

## RELIGION AND GENDER VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Social relationships in Bhutan between men and women are marked by gender equality unique in South Asia. Located in a geographical region where prejudice against women is common, Bhutan accords the same legal rights to both men and women, and there is no significant difference in gender discrimination. Both men and women have equal status and opportunities. There are no sharply defined male or female domains within the society, and in most cases, women own and inherit land and assets (Kunzang Choden 1999, Brauen 1994, Crins 1997). For a western anthropologist, this gender equality in an Asian society is a very fascinating trait of Bhutanese society.

The goal of this paper is to address some of the complexities in the ways gender relations were formed within the Bhutanese system and how these gender relations will stand the changes of time. I will try to point out the basic value system underlying the gender equality. First, I will give a description of the gender relations I found during my visits in Bhutan and in the village in northwest Bhutan where I lived for six months. I will look at female symbolism by examining some remnants of historical evidence pertaining to the emergence of Tantric Buddhism in Bhutan. I will acknowledge the many cross-cultural factors of pre-Buddhist times on the development of the indigenous belief system, and the adoption of Tantric practices from India and Tibet.

It is generally believed in Bhutan that basic value system and gender values are shaped by Buddhism, but the pre-Buddhist ancient values also play a significant role. My point in this paper is to discuss the old values on which the gender relations could be based, and point out the survival of very old traditions lost in most parts of the world, which have shaped the Bhutanese society up until today. One characteristic of the gender equality in Bhutan is the fluid marriage system. Their fluid marriage system means that people can live together (without performing a ritual), divorce is not a problem and women and men can freely choose their partners. According to Pommaret (1998), "this fluid marriage system and the freedom for couples to live together might be due to the fact that in Buddhism, marriage is not a sacrament and, the belief that everything transient is deeply rooted. I personally think that the gender relations in Bhutan were shaped by a much older pre-Buddhist value system. Another reason for the fluid marriage system could be that women inherit in the same way as men, and keep their inheritance for themselves. The fact that women do not surrender their property to the

man when they marry makes them to be financially independent. Because of these two factors divorce has always existed in Bhutan and it is not a social problem (Pommaret 1998:18-19)".

I agree with Pommaret that Indian and western influences are sometimes misrepresenting the Bhutanese system or even in an ethnocentric way their tolerant marriage system is becoming somewhat more rigid than before, and traditional arrangements are giving way to a kind of standardization. The notion of love, as understood in the western world and propagated by movies and novels, is rapidly gaining ground among the educated segment of the population. Because of the sarcastic attitudes of Indians and westerners alike, youngsters feel embarrassed about some of the traditional arrangements that they perceive as "backward". Another factor is that marriages must be registered at the district court, which results in divorce procedures having to register as well.

In the west, the value system on which the gender relations are based differs significantly from the Bhutanese value system. I will point out the different definitions on value and I will give brief overview of the gender debate. I will also give attention to a recent feminist movement (some may argue if it is a movement at all)- the ecofeminist movement. This ecofeminism, 'a new term for an ancient wisdom' has grown out of various social movements- the feminist, peace and the ecology movements- in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though Franchise D' Eaubonne first used the term, it only became popular in the context of numerous protests and activities against environmental destruction sparked off initially by recurring ecological disasters. According to Radford Ruether (1996) there are varieties of movements dealing with ecological crises from several perspectives, and within those movements there are women who make a conscious critique of the movement's androcentrism and seek to show the connection between women's domination and the domination of nature.

The ecofeminist view reflects the western view on the position of women, the domination of men and combines this with the western view on nature. It is interesting to see that the ecofeminists are advocates for a more Bhutanese way of shaping society and the gender relations. It is fascinating that this is happening in a time when Bhutanese gender relations are under stress due to modernization and upcoming market economy.

### **Gender Relations in Bhutan**

In the village in northwest Bhutan where I stayed, I observed daily life, which was characterized by the belief in spirits and deities. This

village is situated a day walk from the “all weather” road and all the villagers were involved in subsistence farming. I noticed the social relations between men and women were harmonious and that gender relations were marked by a remarkable equality. I did not witness any domination by male over female. Men and women worked together in field, and in and around the house. Both took care of children and the only division of work based on gender was ploughing which is exclusively a male chore, while women transported the dung (manure) to the field. This may symbolize what I will write about in this paper namely, the cults of Mother Earth, the plough being the male symbol and women nurturing mother earth.

Reciprocity in sharing work is very vital to the existence of the households in the village. From the 18 households only two had a male as head of the household since these households only consisted of male members. The rest of houses had women as the heads of the households. Preference was given to daughters to inherit the house and land. Women made the decisions in most cases concerning the farm and family matters.

The gods and deities surrounding the village were male and female. Many rituals had to be performed to keep the gods at peace. Chakravarti (1979) explains in a clear way the indigenous religion of Bhutan: he argues that Bön was the only pre-Buddhist religion of Bhutan. Bhutan had its own indigenous religion Bön, but later Buddhism assimilated it. Many elements of that indigenous religion are still alive today. Evidence for this is there are many gods and deities who are worshipped like sky gods (*lha*), water gods (*lu*) and earth gods (*sa bdag*). Everywhere in the village one could find, as Chakravarti calls them, Lapchas – stone cairns. Such cairns are the altars of the indigenous warrior gods. One big black stone in the shape of an altar was found in the forest at a place where there is an irrigation channel, and offerings is made to Katchap, the warrior god of the valley before the people in the village started to use the canal.

Nevertheless this community consists of human beings with all their faults and problems. Jealousy, gossip and envy also exist in the small community and there are rituals to restore the balance. One way to protect oneself from gossip and the “evil eye” is a “dorji” a wooden sculpture with an image of a woman carved in it, her genital is carved explicitly and painted red: or a wooden phallus painted red. Bhattacharyya links this to the Tantra where special importance is attached to the menstrual blood. Painting sacred stones and figures of the Mother Goddess red is a very old ritual, red symbolizing menstrual blood, and the act of painting it on the stones and figurines implies the

fusion of productive energy with the earth. The colour red is a symbol of fertility and the object stands for Mother Earth.

Five *nenjorm* (female medium) in that small community were consulted to help with problem such as sickness and all kinds of misfortune. These *nenjorm* worked closely together with Buddhist monks and Lamas. The indigenous religion fused very well with the official state religion, the only exception being that in the indigenous religion the “experts” are women while in Buddhism men are the experts in most cases.

In relation to the environment which has been made into an explicit concept in the west, who like it to be “environmentally friendly” to be aware of the ecology. In order to survive, people in Bhutan had to be respectful to the environment. This nature has been animated with deities and Gods and, as previously mentioned, respect for mother earth is still very alive. In the village where I stayed there were many rules on how to live with the ever-present deities in the air, water, earth, forest and fire. They were treated with respect and never abused. It was just as Pommaret points out: “Even if the rural population’s awareness of this concept was not conscious, their way of life, their basic survival, as in other rural societies, depend on natural resources. It therefore reflected a careful management of the environment: rotation of the crops in the field, management of pastures and preservation of the forest and animal species. Buddhism enhances this last aspect with the precept not to kill any living being “ (Pommaret 1998:24)”. My point here is that although Buddhism is the official religion, pre-Buddhism or the indigenous religion plays a significant role in daily life, this indigenous religion has many aspects of the ancient Mother Goddess cult and it is still alive today.

### **Female Symbolism**

In the village where I stayed and in more places in Bhutan I encountered many aspects of an archaic female cult. I traced several distinctive aspects that have their roots in ancient times and examined the features of the Great Mother, Mother Goddess, in her ancient form. Later her qualities and symbols associated with her became redefined in Tibetan Buddhism. Or as Campbell points out that “the influences of female symbolism derive from an ancient cult of the Great Mother, Mother Goddess or Mother Earth. Because deeply embedded in cultural practices, some, which have survived in, deluded yet recognizable form till modern day (Campbell 2001:19)”. Tantric Buddhism offers a variety of ideas about the role and philosophy of the female, both in terms of the place of women within its theocracy, and the esoteric meaning of female

being. In order to clarify the various components which contributed to the complexity of the Tibetan and Bhutanese religious believe and in order to make links with the development of female identity in the philosophy. Many authors (e.g. Bhattacharyya 1997, James 1957, Campbell 2001, Chakravarti 1979) assume that before the male-dominated (patriarchal) society, there were female dominated (matriarchal) societies. "These matriarchal societies worshipped the Mother Goddess and centered round the women, on whom the responsibility rested for the essentially important function of rearing their young and imparting to them whatever could be characterized as the human heritage at the dawn of civilization. All cultural traits, including habits, norms of behaviors, inherited traditions, etc, were formed by and transmitted through the females. The woman was not only the symbol of generation, but also the actual producer of life. In the earliest phases of social evolution, it was this maternity that held the field, the life-producing mother being the central figure of religion. This has been proved by the plentiful discovery of palaeolithic female figurines in bone, ivory and stone "(Bhattacharyya 1977:1)". The observations of E.O. James are significant for historical understanding of the subject:

"An adequate supply of offspring and food being a necessary condition of human existence, the promotion and conservation of life have a fundamental urge from Paleolithic times to the present day which has found magic-religious expression in very deeply laid and highly developed cults. Exactly when and where it arose is still very obscure, but it was from western Asia, the South Russian plain and the valley of the Don that female figurines, commonly called 'Venus', often with their maternal organs grossly exaggerated, were introduced at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic (60,000-10,000 BC) by an Asian migration in what is known as the Graveton culture.

With the transition from foodgathering to food-production the female principle continued to predominate the cults that had grown up around the mysterious forces of birth and generation. Woman, being the mother of the race, was essentially the life-producer and in that capacity she played the essential role in the production of offspring. Nevertheless, as agriculture and herding became the established modes of maintaining the food-supply, the two poles of creative energy, the one female and receptive, the other male and conceiver, could hardly fail to be recognized and given their respective symbolic significance. But although phallic emblems became increasingly prominent from Neolithic times

onwards, maternal principles, in due course personified as Mother Goddess, continued to assume the leading role in sects, especially in Western Asia, Crete and the Aegean, where the male god was subordinate to the Goddess. The mother and her maternal organs and attributes were the life-giving symbols par excellence (James (1957) in Bhattacharyya 1977:1-2)".

"In the earlier stages of human history, the mother Goddess was a composite deity. Basically, she was the symbol of generation, the Female principle, conceived as the actual producer of life. In the course of time however, when the function of the male in the generation process became recognized, a Male Principle was introduced, evidently as an insignificant lover of the Goddess, to play his role of conceiver. With the establishment of husbandry and domestication of animals especially among the rural community, as well as with the introduction of the cattle-drawn plough, the economic importance of the males increased further, as a result of which the insignificant male god became co-equal and eventually the predominant partner. But where the transition from hunting and food gathering to the higher forms of production was marked by an extensive development of primitive agriculture, the function of the life-producing mother was extended to the vegetable kingdom. The Mother Goddess was thus identified with Mother Earth who became the womb in which the crops were sown. The connection between the growth of agriculture and the origin of the village communities accounts for the resurrection of her cult as Earth Mother. All over the world, the earth spirit is generally regarded as female and the presiding deities of agriculture are mainly goddesses, because the idea of fertility and reproduction are mainly goddesses connected with women. (Bhattacharyya 1997:12)"

Many factors of the influence of the Mother Goddess cult are still alive today within traditional Bhutanese society. This may be due to the fact that Bhutan has been isolated for such a long time and because of the fusion of indigenous religion with Mahayana Buddhism in its Tantric form, the traditional society could preserve old ways which have been lost from many other societies in the world. Although there are still traces of cultures with a strong gender equality in Asia, like in Cambodia, Minangkabou in Indonesia, Miao in China and Adivasi societies in India and more, but they have been rapidly vanishing due to colonialization, industrialization and modernization.

## **Gender Values in Tantra Buddhism**

According to Simmer-Brown 2001, Tibetan Buddhism (Mahayana Buddhism) developed its own unique understanding of gender, though it is in a context somewhat different than the contemporary concerns of Western culture. Questions of personal identity and gender are generally considered a contemporary Western phenomenon. In traditional Tibetan culture, before the Chinese occupation in the 1950s, every detail of cultural life was infused with religious concerns such as appeasement of obstructing spirits, the accumulation of merit, and the attainment of enlightenment. In many parts of Bhutan this is still very alive today. For Tibetans and Bhutanese, concepts of 'feminine' and 'masculine' have been important only to the extent that they reflect this ultimate dynamic in ritual and meditation. Gender has been understood to be beyond personal identity, a play of absolute qualities in the experience of the practitioner. The 'feminine' refers to the limitless, ungraspable, and aware qualities of the ultimate nature of mind; it also refers to the intensely dynamic way in which that awareness undermines concepts, hesitation, and obstacles in the spiritual journey of female and male Vajrayana or Tantra practitioners. The 'masculine' relates to the qualities of fearless compassion and action that naturally arise from the realization of limitless awareness and the confidence and effeteness associated with enlightened action.

From this sacred view, the embodied lives of ordinary men and women can be seen as a dynamic and sacred play of the the ultimate expressing itself as gendered physical bodies, their psychologies, and their states of mind. For Tantra Buddhism, this dynamic is merely one among a universe of polarities that are ordinarily taken as uncompromising. For the mind ensnared in dualistic thinking, these polarities represent the endless dilemmas of life; for the mind awakened to the patterns of cyclic existence, these extremes do not differ from each other ultimately. Seeing through the seeming duality of these pairs, using the method of Tantra (vajrayana) practice, transform the practitioner's view. This sacred view of gender was not necessarily reflected in Tibetan or Bhutanese social life. In general, women have enjoyed more prestige and freedom in Tibet than in either China or India. Women in Bhutan enjoyed even more prestige and freedom than in Tibet.

According to Campbell (2002), Tantra Buddhism offers a variety of ideas about the role and philosophy of the female, both in terms of the position of women within its theocracy, and the esoteric meaning of female being. Campbell traced several distinctive aspects that have their roots in ancient times. She characterized this theme under the heading: Early religious influences and the shamanic component, and the waning

power of the Great Mother and the Steps of Tantra. Campbell too refers back to ancient times to the introduction of Bön in Tibet; it is believed that Bön came to Bhutan through the Duars and the Tibetan and Bhutanese passes. Bön was brought to Tibet from Zang -Zung an area that bordered on what is now Pakistan. Bön texts confirm the existence of Indian Tantric thought as well the basic tenets of Buddhism and indigenous beliefs. In early days both in Bön and Buddhism devotion to the Mother Goddess were maintained in different forms, but particularly important is her form as the central figure representing female energy. In Sanskrit she is known as Dakini while in Tibetan and Bhutanese her name is Khandro, literally means "sky-goer". Her dynamic presence is a particular feature in the biographies of all famous practitioners of Tantra, appearing as she does to help the acolyte on the path by clearing obstacles, challenging an intellectual approach, and uniting in sexual union with the male practitioner in order to provide the means whereby he can realize the highest truth. Her further association with charnel grounds links the Dakini with several ancient goddesses whose powers over life and death are described in the texts of many traditions. In an insightful essay on the *Sinmo*, the mythical Tibetan demoness who had to be subdued in order for Buddhism to become established in Tibet and Bhutan, Campbell proposes that her supine presence in art and in literature actual forces which had to be set under control so that the patriarchal imperatives of Buddhism might prevail. Her femaleness was necessary, she argues, because the subjugation of the land as Mother Earth was inevitable, social patterns of matrifocal and matrilinear customs had to be wiped out and the early patriarchal view of 'that which is uncontrolled and threatening as feminine had to be established.

Campbell is convinced "the Srin-mo does not primarily represent women, but rather a religion, or more accurately a religious culture and world view that is being dominated (Campbell 2002:44)". This point from Campbell is very interesting if we look at Bhutan. In Bhutan there are two *lhakang* from the time of subduing the demoness described above. But in Bhutan social pattern as matrilineality and matrifocality was not wiped out by mainstream Buddhism. Shamanism, (as it is wrongly called by some western scholars) or better mediumship performed by women is still very much alive in Bhutan.

## Gender

To understand the concept of gender I give an overview how the concept of gender was formed in western social science. There have been many debates over the words of sex/ and or gender (Oakley1972; Gates1991a; Delphy1992). Within the discipline of anthropology it was



Mead (1965) and Rubin (1974) who focused on the difference between individual predisposition and social personality and on the social construction of gender. Mead only presents a construction of gender but Rubin premises the universal oppression of women. To understand this oppression we must examine the sex-gender systems (Den Uyl 1995:46). The original division of the concepts in social science was between that which relates to biology (sex) and that which related to social characteristics (gender) (Oakley 1972), although it was quickly recognized that the two ideas could not easily be kept theoretically separate (Rubin 1974). Later authors have increasingly argued that sex, like gender, should be seen as socially constructed rather than biologically given (Delphy 1993; Butler 1990).

Mellor (1997) follows Gates (1991) in seeing embodiment as a material and an historical phenomenon that cannot be “degendered” through socialization or counter socialization. Social construction does not begin with a blank slate. Or as Mellor (1997) puts it: “To say that human beings as reproductive mammals are embodied in sexed bodies does not imply anything about sexual identity or sexual orientation of individual people, or even some unified and singular bodily form of the male and the female. Embodiment is a universal human condition, not a determining factor at the individual level. It is also important not to limit discussion to sex, sexuality and reproduction. Human embodiment covers all aspects of human biological needs and developments such as hunger, excretions, maturation and death. If the realities of human embodiment in its broadest context are not discussed, the ways in which the social consequences of embodiment have historically had different impacts for men and women will not be addressed” (Mellor 1997:9)”. Aries (2001) presents social definitions of masculinity and femininity. These (western) social definitions provide prescriptions for behavior, dictating how males and females ought to behave to be socially acceptable. Aries describes expectations for each sex, which include for men: Leadership, competence, dominance, independence, and assertiveness. Women are reared for: warmth, sympathy, tact, expressiveness, nurturing, and awareness of the feelings of others. The message that these social definitions of masculinity and femininity send is that in order to be part of society, one must fit into the definitions established by society (Aries 2001. 2001: 259)”. It would be very valuable to establish definitions, which fit into the Bhutanese society, based on the Bhutanese value system.

## Values

The notion of values is complex and through the history of anthropology different definitions have been given to values, from values to sentiments, to concepts, to general meanings; unconscious assumptions; relations of interest; ethos. Sometimes values are identified with things, sometimes with motives, sometimes with ends. "The notion of values is complex and to speak of values implies recognition of preference qualities of relationships between means and ends in social context. Values involve a grading of objects and actions in terms of their relative desirability. Values also imply systematic behavior, not simply random choice. Values have a cognitive aspect, they may be conceptualized, have a shape in ideas, an emotional charge. This may be at a minimum for values of a technological or economic kind (Firth 1964:220)".

In the field of social psychology Rokeach signed a model to study values and value systems. Rokeach's definition of values is: "A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs, concerning preferable modes of conduct or end states of existence along a continuum of relative importance"(Rokeach 1973:5)".

Tashi Wangyal (2001) describes of a shift in fundamental values due to the modernization process initiated in Bhutan in the early 1960s. According to Tashi Wangyal, "traditional values have largely been shaped by Buddhist culture and these values are comprehensive as they include the conduct of an individual's relationships, to the natural environment, interpersonal relationships, and addresses issues of individual self-discipline. Traditional Bhutanese values not only address individual self-discipline and the conduct of interpersonal relationships but also delineate the responsibility of all sentient beings. The concept of *ley jumdrej* and *tha damtshig* is central to Bhutanese values. The concept of *ley jumdrej* essentially states good begets good and vice versa. The idea of *tha damtshi* outlines the sacred commitment to others in society. This is best illustrated in pairing of duty and obligation between parent and child, teacher and pupil, husband and wife and master and servant. Such pairing of duty and obligations reinforces the need for social responsibility. In terms of individual self-discipline Bhutanese values emphasise the *domba nga* or the five lay Buddhist undertakings. These include: not killing; not taking what is not given to you rightfully; not lying; not consuming intoxicants and avoiding sexual misconduct (Tashi Wangyel 2001:107)".

A Buddhist view, according to Truong (2000) would consider for example social tension as a crisis of disharmony, the tendency in human beings to cling the false notions of self and other, a condition that favours individuality to the exclusion of the common good. The search for harmony requires an abnegation of the self and a shift of interest to others. Buddhist epistemology emphasizes the need to learn to be part of whatever one seeks to understand, to generate a process of dialogue within oneself and with others, eliminating the barriers separating human lives. As Truong points out: "Buddhism is like other religions not free from sectarianism nor are Buddhist societies free from violence and internal domination. It is a Buddhist contention that social division, violence and domination are reflections of a deep-seated anxiety in the human being. Buddhism seeks to remove the causes of anxiety in order to free human beings from suffering: for this reason it is referred to as a science of man rather than the revelation of God. Humans are central to Buddhism, both as the cause of social division, suffering and violence, and as the followers of a path which respects virtuousness and non-violence (Truong et al: 2000:50)". Although Truong based his view on Vietnamese society, many elements of it are applicable for the Bhutanese society. Just as Bhutanese Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism belongs to the Mahayana branch of Buddhism. Many Asian societies are developing at a vast pace and becoming strong economic and political powers. None of the religions or philosophies particular to Asia (Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, and Animism) draws a distinction between religious and secular values. The religious scriptures contain guidelines not only for worship, but also for correct conduct in everyday life, even including politics, economy and the arts. (Cauquelin ET al1998:3). Just as Cauquelin stated that in South Asia, with the imprint of Hinduism, Islam, and the historical influence of Buddhism, the people are very aware of values. But efforts to translate the word "value" show that their main languages do not provide us with a single equivalent word. So is the case in Bhutan. Words cover different interpretations of 'value'. There is no distinction between values, religion, and way of thinking, belief, purpose or custom as in western languages.

Values are complex and the question is where to draw the line between values and codes of conduct. According to Cauquelin et al (2000) codes of conduct can be seen as the practice or expression of values such as harmony and respect in everyday life. The question is, how are ancient cultures and traditional values modified by modern developments, for example, under the impact of market forces, consumer culture, and westernization. In Bhutan (although still a traditional country in development), with its imprint of the historical influence of

Buddhism, the people are very aware of values. I do agree with Cauquelin that the origins of Asian values can be traced in religious and philosophical texts and traditions; this is also the case in Bhutan too, as mentioned before. Other factors too have an impact such as historical experiences, development within society, the rise of a market economy with the phenomena of urbanization and industrialization, geographical and climatic conditions, experiences of wars and ecological disasters.

### **Ecofemism**

Scientific research on social, cultural and political changes within the Bhutanese society are still in early stages. Bhutan is a state in transition and the social structure of the country can be described as traditional, however the country is now slowly opening up to the outside world and political, social and cultural changes are a result of this development. "The historical evolution of Bhutan provides a manifestation of considerable and complex transition through which contemporary Bhutanese policy has come into being. Its religious, political and ethnic institutions had been uniquely secured through the historical process, which has shaped the typical Bhutanese personality in which a clear separation between spiritual and temporal realms is not recognized (Ramakant 1996:12)". Traditional values based on this historical evolution are playing still a significant role in Bhutanese society, and these values are marked as said before on respect for all sentient beings and a non-domination of men on nature and gender.

Many westerners are looking for a more harmonious relationship between the genders, a healthy non-exploitable relationship with the environment and a new spirituality based on equal principles for gender and human beings in general. Bhutan's philosophy of enhancing Gross National Happiness requires these values. These are values that are advocates by the ecofeminist movement. There are different views of ecofeminism found in North America with the perspective on women and nature. Among northern ecofeminists the connection between domination of women and domination of nature is generally made first on the cultural symbolic level. One charts the way in which patriarchal culture has defined women as being "closer to nature", as being on the nature side of a nature-culture hierarchical split. This is shown in the way in which women have been identified with body, earth, sex, and the flesh in its mortality, weakness, and sin-proneness, "vis a vis a masculinity identified with spirit, mind, and sovereign power over both women and nature being the property of ruling class males.

A second level of ecofeminist analysis goes beneath the cultural-symbolic level and explores the socio-economic underpinnings of how

the domination of women's bodies and women's work interconnects with the exploitation of land and animals as sources of labor and wealth. How have women as a gender group been colonized by patriarchy as a legal, economic, social and political system? From a Marxist-feminist perspective, the cultural symbolic patterns linking women and nature are an ideological superstructure by which the system of economic and legal domination of women, land and animal has been justified and made to appear "natural: and inevitable within the total patriarchal cosmovision. Religion then comes into reinforce this domination of women and nature as reflecting the will of God and the relationship of God as the supreme deified patriarchal male to the "world" that he "created" and rules (Radford Ruether 1996:2)". It is interesting to put this ecofeminist view in relation to the Bhutanese world view: it is clear that the idea described above is a western view, and it points out the connection of the domination of the women and nature. In Buddhism, there is no male creator and the main aim in Buddhism is to reach enlightenment for all sentient beings. The Bhutanese and Buddhist view enlightenment, a higher level of consciousness or as Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley puts it, "Enlightenment is blossoming of happiness. It is made more probable by consciously creating a harmonious psychological, social, and economic environment. Within Bhutanese culture, inner spiritual development is as prominent a focus as external material development. This follows from an original meaning of development in Bhutanese context in which development meant enlightenment of the individual (Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley 1999:17)".

## **Conclusion**

Modernization is moving on at a vast pace in Bhutan and the result is a changing society. One evidence for this are the results of a gender pilot study conducted by the Royal Government of Bhutan's Planning Commission, Central Statistical Office (CSO) and UN agencies the conclusion was: "Women enjoy a fair amount of independence in their personal, social, economic and political spheres. Although there are some changes in the position of women due to gradual shifts from traditional subsistence-based agrarian forms to more diversified "surplus"- based, livelihood options seem to be emerging. The people are moving away from agrarian economy or upscaling their economic activities; women seem to be losing their decision-making role. In this paper I have discussed the traditional values and gender relationships in Bhutan in a changing world. I have discussed an ancient cult which could explain why Bhutan is blessed with gender equality. However, this gender

equality is under stress due to modernization and imported mass media images.

This will undermine the traditional value system which ecofeminists in the rest of the world want to bring back. Bhutan and Western countries are aware of the unique Bhutanese value system and it would be highly valuable to create awareness among the young people in Bhutan not to neglect the own values and be aware of the valuability of their own culture.

Shiva and Mies put it this way: "An ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love. Only this way can we be enabled to respect and preserve the diversity of all life forms, including their cultural expressions, as true sources of our well-being and happiness. (Mies, Shiva, 2001:6)". Shiva and Mies advocate a creation of a more holistic view of all life embracing cosmology and anthropology. Though the ecofeminists view was and is given a lot of criticism, especially in perspective to women and nature. Many feminist scholars question the relationship of women and nature. There is the assumption that women are closer to nature than men. As we can see in rural areas it is both women and men who are close to nature, because they are dependent on her. In the Bhutanese Tantra view includes a profound respect and veneration for the magical potencies and divine powers inherent in womanhood. I agree with Shaw (1994): Tantric religion revolves on the axial values of purity and pollution and auspiciousness and inauspiciousness; they do not share the prevalent Western dualisms of nature and culture, matter and spirit, and humanity and divinity. The association of women with "nature", "matter" and "humanity"-particularly as devalued halves of this duality is misplaced here.

More and more western people are aware that consumerism and materialism does not bring happiness and many western people feel a spiritual void. Bhutan's society is still blessed with tradition, spirituality and gender harmony and valuable historical cultural heritage lost in most places in the world. Although there is a danger, modern times are vastly eroding these qualities. But still can Bhutan set an example to the western world.

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