

# **The Impact of Cultural Folklore on National Values: A Preliminary Study with a Focus on Bhutan**

Steve Evans\*

## **Abstract**

*Are the personal and national values of people found in their traditional folklore? This paper will look at the correlation between the values expressed by Bhutan's citizens of themselves and their nation and the traditional folklore of Bhutan, seeking to discover the similarities and differences between the values of the people and those found in their folktales. A people's stories help answer questions of identity and values. They touch on the very core of who they are, both personally and corporately. Cultural anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, and cultural researchers seem to agree that to investigate the idea of self and all that self means, one does it by way of an individual's stories, along with the stories of his or her historical, societal, and cultural self. It is through these stories that self is revealed – whether the individual self or the "self" of a community, culture or society.*

## **Introduction**

There is a story from Central Asia about a man who found a magic cup and learned if he wept into the cup, his tears turned into precious gemstones. Even though he had always been poor, he was a happy man and rarely shed a tear. So he found ways to make himself sad so that his tears could make him rich. As the riches piled up, so did his greed. The story ends with the man sitting on a mountain of gems, a knife in his hand, and weeping helplessly, while his wife's dead body lay at his side (Hosseini, 2003).

What a gruesome and tragic tale this is, one so different from the image of happiness portrayed in Bhutan's story of *Meme Haylay Haylay*.

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\* International Center for Ethnographic Studies, US.

In brief, the story is of a poor old man who goes to his fields and uncovers a valuable turquoise stone. On the way home, he trades the stone for a horse, the horse for an ox, the ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, the goat for a rooster and the rooster for a song. He continued home feeling the happiest, richest and most successful businessman in the world.

Once there lived a poor old man, Meme Haylay Haylay. One day he went to his fields to prepare them for planting, and as he uprooted a clump of very stubborn weeds, he found a huge, round, bright blue turquoise stone in the dirt. It was so heavy that a man his age could hardly lift it.

Well, because of his good fortune, he decided to stop working and go home. On the way he met a man leading a horse with a rope. "Hey, what are you doing there, Meme Haylay Haylay?" the horseman asked. "Today I am no longer a poor old man," Meme Haylay Haylay replied, "because today I struck it rich! As I was digging in my fields, I found this huge valuable turquoise." But before the horseman could utter a word, Meme Haylay Haylay put forth a proposal, "Will you exchange your horse for this stone?" "Don't joke with me, Meme Haylay Haylay! Your turquoise is priceless, and in comparison my horse is worthless," the horseman replied. "Priceless or worthless, if you are for the trade, take this turquoise and hand over the rope," Meme Haylay Haylay said. The horseman lost no time in throwing over the rope and went his way carrying the stone, feeling happy. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way feeling happier than the horseman.

But that was not the end of Meme Haylay Haylay's business. On the way, he met a man with an ox. "Hey, Meme Haylay Haylay. What are you doing there?" the ox-man asked. "Today I am no longer a poor old man, but a rich man" Meme Haylay Haylay replied. "As I was digging in my fields, I found a huge valuable turquoise stone and I traded it for this horse." He then asked the ox-man, "Would you trade your ox for this horse?" "I certainly would," the man with the ox replied, and the man went away with the horse feeling very happy. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way feeling happier.

Then Meme Haylay traded the ox for a sheep, and the sheep for a goat, and the goat for a rooster. And after each transaction, the others walked away feeling happy, but Meme Haylay Haylay walked away feeling happier. Finally Meme Haylay Haylay heard someone singing a beautiful song, and tears of happiness filled his eyes as he listened to it. "I feel so happy just listening to the song," he thought. "How much happier I would be if I could sing it myself." Just then the singer spied Meme Heylay Heylay and asked, "Hey, Meme Haylay Haylay, what are you doing there?" "Today I am no longer a poor old man, but a rich man," Meme Haylay Haylay replied. "As I was digging in my fields, I found a huge valuable turquoise stone and I traded it for a horse, then I traded the horse for an ox, the ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, and the goat for this rooster. Here, take this rooster and teach me how to sing your song. I like it so much."

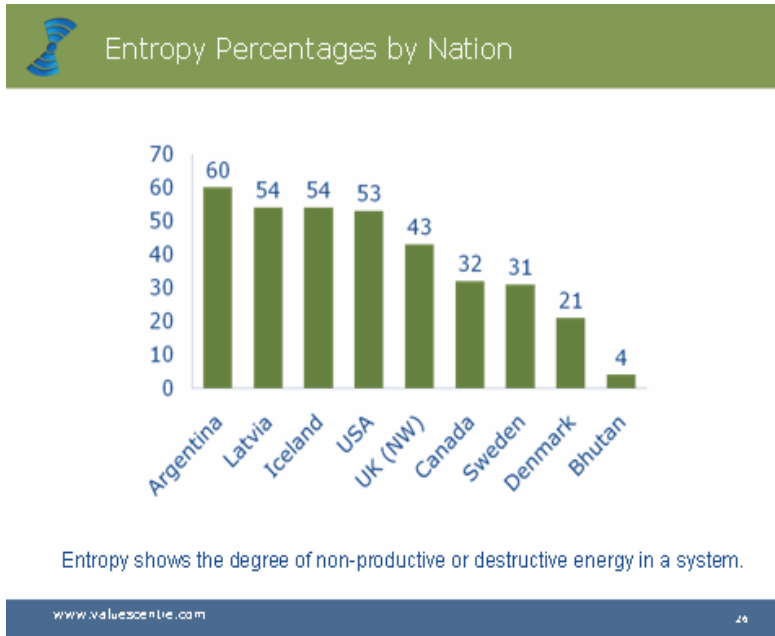
After learning the song, Meme Haylay Haylay gave away his rooster and went home singing the song, feeling the happiest, richest and most successful businessman in the world.

I can hear him singing now: "In my heart there's a song that I sing all day long; I'm happy; I'm happy; I'm happy." In the land of Gross National Happiness, could it be that this folktale of happiness should be the national folktale?

### **Bhutan National Values Assessment**

Research shows that Bhutan is indeed a healthy and happy nation when it comes to personal and national values. To date, nine countries have participated in a national values assessment conducted by various agencies and organizations in cooperation with The Barrett Values Centre. Bhutan's assessment was conducted by the International Center for Ethnographic Studies (ICES) in partnership with the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), East Tennessee State University (ETSU), the Brimstone Grant for Applied Storytelling, and the Barrett Values Centre. Results were released in January 2009.

As already mentioned, the *Bhutan National Values Assessment* confirms that the nation and its people are healthy when it comes to self identity and community. In fact, indications are that when it comes to values, Bhutan could possibly be the healthiest nation in the world. Among other things, the survey measures entropy caused by potentially limiting values. Entropy is a measure of the degree of dysfunction in a system indicated by the proportion of potentially limiting values found in a survey. Bhutan's entropy is at 4% compared with the eight others: Denmark at 21%, Sweden at 31%, Canada at 32%, northwest United Kingdom at 43%, the United States of America at 53%, Iceland at 54%, Latvia at 54%, and Argentina at 60%. This is something Bhutan can truly be proud of! The full report of the Bhutan National Values Assessment can be found in the *Journal for Bhutan Studies, Volume 18, Summer 2008*.



*The Bhutan National Values Assessment* focused on three key areas – Bhutanese personal values, the values and issues perceived to drive the current national culture, and the values that Bhutanese want their society to embrace. An assessment reveals those values that unite the nation in shared understanding, direction and purpose, while providing clarity to any challenges ahead.

The personal values of the people of Bhutan show that they demonstrate:

- Support for and connections with others
- Focus on enriching their knowledge and understanding
- A positive outlook
- Inner drive and strength

Their top personal value is “friendship,” and the Bhutanese have a high number of relationship-type values, indicating that people and their connections to them are notably important, while the people of Bhutan also seek meaning and purpose in their lives. Other personal values in order of predominance are, continuous learning, compassion, caution, sincerity, social justice, self-discipline, optimism, helpfulness, and caring. Current culture values reflect citizens’ perceptions of the nation’s culture and of day-to-day living. The current culture of Bhutan is driven by values that promote:

- Access to information and knowledge and a commitment to the betterment of society
- Intelligent stewardship of resources
- Being guided and united by a common set of values and a common direction
- Protection for the rights of the people to make political choices

- Moral structure that provides guidance and encourages comfort.

Bhutan's top national value perceived by its people is "continuous improvement," and there is a strong concentration of values showing that the people have a powerful focus on governance that is based on efficient systems and processes, along with a provision of public infrastructure and services that enhance the productivity of the nation and the wellbeing and prosperity of the people. The people of Bhutan see the nation as open to change. Bhutan's other current culture values in order of predominance are: environmental protection, importance of religion, political rights, education, nature conservation, shared vision, information availability, shared values, contentment, and social justice.

What do Bhutanese want? Desired cultural values reflect what participants believe to be important for the wellbeing of their nation. These values provide insights into the direction participants want the nation to take, possible antidotes to current problems, and values that need strengthening. Key themes from top desired cultural values include: 1) providing more opportunity for people to learn, work and strengthen the economy; 2) allowing people to express their views and have access to fair systems; and 3) demonstrating care and empathy for people. The desired cultural values expressed by the people of Bhutan for their nation, in order of predominance, are: education, continuous improvement, freedom of speech, economic growth, social justice, contentment, environmental protection, compassion, full employment, and importance of religion.

### **Implications for Bhutan's Oral Traditions**

It is interesting to note that the number one personal value of the Bhutanese is friendship, while the most well known national folktale is undisputedly *The Four Harmonious*

*Friends.* As with *Meme Haylay Haylay*, we know this story well.

Once in the forest, four animals – an elephant, a rabbit, a monkey, and a partridge – argued over the ownership of a tree that all of them had cared for. The elephant claimed, “Well, this is my tree because I saw it first.” To this the monkey replied: “Now, elephant, do you see any fruits on this tree?” The elephant agreed that the tree was without any fruit. The monkey continued: “That’s because I had been feeding on the fruits of this tree long before you ever saw it.” Next the rabbit spoke up: “I fed on the leaves of this tree when it was just a small sapling before the monkey ate its fruit and way before the elephant ever saw it.” Finally the partridge, who had been watching the argument, came forward and asserted: “The tree belongs to me because the tree wouldn’t have grown if I hadn’t dropped a seed. I planted the seed that grew into this huge tree before the rabbit fed on it, or the monkey ate its fruit, or the elephant saw it.” The elephant, monkey, and rabbit, agreed that the partridge was the first to know the tree. So all of them bowed to the partridge and regarded it as their elder brother. The four animals became friends and decided to share the tree together in peaceful harmony, enjoying the beauty of the tree’s fragrance, its delicious fruits, and the bounty of its shade. They worked together to obtain the fruit: the fruit on the ground and on the lowest branches, the partridge and rabbit got by working together. The monkey climbed the tree and dropped fruit for everyone to share, but only the elephant could reach the highest branches with his trunk. The four animals worked together and with their combined strength, each one benefited and no one went hungry. Other animals in the forest often saw them together, with the partridge on top of the rabbit, who was held up by the monkey, who rode on top of the elephant. Since then, they are called “The Four Harmonious Friends.” The four animals are looked upon as an example of peace, harmony, co-operation, interdependence and friendship.

While we can rejoice over the good news of the *Bhutan National Values Assessment* and can recognize the positive influence of the much loved folktale “The Four Harmonious

Friends', a word of caution must be put forth here. His Majesty King Khesar, the 5th Druk Gyalpo of Bhutan, recognized in his coronation address on November 7, 2008 that core values form a common thread that binds and guides the nation, especially in the wake of current democratic processes. However, his deepest concern, he said, is that as the world changes Bhutan may lose its fundamental values on which rest its character as a nation and people.

He said:

Our generation of Bhutanese have been gifted a strong, dynamic nation by our forefathers. I am confident that as long as we are willing to work with their commitment and dedication and follow their example we can bring greater peace, happiness and prosperity to our country. I am confident because I know the worth and character of our people. You are the true jewel of this nation. As citizens of a spiritual land you treasure the qualities of a good human being – honesty, kindness, charity, integrity, unity, respect for our culture and traditions, love for our country and for God. Throughout our history our parents have upheld these values and placed the common good above the self. My deepest concern is that as the world changes, we may lose these fundamental values on which rest our character as a nation and people. It is critical that we are able to recognize Bhutanese character irrespective of how far we look back into the past or into the future. The Bhutan we see is vastly different – unrecognizable even – when compared to the Bhutan in the time of our first King. Yet, the character of our people and the nature of our fundamental values have remained unchanged. Henceforth, as even more dramatic changes transform the world and our nation, as long as we continue to pursue the simple and timeless goal of being good human beings, and as long as we strive to build a nation that stands for everything that is good, we can ensure that our future generations for hundreds of years will live in happiness and peace (CBS, 2009).



It is wonderful how His Majesty recognized the true values of his nation and its people (closely matching those of the *Bhutan National Values Assessment*). At the same time, it is significant that he expressed a concern for the preservation of those values in a rapidly changing world.

Dasho Kinley Dorji, former chief editor of Bhutan's Kuensel Corporation, feels the country is going through difficult times, with its values systems dramatically diminishing. One way to combat that, he believes, is to create stories calling attention to the situation and ensure that these stories are shared and heard (Kinley Dorji, 2007).

His creative non-fiction short story *Pretty Woman* portrays how the introduction of television to Bhutan in 1999 thrusts the country into dramatic and painful change. The story tells how, over a period of seven years, a young boy and a young woman collide with forces much greater than themselves, their community and even their country. She was the prettiest girl in the village – strong, sun-darkened, and hard working, with a face as round as the moon and a singing voice that enchanted all the men. He was a young boy, growing up in a volatile climate of change, confused by what he observes.

“The story invites important questions,” Dorji said. He then asked, “Are the side effects of development taking a toll that is more powerful than the effects of mainstream development? This is symbolized by the immediate excitement over television that far exceeds the advantages of electricity as a source of power for utilities.” (Electricity comes to the story's setting in 2003.) “In a country where there are now an estimated 50,000 television sets compared with 14,000 computers, television becomes a major status symbol and dominates the altar in the altar room” (as it does in the story), he said (Kinley Dorji, 2007: 11).

Over a period of seven short years, the country's hero is no longer the king, but are athletic superstars and Bollywood film actors, and the beautiful image of the hard working village girl is replaced by singing and dancing Bollywood stars and bikini-clad Pepsi models. The end of *Pretty Woman* is poignant and bittersweet:

Aum Thrimi looks into the distance. "They are so pretty, the girls. They are so thin. They are so fair. They smell so nice." She looks at Kuenley, a gangly five-foot nine-inch boy, standing with his hands in his pockets. She turns and looks out the window again. "Better study hard, Kuenley. Otherwise you'll have to live in the village. You have to work all day in the sun. You have to walk everywhere with no shoes. You have to carry manure on your back and smell of cow dung. In the village you will quickly become ugly. We have no choice because we are already old and ugly." Kuenley says nothing. He does not know what to say. Thrimi is 27 years old. She has not changed. But the world had changed (Kinley Dorji, 2007: 8).

"This story is Bhutan's story," Dorji said. "The metamorphosis of a rural society is documented through the eyes, and the confusion, of a Bhutanese youth who personifies a generation in transition. There are no subtleties because the experience is not subtle." (Kinley Dorji, 2007:10). The message that comes through as the pair's community feels the impact of globalization is that there is an urgent need to put on the brakes before it is too late to do anything about it.

Others agree with Dorji's assessment of the importance of values preservation and transmission. "There is a need to provide a sense of continuity amidst change," said Tashi Wangyal in the article *Ensuring Social Sustainability: Can Bhutan's Education System Ensure Intergenerational Transmission of Values?* "In addition, since culture and traditional values form the bedrock of Bhutanese national identity, it is important for the Bhutanese to ensure that its culture and values are not undermined." (Tashi Wangyal,

2001, 107). Wangyal continued, “It is now more necessary than ever to ensure the intergenerational transmission of values. Otherwise, unbridled modernization may destroy the very spiritual and cultural fabric that has enabled the Bhutanese society to live in harmony with each other and with the natural environment.” (Kinley Dorji, 2007:115).

But what can be done?

“Every people, nation, and community has stories and myths that preserve and prolong the traditions that give them their identity,” said William Bausch, author of *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. “When a nation is in trouble, it often returns to its traditional stories to look for direction and healing, to regain a sense of what made it great in the past and what will nurture it into the future.” He said that “individuals, families, and communities also have their identifying stories that link them to who they are, to their culture.” (Bausch, 1999:26)

Bausch said that often a region or a nation has its story concretized in a shrine, statue, museum; that a person without a story is a person with amnesia; and that a country without its story has ceased to exist. “Humanity without its story has lost its soul,” he concluded (Bausch, 1999:33).

Edward Chamberlin, Canadian professor of English and Comparative Literature, shared the following story, an incident from which he derived the title of his book on stories and national-cultural identification: *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?*

It happened at a meeting between a [native America] Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn't understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put what was

bothering them in the form of a question. “If this is your land,” he asked, “where are your stories?” He spoke in English, but then moved into Gitksan, the Tsimshian language of his people – and told a story. All of a sudden everyone understood...even though the government foresters didn’t know a word of Gitksan, and neither did some of his Gitksan companions. But what they understood was more important: how stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart (Chamberlin, 2003:1).

“If this is your land, where are your stories?” This question carries with it the importance of a people’s story and its contribution to their sense of identity and community. It is interesting here how identity is tied to land – possession of it – and to history and culture. What’s even more interesting is that story is the glue that holds it all together. The original inhabitants in this factual tale told by Chamberlin seem to be saying: “Our land, our language, our stories, our history, our heritage, our identity – our very being of who we are – are all tied up together, are all integrated.” To challenge any one of these, they imply, is to challenge all the others. This seems to be true for the nation of Bhutan as well.

Kunzang Choden, author of the much loved *Folktales of Bhutan*, pushes for the promotion of storytelling in her country. She said that Bhutan’s stories are alive and continuous, not only in the minds of those who unravel and release them, but also in the minds of those who listen to them being unraveled and released. “This oral tradition,” she said, “transmitted by one generation to another, is thus the continuing and living thread that links one generation to another.” (Kunzang Choden, 1994) In short, stories ensure the continuity of community and identity.

Reflecting back on her early years and the effect Bhutanese stories had on her life, Choden said,

Some of the stories stayed alive in my mind even during the fourteen years of my cultural exile in India (at boarding school), often providing me with a safe refuge and a solace in times of loneliness and depression, in trying to adjust and later on to understand other cultures. Memories of the stories helped to keep the link to my roots and, therefore, gave me my identity. I knew who I really was even when trying to conform to being somebody else! (Kunzang Choden, 1994:xiii).

“As I realize the importance of the stories as a link to who I am and where I come from, I also realize how important they will be to my children,” she said. “They [stories] will be of some value in their lives to link up with their cultural base so in knowing their base they may better understand and appreciate their own lives” (Kunzang Choden, 1994).

Dorji Penjore (2005) of the Centre for Bhutan Studies emphasized the impact folklore can have on the formation and transmission of values. A senior researcher with a focus in the area of oral traditions, he said:

Distilled folk wisdoms like proverbs for example validate values and beliefs, which are reinforced practically in adult life. Folktales make children imagine and create their own mental pictures, and this mental exercise leaves deepest impression on them, imprinting folktales’ rightful place in their imagination. Folk wit and wisdom are not taught through formal arrangement, but through direct observation in earlier stage and direct participation in events themselves. To children, entertainment is the end, and values inculcation comes as a by-product. Scolding parents distill folktales into proverbs and use them to guide children’s behaviours, thoughts and actions.

Listening to folktales momentarily transports the audience, mostly children, to a different world; later reflection connects the folktale world to the real world that they would soon face as adults. It is when they first understand and link these two worlds that values so imparted are used in their interactions with man, animals, physical world and spirits. These wisdoms

are not ordinary one; they have been time-tested through many years of interaction or experience with the real world. The morals of tales are packaged into proverbs. “A confederation of frogs can kill even a tiger” for example is a distillation of the folktale, “Come on Acho Tag! Jump!” Stories express moral or practical wisdom and provide an insight into the adult world. It is common for village elders to quote from some well-known folktales: “like in the tales, you will end up with nothing,” or, “don’t behave like a tiger in the tale.” Child is exposed to knowledge, experiences, morals, customs, rituals and belief that they are supposed to live through as adults through tales (Dorji Penjore, 2005:47-74).

I’m reminded of a story called *Strength* (MacDonald, 2004:17). It is a tale that turns from delight to disaster. It is endearing, sobering and thought-provoking. One day elephant has the idea to have a contest to see who was the strongest. Monkey tied a small tree in a knot. Deer ran three miles into the forest and three miles back. Tiger mightily scraped the ground with his powerful claws. Antelope plowed a road through the fields with his horns. Elephant brought down a huge tree. With each feat, all declared that, indeed, it was a show of strength. Then it was man’s turn. He whirled, twirled, did somersault and cartwheels. “That’s not strength,” the animals said. Man climbed a tree and threw down the palm nuts. “That’s great, but not strength,” the animals said again. Then man took a gun and shot elephant dead.

Man was jumping and bragging.

“Strength! Strength!

Wasn’t THAT strength?!”

“Strength. . . .”

Man looked around.

The animals were gone.

They had fled into the forest.

“Strength! . . .”

There was no one left to hear him brag.

Man was alone.

In the forest the animals huddled together and talked.

“Did you see that?”

“Was that strength?”

“Would you call that strength?”

“No. That was DEATH.”

“That was DEATH.”

Since that day the animals will not walk with Man.

When Man enters the forest he has to walk by himself.

The animals still talk of Man . .

That creature *Man*. . . .

He is the one who cannot tell the difference between strength and death.

“The heart does not respond to principles and programs; it seeks not efficiency, but passion,” said authors Brent Curtis and John Eldredge in their book *The Sacred Romance*. “Art, poetry, beauty, mystery, ecstasy: These are what rouse the heart. Indeed, they are the language that must be spoken if one wishes to communicate with the heart.” They said, “Life is

not a list of propositions, it is a series of dramatic scenes. Story is the language of the heart. Our souls speak not in the naked facts of mathematics or the abstract proportions of systematic theology; they speak the images and emotions of story” (Curtis, 1997:39).

Without intellectual assent or intentional behavioral change, stories enter the heart and affect change. Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, said that much later, after one hears a story, he or she proclaims “what are these doing here?” but then finds oneself embracing the truths embedded within the stories. “All of a sudden we see things and people we had never noticed before,” he said. “We hear words and sentences that make sense of what we’ve had intimations of but couldn’t quite place.” (Peterson, 2003:7). Curtis and Eldredge conclude, “The deepest convictions of our heart are formed by stories and reside there in the images and emotions of story.” (Curtis and Eldredge:38).

### **Conclusion**

There is a wonderful traditional Tibetan proverb that says, “What is written in ink can fade away by a single drop of water; what is written on the heart will last an eternity.” And folklorist Margaret Read MacDonald said, “Once the story leaves your mouth, it is carried away in the hearts of your listeners” (MacDonald, 2004:22).

It seems that every individual asks the questions, “Who am I? Where do I belong? What are the accepted norms of behavior for me?” A people’s stories help answer these questions; while their stories also help shape their answers. These questions touch on the very core of being – identity, community, society, culture. Anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, and cultural researchers all agree that to investigate the idea of self and all that self means, one does it by way of an individual’s stories, along with the stories of his or her



history, society, and culture. It is through these stories that self is revealed – whether the individual self or the “self” of a community, culture, society, or nation. At the same time, these experts also say that to influence an individual, and ultimately his or her entire culture or society – to preserve its values and morals and pass them on to future generations – it is best and most effectively done through stories.

Stories are an integral part of life, said George Burns, author of *101 Healing Stories for Kids and Teens: Using Metaphors in Therapy*. “Regardless of our language, religion, race, sex, or age, stories have been and will remain, a crucial element in our lives,” he said. “It is because of stories that our language, religion, science and culture exist.” Quoting author Salman Rushdie, Burns said, “When we die all that remains are the stories” (Burns, 2008).

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