

## **Review Articles**

***Bhutan, Mountain Fortress of the Gods* (1997), edited by Christian Schicklgruber and Françoise Pommaret, published in London by Serindia Publications and in Vienna by the Museum für Völkerkunde.**

### **BHUTAN, ALPINE RETREAT OF DEITIES**

**George van Driem**

The first thing that will strike any casual observer about this truly valuable book on Bhutan is the photography. There are already a number of books providing excellent photographic documentation of Bhutan: *Bhutan, A Kingdom of the Eastern Himalayas* by Guy van Strydonck (1984), *The Dragon Kingdom, Images of Bhutan* by Blanche Christine Olschak (1988) and *Bhutan, Land of the Thunder Dragon* by Tom Owen Edmunds (1988) are just a few of the more prominent specimens in that genre. To be sure, Bhutan is an exceptionally photogenic country, but this volume is far from being a glossy coffee table book. *Bhutan, Mountain Fortress of the Gods* is a valuable resource. The photographs are quite relevant to the articles written by the two editors and the seven other authors. Yet the photographs are splendid none the less, for they capture the atmosphere of the country. My first perusal of the book at once evoked a sweet pang of homesickness for Bhutan even though I had only been outside of the country for just several months. The photographs of Bhutan are by Robert Dompnier, Gerald Navara, Guy van Strydonk and Jon Warren. The photographs of ritual objects are by Erich Lessing. Their excellent work furnishes the décor for the articles which are the substance of the book.

The book opens with a prefatory letter by His Majesty the King, followed by a page of Acknowledgments written by the two editors, Françoise Pommaret of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique at Paris and Christian Schicklgruber of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna. The main body of the book begins with a brief well-written Introduction by Christian Schicklgruber. The remainder of the book is divided into four sections. The First Section about Bhutan and the country's natural and cultural heritage contains five chapters. The next three sections contain two chapters each. Section Two is about Bhutanese Buddhism, Section Three about Bhutanese History, and Section Four about modern Bhutan.

The First Chapter of the book, entitled 'Lay of the Land', is by Viennese botanist Gerald Navara and provides a fleeting impression of Bhutanese fauna, flora and ecotypes. I sometimes traipse through the wildest parts of Bhutan to get to the remotest language communities, so I cannot help but be awestruck by the beauty, grandeur and majesty of the Great Bhutanese Outdoors. Navara stresses the diversity of ecotypes due to the rugged topography, but somehow I would have expected something a bit more captivating, like vivid descriptions of the extremely different natural senses of place that one can experience in Bhutan. Here the exquisite photographs come to our aid, some of which were provided by Navara himself. Navara's chapter is pleasantly written, but it is my feeling that the editors could have allowed him to write more generously and present more facts. For example, the two paragraphs on birds cannot begin to give an idea of the hundreds of variegated

bird species in the kingdom. The six paragraphs on mammals do comparatively more justice to the mammalian fauna, and here again the photographs help out quite a bit. Somewhat disappointing is the brevity of the section on agriculture, where it is clear that the author, who is a botanist, neglected to indulge himself. Navara mentions 'the impressive array of fruit and vegetables' available at local Bhutanese produce markets, the existence of 'many different crops' and the cultivation of rice. Rice is not the only food grass to be cultivated in Bhutan, and in terms of the country's prehistory it may not the most important or most interesting crop. Rice was first domesticated along the middle Yangtze about 10,000 years ago, but this cultivar is first attested in South Asia only millennia later. Navara makes no mention of Bhutanese red and white rice varieties, nor does he mention any other more traditional staples still cultivated in remoter parts of the kingdom. Broomcorn millet *Panicum miliaceum* and foxtail millet *Setaria italica* have been cultivated in the Himalayas at least since the middle of the third millennium B.C. Both crops were first domesticated by the early neolithic civilisations along the Yellow River on the North China Plain. The former is known as *khe* in Dzongkha and as *chera* in Tshangla or 'Sharchop', whereas the latter is known as '*yangre*' in Dzongkha and as *yangra* in Tshangla. Another grass species, finger millet *Eleusine coracana*, has also been grown in the Himalayas for many centuries, but this cultivar ultimately originates from Africa. Pearl millet or *Pennisetum typhoides* is only cultivated in parts of eastern Bhutan, where it is known by the Tshangla name *pshinang*. A species of amaranth with black seeds is known in Dzongkha as *z'imtsi 'nap*, and there is an amaranth species with white seeds which, quite logically, goes by the name of *z'imtsi káp*. These and other interesting facts about agriculture in Bhutan are left untold.

The Second Chapter deals with the ethnolinguistic composition of the Bhutanese population and is by far the most important part of the First Section. Françoise Pommaret excels in this splendid, sensitive and detailed account of the language and dialect diversity of the country. Her exposition presents an accurate, well-informed and balanced picture of the ethnic mosaic of this Himalayan kingdom. There is one small misunderstanding on page 54. The Brokpas or 'Bjop' of eastern Bhutan speak a Central Bodish language, which is more closely related to South Bodish languages like Dzongkha than either are to Dakpa. Dakpa is spoken in a part of eastern Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh which is contiguous to that of the Brokpas. Some Dakpa speakers lead the same lifestyle as the Brokpa of Mera and Sakteng, and so essentially also qualify to be called Brokpas. The Dakpa speaking community is called 'Northern Mönpa' in some sources, although the latter term is misleading. Dakpa is an East Bodish language. Other East Bodish languages include the Bumthang, Kheng and Kurtöp dialects and the Dzala and Mangde languages. Pommaret thinks that Aris, Michailovsky and I differ on this point, and I believe that we all say the same thing. If Pommaret has misread me, which appears to be the case, then this is perhaps due to a lack of clarity on my part in the relevant passage of the first edition of my Dzongkha grammar. At any rate, since Pommaret points out the linguistic distinction between the Brokpas of Mera and Sakteng and the Dakpa speaking Brokpas, the reader is not given incorrect information about the ethnolinguistic situation of Bhutan. In fact, this wonderful chapter by Françoise Pommaret is one of the most valuable parts of the book as a whole, and must be recommended as essential reading.

The next three chapters of Section One deal with Bhutanese architecture, village life and traditional crafts. In Chapter Three, Belgian architect Marc Dujardin explains traditional spatial notions in Bhutanese architecture and shows how there is an unbroken continuity of quintessentially Bhutanese perceptions and building conventions, even where these are adapted to modern times. Bhutanese architecture is a defining trait of the nation with particularly high visibility. In Chapter Four, Swiss ethnographer Martin Brauen gives an insightful account of village life. Quite fashionably, though not inappropriately, Brauen zooms in on the role of women in society, traditional divisions of labour and their local economic ramifications. In Chapter Five, Australian economist Barry Ison gives a highly detailed account of Bhutanese traditional crafts and of the lives of those who practise these artisanal skills. To my knowledge Ison's chapter is the most detailed and informative factual account of this aspect of Bhutanese culture in existence.

Section Two opens with a substantive introduction to Bhutanese Buddhism by His Holiness the Mynak Trülkhu, a highly learned and respected cleric in Bhutan. Chapter Six is a marvellous factual exposition which, like Chapter Two, constitutes essential reading. Both the main body of the text and the wealth of information presented in readily accessible tabular form by the Mynak Trülkhu in his notes constitute a handy reference and valuable resource for those wishing to familiarise themselves with Buddhism in general or with Bhutanese religious practice in particular. Chapter Seven is a lucid exposition by Christian Schicklgruber on alpine deities. Deities of the soil are a conventional topic in Western scholarly writings about Mahāyāna Buddhism, but it is fair to say that holy mountains and sacred landscapes in Central Asian Buddhism were a hot topic during the past decade. Two of the more prominent books are *The Mountain Cult and Buddhism in Buryatia* by Ljubov' Lubsanovna Abaeva, published in Moscow in 1991, later followed in 1996 by the anthology *Reflections of the Mountain: Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalayas*, edited by Anne-Marie Blondeau and Ernst Steinkellner. Schicklgruber provides an informative and well-written treatment of this theme in the Bhutanese context.

The two chapters of Section Three are both written by the eminent Bhutan specialist Françoise Pommaret. The first is lengthy and deals with the entire history of Bhutan, the second with the rise of the hereditary monarchy. Like Chapter Two by the same author, Chapters Eight and Nine are brilliant expositions of a vast amount of facts woven into a beautiful and easily digestible tapestry. Pommaret does a great service to Bhutan and to the readers of this book by presenting the history of the country in such elaborate detail and with such succinct lucidity. These two chapters, together with Pommaret's earlier chapter on the ethnolinguistic mosaic of the country and the lovely chapter on Bhutanese Buddhism by the Mynak Trülkhu, elevate the book to the level of a valuable scholarly resource on Bhutan for both the specialist and the general reader. The breadth and the scope of the other excellent contributions complement this meaty core.

Section Four deals with modern Bhutan and consists of two chapters. Chapter Ten is entitled 'Tradition and Development', and the title is an accurate reflection of the content of the piece. The winds of change which blow through Bhutan are discussed by Karma 'Ura in terms of generalities as well as numerous specifics. In Section One, Dujardin used the phrase 'in search of an urban identity', but he was

referring to innovative interpretations of traditionalist architectural styles. It would have been interesting if Karma 'Ura were to have addressed this topic more directly, for a subset of the new urban youth seems to lack a sense of direction. This is something new which Bhutan now shares with other supposedly 'more developed' nations. The roots of the problem can be found, however, in the economic and other facts which Karma 'Ura details. Writing in 1943 in the Netherlands during the German occupation at the height of the Second World War, Simon Vestdijk foresaw a global supermarket of religions in which science would prevail. Vestdijk predicted that most major religions would peter out, whilst intensified cultural exchange would lead to a unified global culture. With the advance of science, the ultimate enduring global religion would essentially be a rarefied form of Buddhism. If Vestdijk was right, Bhutan may now already be better equipped than some societies to face the challenges of the future. I must agree with Karma 'Ura, however, when he concludes that attempts to sustain traditional Bhutanese spiritual values in the face of change 'are so far quite encouraging, but also hang in the balance.'

The last chapter by Künzang Chöden is an accurate portrayal of Bhutanese urban women. This chapter continues a theme already broached by Martin Brauen in Chapter Four. Although the focus of Brauen's chapter lay at the village level, the two chapters complement each other in terms of what they say about the position of women in Bhutanese society. Both the traditional position of women and the many roles which urban women fulfil in Bhutan today reflect favourably upon Bhutanese culture and society in the broad context of extant and historically attested cultures and civilisations. Finally, the publishers deserve to be complimented for producing yet another exquisite book in terms of technical execution. It is exhilarating to see books still produced in a way that shows that publishing can be a fine art.