

# Tshering Choki

## Cross-Cultural Relations

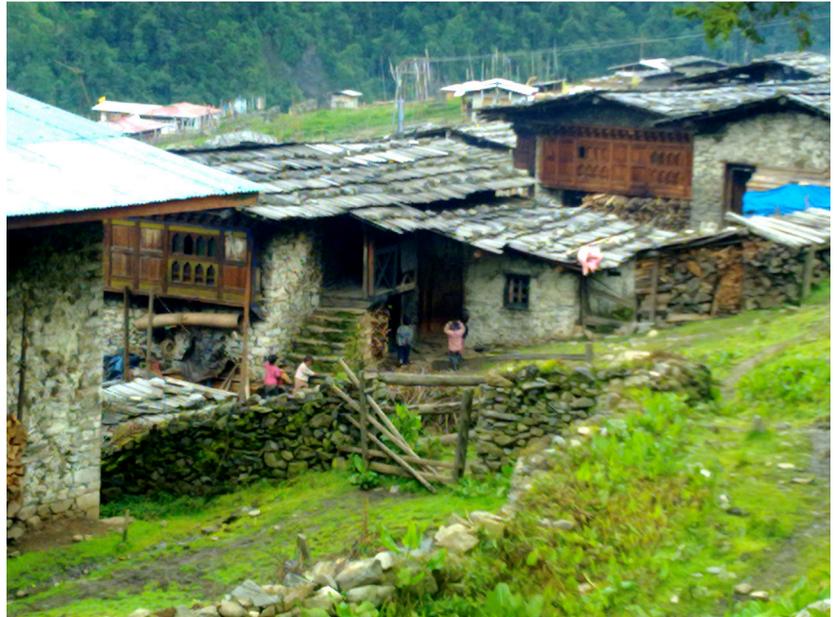
Nancy Bonvillian  
Tsirang, Bhutan

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Bhutan is known as the world's happiest country, with its own unique traditions and cultures. There are many different tribes of people living in Bhutan who practice different social and religious customs, and speak a variety of dialects.

Only a few decades ago, the small kingdom of Bhutan opened itself to western influences. The 3rd King, Jigme Dorji Wanchuck, is considered the father of modern Bhutan. The Bhutanese development strategy focuses on the preservation of socio-economic, ecological and cultural characteristics of the country, as well as the well-being of the Bhutanese population through policy of "Gross National Happiness" or GNH. Gross National Happiness theory is based on the "four pillars" that strive our country towards "Gross National Happiness." The four pillars are good governance, preservation and promotion of the national and cultural heritage, protection of environment and sustainability for future generations.

Merak, located in the Eastern part of Bhutan, is a rural area with a different culture and tradition. The people, known as Brokpa, meaning highlanders, speak a different dialect. Merak has no access to electricity or road, and the people are farmers (i.e. they raise domestic animals.) Merak has opened its beauty, culture and traditions to the outside world which allows tourists to explore



and to see the typical lifestyles of a rural valley in Bhutan. With the opening and development of the country, how long can People of Merak continue living in peace and harmony without the influence of Western lifestyles?

One aspect to consider in regards to these changes is the role of women in Merak. Women here play a very important role in the family and in the community. Although the family follows a patriarchal structure, women work as hard as men do. They not only stay within the four walls but go out in the woods and live with the animals. The main income of Brokpas comes from selling milk products. In comparison to the women living in rural areas, like Thimphu, how do women in Merak play a different role in the community and in their family? Additionally, since the government created eco-friendly tourism trail, a lot of local people are employed. The question is, is it secure for the community to get exposed to changes so rapidly? In the future, will the unique tradition and culture disappear or will it still remain there?