st, and 49th days, or a selection of these. There are also conventions governing secular visits by kinsfolk, neighbours, and friends of dead and the bereaved family on some of these days. Unless these things are properly taken care of the soul is liable to become resentful, and cause misfortune and death in the family and neighbourhood by lingering and demanding retribution. If the astrologer ascertains other obstructions to the progress of the dead soul, prayer flags with appropriate texts must be erected (105 or 108 according to the sex of the dead person). Special offerings with butter lamps (of an even number

uneven numbers constitute offerings of gods) may also be made for the dead soul. Indeed, the most pitiful fate (and most dangerous to the living, who are liable to be haunted) is to remain on earth as a wandering soul for hundreds of years, as these are years of suffering and frustration which provide no progress towards atonement and rebirth.

It is characteristic that no shrines or monument remains after a dead person, and no aspect of ancestor worship is incorporated into the daily ceremonies at the family altar: all offerings and attentions after the completion of the mortuary rites are due to the dead souls collectively, not offered to one's own ancestors or other particular persons.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION OF RELEVANT TOPICS

Health and Diseases

We have emphasized the absence in Bhutan of any elaborate folk taxonomy of illnesses which would differentiate one syndrome of symptoms from another, and favour different treatment alternatives on this basis. Instead, we find a preoccupation with the causative agents of illnesses, and remedies of ritual and spiritual kinds. This emerges as the single most important

empirical finding of our investigation, with important consequences for the planning and execution of most of UNICEF's activities.

But it is important as to be precise as what this finding entails. Recent comparative work in medical anthropology has established the prevalence of pluralism in folk conceptions and practices regarding health and illness. Several simultaneous conceptual systems regularly coexist, and health-care seeking behaviour is often characterized by considerable pragmatism. The fact that indigenous folk conceptions in Bhutan focus on the spirit agencies causing disease certainly has consequences, but need not represent an absolute barrier in the adoption of ideas from Western biomedicine, and a progressively increasing use of its services. To identify the trends, it is instructive to observe carefully the patterns of use, and present mode of functioning of the western-type medical facilities that have been established. Crucial among them are the smaller Basic Health Units (BHUs) without fully trained medical doctors which serve the countryside.

It is notable from our on-site observations that patients arriving at such BHUs tend to have a predetermined identification of the

category of their complaint. These range from major categories of symptom (fever, cough) to the location of acute pain (stomach pains, chest pains). Apparently, in the context of the BHU visit, the selection of persons who indeed makes such visits has learned to think in terms of the prevailing premises of symptoms-oriented medicines. There further seems to be an expectation on both sides that the patient's identification of the condition exhausts the relevant information which the patient can give.

There is rarely a discussion of further symptoms or exploration of a case history, or any physical examination of the patient: a medicine is simply prescribed and handed over on the basis of the patient's self identification. Visitors to the BHU consequently feel that they can meet on behalf of an absent patient—despite resistance to this from the health staff—and expect to be given medicine for the reported condition. At larger BHUs, and especially in the case of the clientele that chooses to consult the indigenous doctor (where such are found) this is not to the extent true.

Secondly, many people arrive after a considerable amount of health-seeking activity in which they have consulted other healers and often pursued lengthy attempts at cures. This is

generally known by the BHU personnel, and may on occasion lead them to scold the patients, but is not otherwise taken into account.

Patients further have a firm conviction that the most effective biomedical treatment for illness is injections rather than mere pills, and so they often request the best.

These various observations have important implications. Firstly, they show that there is already a certain folk acquaintance and understanding of western type biomedicine. But it is striking that patients who choose the indigenous wing, where it is found, in the BHU shows a considerably greater comprehension of the relevant categories and therapies used than do the patients who seek the regular medical treatment.

Furthermore, these observations demonstrate the presence of a broader diagnostic community, with which it would be highly desirable that the BHU- organized medical practice were to articulate better. We see evidence that this diagnostic community has already been actively involved in forming expectations and making decisions, often also effecting lengthy treatments, regarding illness episodes before they ever reach

BHUs. These communities are formed by family members and acquaintances, prominently but in no way exclusively elder women, they seem often to include the local Voluntary Village Health Worker; but more profoundly, they are influenced by local healers such as shamans, astrologers of various degrees of prestige, *gomchens*, lamas, and monks.

No doubt these diagnostic communities are in many cases beneficial; but it would be relevant to know a great deal more about what kinds of information and attitudes they embrace. Health extension work should enter into an effective dialogue with these communities on the basis of an informed awareness, of the ideas and conventional knowledge embraced by patients and native healers, rather than assume a *tabula rasa* or enter into irrelevant polemics.

One widely distributed premise is the idea that the spirit causing any particular case or illness will react with anger to western medical treatment, and particularly will resent the use of injections, where the spirit will generally kill the patient. This is at least one major factor behind the pathetic cases one can observe of infants and small children with diarrhoea and

terminal cases of dehydration who are brought to the BHU as a last resort after a number of other remedies have been tried.

It would be of inestimable importance if greater co-operation could be achieved within the broad field composing such diagnostic communities: lay persons, traditional healers, VVHWs, monks, lamas, and *gomchens*, and professional medical personnel with both western and indigenous training. In recognition of this, and with the support of Helvetas, the systematic transfer of staff combats such competence by posting personnel away from their home area and preferably in unfamiliar language zones, and transferring staff every three years or so. This is further aggravated when BHUs with a basic staff of three are also subject to the simultaneous transfer of all three members. Under the influence of Helvetas involvement in health services in Bumthang, this counter-productive practice is resisted in that district, with improved results; and the experience in this district should be generalized.

A final problem should be mentioned. The Bhutanese emphasis on the avoidance of the pollution/inauspiciousness of *drip* creates a distinct attitude of reserve against hospitals and other institutions where births, and frequent deaths, take place. This is

a problem for the Bhutanese staff, but also for patients, who fear the *drip* that adheres to the locality and building and are reluctant to be hospitalized, and afraid while in the institution. Other complaints that also are voiced, like that nursing staff are abrupt and impolite, may be suspected as displaced signals of this same fear and ambivalence. It is interesting that the response of the Thimphu-based monk participants at the Workshop on religion and health, looking for an immediate expression of their involvement and goodwill, was to visit the Thimphu hospital during the very next week to perform cleansing and blessing ceremonies. Such ceremonies should become a regular feature of all clinics and hospital wards.

Hygiene

A striking consequence of Bhutanese conceptions of luck is the pattern of handling of household refuse. Such refuse is regarded as blessed since it will contain rice and other food remains, and the chaff and peel that has contained and protected the growing rice and fruit, etc. To throw such materials, health authorities in Bumthang have instituted an annual meeting including representative astrologers, *paws* and others at the conclusion of their regular annual planning sessions. This meeting has had

notable positive effect in satisfying the traditional healers' wish for recognition and producing an atmosphere of cooperation. These indeed were the observations which encouraged us to take the initiative in connection with the "Workshop on Religion and Health" in Thimphu in October 1989; and the experience gained during and after this Workshop only strengthens our judgement of the importance of such an approach.

A further aspect of traditional concept connected with health and healing should be noted. Bhutanese ideas stress the importance of rapport/person compatibility (*khamthral*) in health matters. Such compatibility is required to establish the necessary trust between a traditional folk healer and his patient. It is recognized to vary idiosyncratically without the fault of either party; indeed, it may even be absent between parents and children, inhibiting the well-being of the child. In such cases the child will easily come to suffer chronic or persistent illness, and the remedy adopted is to have a powerful lama adopt the child in a "godparent" relationship. Then he provides that protection against spirits which the ill-suited parents are unable to do.

It is a shortcoming of the present public health service that this dimension of the healer-patient relation is ignored. The smaller

BHU cannot, of course, offer the facility of personal choice in whom to seek within its limited personnel; but the structure of its services is largely and intentionally impersonal. This is aggravated by the fact that staff rarely has linguistic fluency in the local dialects and languages, and even less in the local cultures. Indeed, official policy of posting and inauspicious moments is reprehensible. Good luck, blessing, and plenty will follow the refuse and disappear from the house. As a consequence, when sweeping the kitchen floor, the refuse is only swept into the corner behind the kitchen door, where it accumulates as a miniature kitchen midden. Customs and ideas vary as to just when this accumulation can best be removed. Some say it is enough that certain inappropriate days of the week are avoided, others say that certain times of the week should be chosen, and in parts of Bumthang we found that appropriate time was limited to the 9th and 29th days of the month.

The issue was acknowledged and discussed in the Workshop on religion and health; the monk body's opinion was clear that a change of cosmological premises and customary attitudes would be difficult. Solutions involving garbage pails or other containers were more favoured, though the fact that this also entails a need for a dustpan and for periodic cleaning of the garbage pail were

not considered. Outside the house, on the other hand, the preparation and use of small garbage pits has been successfully introduced in some communities, with the initiatives and supervision of the VVHWs.

Personal hygiene is an even more complex issue, and probably the most important for an enhanced level of general health. A major limitation is the fact that there is simply no traditional place in Bhutanese houses for washing, and a definite convention that washing and splashing of water is both inappropriate within the house, and damaging to the house itself. In many villages, one finds a site with a public bath tub (often in disrepair), close to a source of water but away from the houses. In these bathtubs, the water is heated with hot stones from an adjacent fire. But these facilities should be understood as medicine rather than hygienic installations: using a particular kind of mica-glistening rock for heating they are supposed to affect the body favourably, and are used to ameliorate conditions of dysentery, prostate troubles, and venereal disease. There are also many places with streams with water-driven prayer wheels where the discharge offers a favoured place for washing clothes and also auspicious water for washing face and hands. But these are places visited irregularly, and families who practice any form of

morning wash at all do so on the landing/ veranda by the first floor entrance to the house. Here may also be placed a small wooden tub, used for the occasional bathing of children. There may likewise occasionally be a wooden tub at the foot of the stairway up to this landing, where one can wash off excessive mud on legs and feet such as often accumulates during farm work in the rainy season. But the general point is: any incident of washing is a distinct project, an effort which is made only spasmodically and rarely; and there is no practical way whereby a person can regularly wash hands before handling food, preparing a meal, after cleaning a soiled child, etc.

Consonant with these conditions, personal and domestic hygiene is generally poor. Districts vary in their conventions and appearance, but generally speaking cleanliness is given low priority, and in many areas, people are unconcerned to appear in public conspicuously dirty, with soot and smudges on face and hands, and soiled and unwashed clothes, even for ceremonial occasion. There thus seem to be only weak aesthetic demand made towards cleanliness, and few pressures on self-presentation connected with clean appearance, or cleanliness and tidiness in the home. On the other hand, there are conventional verbal forms observed in connection with visits from prominent

people, when the host will repeatedly apologize at the dirty appearance of the house and the poverty and dirt of what they can offer guests. There are thus suggestions that a low level of cleanliness is somehow regarded as appropriate for the lower classes, and may function on their part as an idiom of humility and denial of hubris, both to protect the commoner family from social criticism and ostracism from equals, and to avoid the suspicion of ambition and insubordination from superiors. Certainly, the appearance of personal cleanliness and standard of dress observed by elite persons is distinctly more rigorous than among commoners. There are also clear changes under way. Persons with modern education tend to practice a much higher, though often somewhat inconsistent, level of hygiene. School and village health workers articulate stricter standards, in theory if not always in practice; an enhanced practice with regard to keeping children cleaner has been successfully introduced in some villages and neighbourhoods, often at the behest of VVHWs; and a conceptual association of modernity and cleanliness is widely embraced. There is every reason to believe that, with the growing level of aspirations and the enhanced self-image of the general population encouraged by the present regime, the trend is set towards continued improvement of

hygiene, and development efforts in that direction will benefit from a favourable climate of the times.

Sanitation

The different efforts made over the years to introduce latrines have had variable but largely rather limited effects. Bhutanese sensibilities seem to focus on a simple avoidance of human excrement. The ideal place for defecation is thus a peaceful, unsullied place, with green grass and fresh air, which you leave as soon as the errand is finished. There is also the consideration of anal cleansing, for which are used sticks, stones and other suitable large objects: these will be randomly available within reach in a place that has not previously been used by others, but are unavailable or sullied in the frequently-visited places.

A latrine, on the other hand, is associated with old excreta and bad smells; personal preference encourages the avoidance of such places, particularly in the dark, which is the time regularly chosen for elimination. These negative considerations tend to persist, almost regardless of the investments and elaborateness of the structure: the short and polite response simply reiterates that such places smell. There is also the unfortunate circumstance that most programmes initiated have assumed the use of water

for anal cleansing – since this is the pattern in neighbouring India and is low-cost, compared e.g., to toilet paper. Bhutanese clearly dislike the close tactile contact this entails, and will choose a long stick or nothing.

The present situation is one where latrines are being introduced, and to some extent adopted, in direct proportion to the amount of authority and pressure asserted by the *dzongda* on the matter. The most acceptable is one where every separate house has its own latrine, no matter how simple a structure this is. In some areas, all houses have been forced to build them, in which case they tend to be used only to the extent that other options are not conveniently available; in a few districts compulsion to use them has been asserted and followed up with inspection that they are indeed in use; in such areas only is the practice truly taking hold, as far as our materials indicate.

Water

The facilities of piped running water are much appreciated by the population at large, and the investments made for this purpose have been welcome. Though the breakdown of these facilities has been over-reported, there have undeniably been

considerable difficulties and frustrations, both because clear responsibility for maintenance had not been assigned, and because spare parts were not available, or at least not accessible to persons who might have charge, by assigning an officer to be responsible. Villagers blame both poor installations (pipes were not properly joined, they were left exposed to being trampled by cattle, etc.) and lack of solidarity in the community (people cut the pipe to fill their buckets at more convenient place than the tap, or to lead the water by hosepipe to their house they break the main pipe from the source to use the water to irrigate fields, etc.). There is also a ubiquitous preference for leaving tap open and water running, even to the point of destroying the automatic self-closing taps that were originally installed. As a result, water pressure is constantly at a minimum and availability impaired; in the larger public systems, excessive volumes of water per household have to be provided. In some communities we have seen, deteriorating conditions caused by disrepair have led to ad hoc collective repairs and controls, though such matters are notoriously difficult to handle in a community saturated with petty divisions, mutual criticism and control, and underlying sorcery fears.

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There may be cases where the source of such pipe water is not clean, or is inadequately shielded from animals etc., where PWD pipes have not been installed, the local spring or main river sources used, and the privately improvised hose-pipe arrangements bringing water close to the house, are even far more unsafe. But the main problem is no doubt here, as in most comparable conditions, located on the waterway from tap to mouth. Containers for collecting and transport are dirty and open; storage basins in the Kitchen are rarely, if ever, emptied and cleaned; dirty ladles and pots are dipped to retrieve the water from the store; cups, glasses and other containers are unwashed or poorly washed and dirt are not cleaned. Efforts to reduce contagion of water-transmitted disease must focus on this chain of factors, rather than concentrate on the condition of the original water in the tap.

A major convenience is the increasing availability of plastic water containers with screw corks. These are easy to handle and can be used both to fetch and to store water safely. To the extent they are employed, the critical points would seem to be hand-washing and other personal hygiene, and the cleaning and storing of glasses and crockery. In many homes these are kept on shelves left open to dirt, flies, and vermin; but Bhutanese custom favours

the use of cupboards for these purposes, some of them even equipped with flying net.

Voluntary Village Health Workers

The Government of Bhutan has instituted a nation-wide programme of such workers, presently covering 16 of the 18 districts. VVHWs are unpaid, but receive 1-2 weeks of initial training and annual or biannual refresher courses. They may also be issued a store of medicines (Aspirin, vitamins, worming pills), and they may be favoured in certain ways, such as by being excused or less called for community labour service. The position is regarded as having a prestige among villagers, and implies a form of recognition as member of the village leadership. The area of responsibility of VVHW varies with population density and terrain, but also with somewhat varying policy of coverage. Single workers may be responsible for as much as thousand or more people over a large area of scattered settlement; at the other extreme we found in parts of Bumthang a coverage giving one worker in every village hamlet. Recruitment is presently very biased in favour of middle-aged men: the rate in 1989 was 729 men to 69 women. In 10 of the 16 districts, there are no women at all but 443 men, where as 3

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districts show the ratios 119 men/31 women; 29 men/18 women; and 8 men/13 women. Villagers explain that it is difficult for women to attend the training and refresher courses, as they normally have responsibilities for their small children. This, however, can be solved easily where several women occupy a house, or where a woman is childless or the children are slightly older. Female VVHWs are reported to have greater difficulties moving the considerable distances and being absent from house and children to cover the membership of a far-flung area. They may also find it difficult to confront and instruct strangers, and senior men outside their hamlet of residence.

On the other hand, our observations suggest that there may be dramatic differences with respect to what men and women in these positions actually attempt and achieve. In many areas, the VVHW is little more than a messenger of the Health Department, commandeering an audience to attend their educational ventures and outreach clinics; or the position is only cherished as a public recognition and the tasks of motivating women to keep a clean kitchen and give supplement to nursing children are seen as below the incumbent man's dignity. Where women are found as VVHWs responsible for fairly small village communities or neighbourhoods, on the other hand, we have

observed cases where they have achieved remarkable results precisely in such tasks, transforming the level of hygiene and practice in the course of a few years. We also know of cases where young girls of 16, very shy about taking on such responsibility and visibility, have quickly grown to prove equal to the task. There are thus strong indications that an encouragement to recruit women and a policy to make VVHW areas fairly local, would represent a very effective development policy in the field of health.

The Position of Women

The life of children will, to considerable extent, depend on the dignity and influence exercised by their mothers, and their command of physical resources. There are a number of unique historical and cultural factors affecting these questions with regard to woman in Bhutan, which combine to create rather an enigma, but certainly militate against the easy transfer of issues and policy from neighbouring countries and other developing countries to Bhutan.

In-depth cultural studies covering a diversity of sub-cultural areas would be necessary to give any kind of definitive account, but some major features can be noted. Particularly distinctive is the

conjunction, in western and central parts of Bhutan, of patterns favouring:

(i) Female succession to land and marital residence in the bride's home;

(ii) Considerable freedom and equality in sexual matters and a weakly instituted marital bond; and

(iii) marked difference in power and public position between social classes in the population. Only the second of these patterns is equally valid in the eastern regions of the country; and none of them characterize the Nepali-speaking sector of the population. With increasing dependence on wage-compensated employment, numerous professions based on specialized education, and changing relations between the classes, many of the assumptions and conventions that were based on these patterns are however losing their validity; and these are the areas which call for a careful attention to the contemporary role of women in Bhutanese society.

Thus, for example, the pattern of female succession to house and farm largely made the issue of securing auxiliary income for the wife—so important in many development situations—largely

irrelevant. Though farm income was administered by the husband, her inherited right to the means of production secured her and the children's interests. The effects or the instability of many marriages, and the absence of economic responsibility by the husband and father for his children, likewise is no major problem where marriage dissolution meant that the husband had to vacate, leaving the wife with her farm. The same instability and absence of male economic responsibility for the children becomes a major problem if the dissolving household unit is based on wage income. Likewise, where foodstuffs and other necessities are purchased from wage income rather than produced in a subsistence economy, the tasks of securing adequate resources for the children become differently distributed and raise different issues between the spouses.

The task of designing nationally valid programs to secure the position of women, or indeed designing generally beneficial legislation on matters of family law and inheritance applicable to the nation as a whole, is a somewhat misconceived task, as it is necessary to design such matters with a careful view to the actual resources and situation of the people concerned.

Modernization

As noted in the preamble of this report, the cultural and social data presented have focused on the commoner and rural majority of the population, and is consequently heavily weighted in the direction of traditional forms. The picture is therefore hardly valid in/to the urban population, or for the elite, who are both the national opinion leaders and the people with whom UNICEF staff come into contact. It is therefore important to relate the data presented above to the perspective represented by the elite.

The opening of Bhutan to intensive foreign contact, and the modernization and urbanization which have followed from such contact, have taken place within the life of the present senior generation. All persons thus have a close connection to rural traditional life. Indeed, in terms of the ideas and domestic customs embraced by the less educated urban sector, e.g., the residents of the lower market area in Thimphu, there are not very major differences to be noted from the majority, rural population.

In the case of the educated elite, on the other hand, these differences are indeed great - partly because of extended and

profound educational experiences, partly because they are, naturally, disproportionately recruited from a small traditional elite group of families with unique traditions and experiences.

In the case of this educated elite, however, the factor that needs to be emphasized most is perhaps the extent of discontinuity with traditional culture. A large proportion of the younger members of this class has had only very limited experience of traditional life and been subject to limited influence by their family seniors. Many have been sent to schools abroad at an early age, and nearly all have been separated from parents during enrolment in boarding schools within Bhutan, and thus brought up in a modernized, untraditional context. Though they strongly embrace a Bhutanese identity, their actual knowledge of its traditional content is highly variable and often quite limited, having been formed without participation, despite its historic closeness. With a strong and optimistic orientation towards the future, and being virtually guaranteed a successful career in the emerging modern Bhutan, their consciousness is mainly taken up with contemporary issues and trends, and is future-directed. It is striking that those persons who have had somewhat greater exposure to traditional life, and share in many of its premises and

practices yet seem to insulate this part of their identity and participate with apparent ease in the modern ambience.

There thus seems to be little intellectual reflection on cultural clash and contradictions, and little searching debate on existential questions, among the members of the elite. The shared perspective that is expressed is in conformity with the liberal, humanitarian vision first articulated by the late king and clearly set out in a number of connections, by the present king: a carefully planned and monitored course of development, building on Bhutanese traditions and values, and emphasizing the ends of welfare and happiness rather than the proximal means in economic growth.

However, the rate of material transformation of life which is taking place must not be underestimated (see below, 4.8). With this goes a growing attention towards material wealth and its attractions and comforts, both within the elite and in a growing sector of the population at large, which is not being clearly confronted and challenged by traditional, immaterial values. While there is a certain current of sophisticated, secular interest in Buddhist philosophy and mysticism in some circles, these are not mainstream orientations; and among most of the younger

people there is very little explicit concern with religious and ideological issues. Thus, the main body of the elite seems to follow, rather than shape and lead, the general climate of opinion, which now moves unthinkingly and swiftly towards an internationalized, market-directed modernism. Only some of these forms of consumerism are counteracted by the recent Government policies designed to enhance common national symbols and identity based on West Bhutanese idioms, and there are as yet no indications that these constitute an effective response to the challenge.

Population and Resources

There is no question but that the problems relating to growth and sustainability constitute the critical long-term challenges in Bhutan. The neighbouring Nepal, with population pressures and environmental degradation far in advance of Bhutan, provides a graphic warning, frequently cited by Bhutanese people. The mountain ecosystems of the Himalayan area are neither particularly productive nor robust. Traditional agriculture, which has always been and still remains the dominant source of livelihood, has depended on a rather vulnerable balanced exploitation of forest pastures and crop-lands in a subsistence

regime. Population growth, increased consumption, and increased take-off in the form of market economy and cash cropping, all represent dangers to such an adaptation. Any program, such and that of UNICEF, which cooperates to save children's lives and promote welfare, must also take its share of responsibility for looking to the future and acknowledging the long-term connection between reduced mortality, enhanced consumption, and the issue of sustainability.

As we have emphasized above, the magnitude of the change already effected must not be underestimated. Materials collected in the Phobjika valley can be used to illustrate. In this area, though Gangtey Gonpa has long been a major monastic centre, the pattern and volume of consumption per head had undergone a succession of changes during the lifetime of present adults, while population has increased radically. Fifty years ago, the clothes of commoners were entirely composed from a local fibre. Cotton and a few items of silk were bartered for ceremonial clothes for the elite only. Not until 30 years ago did trade with Tibet reach a volume so that commoner girls of 15-20 years' age would expect to obtain their first wool *kira*. These were trade items carried on human backs, and thus of very limited volume both as imports and exports. Footwear for longer treks was

made of raw hide cut into the shape of the foot and tied fast with straps; only during winter were half-shoes of leather with woollen boot tops sparingly used. The public economy was maintained by *corvée* labour and tolls and taxes, including even an ‘ash tax’ on every hearth to provide the ash used by the dzong to produce paper for manuscripts and correspondence. What remained was leached to provide soap for washing clothes.

In other words: the environment that still surrounds the settlement—the trees that are now mature, the stately buildings, many of the houses and the fields—all this is the product of a time when the impact of human consumption was still minuscule; and it is an open question whether even the ‘traditional’ consumption patterns of 10 and 20 years ago are sustainable within the regional economy. The pattern of 1989—with a surfaced road and considerable lorry and land rover traffic, universal consumption of imported foods, industrially produced clothes and footwear, a variety of domestic equipment, school and BHU, the purchase during the year of two tractors, and the growing export of potato crop for sale in Phuntsholing—all these activities are part of an additional economic explosion on top of a generation of steady growth; and its environmental consequences are in no way yet visible.

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In the central places in Bhutan, there are even more dramatic shifts under way in occupational and residential structure, removing the traditional infrastructure of social relations in production, family and community, and replacing them with forms that are essentially the large scale development of an entirely secular mass educational system, conceived in another societal context to pave the way for participatory citizenship and recruitment to a great volume and diversity of occupations and professions, introduced a cultural dynamic and changing patterns of knowledge that do not articulate with any traditional Bhutanese institutions, values or identities.

All these features may be regarded in their aspect of changing patterns of production and consumption, and their sustainability must be linked with realistic population prognoses. This is one immediate and urgent perspective of longer-range planning, and an active population policy must be an essential component of such planning. Even more fundamental is the issue of cultural policies, to reshape a base of institutions and values that can sustain a changing Bhutanese identity and culture. There is still much left of the natural environment that could continue to provide a physical habitat for the local population. There is also much still intact of the traditional legacy, values and institutions

which could provide such a population with a sense of continuity with its cultural past, and the bases for shaping a contemporary identity and life. But these precious resources cannot be sustained without considerable, careful cultivation in the face of the wholesale onslaught of introduction of numerous material and organizational innovations now underway under Government, UN Agencies and private commercial direction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our emphasis has been in identifying programme areas which articulate with existing local realities in Bhutan: the knowledge and understandings of children's caretakers, primarily parents; the objective needs of mothers and children in their current situation; and a realistic assessment of the activities and capacities of the local health care system, various other local interests and institutions, and UNICEF and the rest of the UN agencies.

On the basis of these materials, five priorities for UNICEF work can be recommended:

- (1) The enhancement of co-operation within the local health care system.

Health Department, Monk Body (both the main monastic organization and the dispersed (*gomchens*), astrologers, and possession healers.

- (2) intensification of the system of Voluntary Village Health Workers and the stepped-up selection of women to these task;
- (3) certain modification added to the present programmes for water and sanitation;
- (4) the development of midwifery services
- (5) Initiating a dialogue with Bhutanese authorities on long-term perspective on population and family planning.

The Promotion of Enhanced Co-Operation Between the Specialists Variouslly Involved in Health Care

Our report has shown how Bhutanese folk responses to cases of illness focuses on the identification of the causative agent rather than the symptomatology of the illness. According to folk belief, the great majority of illnesses, especially in infant and children, are caused by a diverse range of supernatural agencies such as demons, spirits, demigods, and ghosts. Remedial action in such cases is entirely concentrated on appeasing or influencing

the illness-causing agent, and not towards effecting a cure of the illness as parents of a sick child will consult a ritual specialist, generally an astrologer (*tsip*), possession healer/shaman (*parw*, *pamo*, etc.), or lama who can either perform the appropriate ritual as a counter-measure or instruct the patient to engage monks to perform specified *rimdro* and make offerings. There is also a widespread belief that medical action against a spirit-caused illness will anger the spirit and thus aggravate the conditions.

As a consequence, the predominant pattern of response in the broad mass of the population to illness in the children, even where medical facilities are available, is to consult ritual specialists and shamanistic healers first, then have the monks perform often lengthy ceremonies, and only as a last resort seek medical assistance. Change in these practices can best be facilitated by increased co-operation between all the ritual and medical specialists concerned, and through a broad educational programme through all these authority persons to change knowledge and attitudes in a way that modifies but does not unnecessarily alienate entrenched interests. At present, a realistic goal would be to have all the specialists consulted encourage the simultaneous and immediate use of both spiritual and medical measures when a child is sick.

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The joint UNICEF and Ministry of Health workshop on “Religion and Health” in Thimphu during 2-4 October 1989 for representatives of the Monk Body was a very successful first step along these lines, and represented by a breakthrough in a number of ways. But for that occasion it was only possible to reach the centrally organized Monk Body who wields enormous spiritual influence but are not as immediately and directly involved in healing as are some of the other ritual specialists. This first initiative thus needs to be followed up by a comprehensive programme of other measure’s including:

- (i) A tour by a delegation of senior and influential monk body officials to familiarize them with the pattern of social participation by Buddhist monks in some other Asian countries, particularly Thailand and Korea (the recommendations of the workshop) to consolidate the interest and spirit of co-operation presently achieved.
- (ii) The execution of a series of workshops on Dzongkhag level, bringing together not only Drukpa Kagyu monk representatives and Ministry of Health Personnel, but also the locally influential dispersed Nyingma monks (*gomchens*), lay astrologers (*tsips*),

possession healers (*paʼws*, *pamos*, etc.) and others (of the recommendations of the workshop).

(iii) The development, in co-operation with suitable counterparts in the Ministry of Health, of medically and socio-culturally carefully considered plan of further action, including the provision of appropriate materials and training personnel.

We urge that this point be given the very highest priority, as its effects on the treatment of acute illness among infants and children, e.g., for dehydration from diarrhoea, should prove dramatic.

Intensification of the Present System of Voluntary Village Health Workers and the Extensive Recruitment of Women in this Role

Our findings from the comparison of various areas of West and Central Bhutan indicate variation in the local impact of the important institution of Voluntary Village Health Workers, from its non-existence in some areas, through a (perhaps predominant) indifferent performance, to a role of significant vigour and impact. The strengthening and vitalization of this lowest rung of health workers will probably provide the most

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effective way (given successful change under priority 1, above) to influence health-related behaviour, especially in the broad field of childcare, hygiene, and enhanced public use of medical facilities. Our materials show dramatic variations. In parts of Bumthang, where predominantly women VVHWs have been selected and the density is such that each VVHW is responsible for a small community of 12-20 houses backed by a local support committee, their impact has been remarkable over only few years. In most other areas, where senior women have been selected (10-16 districts have no women as VVHWs) and where the workers are made responsible for populations of 1000-2000 persons, they often do little more than pressure small and reluctant audiences to attend occasional extension visits.

VVHWs are unpaid, but receive 1-2 weeks initial training and annual or biannual refresher courses. The cost of increasing coverage by a suggested factor of 10 is, therefore, considerable both in subsistence subsidies and administrative and training personnel. But it is our judgment that this would represent a most effective input, and that UNICEF should give high priority to an active programme of support for such intensification coupled with greatly increased selection of women VVHWs. In cooperation with the authorities the introduction of other

training, information incentives, and encouragement for VVHWs should also be carefully explored.

Water and sanitation

In this field, UNICEF's work over the years to provide clean piped water to rural communities has been very important and highly valued by the public, despite certain setbacks caused by local breakdowns and poor maintenance. The programme for the development of latrines and change of defecator patterns, on the other hand, has met with public indifference or resistance. Our observations indicate that the use of clean water for hygienic purposes is enhanced when fewer houses must share a tap; and maintenance is greatly improved where the Dzongkhag administration, as is increasingly done, makes one of its officers responsible for inspection and the organization of local maintenance. Increased construction and use of latrines, on the other hand, correlates simply with the amount of interest and pressure the various *dzongdas* of the provinces have brought to bear on the population. Apart from the water supply schemes where the authorities request UNICEF support, there does not seem to be any pressing need for UNICEF involvement in these matters.

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Our recommendation is that UNICEF give priority to two matters:

(i) Trial programmes should be initiated, associated with close observation of usage and monitoring of effects, of bringing separate taps to each household, as closely integrated with their living quarters as possible. Present architecture and custom do not allow any washing of the person, or of clothes, within the house. This greatly discourages the practice of cleanliness and personal hygiene, and forces the rare incidents of bathing of children, and the customary washing of birthing mothers (see point 5.4 below) to take place in the cowshed or in the open, during winter as well as summer. In a few places we have observed the private construction of a tap and an ample cement basin on the landing of the main floor of private houses, outside the door but under the roof. This would appear a very promising innovation which should be explored in co-operation with the government's programme for designing and building model housing.

(ii) In connection with the increasing use of latrines, the question of practices connected with anal cleansing is essentially unresolved. By Bhutanese custom, sticks, stones and other

fortuitous objects are normally used, and no strict conventions govern the use of right or left hand for eating and cleansing. The main purpose of introducing latrines to break the cycle of re-infection by water-transmitted diseases is thereby probably obviated by transmission directly via soiled hands. UNICEF should work with Health Authorities to identify a single, broadly acceptable standard method of cleansing, and its vigorous promotion by Voluntary Village Health Workers (VVHW) as well as instruction and supervision of its practice among school pupils.

The Development of Midwifery Services

Bhutanese conceptions of birth pollution (*kaydrip*) and other birth-connected beliefs serve in exceptional degree to isolate mothers during delivery and for the three subsequent days, until a ritual cleansing ceremony has been performed. Our materials show that a majority of women have been assisted only by their husband during their deliveries, while neighbours and even co-resident close female kin avoid the pollution and stay away from the house during the birth. There is thus no traditional pattern to secure the presence of an experienced woman or folk midwife during delivery. The hardships of delivering mothers are

exacerbated by fears on her side of the dangerous effects of contacts with strangers and neighbours; leading to secrecy and isolation in connection with childbirth, and also by the practice in many places of scalding hot-delivery baths, administered by the woman to herself in the cowshed or other out-of-house location in the belief that this is necessary for recuperation.

UNICEF should develop a programme of well-designed and long-term action to reduce these hardships and dangers by (i) a meticulous mapping of the actual practices and their conceptual, religious and social foundations; (ii) the formulation of culturally appropriate solutions and the identification of appropriate channels to modify and change these practices; (iii) in cooperation with the Health authorities, to explore ways of developing effective midwifery services and identifying the optimal category of recruitment and training of such appropriate personnel.

The Development of a Population Policy With a View to Sustainable Development

The developments in health that are taking place in Bhutan—partly as a direct result of active UNICEF assistance and

intervention—and the various other simultaneous developments and changes, are together having increasingly profound effects on the demography, agriculture, forest exploitation, and other resource use of the country. The Bhutanese authorities are about to embark on a more active population policy including stepped-up family planning measures. These are urgent matters where UNICEF can provide valuable support, and can contribute with a unified perspective on population and resource management in dialogue with the Bhutanese authorities and the other UN agencies. There can be no doubt that the balances which have been obtained between population human activities and use and the regeneration of renewable resources in the Himalayan areas are sensitive and in critical ways precarious, and that a concerted effort needs to be made to avoid environmental deterioration and secure the welfare of coming generations.

UNICEF should take the necessary initiatives and allocate the required expert resources so an informed, co-ordinated, and effective planning capacity is mobilized, with the necessary local and general knowledge to tackle this urgent, but long-term, problem area.

Oslo, 25 February 1990