

Land of the Thunderdragon

By LAWRENCE HANSEN

One of the most exciting features of university life is the opportunity each of us has to meet people from cultures very different from our own. It is important therefore, that we take advantage of this opportunity by recognizing and encouraging the continuing contributions of the UNB International Student community.

One contingent of students which UNB and Canada has had the honour of accepting hail from DRUK YUL, Land of the Thunderdragon; the nation which the rest of the world knows as BHUTAN. As a result of an agreement between the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Canadian government, ten Bhutanese students are pursuing advanced studies in education under the sponsorship of the World University Service of Canada. (WUSC)

Gary Whiteford, a Professor of Education who has worked closely with these students, points out that the reason they have come to Canada grows out of the Bhutanese government's concern over the need, not only for trained professionals in the field of education, but also the perceived necessity that these professionals be indigenous and trained in "countries other than India," the nation in which most have traditionally been educated.

According to Jigme Zangpo, 37, one of the students and a District Education Officer for one of the nation's regions, the formalized education system in Bhutan is a mere 25 years old. It began because the monarch at the time, the present King's father, felt that education was vital to the growth and well-being of his nation.

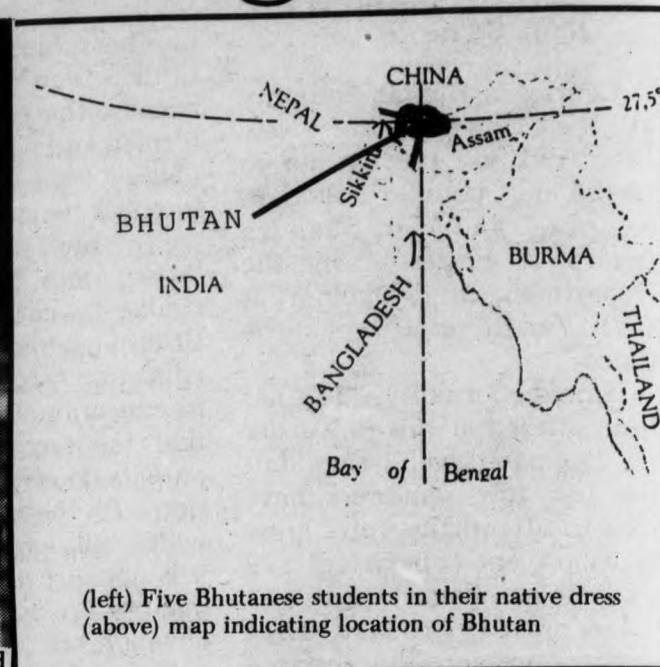
Consequently, a Canadian priest, Father Mackie, whom today is revered in Bhutan, laid the foundations for the nation's vibrant and continually growing educational system.

For Devan Tamang, 32, his sojourn in Canada is the second time he has pursued his education outside his homeland. As a younger man he spent thirteen years in India. Subsequently, he served as an administrative officer in the Bhutanese government's Department of Education, and later became a District Education Officer.

One of his fellow students, Tsheten Dorji, the youngest of the group at 28, received all his schooling in Bhutan. Right now he holds the position of



photo by Al MacDonald



(left) Five Bhutanese students in their native dress
(above) map indicating location of Bhutan

headmaster at a primary school.

To listen to these students talk about their homeland is to learn to appreciate the deep respect they have for their nation, countrymen, and their King. Jigme explains that the system of government, while essentially a monarchy, consists of a Royal Advisory Council, a number of specialised ministries, and a national as well as local assemblies comprised of officials.

In spite of the fact that the nation is relatively lesser developed the Bhutanese government and its people are working hard to modernize. With great pride, he points to the development of education, government reforms, and membership in international organizations initiated and carried out by the last two kings.

Yet the road to modernization has not detracted from the integrity of the nation. As a people, it seems that the Bhutanese have remained committed to their way of life. Religion, if one can use the Western connotation of the word to explain the DRUK KARUYKBA sect of Buddhism, remains a vital part of everyday life.

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The sect's leader, Je Khenpo, is at least theoretically, an equal to the monarch, and Buddhist monks make a constructive contribution to Bhutanese society. As for the populace, the vast majority are, as Devan observes, "Buddhist when (they) are born."

Unlike Christianity, the Buddhists are not obliged to proselytize to those of other religious convictions. Devan states that even in family situations, parents do not instruct children on how to be a Buddhist. In terms of other cultural phenomenon, Bhutan still retains its customs, including its famous mask dancing festivals.

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While there are important differences in levels of technology, types of food and myriad of other things between Bhutan and Canada, Tsheten Dorji pinpoints "vast differences" in the way members of each gender interact. Here, he said, "boys and girls sit together, talk together, and embrace in public." When "a boy and boy

...vast difference

embrace, people think they are homosexual." In Bhutan, the opposite is true. Men and women do not mix as freely and it is quite common and acceptable for men to hug one another.

...impressed

Jigme is impressed with the egalitarianism of Canadian society. In his homeland, "the line of authority is very strict." You are expected to treat those in authority with great respect and deference. He seems amazed, for instance, that professors are not treated in a more reverential manner.

Overall, the Faculty of

Education has tried to integrate the Bhutanese into university life. As a result they have, as Professor Whiteford explains, "enriched" the Faculty by adding to the diversity which creates "the best thinking environment".

Unfortunately, the end of the current academic year will mark the return of Jigme, Devan and Tsheten, as well as their fellow countrymen to Bhutan. For their stay here they express sincere gratitude to the Royal Government of Bhutan, WUSC and UNB.

One can't help think, however, that it is we who should be thanking their sponsors for the contribution that these handful of Bhutanese students have made to our university community.

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