

Traditions -- Lost in Change

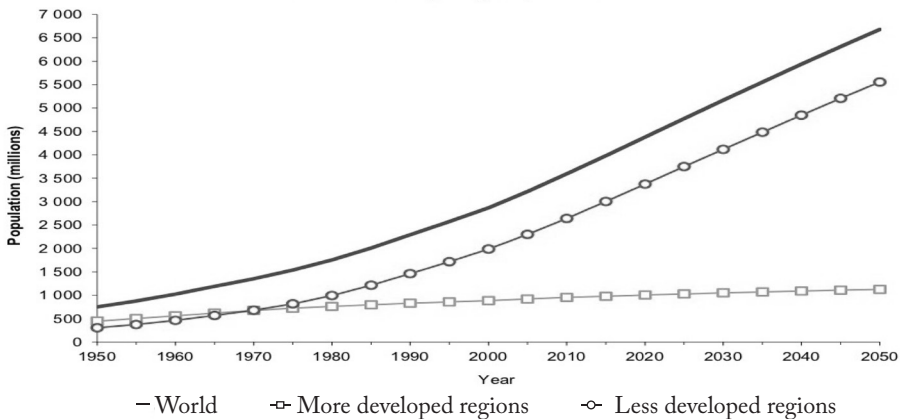
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(Excerpts from a talk on civic culture and urbanisation at the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region, Joenju South Korea in 2019)

In the past decades, the world has seen unprecedented migration of people from rural communities to urban centres. According to the UN, “the urban population of the world has grown rapidly from 751 million in 1950 to 4.2 billion in 2018”. Today, 55% of the world’s population is reported to live in urban areas, and this is expected to increase to 68% by 2050.¹

Such migration is particularly intense in the less developed countries, which makes population growth and the rate of urbanisation highest in Asia.

Figure 1.1. Estimated and projected urban populations of the world, the more developed regions and the less developed regions, 1950-2050



In spite of its historic isolation and renown for conserving its traditional way of life, Bhutan is no exception in the process of urbanisation. On the contrary, it stands out as a striking example of urban growth.

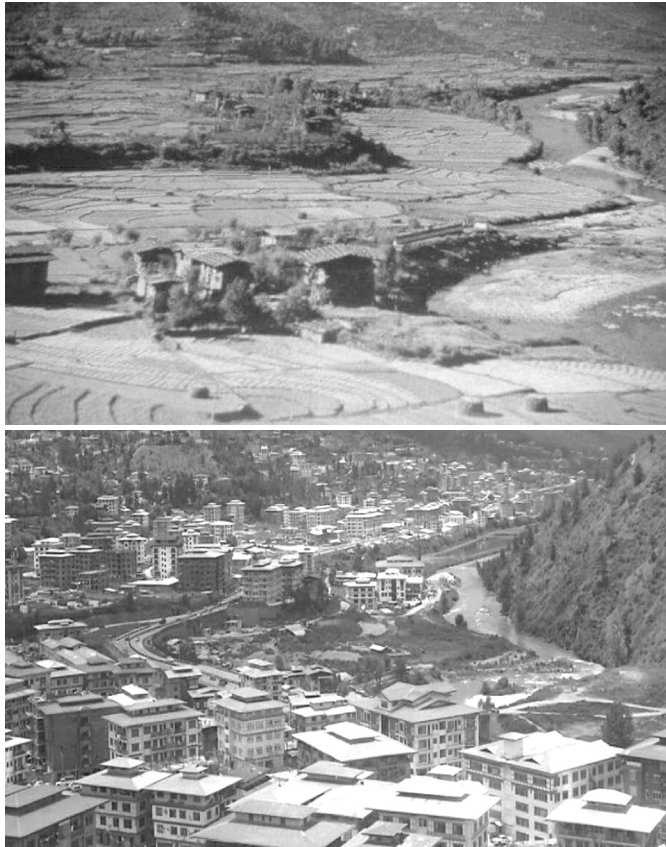
Just over half a century ago, there was not a single town in Bhutan. The country was made up entirely of villages. Even Thimphu, the nation’s capital

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html> Retrieved on 3 September 2019.

for nearly four centuries, was a valley of a few scattered villages and the *dzong* fortress, which housed the government and monastic headquarters.

Over 99% of the built environment we see today in the growing metropolis of Thimphu was built after 1960s.

The following pictures of south Thimphu taken towards the end of the 20th century and in 2018 show how fast the suburban areas of Thimphu have grown.

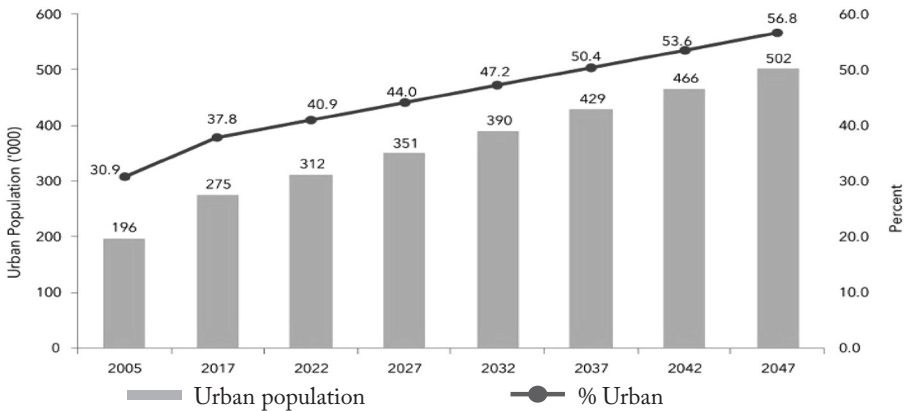


With no urban centres 60 years ago, Bhutan now has about 40% of its population living in 20 main district towns and 20 satellite towns, according to the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement. The number is constantly rising and is projected to go up to 56.8% by 2047.² This is

² National Statistics Bureau (2019), *Population Projection Bhutan 2017-2047*, Thimphu: National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan, p. 25.

a very conservative projection, as the country saw its urban population double from 15% in 1999 to 31% in 2005, and it is said to be growing by 7.3 % each year.³

Figure 1.2. Urban population (in thousands) and Percent Urban, Bhutan 2017-2047



Like the transition from rural villages to urban towns, Bhutan has also economically moved from subsistence farming to capitalist market economy; socially from a largely oral past to an audio-visual society; politically from a medieval Buddhist monarchy to a bicameral parliamentary democracy, and culturally from a nature-oriented spiritual system to a secular and scientific worldview. Bhutan is going through a massive change in which a majority of its citizens has seen motor roads, electricity, television, telephones, internet and social media come to their communities in a span of some 50 years.

Such systemic changes and demographic shifts consist of transformations in both the tangible, physical environment and the intangible, social and cultural systems. To put it in a Buddhist idiom, Bhutan is witnessing changes in both the *nod* (སོད) or external landscape and the *chud* (ཅུད) or internal people.

Of the two, the creation of external urban infrastructure, such as roads, houses, sewers, parks, etc., is achieved relatively quickly and easily, using imported materials and know-how enhanced by advanced technology. Mainstream development efforts are also focused on such material

³ Ministry of Works and Human Settlement (2016), Nation Report: The 3rd UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, retrieved http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Bhutan_Habitat-III-National-Report.pdf on 22/9/2019

conditions. Moreover, the lure of consumerism and public amenities in urban centres attracts people to them, which in turn fuels the growth of urban infrastructure and built environment.

However, the process of developing the intangible culture of social support systems to manage and maintain the facilities and address social challenges, needs much greater efforts of cultural education and social organisation. While physical facilities can be built in a span of a few years, the culture to use them responsibly and sustain them takes many decades to develop.

Electrification in Bhutan is a good example. Since its introduction some 60 years ago, electricity has today reached all parts of the country. While Bhutan has done well in building hydropower stations, connecting homes to the grid and procuring electrical appliances, the general knowledge about and culture of safe installation and responsible use of electricity still remain poor. As a result, electric short circuit has become a major cause of house fires in Bhutan today.

An example was the fire which destroyed Wangdue Phodrang Dzong, one of Bhutan's most prominent state edifices, in June, 2012. When there are such fires in urban places, people often stand by and watch helplessly, partly because there is a lack of a sense of responsibility to act, but also because they fear the risks of electrocution and explosion of liquid petroleum gas cylinders.

Modern facilities such as electricity are new to the Bhutanese citizenry, and thus require concerted efforts of regulation and consumer education. However, this is not the case with many other challenges Bhutan's urban areas are facing.

Many challenges can be overcome by revitalising social and cultural practices which existed in the villages for many centuries. Alcoholism is a case in point, alcohol liver disease being a top cause of death in Bhutan for about a decade. Almost all Bhutanese villages have a robust culture of drinking, particularly during festive occasions. However, traditional communities also have a strong support system in place to help a person who is abusing alcohol. Firstly, supply of alcohol is limited, as it is brewed at home. If the person abuses alcohol, the housewife serving the person would normally refrain after serving a couple of rounds. Family members, neighbours and

villagers provide counselling and controlling measures when necessary. One's sense of community identity and the general practice of community solidarity restrain the person from becoming a serious alcoholic.

When the same person abuses alcohol in a new urban environment, he or she is deprived of the social support system. Alcohol flows unlimited, having been produced in large factories, and sometimes even sold on credit. The bartender only wishes to sell as much alcohol as possible. With the anonymity granted by a populated urban centre, the person has less sense of social respect and responsibility. Support and care from family, friends and neighbours are less common in urban places where people generally live very private individualistic lives. Thus, alcohol abuse becomes worse in a new urban place, leading to serious economic and social consequences.

To overcome such challenges, fledging steps are being taken by state and civil society organisations. However, their discourse on civil society and responsible citizenry is modelled on foreign practices of civil society and non-governmental organisations, because literature on and support for these matters are more easily available from other countries than from within our own communities. Thus, no serious effort has been made to transfer and adopt the existing traditional support systems and beneficial cultural practices from traditional communities.

As Bhutan's systems for organising society and mobilising community members for public good evolve, it is imperative that we look at the rich tradition of societal organisation and governance, both on the level of the national, state and local communities.

Being a society with uninterrupted ancient history and one of the oldest nations in the world, Bhutan has a rich heritage of governance systems, fiduciary and judiciary practices, social contracts and norms, and community organisational structures and strategies. These practices still remain in rural communities but undergo a serious risk of vanishing into oblivion given Bhutan's rapid cultural changes.

The community in Ura, for example, still practices ancient organisational structures and social schemes, which existed before the unification of Bhutanese valleys into one nation state by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the 17th century. Even today, subdivision of the village into four *dho*

(units) and the rotation of households called *letsen* and *taza*, to lead village activities and mobilise resources, are practised in Ura alongside the national systems of governance and administration, in order to help maintain the village in harmony.

The village has many unwritten social contracts on the maintenance of public spaces, including religious monuments and village commons, distribution of resources such as pastures, water sources and forests, and the execution of village events. Codes and rules for the week-long Ura Yakchoe festival alone amount to a thick book, as we try to put them into writing.

Until a few decades ago, all internal disputes were settled through mediation and reconciliation by local elders, without recourse to the formal court. The village has social mechanisms in place to help the bereaved, conduct seasonal religious rituals, work together in the event of emergency and disasters, and conduct exchanges of labour and goods.

This would be true for almost all Bhutanese village communities. Even the scattered community of Ngangla Trong in Kheng region has a very sophisticated social system of looking after the temple and organising the annual festival in rotation among its three main tribes of Brela, Lhamenpa and Bjarpa. The community has local traditions of civic responsibility and engagement, taken very seriously and sincerely by its members, although these traditions are largely unwritten and passed down orally.

Such civic traditions served as the social cement to hold the communities together, and were sustained because the communities lived visibly interdependent and connected lives within the same social and geographic space. Community members felt the impact and benefit of such community engagements and social actions.

Today, as a large number of people leave rural villages to settle in new urban towns, the old practices of civil society and community mobilisation are gradually declining in rural areas, but no serious steps have been taken to effectively transfer the traditional civic culture to the new urban areas.

While material development of structures and amenities takes place with good speed, adequate attention is not given to the intangible social support systems in urban areas. This has led to numerous social problems and rising

mental health issues. The rape of two young girls in September 2019, the social media outrage and demand to reinstate capital punishment, are signs of a breakdown of community spirit and erosion of social values and moral systems.

In Thimphu, it is not uncommon to find *tshogpa* (associations), which are formed primarily to attend to the welfare of the village from which the members came. In addition to helping development and other issues in their village of origin, these associations also provide social support to the village diaspora. Despite being distributed to different parts of the town or even to different towns, people originating from the same village come together to look after each other in times of illness and bereavement. This shows the strong Bhutanese tendency for community organisation and social support systems.

Ironically, through the informal *tshogpa* culture, people living in towns today are socially more connected to people of the same origin in another part of the town than to their immediate neighbours. They have much less sense of ownership of their neighbourhood or connection to their neighbours, compared with their sense of belonging to the place of their or their parents' origin.

Unlike in the villages, they are not involved in decision-making processes for the use of local public resources or community organisation, as most of these are provided and regulated by state or municipality authorities.

The new urban places also generally do not have a calendar of cultural events. Such events which urban populations attend are traditional, such as *tshochus*, which are managed by traditional communities or institutions and thus do not formally engage the new urban residents.

Say for a few events such as literary or film festivals, trade fairs or national celebrations, which are organised by institutions or interest groups, there is virtually no new cultural activity to bring together the urban residents in a specific area.

While Thimphu has some 626 places with licences to sell alcohol, there are only two public libraries and only a couple of art galleries. Sport and outdoor facilities are increasing in number but still inadequate, and these

existing facilities generally bring together specific age and interest groups, rather than serve as a social cement for the whole community in the way a festival works for a village community. Thus, wholesome avenues to build community spirit and solidarity in urban centres are dismally rare.

Yet, state investments in cultural promotion are disproportionately put into development of physical infrastructures such as *dzongs* and temples. Out of some Nu.310 billion allocated for the 12th Five-Year Plan, only Nu 2.5 billion is allocated to culture, out of which Nu.2.3 billion is for building monuments and structures. That leaves a scanty budget for the promotion and development of intangible cultures and social support systems, although these are what Bhutan's urban centres need most in order to become smart and vibrant human settlements.

Today, urbanisation has not only become an inevitable process of development, but is also seen as the biggest driver of economic progress, through agglomeration and optimal utilisation of resources. Urban centres allow economy of scale and cultural diversity and richness, which are required for a society to flourish. Without a rich and dynamic culture, our new urban centres cannot be sustained, and will become sterile and spiritless workshops of routinised labour.

Without a strong culture of civic responsibility and community support, our towns will be plagued by social ills such as crime, substance abuse, and youth delinquency, in addition to worsening problems of waste, congestion, misuse and shortage of municipality services.

Economically, an urban centre with a rich culture will attract visitors and investors and further enhance its cultural life and milieu. Many Western governments are creating cultural zones in their cities to bring about urban regeneration and attract talented minds, as well as generous investors.

There is a rising global trend of “culturalisation” and “creativisation” of the economy, and cultural and wellness tourism have risen to unprecedented heights in the 21st century. Thus, it is critical for Bhutan to leverage our own traditional strength and adopt our traditional community practices to build culturally robust and resilient urban centres.

Adapting the traditional civic systems to make them relevant and beneficial in urban settings, and engaging urban citizens in appropriating and promoting the civic cultures of their communities of origin in the new urban settlements, will help develop a culture of civic responsibility and social harmony. In addition, Bhutan must also increase investments in cultural enterprises and boost creativity and innovation in arts and media. Through the economy of agglomeration, the development of culture will attract more resources, which can in turn enhance cultural life in urban settlements.

In order to help preserve the local intangible cultures in their traditional setting and also to promote them in new urban centres, I am currently engaged in the following projects of cultural development:

- 1) Document the written, oral and artistic cultures of Bhutan in audio-visual recordings, for preservation and easy dissemination.
- 2) Develop cultural and rural enterprises to help local practitioners of arts, crafts, skills and practices gain meaningful employment and income from their cultural heritage.
- 3) Build a community learning hub in lower Thimphu to engage young people in study, discussion and exchanges of ideas, opinions, expertise and skills.
- 4) Write down, formalise and codify the unwritten codes and rules for the Ura Yakchoe festival, which can be subsequently used as a template for writing down the oral rules of other community organisations and festivals.
- 5) Strengthen and formalise the Ura community association in order to sustain traditional community practices, and also create a model statute for such a community group, which other communities can replicate.
- 6) Initiate and encourage the new settlers in and around Changangkha temple in Thimphu to form a local urban community.

With unprecedented population displacement taking place, if Bhutan is to continue to put its traditional intangible cultures to use and benefit from them, it is crucial that we facilitate the urban population to engage in supporting and promoting the cultures of the communities of their origin, and we adapt and adopt traditional Intangible Cultural Heritage in the new urban environment without losing their core values.