

Bhutan (By Edward Ordman, with Eunice Ordman)

[Version of 1/24/2010. This is a work in progress, more revision is coming]

Sometimes Eunice and I wonder whether, if we travel enough, we will eventually experience every odd scene recorded in travel fiction. Sometimes, even when the thing happens, it takes awhile to understand how it came about. We have, for example, once crossed the path of Indiana Jones. On another trip we got deep enough into the jungle that the natives, entranced by Eunice's long white hair, carried her off for a fertility festival. Making that plausible, however, will require some explanation.



The Indiana Jones encounter is easily explained. In 2005 we were walking through the jungle in Cambodia, going to visit a small village north of Angkor Wat, where American Jewish World Service was supporting a local charity. As we walked along the very muddy track through the jungle, we suddenly entered a stretch where the track had been much improved, by the addition of truckloads of very clean, very high quality sand. What was it doing there? Our guide explained: A film crew had recently come through, to film an Indiana Jones movie scene in the ruined temple just off to one side of us, in the jungle. The camera trucks kept getting bogged down in the mud, and the sand had been brought in to make the path passable for the movie equipment.

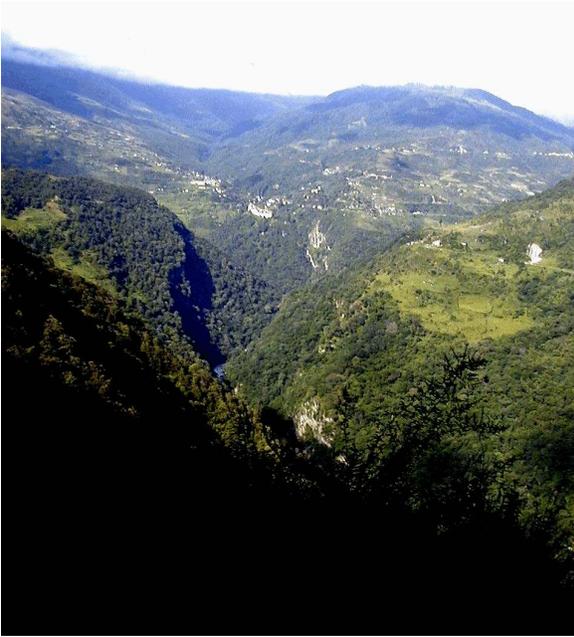
The fertility festival will take longer to explain. That occurred in the Fall of 2002 in Bhutan, a small country northeast of India, clinging to the south side of the Himalayas along the southern border of Tibet. We were traveling with an alumni group from Principia College, the Christian Scientist-sponsored college in Illinois from which Eunice graduated in 1946. The trip leaders were Marge and Hank Hamlin, people her age whom she knew from the college, and we knew they could lead a fascinating trip: Hank is an extremely good photographer and teacher of photography, and Marge was for many years the foreign student advisor at the college



and has a remarkable ability to make friends in other cultures. They seemed ideal people to lead a visit to religious festivals at Buddhist monasteries clinging to the mountainsides.

We saw but didn't visit the famous cliffside monastery called the Tiger's Nest, as the climb seemed prohibitive. According to the story, Guru Rinpoche (the words simply mean "the great teacher"), the first Buddhist missionary to Bhutan, arrived at this mountainside on the

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back of a flying tiger in the year 747. He spent awhile on the mountain, looking over Bhutan which in those days was victimized by a giant invisible dragon. (Bhutan still calls itself “The Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon.”) He mapped out the location of monasteries which would pin down the dragon’s claws, head, and tail to keep it from doing harm. These monasteries still exist today, large wooden structures called dzongs, each of which serves as a combination monastery, temple, fortress, and regional government office building.

Several of the dzongs and monasteries, most of which were on steep hillsides, did still require significant climbs to visit. The entrance to the Punakha Dzong included three long flights of steps, some two or three times as steep as



standard American stairs. Shortly before leaving the United States, Eunice had apparently pulled a knee ligament. The doctor prescribed a full knee brace and crutches, which Eunice promptly abandoned as they slowed her down too much. The use of two canes slowed her only slightly, and didn’t stop her from climbing steep stairs or crossing swaying pedestrian bridges with surfaces not designed for canes. When she got back to the United States and asked the doctor “How do I treat this knee?” he replied, “I’m not sure what you’ve been doing, but do more of it.”

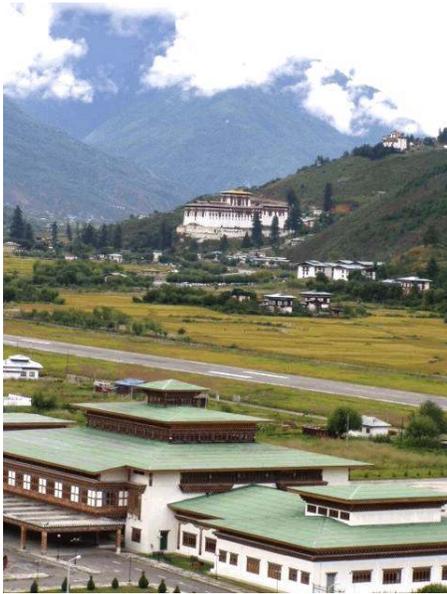
Prayer flags were often placed on bridges or at the top of high mountain passes, where the wind will carry the prayers aloft.



The country

Flying to Bhutan on a Druk Air (Dragon Air) flight from Calcutta to Paro is an experience in itself. The pilot of the small twin-jet aircraft encourages people to shut their eyes after assuring them that he knows what he is doing and has done it before. It is easier to describe the flight out than the flight in: the

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aircraft takes off climbing as steeply as it can, for the length of a narrow mountain valley. Just before slamming into the cliff face at the end, it does a sharp one hundred eighty degree turn and climbs sharply again, just clearing the mountain at the other end of the valley. Once when the United States Ambassador to India decided to pay a state visit to Bhutan, he wanted to be flown in by the United States Air Force. The Bhutanese managed to convince the Air Force that the airstrip was too difficult to fly into: the Ambassador would have to fly in on Druk Air like everyone else. In the picture, you can see the Paro Dzong on the hillside overlooking the airport.

Bhutan is the size of New Jersey, with a population roughly estimated at 700,000 scattered in small villages through a large number of different narrow river valleys coming down the mountainsides. While united by a shared form of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism (locals primarily said they belonged to the “red hat” sect although some said they followed the “yellow hat” sect) each valley has its own language and they were fiercely independent until the 1700's when the British in India discovered that there were very large trees in Bhutan that could be harvested for masts on British sailing ships. A British military expedition went into the mountains and explained to the tribal chiefs that England could conquer them, as it had India, but would rather not fight in the mountains. If the chiefs would select a king with authority to cut the large trees and sell them to the British navy, the conquest would not be necessary. Bhutan arrived at an odd form of government: a dual monarchy consisting of a secular king who ruled by heredity and a religious leader, a Shabdrung, who obtained his position by reincarnation. During most of the twentieth century, though, each young Shabdrung died before reaching the age of 18. Usually it was blamed on a swimming accident. One may reasonably conjecture that some of the kings preferred not to share power.

In the late 1960's, India and China fought a war. Bhutan, caught between them, feared being overrun. This led to several changes in Bhutan. The young Shabdrung was moved to India for safety (perhaps kidnaped by the Indians); he has grown to adulthood in India, leaving the King in charge in Bhutan, and some people in Bhutan regard him as too influenced by India for them to want him to return. Also, Bhutan, which had previously remained extremely isolated, decided it needed some contacts with the outside world. The King established contact with the United Nations. As the local people tell the story, facetiously but proudly, the United Nations asked the King, “What is your Gross National Product?” The King (who, you should know, was educated at Oxford) is said to have replied, “I don't think we have one of those. What do you mean, exactly?” After the notion of Gross National Product was explained, he said, “Very well, we are not going to have one of those. We will have a Gross National Happiness, instead.”

This has caused us to think hard about that distinction. How is the Gross National Product (now slightly redefined as the Gross Domestic Product) defined? It is, loosely, the dollar

value of all goods and services produced in the country. If there is a traffic accident and the cars need to be repaired, the Gross National Product rises. Someone's car insurance premium goes up and it rises again. If someone is injured and goes to hospital, it goes up more, and a lawsuit can cause it to skyrocket. Has happiness increased? I am reminded of the comedian Mort Sahl in the 1960's. If I recall correctly, he commented that every time we build a nuclear bomb and bury it in a silo underground where we hope it will never be used, "it makes the Gross National Product even more gross."



In Thimphu, the capital city, our small group of travelers was invited to dinner by a princess, a cousin of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. She is in the center; Eunice, wearing a traditional Bhutanese jacket, is on the left. The Princess explained that she had been told that we were a group of people "more interested in religion than money" and she wanted to meet us. She'd invited several other members of the royal family and government officials, a good chance for us to learn about the country. This is a good place to warn you that the history we are giving is the one told to us by these people and by people on the street

in Bhutan; we find that what people think of their own history is at least as interesting as the versions in the history books, and tells us more about how people understand themselves. One of those present that evening was the editor of the national weekly English-language newspaper, Kuensel. The website <http://www.kuenselonline.com/> is a wonderful source of information and pictures of Bhutan; keep in mind that like many newspaper sites, it is government sponsored.

I could not resist the temptation to organize some discussion of religion. I lined up three high-ranking Bhutanese on one side and three Christian Scientists on the other.

"Can someone be both a Buddhist and a Christian?" I asked the Buddhists.

"Of course," they answered. Guru Rinpoche had preached "respect the gods," but didn't say which gods. Many Bhutanese, while Buddhists, still honored the Hindu gods and other deities of pre-existing Bhutanese religions.

"Can you be a Christian and a Buddhist?" I asked the Christians.

"Of course not," said the Christian Scientists present.

I have known plenty of people who think of themselves as both Jews and Buddhists. I've always thought of Buddhism more as a philosophy than as a religion.

One of the Christian Scientists then asked the Bhutanese, "Since you think someone can be both Buddhist and Christian, would you allow Christian missionaries in Bhutan?"

"No", said a member of the royal family. "That would tend to disrupt our local culture. It would hurt our cultural unity."

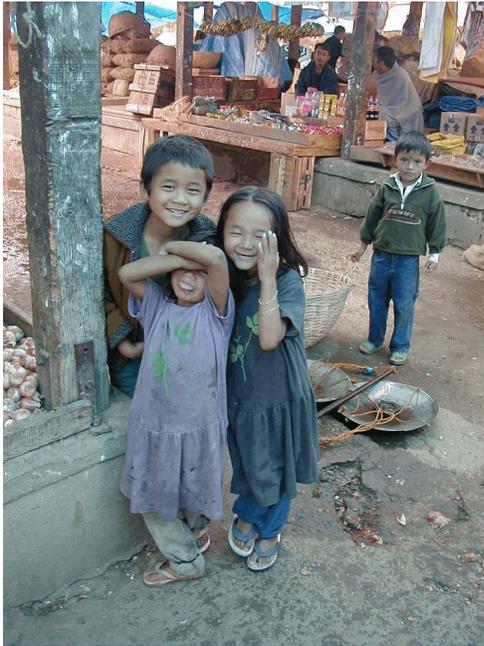
You won't hear in Kuensel on-line, as we didn't hear from the Bhutanese officials, about problems with the Indian Hindu minority in the south of Bhutan or the problems with refugees from Nepal. Part of maintaining the "Gross National Happiness" is a strong effort to maintain the national culture, even at the explicit cost of reducing Gross National Product. Storekeepers

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and other people serving the public, and anyone visiting temples or government offices, were legally required to wear the traditional national costume, made of locally handmade cloth. Men other than members of the royal family were not allowed to wear their skirts below the knee. These rules, obviously, were not popular among the ethnic minorities. We did visit workshops where the local cloth is produced; we saw no indication that it is exported.



Among the ethnic Bhutanese who form the large majority of the population, the King was immensely popular. In nine days of travel, we saw no evidence of poverty. I asked a man in a farmer's market about this. He spoke good English, but I didn't think to ask his occupation or background. His report was not definitive, but is interesting nevertheless.



"Does anyone worry about going hungry," I asked, "or not having enough to feed the children?"

He looked bewildered. "No, why should they?"

"Well," I said, "they have small farms. What if there is a flood, or a crop fails?"

"Oh, we work together in our fields," he said.

"Lots of people work in my field today, in someone else's field tomorrow. So everyone knows if someone has a bad crop. When we divide up at the harvest time, the village headman sees that everyone gets enough."

"But," I asked, "what if the entire village has a problem, a very bad crop?"

"Oh," he replied, "then the village headman would just go and talk to the king. The king would take care of us."

With a low population, and relatively low economic expectations, the system seemed to work well.

One wonders if democracy will work as well. By the time of our visit, the King had put into place a constitution, with a National Assembly that was one-third elected by the population, one-third from the monasteries, and one-third appointed by the King. The parliament was still largely advisory to the King, but the King made clear that democracy was coming, despite great reluctance on the part of the population. In 2006 the King abdicated and transferred full power to the Assembly. His son Jigme Khesar Namgyel

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Wangchuck became the constitutional monarch.

While farming does provide a good bit of the local food supply, it does not provide exports, and the Bhutanese today highly prize their forests and export little timber. Living on the mountainsides, they have large altitude differences. If you can run a pipe a thousand or more feet up, you need little volume of water to support a small hydroelectric generator, and there were many of these on the hillsides as well as small dams on many of the rivers. The electricity is exported to India, and we saw many wires running to the south. At least when we were there, electricity going by could be tapped for free by the locals. Even in quite rural and poor homes we saw an occasional solitary light bulb and even sometimes an electric hot plate for heating food. Televisions had not yet arrived, but the government was considering allowing them.

Festivals



January 2003 was a festival season in Bhutan. It seems to have a great many festivals; we attended dance festivals, a longevity festival, and a celebration of “The Last Rainy Day”, a day late in the rainy season when businesses close and everyone goes out to play in the rain. The picture shows an archery competition held that day, and was taken during a very brief pause in the rain. Archery is the national sport; even at a distance of a hundred and thirty yards, people would gather close around the target to watch the arriving arrow strike.

We also witnessed the annual celebration of The Goddess of Machinery. In many villages, a ceramic figure is constructed, celebrated, and then loaded into a highly decorated truck and driven to the nearest stream, where it is ceremonially destroyed by being thrown onto the rocks.

We missed the day of “The meeting of the nine evils.” When I asked about it, I got only vague reports of a story of incest among the gods, but was told it was considered a very good day to stay home in bed. I could not help wondering how closely its date matched with those of the faculty meetings of American universities.



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Thimphu



The first major festival we attended was in Thimphu, the capital. It is held for several days in succession in the courtyard of the Thimphu Dzong. People attend dressed in elaborate

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local costumes, and often picnic on the grounds. The show consisted of a long sequence of elaborate dances, with fantastic costumes. The dances, all danced by male dancers who twirled and pranced for an hour or more at a time, often portrayed traditional stories. In one, for example, a herd of deer are grazing in a field. Two princes arrive, planning to hunt them. A Buddhist missionary arrives and preaches to the princes on the importance of recognizing the unity of all sentient beings. The princes, converted to Buddhism, leave the deer to graze. The dances are accompanied by traditional musicians.



In these festivals there are also what amounts to a sideshow: clowns. The clowns are retired dance masters, who apparently are allowed to do anything they want. They may pour water on people's heads, beg for alms, or engage in all sorts of pranks. We will encounter them again later.



Despite the traditional Buddhist stories in the festivals, the Bhutanese are not vegetarians. As someone explained to us, “In a climate good for agriculture, being a vegetarian may make sense. At our altitude, we couldn’t get enough to eat if we insisted on not eating meat.” Most of the places we visited were at 8000 to 12000 feet, on steep mountainsides. While some rice is grown on steep terraces at lower altitudes, only barley and chilies would grow at the higher elevations; raising pigs and chickens was not uncommon. One farmer explained that he could not actually bring himself to kill a pig, but if he put a collar on it and tied it to

a post near a cliff, it would fall off and kill itself. Then he could eat it with a clear conscience. I do not know if he was pulling my leg.

In 2009 at a talk in Memphis, Tennessee, the Dalai Lama (who comes from Tibet, but whose religion is not very different from the Bhutanese form) was asked if he was a vegetarian. His reply was: “As a youth, I was a monk. Monks go out with a begging bowl, and eat what people put in it. If they put meat in it, I ate meat. I learned to eat what the people around me are eating.”

Notwithstanding the fact that they were not vegetarian, the Bhutanese did have some different attitudes towards animals than we have encountered elsewhere. For example, the cities and towns had large numbers of dogs, who often howled all night. Obviously, people put out food for the dogs. We asked if the dogs had names, or belonged to anyone.

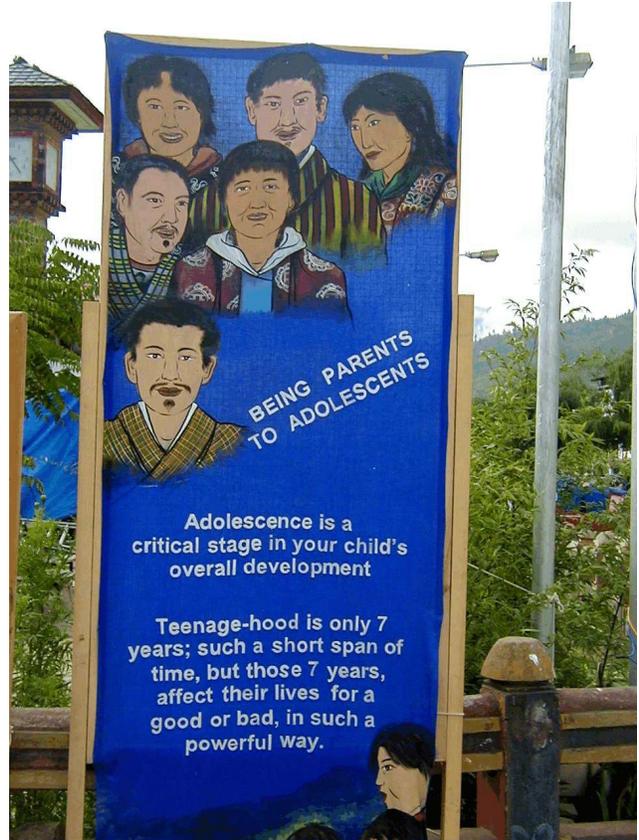
“Of course not,” we were told. “Why should a dog have a name, or belong to anyone, any more than a monkey in the forest? They are just animals.”

Why did people tolerate the noise?

“We treat them well and feed them because they are very close to people. A dog is the last animal a soul is reincarnated into before it is reincarnated as a person, so they live near people.”

In the late afternoons and evenings, following the formal festival in the dzong, the young people had their own festival in a city square. This included skits, fashion shows, and singing. The crowd watching this was as large as that in the dzong, but the young people were less formally dressed. Among the interesting features of the city square were posters about adolescence, directed both at parents and adolescents. In English and local languages, they talked about the strong emotions of adolescence, urges for independence and sexual urges, the dangers of unwanted pregnancy, and birth control methods. A vending machine dispensed free condoms.

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Traveling East

We traveled east about halfway across the country - about as far as the one main east-west road was paved. The “national highway” was narrow, shared with wandering cattle, twisty, often washed out, and our minibus only rarely went as far as 15 miles in an hour.

Bhutan has few foreign tourists - there were about 6000 the year we were there, compared to 600,000 in Nepal the same year - and not many facilities for them. We asked what would happen if the road washed out or there was a cave-in destroying a stretch of road while we were on the far side, away from the capital. “It happens fairly frequently,” we were told. “We make a path around the gap in the road, bring a minibus to the other side, and people walk around the gap.”



There were plenty of other sights along the road. We were told that an ancient water-

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driven prayer wheel showed that water wheels had been in use for sacred purposes in this area for centuries before they had been used for secular purposes in the western world. And who could resist stopping to photograph the occasional grazing yak or wandering herd of monkeys?



One of the more spectacular dzongs we visited, in Trongsa, was called the “never-reaching dzong.” Since the road has to follow the twists and turns of the small valleys made by streams coming out of the mountains, one sees the dzong several hours before the road reaches it. In the old days, travelers on foot saw the dzong for days before they arrived at it.

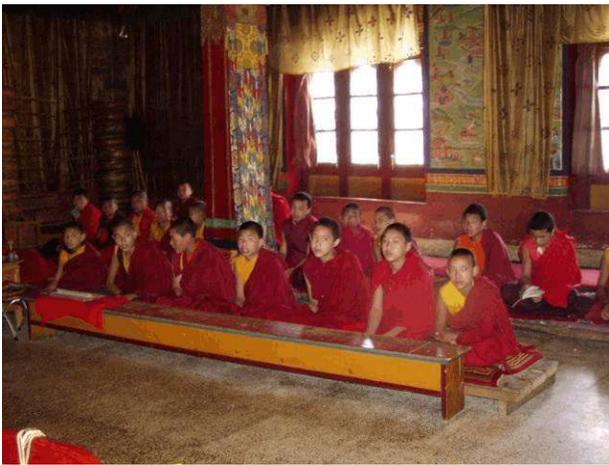


On this day the dzong had a longevity festival. We watched the crowd of locals who waited in line for hours to receive the longevity blessing, and saw an important relic being carried into the temple by the Buddhist monks. Our small group was allowed to bypass the long line only after one of the monks assured the people that foreigners would not actually receive the longevity blessing.

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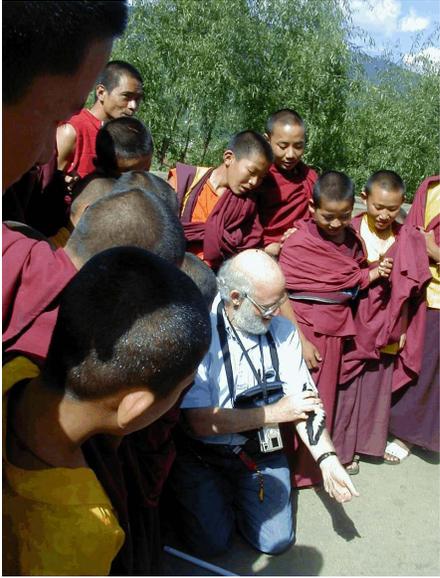


Schools



We visited with some of the people in monastic schools. We participated with the younger pupils at prayer, and introduced them to the toy animal we carry to make friends with children across language barriers. Surprisingly, they were almost as fascinated by my cane. Apparently even some of the adult monks had not seen a folding cane before. The pupils tried to explain to us the difference between Bhutanese Buddhism and the Theravada Buddhism of Thailand, as they saw it: “In Thailand each person tries to attain release from reincarnation for himself. Here we all seek to benefit all sentient creatures.”

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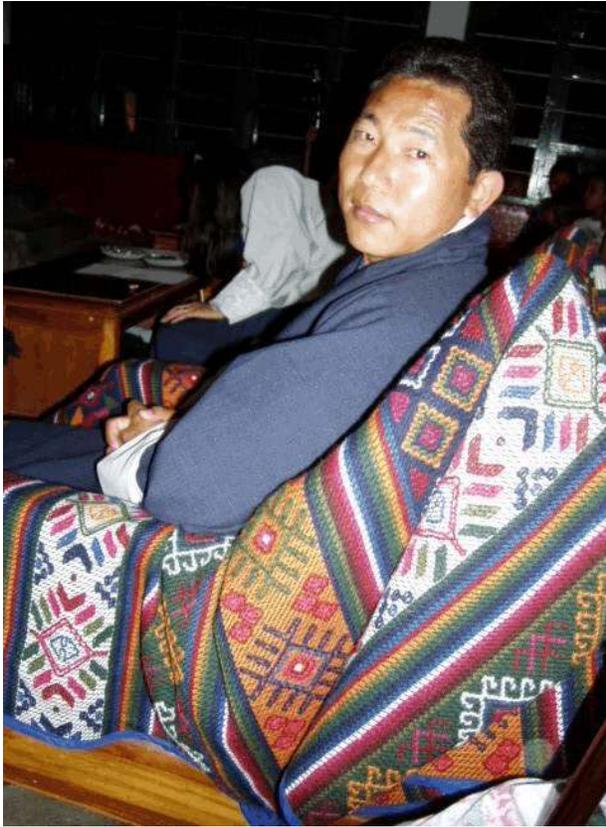
One monk we met was five years old. At the age of three he had been identified as the reincarnation of an important lama. The identification is done as follows: at the appropriate time, monastery officials identify children born at the right time. Each child is shown a collection of small objects, such as pens and watches, some of which belonged to the deceased former lama. The child who picks up the items that belonged to the former lama, and only those objects, is

the reincarnation. After being identified, the boy was removed from his family. He was now living in a monastery a full day's journey from his parents, even in the season when the road was passable to vehicles. They visited him only once or twice a year. He was obviously receiving a great deal of education and personal attention.

Many Bhutanese families have at least one son become a monk. Because the monks live relatively secure lives, and may be well-connected politically, it is often to the advantage of a family to have a relative who is a monk. In Bhutan, many enter the monasteries as a child, and monks are expected to remain monks for their entire life. This differs substantially from the custom in Thailand or Japan. In Japan it is very common for a young man to spend two years as a monk; in Thailand people move in and out of monasteries quite freely, it being common to become a monk for "three months and three days."

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We visited one public middle school. We initially met pupils on the street, selling tickets to their school variety show that evening. When we arrived, we discovered they had sold us the cheap tickets, second class seats in the rear of the auditorium. When the school discovered



foreign guests were arriving we were immediately ushered up to the front row. The center seat in the front row was an elaborate upholstered chair, almost a throne, occupied by the provincial governor. The students ceremoniously served him cookies and candy, which he proceeded to share with his foreign guests. The show was a typical school show, with fashion displays, songs and dances, and skits: we could easily follow the comedy skit in which a doctor tried to take sexual advantage of his female patients.

After the show the governor and school staff told us about the Bhutanese public educational system. Before the 1960's, the only schools were the monastic schools, in which the primary subjects were traditional Buddhist texts and rituals. The language used was the ancient holy language, Dzongka, with a script like that of classical Tibetan. When the King first established public schools, no teachers were available. The government imported teachers from India, so the language of instruction was English. Primary schools were fairly well established, but there were few secondary schools. This school, The Sherubling Lower Secondary School, hoped to become a full secondary school within a few years. Like other secondary schools it had dormitories since many of the pupils came from remote villages located as far as a two day walk from the nearest (probably unpaved) road. When the government sent emissaries into the countryside to get a good geographic distribution of pupils, parents were often reluctant to part

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with their children. In some cases, we were told, parents even injured children so that they would not be taken away. We had heard of that sort of thing being done in Czarist Russia a century or more ago, to avoid the draft, but had no idea it went on anywhere today.



An interlude of Christian Science

Traveling east through the mountains, we spent an extremely long and rainy day on the minibus. We stopped for a picnic lunch at an old stupa, a small building constructed as a memorial to someone's ancestor. The only bathroom facility was a small wooden outhouse with a slippery mud floor and a hole over which to squat. As the bus drove on through the rain, someone suggested that we sing hymns to relieve the boredom. While my wife is a graduate of Principia College and was once a devout Christian Scientist, my own acquaintance with Christian Science is much more limited. People tended to call out hymns by number in the hymnal. I joined in if I recognized once they started singing, or faked it if I did not. But I was faced with a bit of a quandary when it became my turn to name a hymn. I can't know everything, but hate to confess ignorance. I tried a guess: "I forget the number, but isn't there one to the tune of Beethoven's Ninth - the Ode to Joy?" There was - someone called out the number, and everyone joined in singing. I'd never heard that set of words before, but hadn't had to admit ignorance. A surprising number of denominations have hymns set to that tune. I like the German words, and it has always pleased me that the United Nations uses that tune as its anthem. When the UN was founded, Germany was the defeated enemy and its language did not become one of the official languages of the organization.



Late in the afternoon we crossed a desolate, muddy, windblown mountain pass at an altitude of 12,000 feet. We stopped to photograph the profusion of prayer flags. Our guide explained that the white flags typically were prayers on behalf of dead people, and the colored flags were prayers for the benefit of the living. Someone pointed out that we had not had a bathroom stop for five hours, and asked if there were any possibilities. "Not for about three or four more hours," said the guide, depending on how fast we could drive in

the rain. Couldn't we make do in the open, he asked? A few people clambered up the muddy hillside for what little privacy was offered by the prayer flags. Others decided it was too slippery to climb the steep hill, and squatted as necessary on the narrow roadside.

An hour later, a difficult question arose. It was Wednesday evening, time for the Wednesday evening Christian Science service. Did people want to try to do it in the uncomfortable bus? I joined the discussion. I've often noticed that being interested in multiple faiths has real advantages. My reputation as a good storyteller depends in part on the fact that an old story at the Mosque may sound very new and creative at the synagogue, an old Jewish idea may be fresh in a church Sunday School, and a Presbyterian joke may sound extremely original if rephrased to fit a Muslim context. So I recalled a modern Jewish argument in the Talmudic tradition. How do you celebrate the Sabbath if you cross the International Date Line? The ancient rules talked about "every seventh day" but the date line hadn't been invented yet. Once the date line was invented, some rabbis suggested that a traveler celebrate the Sabbath after every seventh sunset, without regard to the date line, until arriving at a place where there are resident Jews. Then, he should conform to the local calculation of the Sabbath. I pointed out that members of our party had arrived in Bhutan from two different directions. Some had crossed the date line and some had not. Since there were no local resident Christian Scientists, could we choose a calendar by majority vote? A majority agreed to postpone Wednesday until tomorrow.

The next night, there was a general expectation that I ought to be an active participant in the religious discussion, expounding that week's passage in the writings of Mary Baker Eddy. It was not an easy passage. While I understand the principle that our father-mother God has created a perfect world and that imperfections we see such as illnesses are only the result of our failure to see that truth, applying this principle to some of the problems of everyday life is not always easy even for devout Christian Scientists. I don't recall the exact case someone raised that Wednesday-Thursday evening, but people saw how faith might be tried as a method without seeing how it would actually help the problem. Again, I was able to bring in a Jewish lesson. When Moses delivered God's commandments to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, the people are said to have replied, in Hebrew, "Na'aseh v' nishmah." "We will do, and we will understand." Sometimes you have to try something, to take it on faith, to live with it, before you have a hope of understanding it.

Sometimes, as have I learned from this trip and at other times in my life, an understanding of an event only dawns years later.

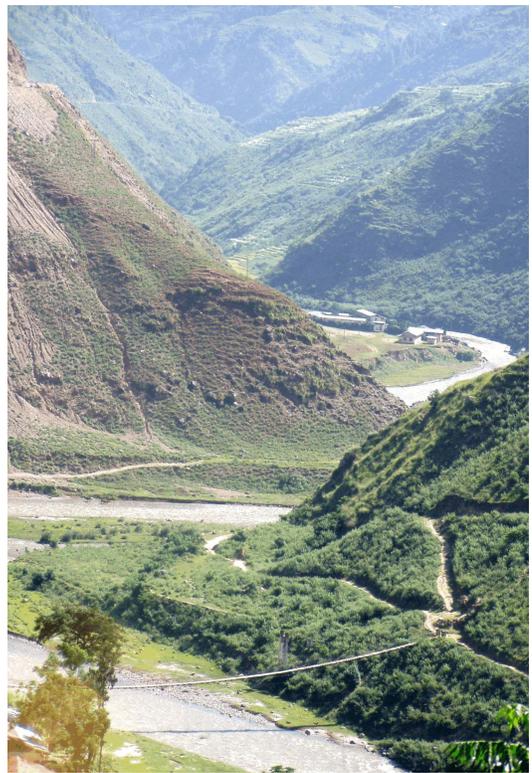
The Bumthang Valley

Our journey east ended in the Second Bumthang Valley, in Jakar. We stayed at The Swiss Guest House, so named because a local resident had married a person from Switzerland and they were trying, as best they could in this location, to maintain “Swiss hotel standards.” A sign in the lobby announced, in German, “A two star hotel, we are not. But we can assure you that the beer is safe to drink.” Since Eunice was the oldest member of our traveling party except for our guides, we got the only room with a private bath, the bridal suite. Other people could use toilets,



The Swiss Guest House

wash basins, and stall showers in a separate building out back. Our room also had an old-fashioned potbellied wood stove in the center of the room, and the chambermaid built a fire in it each evening. There is a wonderful book about life in Bhutan, *Beyond Earth and Sky*, by Jamie Zeppa. Ms. Zeppa, a Canadian, went to teach school in Bhutan for a couple of years. She was teaching near the eastern end of Bhutan, far from the paved road, and speaks fondly of having hiked for days with friends during a school vacation to reach The Swiss Guest House, which they viewed as the last outpost of Western civilization. Looking out to the east from a nearby cliff top, we could see “civilization” tapering off, at the far side of a long and narrow swaying footbridge over the river. It was easy to feel that we had in fact come to the edge of the known world.



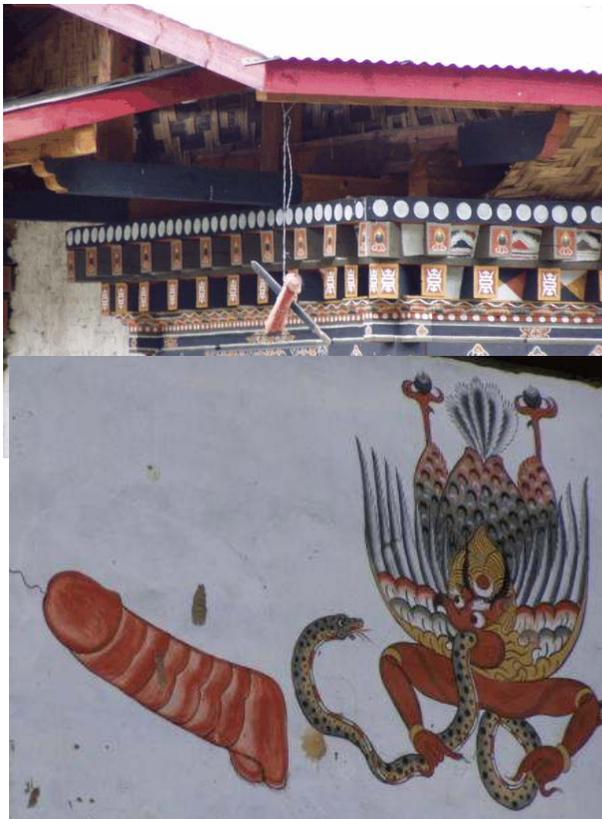
The Country beyond Jakar

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Ms. Zeppa, who married one of her Bhutanese college students, has a fascinating description of local courtship customs. She reported that it was considered perfectly acceptable for a young man to climb in the window of a young woman. If he climbed back out the window

later, they were simply courting. If they walked out the front door together in the morning, the village considered that they were married.

Jakar is not the only place in Bhutan where we encountered extensive phallic imagery. Apparently one of the ancient pre-Buddhist religions of the area, called Bon, made extensive use of phalluses as symbols of fertility, invoked in hopes for a good crop and the hopes of people for having children. Houses were frequently decorated with remarkably realistic drawings of phalluses, and both realistic and symbolic flying phalluses were frequently hung from the four corners of a house roof as decorations and hopes for fertility. The architectural details shown along with the phalluses are very typical of Bhutanese homes.



We went to a festival at the monastery in Jakar - here it was just a good-sized monastery, not a full dzong - and at this festival, the clowns were not only in evidence, but very much engaged in displaying and joking with large dildos. They used them as if they were telephones, pretended to sit on them, and displayed them to children in the audience. Sometimes it appeared that the black faced clown was seeking volunteers, and his audience looked a bit hesitant.

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As the black-faced clown looked around the audience, he spied Eunice's long white hair in the crowd. Very few tourists were present, and white hair is very rare in Bhutan. Eunice's hair attracted constant attention, and the respect accorded in the Orient to the extremely elderly.



I was trying to photograph the Abbott of the monastery, who was blessing the pupils in the monastic school who were witnessing this strange but apparently sacred ceremony. In the background of one picture I caught the black faced clown just as he starts to approach Eunice.

As the clown approached, Eunice got a closeup shot of the dildo. He saw her photographing and pantomimed photographing back. And when she didn't flinch, he grabbed her hand and pulled her out into the middle to play.



(Photo by Hank Hamlin)

He proceeded to point at various parts of her anatomy with the dildo. When he got to her midsection, she explained later, "I wasn't happy with where he was about to poke it, so I grabbed it." The crowd roared its approval.

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I felt I ought to come to the rescue, but how? I approached the white-faced clown. How could I get her out of there? We had no language in common (or, perhaps, the clowns simply refuse to speak) so the negotiations were in pantomime. Apparently I agreed to fight for her honor. The clowns, of course, had their dildos. I carry a folding white cane with a red tip (I have



a mild visual disability) and I folded part of it to match the length of the dildos. I think the audience enjoyed the effect of the swinging “balls” this added to the show.

I’m not a very good sword fighter, and unschooled in oriental combat. But the clowns had a wonderful time toying with me, one of them throwing a kick near my face to distract me as the



(Photo by Hank Hamlin)



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other darted behind me and took the hat off my head, to the laughter of the crowd. They toyed with me for awhile. Then, not knowing how to pantomime victory, I pantomimed defeat. I did the best vaudeville fall and death scene that I could imitate, to the cheers of the crowd.

Afterwards, the black faced clown posed with Eunice and the captured hat. I’ve gotten immense bragging rights from these pictures. How many people ever get to fight a duel with giant dildos?

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Later, I asked our guide what had happened, exactly. He said that he would not touch that question with a ten-foot pole, and the experience went on to my very long list of things I've always hoped to understand some day. My wife was always a bit touchy about showing the pictures without a plausible explanation.

To my shock, an explanation finally surfaced five and a half years later. In the March 2008 issue of the *National Geographic*, page 132, in an article on Bhutan, the following appears:

A sense of humor, even mischief, runs through Bhutanese Buddhism, whose earthly exuberance differs sharply from the ethereal calm of the better known Theravada Buddhism. The profusion of deities and demons can leave other Buddhists dazed. Sexual imagery also abounds, reflecting the tantric belief that carnal relations can be the gateway to enlightenment. Nobody embodied this idea more provocatively than the 16th century lama Drukpa Kunley, better known as the Divine Madman, who remains a beloved saint in much of Bhutan. Carousing across the countryside, Kunley slew demons and granted enlightenment to young maidens with the magical powers of his "flaming thunderbolt."

What happened in Jakar? By hindsight, I think my wife and I were recruited into a morality play, just like the other morality plays we were watching in these festivals. The theme of our play, now, is clear to me: the superiority of traditional Bhutanese ways over these strange western tourists who come in, with their odd western clothes and that absurd explorer's hat. In any fight against demons and strangers our traditional hero, with his traditional tool, is going to be victorious.

Edward Ordman (with a great deal of help from Eunice)