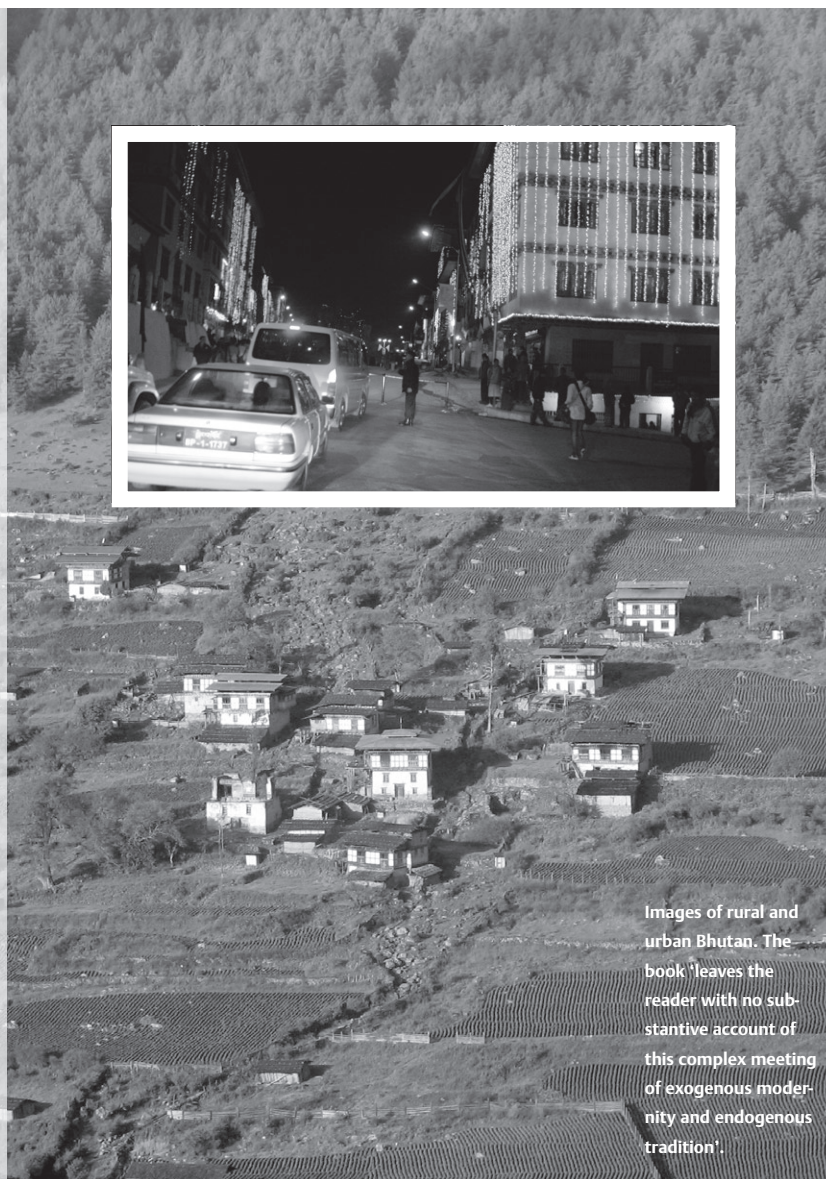


Is the grass greener on the 'Other' side?

A welcome addition to the handful of anthropological literatures available on Bhutan, *Meeting the 'Other'* recounts Crins' personal journey into Bhutan, interweaved with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of some western social scientists. It starts with her encounter with the unknown 'other' when she arrives in a remote village to work on an irrigation project and takes the reader through her analysis of Bhutan's culture and religion, ending with a picture of a romantic 'other' and misgivings about the country's future.

Karma Phuntsho



Images of rural and urban Bhutan. The book 'leaves the reader with no substantive account of this complex meeting of exogenous modernity and endogenous tradition'.

Crins, Rieki. 2008.

Meeting the 'Other': Living in the present, gender and sustainability in Bhutan.

Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers. 216 pages. ISBN 978 90 5972 261 3

IF SOCIO-POLITICAL STUDIES ON BHUTAN were to be divided into positive and negative groups, this study certainly belongs to the positive camp. Western socio-political writings on Bhutan have been astonishingly divided, to the extent that to a new student they may even seem to be talking about two different Bhutans. On the one hand, a reader finds positive accounts infused with an Orientalist picture of a Shangri-la with a benign king and happy citizens. On the other, critical accounts underscoring the injustices and excesses of a primitive and autocratic system. It is generally true that the former picture is often drawn while looking at the people, culture and ecology and the latter mainly comes from studying the power and political structures. Yet, one cannot deny that there is a problem of partiality in western portrayals of Bhutan, not only with regard to comprehensive and contextual understanding of the subject but also in imposing their own cultural preconceptions and personal prejudices. Such tension abounds in this book and is manifest in Crins' rebuttal of Wikan.

Crins uses Wikan's article 'The Nun's Story: Reflections on an Age-Old, Post-modern Dilemma' on the injustices suffered by a nun, as her point of departure. Wikan, she argues, has used a false inductive process and, by generalising an individual case as a systemic problem, has failed to paint a true picture of Bhutan. She debunks Wikan's presentation of Bhutan and claims to provide a more profound and comprehensive picture. Is she comprehensive? The answer is far from straightforward. If Wikan failed due to induction, Crins risks excessive deduction to assume that the general theories she has drawn from her cases and the conceptual norms apply to individual people in daily practice.

Her conclusion about 'living in the present' is a case in point. The few anecdotal cases, such as the answers given by her interpreter (pp.22-23), the lack of greeting at home – a Bhutanese tradition – and the belief about the past she mentions are not persuasive enough to conclude that Bhutanese live in the present. The answers her interpreter offers sound very bizarre to a Bhutanese, and are perhaps meant to be humorous. The lack of greeting is a sign of intimacy. It indicates proximity of social space rather than an attitude to time. Similarly, the avoidance of the past is a very unusual one. It may be a local custom and true in the village Crins spent time in, but is definitely not applicable to most other communities.

Perhaps a better argument for this conjecture of living in the present may be found in the Bhutanese food culture and sense of economy. Bhutanese people, compared to other people, are more inclined to enjoy the here and now rather than hoard for the future. I wonder if Crins derived her notion of living in the present from religious literatures, such as those by Dilgo Khyentse who she mentions, and assumed it to be a popular ethos. Whatever the case, one cannot help sensing a slight neo-ageist romantic tendency in describing Bhutan as living in the present, when it is a society which strongly believes in and focuses on future rebirths, as demonstrated by responses to her interviews.

Strengths and weaknesses

If ethnography is the distinctive method for successful anthropological study, that is also the weakest point of Crins's work. Crins appears to be faltering in ethnographic documentation and data collection due to two related barriers: language and culture. Her work is vitiated by her lack of the relevant language, something which can be said of Wikan and most other anthropologists working on Bhutan. It is a serious problem as resources to learn Bhutanese languages are scarce if not non-existent and Bhutan is fragmented with about 19 languages and many more dialects. Yet still, language is an essential tool to study a society in the way Crins did and no study can be given a great deal of credence if done without a good grasp of the language. It is quite clear from her transcriptions, anecdotes and interviews that there is a great deal of miscommunication between her and the people she worked with. The book is full of inaccurate transcriptions which she could have easily corrected by consulting a local scholar.

Since every word and phrase represents an idea, the linguistic gap entails a cultural gap. Looking at the way Crins has phrased her questions, it appears she was, perhaps unwittingly, assuming that her respondents subscribe to certain cultural and linguistic notions. For instance, how did she translate God, creator, nature, love, gender, sustainability, etc. because there are no equivalent words for them in Dzongkha? Was God rendered as *koncho* (*dkon mchog*) or *lha*? Were her respondents asked about love qua passion (*chags pa*), love qua affection (*brtse ba*), love qua loving kindness (*byams pa*) or love qua compassion (*snying rje*)? The answers to her questions clearly suggest that many of the respondents did not understand the question and often responded according to the explanation of the question provided, most likely, by Crins's interpreter. It also appears that sometimes a robust sense of Bhutanese humour is mistaken for a serious belief. Would the old monk Sonam have really believed that trees with bad karma are reborn on a cliff where they would have a much harder time growing and risk falling off?

In spite of linguistic and cultural misinterpretations, Crins manages to consolidate the Bhutanese cultural and religious values and weave a satisfactory account of the Bhutanese approach to gender relations and sustainability. Both these concepts are foreign to Bhutan, as she correctly points out, and Bhutanese ideas and values associated with these concepts are very subtle and elusive. With no significant study done to this day, these ideas and values remain diffused in a largely oral society without serious attempts to extrapolate even a general framework, let alone develop tested theoretical structures. Furthermore, they are found in numerous localised variations. It is, then, no easy task to capture and crystallise these ideas and values and to formulate them for a scholarly discourse. Crins succeeds in integrating the Bhutanese beliefs, values and practices and informing the reader about Bhutan's gender relations and approach to sustainable development, albeit in a rather chaotic manner.

The true story of meeting the 'other'

In the final pages, Crins touches on the impact the outside world, particularly the West, has on Bhutanese perceptions of gender relations and sustainability. The reader can only wish that she dwelt more on this as this meeting of the traditional Bhutan and the West is truly a story of meeting the 'other', and is more fascinating and significant than the meeting between a single anthropologist and a rural village. Yet, the reader can pick traces of her general point that modern western influence has introduced new gender bias in a society which was largely free of gender inequities. She argues that the traditional gender differences, where they exist, are purely seen in physical terms (i.e. menstruation) or are merely conceptual beliefs with little or no impact in real life. In real life, Crins concludes that Bhutanese societies are mostly matriarchal and women are generally equal to men, if not more important. The exposure to western education and culture has brought about changes in their lifestyles and a new pattern of gender relations, which have given rise to previously unknown gender inequities.

This is a very interesting point and benefits from a couple illustrative examples. As Crins repeatedly notes, most Bhutanese families are matrilineal, passing the family line and property to the daughter. However, in modern efforts by the state to determine citizenship and write regulations for census, a child of a Bhutanese mother is still unable to acquire citizenship without a Bhutanese father to name. Property is now commonly divided equally among the children. Besides, the requirement for official registration of marriages and the proliferation of western-styled weddings have also led to increased stigma for single mothers.

This same pattern of change is visible in many other areas including the approach to sustainability. The traditional Bhutanese approach to the environment, inspired by the pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs and the Buddhist worldview, is a very holistic and harmonious one treating nature with great respect and concern as a living organism and a sacred entity. In contrast, the modern scientific worldview, which is fast replacing the traditional beliefs, explains nature in purely physical and chemical terms and gives man the centre stage to control and use nature. This has led to the loss of fear of non-human forces in nature and man's unbridled exploitation of the ecology. Thus modern secular education (modelled on the western system) and the sweeping process of globalisation, with their materialistic and consumerist trappings, are quickly changing Bhutan's cultural landscape and causing new problems and challenges.

If the West is the source of new problems, it is also in the western systems that Bhutan hopes to find the inspiration for the solutions to these problems. Just as modern western conventions for protection of women (such as CEDAW) and policies on gender equality are sought as answers to its new gender problems, western scientific environmentalism and legislations (such as Bhutan's famous constitutional provision to keep 60% of the country under forest cover) are being sought as solutions to its environmental challenges. In a highly globalised era dominated by western world-view and culture, it is only sensible to seek the remedy in the source of the problem and to learn from the experiences of those who have been on the path.

With roads, hospitals and schools introduced effectively only about 50 years ago and TV and internet only in 1999, Bhutan's meeting with the 'other' has only just begun. Crins, with an acute nostalgia and sentimental attachment to traditional Bhutan, only seems to fear the worst but leaves the reader with no substantive account of this complex meeting of exogenous modernity and endogenous tradition and the implications it has and will have on Bhutan. Crins is very repetitive and she makes many stereotypical remarks such as 'Bhutan is the last bastion in the world that has not been ruined by modernisation' (p.174) or 'Nyingmapa monks can marry' (p.57). The book could be a lot better if it had some editorial help.

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