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WHERE DID BHUTAN’S GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS COME FROM? THE ORIGINS OF AN INVENTED TRADITION

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The ‘invention’ of tradition ... occur(s) more rapidly when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which the ‘old’ traditions had been designed.¹

Introduction

On page 16 of its National Budget for 1996–97, the Bhutanese Ministry of Finance quoted King Jigme Singye Wangchuk as saying “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product”. The Ministry went on to say “This has been and will be the principal guiding force for Bhutan’s sustainable development strategy”.² A recent PhD thesis agreed: “Bhutan has achieved enormous development gains since inaugurating GNH (Gross National Happiness) as its development strategy in the early 1970s.”³ An American political scientist has declared that “GNH has been Bhutan’s guiding directive for development since the 1970s”.⁴ In its Ninth Five-year Plan 2002–2007, the Planning Commission of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) stated: “Gross National Happiness... has been the guiding principle of the country’s development efforts for the last two decades.”⁵ Yet the 1996–97 National Budget marked the first time that GNH was mentioned in any Bhutanese government publication. The year 1996 is the point where the tradition of GNH as Bhutan’s long-standing national development policy was invented.

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This article investigates Gross National Happiness as an ‘invented tradition’ in the sense of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s classic text. Many of the traditions of modern nation states are, contrary to common belief, not ancient but relatively recent in origin. Furthermore, these traditions have often been deliberately constructed to promote political purposes such as social cohesion, national identity and the legitimacy of institutions in the face of rapid social, political and economic change. The inventors of tradition typically employ “ancient materials (such as)… an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication … and the well-supplied warehouses of official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation … religious or princely pomp” to give their novel project the aura of antiquity. The invention of an official tradition thus cannot be separated from its social, economic or political project, which is usually related to state- or nation-building.

This article thus seeks to identify the points of origin of GNH as official Bhutanese policy and to situate those origins in the evolution of the modern Bhutanese state. After briefly outlining my methodology, I identify the four claims concerning the origin of GNH and I demonstrate the weaknesses of each, in particular the lack of contemporaneous sources. The article then provides new evidence of the absence, origins and recent salience of GNH in Bhutanese policy over the past four decades. The article demonstrates that the claims of GNH’s origins and salience show evidence of myth-making, in the sense that the antiquity of its origins and its importance at the point of origin have been greatly exaggerated in the literature to date.

**Methodology**

Almost all authors writing on GNH accept without question the claimed point of origin of GNH and accept that GNH has been at the basis of Bhutanese development policy for 30–40 years. This article questions this set of assumptions and looks for proof of the origins of GNH and of the salience of GNH after the concept was first invented. The origins of Gross National Happiness as official Bhutanese government policy were investigated through a content analysis of Bhutanese and international primary source documents and secondary sources on Bhutan since the 1960s, the earliest alleged point of origin of GNH. Particular attention was paid to major policy documents produced by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) over the decades. This analysis of official documents seeks to establish
when and how GNH came into official policy discourse. The working hypothesis is that, to the extent that GNH was indeed the “guiding directive for development (policy) since the 1970s”, references to GNH would be found in programmatic and policy documents published by the Royal Government. The Bhutanese official documents analysed for this study include the RGOB’s annual National Budgets, RGOB’s five-year development plans since 1961, executive orders by the king, major speeches by key Bhutanese political leaders, RGOB’s sectoral policy documents, miscellaneous government publications targeted at various local and international audiences, the new constitution and the government-owned newspaper, Kuensel.

One would equally expect that, if GNH were indeed the guiding directive for development policy in Bhutan, those who aid, advise, study and write about Bhutan would also mention GNH in their works, since such documents tend to reflect (or react to) the official discourse and policy. The programmatic and policy documents produced by donors, international organisations and international financial institutions in relation to Bhutan have therefore been subjected to the same analysis as RGOB documents. Regional and international media known to have covered Bhutan over the decades have been similarly analysed, especially major Indian and Western newspapers and the sadly defunct Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), which for many years was the only international news organisation outside South Asia to regularly cover Bhutan. I also analysed various yearbooks that publish chapters on development and public policy in Bhutan, such as the Asian Development Bank’s Asian Development Outlook (1989–2015), Europa Publications’ The Far East and Australasia (1969–2015), FEER’s Asia Yearbook (1972 to 2002), and the World Bank’s Trends in Developing Economies (1989–1996). Academic writings, memoires of expatriates who lived in Bhutan, biographies and the tourist literature on Bhutan have also been analysed to establish when and how GNH became prevalent in the broader discourse on Bhutan.

Once references to Gross National Happiness (or analogous terms like happiness, gross national happiness and GNH) were detected in the documents, the frequency of those references and the context in which those references occurred were assessed. Passing mentions of GNH in the appendix, for example, were taken to be of lower importance than the use of GNH in the title of a document, in the executive summary or in the criteria for assessing success. The article then seeks to link the rising number of references to GNH and the increasing centrality of GNH in Bhutanese government rhetoric to broader social, economic
and political developments in Bhutan. The article is structured around three periods, 1960–95, 1996–2001 and post-2002, since these correspond to the (alleged and real) period of GNH’s origin, GNH’s emergence as state ideology, and its meteoric rise respectively.

Where does GNH come from? Evidence of absence, origin and salience 1960–95

So, where does GNH come from? The earliest written reference to GNH that this author can find, and which he has not found cited anywhere in the literature to date, appeared in two articles by Michael Kaufman in the New York Times in 1980.

“There is a gross national product but there is also gross national happiness”, said the 24-year old King … . He said that while he is eager to improve the standard of living, he thinks there are other standards of contentment that should not be endangered by development.10

Although the country has been open to tourists for less than a decade, the Government is aware of the dangers that mass tourism poses to both the social and the natural ecology. The young king, Jigme Singhi (sic) Wangchuk … tells visitors that the country’s ‘gross national happiness’ should not be sacrificed in the pursuit of a greater gross national product.11

The concept of GNH is clearly present in both articles, though it is far from being the central theme of either.

After this first appearance in 1980, GNH was slow to gain traction. This author has been able to identify fewer than a dozen written references to GNH from 1980 to 1995. The next written mention of GNH came in 1982, when the FEER, citing the 1980 New York Times articles, mentioned GNH in the Bhutan chapter of its Asia 1982 Yearbook,12 but GNH was not a central theme of that chapter, and I have not found this 1982 FEER reference to GNH cited in the recent literature either.

GNH next appeared in writing five years later; John Elliott’s “The modern path to enlightenment” in the Financial Times of London13 was the first article to treat GNH as the central theme, and it is based on an interview with the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk. In the three years that followed, passing references to GNH cropped up in newspaper articles14 and the tourist literature.15 A 1988 book of photographs of Bhutan by British photographer Tom Edmund Owens, a guest of the Bhutanese Royal Family in 1985, described “Bhutan’s policy” as “a balance between
gross national product and gross national happiness”. The first academic article to mention GNH was published in 1989 by Stephen Perry; again, GNH was not a central theme. Of the occasional references to GNH in the first half of the 1990s, many were derogatory, comparing Bhutan’s violent expulsion of its Lhotsampa (Nepali-speaking) minority in 1990–91 with the high ideals of GNH.

To summarise the appearance of GNH: there are no discernible written mentions of GNH in the 1960s or 1970s, two newspaper articles in 1980, one in 1982, and a cluster of mentions in 1987–89 followed by a few stragglers in the early 1990s, no more than a dozen mentions all told. In comparison, there were dozens of pre-1996 articles, books and reports on Bhutan that do not mention GNH.

Most importantly, none of the Royal Government’s programmatic or policy documents from the 1960s to the mid-1990s referred to GNH. The first seven of Bhutan’s five-year national development plans, covering 1961 to 1997, did not mention GNH. The RGOb’s National Budgets, the major annual statement of fiscal policy, did not mention GNH until 1996–97; GNH did not assume a central place in the National Budget’s narrative until after the Millennium. Nor did GNH appear in any other RGOb publication that this author has been able to find dating from the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s or early 1990s.

In key sectors where one might expect to find GNH, like education, GNH was absent from RGOb publications until the 21st century. For a decade starting in 1984, for example, the Department of Education undertook a major reform of Bhutan’s primary education system. This New Approach to Primary Education replaced the old primary school curriculum that had been imported from India virtually unchanged. The programme produced voluminous documentation, none of which mentions GNH. It was only in 2009 that Bhutan’s prime minister convened an international conference to begin integrating GNH into Bhutan’s school curricula.

Nor can GNH be found in the fourth king’s own official pronouncements to his people. A hagiographic tribute to the fourth king published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his ascension to the throne credits the fourth king with being the creator of GNH, but none of the 53 royal edicts reproduced in the collection mentions GNH, and ‘happiness’ appears only eight times. On five of these eight occasions, the phrase ‘peace and happiness’ is used, implying that civil peace and national security are linked to happiness of the people. (See below.)
After an extensive review of the programmatic and policy documents produced by bilateral and multilateral donors to Bhutan in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, the author has found no reference to GNH in any UN, Asian Development Bank, IMF or World Bank document from before 1996. The same is true of documents from bilateral donors (Canada, Switzerland, Japan). For example, the World Bank’s encyclopedic *Country Economic Memorandums* on Bhutan from 1984, 1989, 1994 and 1996 contained no reference to GNH.27

A review of yearbooks containing chapters on Bhutan comes up similarly short on references to GNH. The Asian Development Bank’s *Asian Development Outlook* (ADO) has had chapters on Bhutan since 1992, but GNH did not appear until the 2002 edition included a passing and noticeably sceptical mention of GNH. Over the three decades (1972–2002) that FEER’s *Asia Yearbook* published an annual chapter on Bhutan, the 1982 edition was the only one to mention GNH explicitly.28 The World Bank’s annual *Trends in Developing Economies* (1989–96) did not mention GNH in either year (1992 and 1993) that it included a chapter on Bhutan. The *Far East and Australasia* yearbook, whose Bhutan entries have been written since 1984 by a pro-RGOB scholar, are also devoid of mentions of GNH.

A search of the library database at a research-intensive university revealed only four academic articles in English mentioning GNH from the period 1960–1995, with none published before 1989; in none of the four was GNH a central theme. A check of the French- and German-language academic literature on Bhutan showed no signs of GNH before 1995. Even authors who self-identify as being close to the Bhutanese Royal Family fail to mention GNH.29 A major academic conference on Bhutan held in London in 1993 resulted in two books featuring noted Bhutanese and international scholars and officials; the books covered themes related to GNH such as national identity, development strategy and cultural preservation. Yet while gross domestic product was mentioned, GNH was not, even though several of the contributors (Karma Ura, Jigmi Y. Thinley, Kinley Dorji, Thierry Mathou, Françoise Pommaret) later became leading exponents of GNH. What is more, the extensive bibliography in a recent PhD thesis on GNH contains no references to GNH from before the mid-1990s.31

Many international media outlets covering Bhutan did not mention GNH before 1996. The weekly FEER, for example, published 20 articles on Bhutan between 1972 and 1995; none mentioned GNH. Major Western
newspapers and news magazines occasionally published items on Bhutan, but most did not mention GNH. Nor do the memoirs and biographies of expatriates who lived in Bhutan from the 1960s through the 1990s mention GNH. Even the tourist literature produced by official and semi-official sources, much of it breathless in its evocations of Bhutan’s unique qualities, fails to mention GNH until the late 1990s.

So much for the evidence of GNH’s absence before 1996. But is there also an absence of evidence of GNH’s claimed origins? In the official, academic, journalistic and touristic publications post-1996 one finds four different claims about the point of origin of GNH:

1) that the concept was invented by the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, around the time he ascended the throne in 1972 at the age of 16 or possibly in his coronation speech in 1974;
2) that the fourth king, when challenged by Indian journalists at Bombay Airport on his return from the 1979 Non-Aligned Summit to explain why his country was so poor, declared that gross national happiness was more important than gross national product;
3) that GNH first emerged in the late 1980s, specifically in an interview by the fourth king in the Financial Times of London, in April 1987;
4) that the fourth king developed the concept of GNH while touring the countryside in the years following his ascension to the throne, i.e. in the mid- to late-1970s.

Upon investigation, these claims are either false or simply have no supporting evidence. I deal with each claim of origin in turn.

Claim no. 1, that the concept was invented by the fourth king around the time he came to the throne in 1972, is probably the most common story of GNH’s origin. When this claim is made, it is usually simply asserted, as if it were an established historical fact. Yet none of the authors who advance this claim ever cites any source that is contemporaneous to the claimed point of origin. Occasionally, they cite other, recent secondary sources, but those sources simply repeat the assertion of GNH’s origins in the early 1970s. As noted above, however, Bhutanese and international sources from this period do not mention GNH. Media reports around the time of the fourth king’s ascension to the throne contain no mention of GNH either.

The coronation speech version of this claim is also unsupported by contemporaneous sources. The official record of the coronation ceremony contains no mention of GNH. The Times of India, Indian Express
and FEER all reported extensively on the coronation, but did not mention GNH; they focused instead on Bhutan’s foreign relations and a plot to assassinate the new king. The yearbooks covering political and economic developments in Bhutan, FEER’s *Asian Yearbook* and the *Far East and Australasia* both mention the coronation, but not GNH. A *National Geographic* article on the coronation did not mention GNH, nor did a follow-up article by the same author two years later. 

Claim no. 2, that the fourth king came up with GNH in answer to a question from an Indian journalist at Bombay Airport on his return from the 1979 Non-Aligned Summit in Cuba, is also presented without supporting evidence; nor do contemporaneous sources support this account. Two Indian journalists did indeed interview the king for 90 minutes at Bombay airport in September 1979. But the coverage focused on Bhutan’s foreign relations and none of the papers mentioned GNH.

Claim no. 3, that GNH first emerged in the late 1980s, specifically in an interview by the fourth king in the *Financial Times* newspaper of London in April 1987, is incorrect on two counts. The first is that the article in question was published on 2 May 1987, not in April. The difference is minor, except that the claim of publication on an approximate and incorrect date is consistent with the overall pattern of imprecise and/or unsupported claims regarding GNH’s origins. The second problem with this claim of origin is that it is manifestly incorrect; the fourth king mentioned GNH to the *New York Times* seven years earlier, as we have seen above.

It is interesting to note that Claim no. 3, though manifestly incorrect, is promulgated by none other than the President of the semi-official think tank, the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research, Dasho Karma Ura. The Centre publishes the *Journal of Bhutan Studies* and a series of monographs which, as a glance at the endnotes of this article will reveal, have supported a variety of claims regarding GNH’s origins. Even this centre of GNH orthodoxy (see below) does not have a consistent or verifiable storyline regarding the origins of GNH. Dasho Karma Ura has also supported Claim no. 1.

Claim no. 4, that the fourth king developed the concept of GNH while touring the countryside in the mid- to late-1970s, is the most plausible of the claims of origin. The claim is made by people close to the RGOB, including a former prime minister. The fourth king, however, does not give interviews any more, and so it is not possible to corroborate this
claim directly. But the claim is plausible, since the first documented reference to GNH appeared shortly thereafter, in the *New York Times* in April 1980.

**GNH’s official debut 1996–2001**

Starting in 1996, GNH began to appear more frequently in official, donor, academic, journalistic and touristic sources. But even then, GNH did not become a regular or central feature of Bhutanese government documents until after the Millennium. The first appearance of GNH in a Bhutanese government publication was the passing reference in the *National Budget 1996–97* noted in the opening paragraph of this article; GNH appeared on page 16 of that 24-page document, in the “environmental policy” section. References to GNH in *National Budgets* did not become a regular feature until 2002–03.

After Bhutan’s first seven five-year plans (1961–96) omitted GNH, the Eighth Five-Year Plan 1997–2002 did mention GNH, but only once, in Chapter 2:

> Economic growth however is not the goal of development; human development is. Income expansion and increased commodity production are only means that have the potential for enhancing human capabilities. They are useful only to the extent that they can contribute to ‘Gross National Happiness’.49

It is worth noting that this, the second-ever reference to GNH in an RGOB publication, was framed in terms of the human development and capabilities paradigm; this mention is devoid of Bhutanese cultural referents. Two years later, the RGOB Planning Commission with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published a long-term strategic planning document entitled *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, which made GNH the “central development concept” but subordinated it to the “overarching goal” of “the future independence, sovereignty and security of our nation state”.50 It was the first RGOB publication to use the word ‘happiness’ in the title.

RGOB’s promotion of GNH on the international stage began in earnest with a 1998 speech by senior minister Jigme Y. Thinley in Seoul on “Values and development: Gross National Happiness”.51 A semi-official think tank, the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), was established in 1999 with support from RGOB. CBS quickly became the key promoter of
GNH in academic circles. CBS’s very first publication was on GNH; it compared GNH to UNDP’s human development paradigm and was the world’s first book-length treatment of GNH. A UNDP staff member contributed a chapter.52

Simultaneously, donors and multilaterals slowly began to speak about GNH. The UN system’s Common Country Assessment (CCA) of 2000 contained 33 references to GNH. UNESCO helped draft Bhutan’s country report to the World Conference on Education for All in 2000, which contained a passing reference to GNH.53

**GNH goes mainstream 2002–15**

After the turn of the Millennium, interest in and RGOB’s promotion of GNH underwent exponential growth (see Tables 1 and 2). GNH became a regular feature of the National Budgets starting in 2002–03; the *National Budget 2003–04* was the first to explicitly give GNH a central place in RGOB’s fiscal policy. After 2001, Bhutan’s five-year plans placed ever greater emphasis on GNH: The Ninth Plan (2002–07) referred to GNH seven times, five of them in Chapter 2 on “Development philosophy”, while the Tenth Plan (2007–13) features over 80 references to GNH, and firmly placed GNH at the centre of Bhutanese development policy. The Eleventh Plan (2013–18), published by the Gross National Happiness Commission (formerly the Planning Commission), used GNH as its core concept, and contained over 50 references to GNH in the first chapter alone. The Eleventh Plan included extensive analysis of the GNH Index, based on a nationwide household survey. The Gross National Happiness Commission’s role changed to ensure that all projects in the national development plan were ‘GNH cleared’.54

Other RGOB policy documents show a similar pattern of increasingly frequent references to GNH in the opening years of the 21st century. Multiple references to GNH can be found in RGOB policy documents as

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dorsive as the Economic Development Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan (2010), the Foreign Direct Investment Policy (2010), the National Health Policy (2010), the National Human Resource Development Policy (2010), the National Youth Policy (2010), the Tertiary Education Policy (2011), the Renewable National Resources Research Policy (2011), the Protocol for Policy Formulation (2012) and even the Cottage, Small and Medium Industry Policy (2012). Around the same time, the mission statements of various government ministries started to include GNH. In 2009, the Prime Minister launched an initiative to make GNH the cornerstone of the curricula at all levels of education. And not least, Article 9(2) of the 2008 constitution stated that “The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness”. In 2011, Bhutan put forward a resolution at the UN General Assembly (A/RES/65/309) promoting “happiness (as a) holistic approach to development”.

Donor documents follow a similar pattern, giving GNH more frequent mentions and more central status after the Millennium. The World Bank, silent on GNH in its five previous reports on Bhutan since 1984, mentioned GNH 13 times in its Country Economic Update of 2007. The IMF’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper of 2004 contained five references to GNH and that of 2010 contained 17. The UN’s CCA of 2006 contained 56 mentions of GNH, 70 per cent more than its predecessor six years earlier. UNDP’s 2007 Assessment of Development Results contains 23 references to GNH, and gives GNH pride of place. Bhutan’s mid-term report on the Millennium Development Goals, published by UNDP in 2008, gives GNH central importance, mentioning it five times in the foreword, seven times in the executive summary and 20 times in the opening chapter, and it traces the similarities between GNH and the Millennium Development Goals.

In 1999, the Centre for Bhutan Studies launched the Journal of Bhutan Studies, Bhutan’s first scholarly journal in the social sciences and humanities. Since 2002, the Journal has been a steady purveyor of articles on GNH: 19 articles between 1999 and 2013, or one of every seven articles

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published, making it the biggest single source of academic articles on the topic, all of them sympathetic to GNH. Starting in 2004 in Paro, the RGOB and CBS organised or participated in a series of large international academic conferences on GNH and happiness research. Related conferences took place in Antigonish in 2005, Bangkok in 2007 and Thimphu in 2008, with large Bhutanese delegations in attendance; another was held in Paro in November 2015. In 2013, CBS even changed its name to the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research. The success of these endeavours is obvious; academic articles on Bhutan, including those published outside Bhutan, now routinely refer to GNH. Table 2 documents this explosive growth in academic attention to GNH and Bhutan, based on a search of the library database of a research-intensive university on 10 July 2015.

Socio-economic change in Bhutan since 1960 and the elevation of GNH to the status of official ideology

Something is clearly afoot here. We are told in multiple recent publications by RGOB, CBS and their allies that GNH is a longstanding tradition, the driving force behind Bhutan’s national policy since the 1970s. Yet both the absence of evidence to support this claim and the evidence of the absence of GNH from the development discourse of Bhutan in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s tell quite a different story. GNH was invented around 1980 as a vague concept, a play on words that the king used with foreign journalists, but it did not gain traction in Bhutanese government documents, including the king’s own official pronouncements, until two decades later. Furthermore, the exponential growth in mentions of GNH since the Millennium appears to be driven by a conscious strategy of promoting GNH as an alternative development paradigm, complete with support from senior ministers and the creation of a new organisation to promote the concept. And this accelerated promotion of GNH is accompanied by frequent, unsubstantiated claims that the policy of GNH originated in decades long past. In short, what we witness here is the invention of a tradition. So, what happened to trigger this growth in GNH promotion?

Long ago, W.A. Lewis noted that

(s)ocieties (that) … speed up their rate of economic growth … may also incur substantial costs, in social or in spiritual terms …. We demand the abolition of poverty, illiteracy and disease, but we cling desperately to the beliefs, habits and social arrangements which we like ….
This appears to be part of what happened in Bhutan. In the late 1990s, an increasingly confident and capable Royal Government faced a series of domestic and international challenges that threatened the legitimacy and the stability of the state. Deeply conscious of the fate of neighbouring Sikkim in 1973, when domestic disturbances threatened India’s northern frontier security and led to the annexation of Sikkim by India, RGOB determined to confront the challenges head-on. RGOB’s responses were military, ethno-religious, diplomatic and ideological. As part of this process, GNH was elevated from a vague concept occasionally mentioned by the king when speaking with visiting foreign journalists to the status of the organising ideology of the Bhutanese state.

To understand the manifold crisis that threatened to envelope Bhutan in the 1990s, one needs to understand Bhutan’s history. The third king’s decision in 1959 to open up Bhutan to the forces of modernisation and development was a momentous one, unleashing “drastic changes”, even a “revolution” according to contemporary observers who were close to the Royal Family. The decision to modernise was always contentious; anti-modernisers were linked to the assassination of the prime minister in 1964 and the plot to assassinate the fourth king in 1974. The new programme of economic and social development inevitably brought an influx of expatriate experts, initially Indians and later Westerners and others, since it took several decades for Bhutan to train its own technical and managerial personnel in sufficient numbers. Contemporary observers in the 1960s and 1970s noted that the Buddhist monastic establishment in particular was nervous about the future and feared losing its ability to maintain its hold over the people. Economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by the rapid spread of modern education and changing social attitudes amongst the newly educated; video stores showing both Bollywood and Hollywood movies began to crop up in urban areas and the youth began to adopt foreign forms of dress, speech, music and dance.

In reaction, the second half of the 1980s saw a resurgence of Drukpa nationalism. In 1985 RGOB created a commission to promote and preserve the national (i.e. Drukpa, Buddhist) culture. In 1988, tourist inflows were curtailed following allegations that tourists were involved in looting religious sites and corrupting locals with bribes. In 1988, all foreign (mostly Indian) heads of schools and colleges were replaced by Bhutanese in one fell swoop. The Nepali language, previously allowed in southern Bhutanese schools, was suddenly banned; schools put greater emphasis on teaching the official national language of Dzongkha, which is the native tongue of a half dozen valleys in western Bhutan. The stricter
enforcement of Driglam namzha, the national dress and behaviour code based on Drukpa and Buddhist norms, targeted Bhutan’s Westernised youths, but most especially it targeted the Nepali-speaking, mostly Hindu minority in southern Bhutan.\(^6\) The enforcement of Driglam namzha and the banning of Nepali in schools met with resistance in southern Bhutan in the late 1980s and early 1990s since the Nepali-speaking, Hindu citizens of southern Bhutan had their own, very different language and norms of dress and behaviour from those of the Drukpa majority who dominated the Royal Government.\(^6\) The result was an ethnic cleansing in which over 100,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese citizens were expelled from the country in 1990–91.\(^6\) The refugee crisis was the first time Bhutan got consistently bad press in the regional and international media. Negotiations with Nepal and the UN over the return of the refugees dragged on interminably, creating more bad press.

Meanwhile, the struggle between the modernisers and the traditionalists continued. While the modernisers succeeded in getting television and the Internet into Bhutan in 1999, the CBS, Kuensel and others worried about the decline of the national culture, even calling the late 1990s “a degenerate age”.\(^6\) In the late 1990s, Karma Ura wrote that

> While development is being ushered in, by far the most ambitious national goal is that of cultural preservation …. The Bhutanese too are becoming oriented to Western culture …. Traditional values and cultures get relativized, recomposed or submerged …. If not checked, these changes will dilute … the cultural distinctiveness of Bhutan.\(^6\)

All these changes took place at a time when an increasingly confident and capable RGOB was beginning to chafe under India’s sometimes patronising and neo-colonial attitude. India resented Bhutan’s drive to progressively widen the scope of its international partnerships to include aid from the UN, the World Bank and bilateral donors such as Canada, Japan and Switzerland. When Bhutan sought to modernise its (basically Indian) education system in the 1980s, for example, RGOB turned not to India but to Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the UN. At the same time, the unwritten bargain remained: as long as Bhutan remained a stable and reliable part of India’s northern security perimeter with China, India would refrain from interfering in Bhutan’s internal politics. That bargain came under strain in the 1990s with the southern Bhutanese refugee crisis; from 1991 to 1997 five southern districts were affected by insurgency. Around 1992, Assamese insurgents established military bases in southern Bhutan from which they attacked India. Insecurity was so bad that plans to build a US$45 million cement
plant at Dungsum in southern Bhutan had to be abandoned in 1999. Around 1997, Gorkha and Maoist insurgents from India established bases in Bhutan and the Indian military mounted incursions into Bhutan to root them out. In 1998–99 sporadic bombings occurred in Bhutan, apparently linked to the southern Bhutanese issue.

Bhutan’s reaction was skillful and hard-nosed: diplomatic prevarication on the return of the refugees from Nepal combined with strong military cooperation with India against the Assamese insurgents. There was also a public relations and ideological response, painting those Nepali-speakers expelled from the south as “opportunistic” anti-nationals who were not Bhutanese citizens but rather economic migrants who had fled poverty in their home countries; these “anti-nationals” were alleged to be the ones who had started the fight and thus posed a threat to national security by using “mob and demographic pressures” on the Drukpa Buddhist state. The government-owned newspaper Kuensel aggressively promoted this line of thinking.

In 2001, the leading government intellectual, Karma Ura, promoted the idea that “(p)olitically, Bhutanese culture is regarded as indispensable for unique national identity. National identity is in turn connected with sovereignty and the security of the nation”. He further stressed that

Bhutan, like several small states … lacking technology and military strength … has attempted to rely on non-military security alternatives such as national identity for cultural cohesion … (It is important to stress) (t)he relevance and role of cultural cohesion … and other non-conventional factors in the maintenance of Bhutan’s security and sovereignty.

This same Karma Ura was already the founding Director of the Centre for Bhutan Studies, which had begun, two years earlier, promoting Gross National Happiness as the official ideology of Bhutan. And the same Karma Ura was a senior official in the RGOB Planning Commission when it declared in 1999 that GNH was subordinate to the “overarching goal … (of) the future independence, sovereignty and security of our nation state”.

Conclusion

(I)nvented traditions … belong to three overlapping types: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion, or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of
Hobsbawm’s description of the political purposes of invented traditions fits the Bhutanese case quite nicely. GNH was deployed by RGOB beginning in the late 1990s and more strenuously in the early 2000s with the explicit purpose of promoting domestic social cohesion in the face of social fracturing at home and security crises on the frontiers, leading to international opprobrium and tension with Bhutan’s main patron and ally, India. GNH also serves to legitimise the institutions of the state as a developmental, yet distinctively Bhutanese (i.e. Drukpa, Buddhist and Dzongkha-speaking) entity. Through its association with Driglam namzha and its introduction into the school system, GNH explicitly serves the purposes of socialisation and the inculcation of Hobsbawm’s “beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour”.

Many people are attracted to GNH for all of the right reasons, most notably because gross national product is indeed a highly imperfect measure of development and human welfare and because the blind pursuit of economic growth can lead, as even the leading theorists of economic growth accept, to great social, cultural and environmental costs. For these reasons, GNH has proved enormously popular with theorists of alternative development, New Agers and environmentalists. The image of a small, landlocked, plucky country promoting its own alternative path to development based on happiness, not material consumption, has also helped make GNH popular with the anti- and alter-globalisationists. The Royal Government and its allies in CBS and elsewhere have marketed GNH to such audiences with great skill, aplomb and success.

None of this, however, should make us shy away from the truth about the origins of GNH, namely that, as the official state ideology of Bhutan, it is an invented tradition of comparatively recent origin. A young king’s play on words, a vague notion of an alternative path to development based on more than crass economic growth, has been deliberately transformed into the official ideology of a ruling elite in a realpolitik response to rapid and disruptive social and economic change at home and disturbances in the frontier regions.

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NOTES


16. Tom Owen Edmunds, Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon. London: Elm Tree Books, 1988, p. 16. Edmunds’s account is unreliable in many respects, notably in his claim that he “was able to travel east to villages which had never before seen foreigners”. His own partner’s book (Katie Hickman, Dreams of the Peaceful Dragon: A Journey through Bhutan. London: Phoenix House, 1987), which he references, mentions many encounters with foreigners – Canadian, Indian and Nepali – on their trip east.


19. In the interests of keeping within the permitted length, the author will not cite all the many documents consulted in this research; a full list is available from the author upon request.


22. Again, a full set of the references consulted is available from the author.

23. Preservation of the national culture is a pillar of GNH; the education system is an obvious vehicle for promoting and preserving the national culture.


27. A full set of references is available from the author upon request.

28. The *Asia 1991 Yearbook* quoted the fourth king as saying that ‘present policies … (aim) to ensure the future well-being and happiness of our people.’ FEER, *Asia 1991 Yearbook*, p. 78.


38. Karma Galay, *Final Programmes for the Coronation, June 1974 and the Silver Jubilee Celebrations June 1999 of His Majesty the King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies, 1999. In his coronation speech, the King mentioned ‘happiness’ twice; but happiness is not the central theme of the speech, and more materialist concerns like ‘prosperity’ and ‘self-reliance’ got equal billing.

39. See *Times of India*, June 2, 3, 4 and 7, 1974; *Indian Express*, June 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7, 1974; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 June 1974, 8 July 1974.


43. See *Deccan Herald*, September 13, 1979, the *Indian Express*, September 10 and 24, 1979.


WHERE DID BHUTAN’S GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS COME FROM?


56. The third king’s wife and mother of the fourth king, Ashi Kesang, was the niece of the Chogyal of Sikkim.


58. This passage paraphrases Rustomji, 1978, p. 12. Rustomji was an Indian advisor to RGOB in the 1960s.


60. See Johnson, 1988.

61. The Haa, Paro, Punakha, Thimphu and Wangdi-Phodrang valleys are the principal Dzongkha-speaking areas of Bhutan.


64. Bill Frelick, 2008. UNHCR, State of the World’s Refugees. Geneva: UNHCR, various years. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has granted refugee
status to those expelled from Bhutan in this episode, meaning that those people have a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country and are therefore in need of international protection.


70. Planning Commission, 1999, p. 43.


72. See note 55.