

Assessing  
the First Decade of the  
World's Indigenous People  
(1995-2004)

VOLUME II:  
THE SOUTH ASIA  
EXPERIENCE



**Assessing the First Decade of the World's Indigenous People  
(1995-2004): Volume II - The South Asia Experience**

Tebtebba Foundation

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# An Assessment of the First International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A Bhutanese Perspective

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with the collaboration of *Dawa Lhamo\**

## I. Introduction

Bhutan is a mountainous Himalayan kingdom of 39,600 square kilometers with a population of 672,425 (Census 2005) including foreign nationals. Bhutan's population of 552,996 is small especially in the context of Asia where some towns in other countries would have a bigger population. Bhutan is divided into 20 districts called *dzongkhag*. Until 1991, Bhutan had a centralized approach to development policies and activities. The creation of the village and district assemblies in 1981 and 1991 were the first moves towards decentralization that had been gathering momentum in Bhutan. The population and economic census which was carried out in 2005 was partly designed to address the "decentralization imbalances" as well as to get feedback from the villagers on issues that concern them.

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The use of the term “indigenous peoples” in the context of Bhutan, and the Himalayan countries in general, is not appropriate for the following reasons. Firstly, this term might indeed be applicable to in countries like Australia, Canada, South America, South Africa, or the USA where sizeable migrant communities settled at well-known points in history. However, the Himalayas, particularly Bhutan, have very little knowledge of the historical migration of people into the area. We could only guess what happened based on the ethno-linguistic survey. It is impossible to date migrations in many places. Therefore, how do we define “indigenous populations” in this context? Who is “indigenous” when historical records are often non-existent?

Secondly, some groups which consider themselves “indigenous” may not actually be so after scientific investigations. For example, the Monpas of Bhutan consider themselves “indigenous.” However, on the face of linguistic evidences that say otherwise, van Driem (1998:870) writes, “The Gonduk and the Lhokpu and perhaps the Tshangla appear to represent the oldest populations.” Thirdly, the term is also ethnocentric and patronizing as powerful countries imposed the term upon other people without taking into consideration other countries’ histories.

After the workshop in Thimphu on 8 May 2006 to discuss matters pertaining to this research, the participants decided that it would be more appropriate to use the term “socio-cultural groups.” While it may also be an imperfect terminology, the alternative terms such as “tribal groups” and “ethnic minorities” used in neighboring countries were considered demeaning, inappropriate, and too loaded with legal definitions. Thus, they are not applicable in the case of Bhutan (see Box 1).

## **A. Research Objectives**

This paper is part of the project called Assessment of the Decade of Indigenous People in Asia, 1995-2004. The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in collaboration with the Tebtebba Foundation in the Philippines conducted the assessment for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). This assessment covers 10 countries, including Bhutan.

**Box 1.** Summary of Discussion on the Term “indigenous peoples”

The question of whether the term “indigenous” is acceptable in the Bhutanese context depends on whether all ethnic groups would be subsumed or if it refers only to original inhabitants. If the term “indigenous peoples” is used with reference to all ethnic groups with a clear definition of what it means, then the term “indigenous peoples” can be used in the Bhutanese context.

Some contend that the word “indigenous peoples” in an anthropological sense has a negative connotation, as the notion of indigeneity is a colonial construct. Within this frame of reference, the term “indigenous peoples” is applicable only to people within some countries in Asia and Africa, which were colonized.

The anthropological term for original inhabitants is aboriginals. However, some feel that this is more applicable to the western context.

The debate around the term “indigenous” is a discussion of history—for it is linked to the issue of migration through different periods of history leading to some communities being referred to as “natives” as opposed to others.

Others argue that even the use of the term “ethnic minority” is not acceptable as it too is demeaning, as the term “ethnic” has racial overtones.

The term “indigenous” has become too politicized in some countries and is invoked to legitimize certain claims, particularly in relation to land. However, these contentions have not arisen in Bhutan. Thus, the term “ethnic groups” would be more appropriate to the Bhutanese context. The definition of the term “indigenous” as given by the UN Special Rapporteur—Cobo, is not applicable to Bhutan.

After a consensus emerged that the term “indigenous” is not appropriate to the Bhutanese context the discussion on whether to use the term “ethnic” continued. In the Constitution of Bhutan, the term equality does not use the term “ethnicity.” If it is not used in the Constitution then perhaps it should not be used at all.

A broad agreement emerged that the assessment in Bhutan would use the phrase “socio-cultural groups.”

This research aims to discuss the following: (1) it surveys the various groups in the different regions of Bhutan, namely the high northern regions, the central valleys, and the southern belt. The survey aims to avoid a misinterpretation of this assessment, considering that the different peoples of Bhutan are relatively unknown outside the country; (2) it engages in policy analysis; and (3) it provides a situational analysis. The paper ends with a concluding section.

## **B. Methodology**

As we had to draw a line in the maze of the Bhutan's ethnic diversity, we decided that this assessment would concentrate on peoples with small populations (between 1,000 and 3,000) who consider themselves as distinct socio-cultural groups. However, as earlier explained, the terms "indigenous peoples" or "ethnic groups" do not exist in Bhutan's culture and context, and therefore there are no special policies of the Royal Government of Bhutan that specifically address such groups.

Moreover, there are issues of "indigenous peoples" that seem inapplicable in Bhutan. For instance, land issues and discrimination are at the core of many claims by indigenous groups in other countries. As Cobo (1987) stated, "[I]t is essential to know and understand the deeply spiritual special relationship between indigenous peoples and their land as basic to their existence as such and to all their beliefs, customs, traditions and culture. [...] Their land is not a commodity which can be acquired, but a material element to be enjoyed freely" (Cobo, 1987). However, these statements do not apply in the case of Bhutan for two main reasons: (1) there are no historical records on which to base the terminology "indigenous peoples" in Bhutan, although the linguistic survey might provide some information; and (2) Bhutanese do not have an economic story of land grabbing or spoliation between social groups. In fact, when the third King abolished serfdom in the mid-1950s, he took land from the large estate owners and redistributed them to the serfs.

**Box 2.** List of Organizations Visited

The following officials from different institutions and organizations were interviewed in March 2006.

1. Tarayana Foundation, (under the Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck) Ms. Chime Paden Wangdi;
2. Youth Development Fund (under the Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Tshering Pem Wangchuck), Ms. Gama Namgyal;
3. Renew Foundation, “Restore, Empower, Nurture Women” (under the Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck), Mr. Gyeltshen;
4. National Women Association of Bhutan (NWAB);
5. UNICEF;
6. World Food Program, Mr. Gerald Daly;
7. World Health Organization, Mr. Norbu Wangchuk;
8. UNDP, Mr. Nicholas Rosellini;
9. Royal Society for protection of Nature, RSPN, Ms. Rinchen Wangmo;
10. National Commission for Women and Children, Dr. Rinchen Choephel;
11. DANIDA, Ms. Marie Mathes;
12. SNV Dutch Cooperation, Mr. Thinley Dorji;
13. Save the Children USA, Ms. Kunzang Wangmo and Mr. Galey;
14. WWF, Mr. Vijay Moktan;
15. Helvetas, Mr. Sonam Paljor.

It must be noted that there is no specific data related to any particular ethnic or linguistic group. All data that the Royal Government of Bhutan has collected are by districts (dzongkhags) or by gewogs (village blocks) which are at the lower echelons. Other data are organized according to sector (education, health, sanitation, etc.) or age. This is clear from official documents, which government commonly uses including the Ninth Five-Year Plan, Good Governance for Development, the Ninth Round Table Meeting of



15-16 February 2006, the Millennium Development Goals, the Bhutan National Human Development Report, 2005, Good Governance Plus documents, and the Population and Housing Census Report and Indicator Maps of Bhutan of 2005.

We selected the following groups for our interviews: the Lhops (Samtse district), the Monpas (Zhemgang district) often considered as “indigenous groups,” the Layaps (Gasa district), the Lunanaps (Gasa district), and the Merak Saktengpas (Trashigang district). We chose them because they are considered as distinct socio-cultural groups by the Bhutanese people and by themselves. They also comprise a small number (between 1,000 and 3,000) in the population.

ICIMOD is a well-known organization in Bhutan and officials were very receptive to our request for interviews. After explaining the purpose of our visit, we proceeded with the interviews.<sup>1</sup> It must be noted here that all the institutions and organizations that we approached received us warmly and explained thoroughly the policies and projects. Box 2 lists the institutions we visited and interviewed for this assessment. We conducted the interviews before the workshop of 8 May 2006. Some topics discussed in the interviews also emerged in the workshop. The terminology used here reflects the ICIMOD requirements and the pre-workshop debate, which led to the adoption of the term “socio-cultural groups.”

## **II. Bhutan’s Ethnic and Linguistic Mosaic: A Background**

For a long time, the Western world saw Bhutan as a mysterious and elusive country. Roughly the size of Switzerland, Bhutan is small and sparsely populated if compared with its giant neighbors China and India. Its whole population of 672,425 (Census 2005) is roughly the size of a large town in Asia. This small population, however, is made up of a variety of groups that make up the ethnic and linguistic mosaic of this country. From the yak herders of the north to the orange growers of the south, Bhutan can boast of a fascinating kaleidoscope of populations on a small surface.

**Box 3.** The Origin of Druk Yul

The name *Druk yul* itself has an interesting story of origin. It is said that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Tibet, a monk called Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje wanted to build a monastery. When he was at the chosen spot, he heard the thunder, which was believed to be the roar of a dragon. Taking this as a good omen, he decided to call his monastery Druk, which means the thunder or dragon. As is often the case in Tibet, the name of the religious school he founded took the name of the monastery and his followers were called “Drukpas.” Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Drukpa religious figure, the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, unified Bhutan, which became Druk Yul and the name Drukpas was given to all its inhabitants.

Most of the population in Bhutan comes from the Mongoloid stock. They speak languages of the Tibeto-Burman family.<sup>2</sup> However, there are also people of Indo-Aryan stock in the south who speak languages of the Indo-Aryan family. The citizens of Bhutan are called *Drukpas*, a term that comes from *Druk Yul* (see Box 3).

Reading from stone tools and other archeological findings retrieved from the ground, Bhutan may have been inhabited before 2000 B.C. To date, the absence of archeological excavations, or extensive linguistic survey, or DNA analysis make it difficult to know which populations inhabited Bhutan the earliest, and in what sequence. Therefore, it will be premature to try to paint here a scientific and sequential picture of Bhutan population settlements. For some populations though, DNA survey analysis undertaken by the Royal Government of Bhutan with the University of Leiden provides clues of linguistic or historical nature. However, these efforts are not yet completed.

For clarity, this paper shall describe the populations of Bhutan in the following section. The description shall be according to three main geographical zones: (1) the high northern regions, (2) the central valleys, and (3) the narrow southern belt going through each zone from west to east.

## **A. The High Northern Regions**

The high northern regions are situated on the slopes of the highest range of the Great Himalaya, which forms the border around Tibet. It is a region where the people live in altitudes between 3,500 to 5,000 meters. It is cut from the central valleys by high passes and is characterized by its harsh climate with snow in winter and abundant rain in summer. Only barley and high altitude wheat grow in this whole area, which is not suitable for rice cultivation. It is essentially the domain of yaks, which feed on grass and flowers from the pastures and high altitude dwarf bamboos (*yushania microphylla*).

Three main areas compose the northern belt: Lingshi, Laya and Lunana. The communities inhabiting these areas are characterized by their pastoralist tendencies. They are yak-herders who sometimes live under a black yak hair tent, and sometimes in a house, which also doubles as a store. In the summer, younger members of the family move to yet higher altitudes with their herd. This is the season when they prepare butter and hard cheese that they trade for cereals and rice in the central valleys. In October, before the passes are closed with snow, they come down to the central valleys to sell their dairy products and yak meat, which fetch a high price in these lower regions. The cash system has replaced the barter system of old. The villagers use the cash they earned for buying cereals, cutlery, and salt. They then go back before the onset of winter.

Before 1959, these villagers traded and bartered a lot with Tibet. With the closure of the border, they have turned to the central valleys of Bhutan for their supply. Recently, trade with Tibet has resumed on a small and unofficial scale, especially in Laya. They benefit from the great demand for Yartsha Goenbub, a fungus/caterpillar (*cordyceps sinensis*) from Chinese and Japanese markets. Government permitted them to harvest this product since 2004 under specific regulations. A kilo of this fungus/caterpillar costs up to US\$2,000 in Bhutan, and \$5,000 in the international market. People from the whole of Northern Bhutan harvested 190 kilograms in 2005.

As for their language, the people of Lingshi speak in slight variation from Dzongkha, a kind of patois. The people of Laya and Lunana on the other hand speak dialects of Dzongkha that are far different from the language of mainstream Dzongkha speakers.

The Lingshi and Lunana people wear the Bhutanese dress: *go* for men and *kira* for women. The women of Laya have retained their very distinctive dress made partly of yak hair fabric, partly of sheep wool and woven on a long horizontal back strap loom. They wear a black skirt with brown vertical stripes, a black jacket, a very particular conical pointy hat made of bamboo and perched at the top of the head and a lot of silver jewelry including spoons hanging in the back. They keep their hair at shoulder-length, something unusual in Bhutan where in the countryside women traditionally have short hair.

## **B. The Central Valleys**

These valleys are located at altitudes that go from 1,000 meters (the height of Trashigang) to 2,800 meters (the height of Bumthang and Ha). Their ecological system is therefore very diverse going from semi-tropical to alpine with monsoon. Traditionally, the central valleys were divided into three regions on historical and linguistic basis: west, central, and east. However, the reality is much more complex if we take into account the linguistic and economic distinctions.

In the past, these regions are distinct “micro-worlds” separated from each other by mountains with passes over 3,000 meters. In addition, while most of these regions traded either with the north (Tibet) or with the south (India), there was little communications between these regions with the rest of Bhutan.

Today, with the development of infrastructures and roads, goods are widely exchanged between regions hitherto unconnected. The Ha, Paro, Thimphu, and Punakha/Wangdue Phodrang comprise the western valleys. The people of these valleys are called “Ngalong,” which means “the first risen.” This name refers to the conversion to Buddhism, which, according to the Bhutanese popular tradition, first took place in this western region. Rather than

“Ngalong,” western Bhutanese prefer to call themselves by their valley of origin, namely Ha, Wang, Paro or Shar.

It is not clearly known where the people of western Bhutan originally came from. However, it seems likely that they migrated from Tibet in various waves starting maybe in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century. Dzongkha, “the language of the fortress,” is spoken in this region and is a branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. It differs only slightly from valley to valley, and is intelligible all over western Bhutan.

### **I. The Central Regions**

The east of Wangdue Phodrang where the Black Mountains extend and where the 3,400-meter high Pelela pass is found is considered the border between the western regions and the center and the eastern regions of Bhutan. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the governor of Trongsa had jurisdiction over central and eastern Bhutan.

This region is home to an amazing and intricate network of languages, some spoken only by a few hundred people, making Bhutan a linguistic hot spot. Close to the Pelela but still on the western side of the Black Mountains and on the southeast of Wangdue Phodrang, there are a few high altitude valleys. One of the best known is Phobjika whose residents speak a dialect of Nyenkha or Henkha. These languages belong to the Bumthang group of languages, which seem to be a form of archaic Tibetan.

In these valleys, the land is not very conducive for agriculture but potato cultivation has given a boost to the local economy. Beyond the Pelela is the region of Saphuthat, which extends to the north in the direction of Lunana. There, the land is also not favorable for cultivation. Instead, bamboo weaving is widely practiced. People keep yaks and sheep that they move from the Pelela slopes to higher altitudes in summer. Referred to as “Lap” or “people of the mountain passes,” they speak a language called Lakha or Tshangkha belonging to the Dzongkha group.

Moving east, one arrives in the valley of the Mangde River, where Nyenkha (also called “Mangdekha” in reference to the river) is spoken. It is the region of Trongsa, which has great importance in the history of Bhutan. Forested and known for its good arable land, this region could not be examined by itself but in relation

with Bumthang. Owing to its lower elevation than Bumthang (2,200 meters), Trongsa was the winter ground and residence of the nobility of Bumthang. South of Trongsa, mansions dominate the rice fields and the lush forest serves as the winter pasture for part of the cattle coming from Bumthang.

The Yuto-la pass (altitude: 3,400 meters) which separates Trongsa from Bumthang was never a problem for the sturdy cattle herders. While Trongsa had rice, Bumthang could not grow it due to its high elevation. Its rice supply came from Trongsa. The potato that was introduced in Bumthang only over 20 years ago has considerably improved the living standards of Bumthang.

The link between Bumthang and Trongsa is reinforced by the similarity in their languages. The language of Bumthang is similar to the dialects of the Trongsa region, namely the Nubikha and Mangdekha belonging to the Bumthang group. Moreover, Bumthang has historical and linguistic links with the Kheng in Zhemgang district and Kurtoe (Lhunsi district) in the north-east.

Bumthang is divided into four valleys namely Chume, Chökhör, Tang, and Ura, which are separated from each other by dense coniferous forests. The villagers speak slightly different dialects. The Bumthang languages are classified under the East Bodish linguistic group.

Chume and Chökor are the lowest valleys of Bumthang at 2,800 meters and 2600 meters, respectively. The main agricultural product is winter wheat and buckwheat, the staple diet in Bumthang. Tang and Ura (with altitudes of 3,000 meters and 3,400 meters, respectively) were devoted to animal husbandry with large flocks of sheep, mostly used for their wool and yak herds.

In the north of the Chökhör valley, a small group of yak herders lives in the area of Dur. They call their language "Brokkat" or "the language of the herders," which is of the central Bodish group similar to Dzongkha according to G. van Driem (Van Driem, 1998:8-9). Although the origin of the inhabitants who populated this region at that time is still unknown, myths, language and history seem to point to several waves of migration from Tibet from the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, and maybe more importantly, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century at the time of the collapse of the monarchy in Tibet.

The Bumthang region is also linked to Kheng, which is situated south of Trongsa and Bumthang. Today, it covers part of the districts of Zhemgang and Mongar. The Kheng region is a large region stretching to the Indian border in the south. It enjoys a semi-tropical climate with dense deciduous and semi-tropical forests. Rice cultivation, except in some pockets, is not practiced much. Instead, the agricultural pattern is slash and burn for maize plantation and gathering of wild forest products. Bamboos, cannabis, and nettles populate the forest undergrowth. Kheng is partly populated by people who came from Bumthang. It must be noted that there is linguistic proximity between the languages of Kheng and Bumthang.

A small group called Monpas that lives in Kheng is considered one of the aboriginal groups of Bhutan.<sup>3</sup> It may be too early at this stage of research to know if they are really aboriginals. Nevertheless, their language and living patterns hint at a very early migration. This is corroborated by the fact that their migration is not recorded in the Bhutanese historical texts, therefore stating that they could have arrived before the historical period. The Monpas live on the west bank of the Mangdechu, in the south of the Trongsa district, and in the Wangdue Phodrang district south of the Black Mountains. Their domain is the forest where they obtain a large part of their subsistence and they speak a language called “Monkha” or “Olekha,” belonging to the East Bodish group (i.e., Khyengkha).

East of Bumthang is the Lhunsi district in the north and the Mongar district in the south. Before the road from Bumthang to Mongar was built in the late 1970s, the most important trail went from Bumthang to Lhunsi dzong via the Rodung la pass. Links were strong between Bumthang and Kurtoe, “the upper Kuri river,” the region that goes from Lhunsi dzong and the west of the Kurichu river to the northern border. The language is a dialect of the Bumthang group and the religious and economic ties were constant between Bumthang and Kurtoe. Because Kurtoe is lower than Bumthang, rice grew and could be exchanged with cattle products from Bumthang or could be used to pay the religious men of Bumthang coming to perform rituals in Kurtoe in winter.

The south of the present Lhunsi district and north of Mongar district was called Kurmé or “the lower Kuri river.” People who speak a language related to Dzongkha inhabit this place. This is an

important note in this environment of non-Dzongkha related languages. Called by outsiders “Chöcha Ngachakha,” in reference to the way “you” and “I” are pronounced, their language is known as “Tsangmakha” or “Tsakalingkha” (which came from the names of two villages).

Close to this area and north of Mongar are a few villages where Chalikha (from the name of the village of Chali) is spoken. This language also belongs to the Bumthang group, which makes the issue of the Chöcha Ngacha language even more puzzling. It is literally a pocket of people speaking a language not related to any of their neighbors.

The road goes today from Ura in Bumthang to Mongar through what could be termed “the great divide.” After crossing the Thrumsingla pass at an altitude of 3,900 meters, the road suddenly plunges through a dense forest which goes from coniferous to semi-tropical as the altitude decreases to finally reach the Kurichu river which is the lowest point amongst the central valleys of Bhutan (at an altitude of 600 meters). This river marks the boundary between the Khyengkha-speaking and the Tshangla (Shar chopkha)-speaking areas. Khyengkha is spoken in the south of Ura and to the Indian border in the south and to the east of Ura up to the Kurichu river.

There is, however, one exception—the relatively inaccessible village of Gongdu in the south of the Mongar district, which could be reached by two days walk from Gyelpoizhing, and two days walk from the Indian border. This village and a few villages in the vicinity form a small pocket of about 1000 people who speak a very different language—the Gongdupekha. Although belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, this language has no connection either with Khyengkha or Tshangla (Shar chopkha), or even to any other languages of Bhutan or Nepal. It probably forms a whole sub-group by itself (Van Driem, 2004: 321).

## **2. Eastern Bhutan**

Eastern Bhutan is lower and has a warmer climate than any other regions of Bhutan, except the south. It is extensively populated. Land is cultivated and planted with rice and maize, which is the staple diet of the eastern Bhutanese. Most of the valleys are



simply made of riverbeds and the villages are perched high up along the slopes. Eastern Bhutanese used to practice shifting cultivation but the Royal Government of Bhutan now discourages this practice. They also keep cattle but not as much for meat as for dairy products. Because the weather is not too severe in winter, the eastern Bhutanese does not have the habit of migrating to the south with their cattle. In winter, they would go to the marts near the Indian border or to Assam in order to trade.

Shar chopas or “people of the eastern side” populate most of eastern Bhutan, including the south. There is no trace of their migration to Bhutan in the historical texts, which means that they may have migrated in proto-historic times. They speak a language known as “Shar chopkha” or “Tshangla.” It is spoken with some variations in Mongar, Trashigang, Pemagatshel, and Samdrupjongkhar districts. It is also spoken beyond the borders of Bhutan in the Dirang district of Arunachal Pradesh as well as in Pemakoe, southern Tibet. This language is said to belong to the Tibeto-Burman family and might constitute a sub-group by itself (Van Driem, 1998:27). Like most of the languages of Bhutan, Tshangla (Shar chopkha), also has a certain words borrowed from Tibet especially in the religious vocabulary. The eastern Bhutanese are devout Buddhists who are known for the quality of the cotton and silk that women produce on the back-strap loom. However, the Shar chopas are not the only ethnic group in eastern Bhutan.

People whose language is very different from that of their neighbors, the Shar chopas, inhabit the northeastern district of Trashiyangtse, which extends from the north of Trashigang to the Tibetan border. Called “Dzalakha,” it is a Tibeto-Burman language of the east Bodish branch. It is also spoken along the river Khoma in the east of Kurtoe (Lhunsi district) which is contiguous to Trashiyantse. It is it known there as “Khomakha,” the language of the village of Khoma. Although the Lhunsi district, together with Kurtoe and the east of Kheng are generally considered part of Eastern Bhutan, they belong to central Bhutan on linguistic and historical grounds.

In the extreme east of the Trashigang district, at the border with Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, lie the two high valleys Merak and Sakteng. These valleys form a cultural and ethnic entity because they are home to a particular people numbering

around 3,000 that are not connected to the Sharchopas. They are the “Brokpas,” a term that in the context of Himalayan culture simply means “pastoralists” or “herders.” However, in Bhutan, the term seems to apply only to the people of Merak and Sakteng. Other herders are called by the same name but with its Dzongkha pronunciation “Bjop.” The eastern Bhutanese call them “Brami” or “the other people,” and their language is called “Bramilo.”

The Merak and Sakteng people call their language “Brokpaké” and it has been classified under the central Bodish group, like the Lakha of the Black Mountains and the Brokkat of Dur in Bumthang (Van Driem, 1998:7). The people of Merak and Sakteng are yak and sheep herders. They also trade for commodities with Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. Some of them also migrate with their flocks to the upper Trashigang region for the Saktengpas or to Khaling for the Merakpas in winter.

The Saktengpa and Merakpa are famous for their unique dress. The women wear a short poncho-type dress and a red jacket woven in its lower part with geometric or animal designs. The men wear leather leggings and woolen trousers, their upper garments made of sleeveless hide vests, worn with the hide outermost during the rain, over long-sleeved woolen tunics. Both sexes wear a distinctive hat made of yak felt with prongs sticking out, which keep the rain from running onto their faces.

Very close geographically and culturally to the Saktengpa and the Merakpa are the Dagpas. They wear a dress that is very similar to the Saktengpas. They speak a dialect of Brokpaké (Van Driem, 1998:8). They form a small group of herders who constitute part of the population situated between Sakteng and Trashigang, south of Trashiyantse district. Further research is needed to ascertain if they are different from the Merak and Sakteng people or if they are just a “branch” of the same people.

Contrary to G. van Driem who thinks that the Brokpaké (also called “Northern Monpa”) belong to the central Bodish group and might be close to an archaic Tibetan, researchers such as M. Aris (1979) and B. Michailovskyseem (1994) argued that it is the closest relative to Bumthangkha and belongs to the proto-east Bodish branch of the Tibeto-Burman family.<sup>4</sup>

Tibetans who arrived in Bhutan in the 1950s in the aftermath of the upheaval in Tibet live all over the central valleys. They are mostly engaged in running small businesses and therefore mostly live in the urban centers such as Paro, Thimphu, Trongsa, Jakar, and Trashigang. At home, they usually speak the dialect of their region of origin in Tibet. They also speak Dzongkha as well as the language of their adopted region. Most of them are Bhutanese citizens and since they are integrated easily into the society, mixed marriages are frequent. Men wear the Bhutanese traditional dress “go,” which is very close to the Tibetan “chuba,” while women still prefer to wear the Tibetan-style dress which is a sleeveless gown tied at the waist with two pleats at the back.

### **C. The Southern Belt**

The ethnic and linguistic outlook of the narrow southern belt is very complex. The southern belt is a lowland region in the foothills of the Himalayas with elevations ranging from 100 meters to 1000 meters. Its southernmost part forms the border with the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam. Heavily forested in the past, and having a semi-tropical and monsoonal climate, people of the central valleys who feared the heat and malaria did not like this region very much. However, as earlier mentioned, there was a tradition for the people of Ha in western Bhutan to take their cattle in the region of Samtse during winter. In central Bhutan, the people of Kheng came down to the lower elevations (500 meters) in the south. The eastern Bhutanese had already settled in the lowlands of what is today the Samdrup Jongkhar district.

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a progressive arrival of people of Nepalese descent. They came from eastern Nepal as well as from Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts in India. They settled in the region which is comprised today by the districts of Samtse, Chukha, Tsirang, Sarpang, Zhemgang, and Samdrup Jongkhar. In the Samtse district, there are some groups, which the Bhutanese consider as aboriginals. Whether this is true or not is a question that only anthropological and linguistic research could answer.

The first people examined here are the “Lhops,” which means “southerners” in Dzongkha. The Nepalese call them “Doyas.” Mem-

bers of this group refer to themselves as “Lhokpu.” They are a small group of around 1,700 people who live in the hills of the Dorokha sub-district located in the north and northeast of Samtse. According to the G. van Driem, their language is more closely related to the eastern Kiranti languages of the Tibeto-Burman branch (such as Limbu) than to that of the Lepchas, their immediate neighbors to the west. Their language may be “the substrate language for Dzongkha in western Bhutan” (Van Driem, 2004:299). The term “Doyas” that the Nepalese use to refer to this group could be a corruption of the term “daya,” which means “kind.” These people were nice to the migrants who came to settle in their region. A Bhutanese academic, Jagar Dorji and an Indian schoolteacher B.D. Sharma have done studies on this group.<sup>5</sup>

Until today, the Lhops remain quite isolated from the changes that touched most of Bhutan in the last 20 years. A road is being constructed from Samtse to Dorokha and this will have a lot of influence on the Lhops’ life. Still, the Lhops maintain their distinctive way of life today. They live in a close community and marry their cousins. They are still animists who worship local deities. They do not cremate their dead but bury them in wood and stone slab coffins, which then form a small mound. The Lhops are shifting cultivators of maize, millet and sorghum. They raise cattle, hunt fish, and gather forest products.

Today, with the introduction of two important cash crops (cardamom and orange) in their region, they supplement their income by going to work in the fields or work as porters for hire. Their distinctive style of dressing is disappearing quickly. Men and women used to wear the same kind of wrapped garment called “pakhi” made of nettle fiber. Today, they wear the generic machine-woven Indian cotton.

The Lhops appear to consider themselves as different from the “Taba Dramtöp,” a small group living east of Dorokha across the A mo chu River who are called “Shar mi” or “the people of the East.” Very little is known about this group, which is more or less assimilated with the Lhops. However, according to Jagar Dorji, “for some unknown reason there is an air of unfriendliness between these two groups of people. Matrimonial and social relationships between them are rare. Only in certain cases did people

dare to face the wrath of the community to seek matrimonial relations” (Dorji, 2003).

To the west of the Lhops, in the region of Denchukha along the northern A mo chu River, are the Lepchas numbering about 1,000 people and speaking a Tibeto-Burman language of the Naga group. It is not known when the Lepchas arrived in Bhutan but they probably came from Sikkim. They no longer wear the traditional Lepcha style of dress, which is similar to that of the Lhops, but instead wear the Bhutanese attire.

In the south of the Chukha districts and especially in the border town of Phuentsholing, people from the central valleys have settled permanently in the last forty years. The region of Gedu and Tala, which was sparsely populated by people coming mostly from the regions of Ha and Thimphu, have seen the migration and settlement of Sharchopas from the east due to the development of the hydro projects and dairy farms. As for Phuentsholing, it is a real melting pot, with people from all over Bhutan as well as temporary migrants from India settling there for business reasons. Many people from the Kheng region live in the Sarpang district and especially in the border town of Gelephu where even the Indian shopkeepers speak Khyengkha. In the east, Sharchopas have long populated the southern district of Samdrup Jongkhar and the border town of Samdrupjongkhar.

All the districts of southern Bhutan (i.e., Samtse, the south of Chukha and Dagana, Tsirang, Sarpang, and Samdrup Jongkhar) are home to different groups of people called “of Nepalese descent” or “Lhotsampa” which translates to “the people of the southern border” in Dzongkha. This appellation needs to be qualified because it is a “blanket term” which covers peoples of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. However, the term “Nepalese” is used because they all came either directly from Nepal, or indirectly from the Nepalese-speaking area of Darjeeling in India. These peoples arrived by waves into Bhutan at the beginning of this century when they were called by the Bhutanese to help and clear the forested areas of the south. They adapted to the hot climate easily compared to the Bhutanese from the central valleys. Even the British always praised them for their hard work. They progressively settled all along the southern belt of Bhutan, going up to

altitudes of 1,200 meters, especially in the south of Dagana and Tsirang districts. Even now, these groups use as lingua franca the Nepali language called *Lhotshamkha* in Bhutan, or “language of the people of the southern borders.” Unfortunately, some of them do not know how to speak their original language anymore. Nepali, a written Indo-Aryan language, is widely used in Bhutan, especially in business dealings.

Among the people of Nepali origin, two of the most numerous groups are the “Bahuns” and the “Chhetris” otherwise known in India as “Brahmins” and “Kshatriyas” which are the two upper castes in the Hindu system. The groups, who spoke Nepali as their mother tongue, follow the Hindu religion and prefer not to marry outside their own caste. They are found all over the southern belt with particular concentration in the Tsirang district. The other groups are of Mongoloïd stock and originally spoke languages of the Tibeto-Burman family.

In terms of religion, some are Buddhists, Hindus, and a few are Christians. Even if they belong to one of the major religions, shamanistic practices are still alive among some of them. The Sherpas who speak a language classified as a Tibetan dialect are Buddhists. They are found mostly in the upper ranges of the Dagana and Tsirang districts. Among the “Nepalese,” the Gurungs belong to the most important groups in Bhutan. They have settled mostly in the Samtse district. They are originally speakers of a language of the Bodic division of the larger Tibeto-Burman family. They are Buddhists or Hindus, but in this case, they are low in the caste hierarchy.

Like the Sherpas and the Gurungs, the Tamangs’ first migration was from Tibet to Nepal at a date still unknown. They are therefore ethnically and linguistically quite akin to the central Bhutanese. Like the Sherpas (and in contrast to the Gurungs), they practice Buddhism but with a strong shamanistic component.

The Pradhans originated from the valley of Kathmandu where they constitute an important group of the Newari people. Their language is therefore a Tibeto-Burman language, but they are Hindus. They have settled all along the southern belt.

The Rais and the Limbus are also of Mongoloid stock and are said to have inhabited Eastern Nepal since antiquity. In Nepal,

they are also known collectively under the name of Kiratis. They speak Tibeto-Burman languages, which belong to the same Eastern Himalayan branch of the Bodic division.<sup>6</sup> In Bhutan, they are mostly settled in the Samtse district.

The Southern Bhutanese were (and still are) engaged in agriculture, especially with the development of orange orchards. However, they have also turned to the civil service and the private or business sector for employment.

#### **D. Summary**

This survey of socio-cultural groups seeks to situate this research within the context of Bhutan. It demonstrates that the country is composed of a variety of groups and languages for such a small population. None of these groups could really be called “indigenous.” Most of them could in fact claim to be ethnic minorities based on linguistic criteria. Because of this complex ethno-linguistic set-up, the policy of Bhutan since the 1960s and the beginning of the Five-Year plans of development in 1961 has been of “one country and one people” in order to project and establish itself as a nation. Given the ethnic complexity of Bhutan as well as the fact that the caste system is not recognized, this policy gave all the citizens equal chances. However, this does not mean that minority rights have been suppressed. This simply means that the nation’s laws and citizens’ rights apply to everybody, regardless of ethnic background.

The 1985 citizenship law is very clear. The term “Bhutanese” refers to those persons who could prove that they were established in Bhutan before 1958, regardless of ethnic or linguistic origin. Bhutan’s policy towards its citizens is very similar to the French policy whereby the laws and development policies transcend ethnic, linguistic or religious background and apply to everybody in the official national set-up. Like France, the state laws do not interfere in the private sphere where each community follows its own traditions.

In terms of their economic well-being, a majority of Bhutanese are still involved in agriculture and animal husbandry (69%). While this is the case, more and more look for jobs in the civil service and the private sector. These two sectors contribute to the devel-

opment of urban centers, which did not exist until the early 1970s. People with various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds now live in urban centers all over Bhutan. This restructuring of the ethnic landscape of Bhutan is further enhanced by the construction of roads, which make communication and rural-urban migration inside Bhutan easier and faster. Thirty-one percent of the Bhutanese now live in urban areas.

### III. Policy Analysis

The Royal Government of Bhutan has no specific or definite policies regarding the small socio-cultural groups identified above. However, this does not imply that they are neglected or deprived of their rights. This remark is probably a paradox for some organizations.

In fact, in the framework of its development policies and poverty alleviation, all projects (in communications, health, or education) reach out to the above-defined ethnic groups. Moreover, some of these groups such as the Layaps and the Lunanaps in the north are not poor. In fact they are considered amongst the wealthiest rural Bhutanese because of trade across high valleys. Trade activities include goods coming from Tibet as well as the sale of yak products in the lower valleys of Bhutan. The Lunanaps have benefited from the legalization of the *Cordyceps* trade in 2004. They now have a considerable income by Bhutanese standards. The document from the Ninth Round Table Meeting on Good Governance for Development which includes a table of prevalence and incidence of poverty in 2003 shows that the share of the poor was 52.2 percent in the eastern region against 18.7 percent in the west, and 29.5 percent in central Bhutan. This does not follow ethnic group lines but is rather geographical (Good Governance for Development, 2006:13).

Moreover, the Poverty Analysis Report (2004), published by the National Statistical Bureau (NSB), states that 31.7 percent of Bhutanese still live in poverty. The eastern region has the highest incidence with 48.8 percent falling under this category. Poverty in



Bhutan is still a rural phenomenon. This is representative of the fact that four-fifths of this population is still dependent on agriculture.

The Bhutan Living Standard Survey (2003) calculated the national poverty line based on the cost of providing 2,124 kilo-calories per person per day, along with “non-food items.” Based on this, about 32 percent of the people were categorized as living in “income poverty.” However, the overall figure masks considerable disparities across the country. While the poverty rate in the western region was 19 percent, it increased to 30 percent in the central region and to almost half the total population living in the eastern region.

While the report showed no evidence of chronic food security, more than one-fourth of gewogs (village blocks) and towns surveyed in 2000 reported some level of food insecurities in the east. The Nutrition Survey 1999 indicated that children from the east were nutritionally worse off compared children from other regions. Lack of infrastructure and services such as farm roads, health, and communication are some of the reasons cited by socio-economic consultants for the uneven pace of development in the country. The Human Development Report (2005) ranked Bhutan at 129 out of 177 countries listed. It was placed in the group of countries with “medium human development.”

Bhutanese policies target the economically disadvantaged regions and social groups regardless of ethnic origin. The Bhutan Vision 2020 document summarizes the national goal of “special measures in support of the *disadvantaged and vulnerable groups* as well as efforts to ensure that those who have been largely bypassed by the benefits of development are drawn more fully into the mainstream of the development process” (underscoring supplied).

Among the socio-cultural groups included in this assessment, Layaps and Lhops are vastly different because the former are considered wealthy while the latter are very poor. This illustrates the argument that in Bhutan, ethnicity does not necessarily equate to poverty. Especially since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the groups who are economically disadvantaged such as the Monpas and the Lhops are getting special attention from the Royal Government of

Bhutan as well as from the NGOs. This approach is incorporated in a national policy framework as seen in the Rural Access Planning Programme or Education for All.

The results of the housing and population census carried out in June 2005 and released on 28 April 2006 and its methodology are available at [www.bhutancensus.gov.bt](http://www.bhutancensus.gov.bt). It may be noted that the census criteria, which follow international standards, do not mention any ethnic origin. Similarly, the draft constitution of Bhutan, which is to be implemented in 2008, does not mention any ethnic minority or indigenous peoples, but considers all Bhutanese to be equal with the same rights.

The Millennium Development Goals spell out the targets to be achieved by 2015. It includes,

*eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, developing global partnership for development (MDG, 2005:7).*

The MDG document further states that:

*Bhutan today ranks among those countries with the highest share of public expenditure on education to GDP. The country also has high per capita expenditure to GDP. Virtually a quarter of all development expenditure, both capital and current, has been budgeted for health and education. As a result of these sustained investments into the social sector, the country's Human Development Index (HDI) has risen steadily and has grown from 0.427 to 0.583 in 2003. The country has thus moved from the category of low human development into that of a medium human development category (MDG, 2005:11).*

To illustrate, the Layaps in the north of Bhutan obtained mobile telephone facilities in early 2006. Because of their village is a four-day walk away from the main road, the equipment was brought to them by helicopter. This is because the policy of the Royal Government of Bhutan is to equip far-flung communities with communications facilities as provided for in the Ninth Five Year Plan.

The reports, which are available on the web site of UNDP Bhutan ([www.undp.org.bt](http://www.undp.org.bt)), provide a good coverage of different sectors. However, they are useful “topic wise” but not “ethnic wise.” They reflect the national approach taken by the Royal Government of Bhutan. For instance, this approach is reflected in the policy on decentralization and parliamentary representation, as well as in the draft Constitution that would be implemented in 2008.

**Decentralization and parliamentary representation.** The decentralization process started in 1981 with the creation of district assemblies (Dzongkhag Yargey Tshogchung, or DYT). This was further enhanced in 1991 with the creation of “blocks” assemblies (Gewog Yargey Tshogchung, or GYT) which were intended “to empower the people at grassroots level to make decisions on their plans and enable them to adopt approaches and practices suited for their local needs” (Good Governance for Development, 2006:31).

In 1998, His Majesty the King devolved full executive powers to a Council of Ministers elected for five years through secret ballot by the National Assembly. In 2002, the National Assembly passed the revised DYT Act and GYT Act to devolve important administrative, financial, and regulatory powers to the local assemblies. Since 2002, the chairperson of the DYT assembly is no longer the district governor (Dzongda), but a representative elected amongst the DYT members.

In the decentralization process and in the elections process of the past decade, representation and decision-making at grassroots level are carried out by a vote of all the people living in the area without any system of “reserved quota” for one group or another.

**Draft 2008 Constitution.** In order to safeguard this policy of equitable distribution all over the country regardless of the population number, the draft constitution contains the following state policies in *Article 9* (Principles of State policy):

*Paragraph 7. The State shall endeavor to develop and execute policies to minimize inequalities of income, concentration of wealth among citizens, and promote equitable distribution of public facilities among individuals and people living in different parts of the kingdom.*

*Paragraph 8: The State shall endeavor to ensure that all the dzongkhags are treated with equity based on different needs so that allocation of national resources shall result in comparable socio-economic development.*

Moreover, Article 22 on Local Governments contains the following provisions:

*Paragraph 1: Power and authority shall be decentralized and devolved to elected local governments to facilitate direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic and environmental well being.*

*Paragraph 3: The local Royal Government of Bhutan shall ensure that the local interests are taken into account in the national sphere of governance by providing a forum for public consideration on issues affecting the local territory.*

When this research was being conducted, the National Assembly had not yet passed the NGO Act. The National Assembly was expected to pass the bill during the sessions in autumn of 2006 or spring of 2007. It must be noted that several organizations tend to call themselves “NGOs” for practical reasons, although they do not have a legal status yet.

One of the most interesting features of this assessment is that in Bhutan, there is a great cooperation between the different agencies and organizations. Probably because of their small number as well as of the small population, the organizations are very attentive to each other’s projects. They also try their best not to duplicate each other’s work. They cooperate so that the projects really benefit the population.

**Summary of answers to the interview questions.** As mentioned in the methodology, we asked a set of questions in our interview with representatives of the agencies visited for this assessment. It must be noted that there was a remarkable unity in the answers to the four questions. These answers are summarized below.

**Q: What is your organization/agency/department/commission doing for minority groups in Bhutan?**

A: Bhutan has a wide range of ethnic groups and there is no specific policy targeting one particular group. All the policies

of the Royal Government of Bhutan are formulated and implemented without any ethnic distinction. The policies in all districts are meant to alleviate poverty, give equal access to health and education, reduce the gender bias and gap, empower the local communities, and promote participatory approach and sustainable development.

**Q: How would you define minority groups in the Bhutanese context?**

A: To define minority groups numerically and as indigenous groups would be very difficult. If pushed to name such groups, it would probably be the Lhops of Samtse District and the Monpas of Zhemgang district. However, the Layaps, the Lunanaps, and the Merak Saktengpas, although not indigenous, are minority groups in the numerical sense and, being pastoralists, have a distinct way of life.

**Q: What are your projects/policies that reach out to these particular groups?**

A: The Lhops and the Monpas are reached through the normal policies implemented in their respective districts. These policies are within the framework of poverty alleviation projects. However, it is often difficult to reach them because of communications problems and their geographical location. There is a drive to improve communications so that these groups can benefit from economic and development opportunities.

**Q: If you do not have any specific projects/policies regarding these particular groups, how do you think that you reach out to them? What are your alternatives?**

A: The projects reach all the groups through implementation at the district and village levels. All these groups express their views through their elected representative or through village meetings. In the case of the Monpas, they could be reached through projects prepared for the Zhemgang district, which is one of the poorest districts in Bhutan. As for the Lhops, the Tarayana Foundation has activities, which are geared towards them. They also benefit from projects implemented in the Samtse district.

The last point that the interviewees made with regard to our questions was this—“Why do we want to artificially create an ethnic divide when there is relative harmony between all groups in Bhutan, and policies and rights are the same for everybody?”

The workshop on 8 May 2006 allowed the stakeholders (see Box 4) to discuss different issues. Although the terminology issue that we already explained dominated the debate, participants discussed several other points regarding socio-cultural groups and the political changes in 2008.

**Education and the Dzongkha language.** There was a concern from some participants the dominance of the Dzongkha language leads to the demise of other languages. They also believe

**Box 4.** List of participants to the workshop of May 8, 2006 held at ILCS, Thimphu

Lopen Lungtaen Gyatso, ILCS Principal

Ms. Radhika Gupta, ICIMOD

Ms. Dawa Lhamo, ILCS

Dr. Françoise Pommaret, ILCS

Ms. Marie Veno Thesbjerg, DANIDA

Ms. Parvati Bishan, Helvetas

Mr. Pema Wangdue, DDA (Dzongkha Development Authority)

Mr. Tshewang Dorje, DDA

Mr. Dorje Gyeltshen, DDA

Ms. Sonam Pelden, NCWC (National Commission for Women and Children)

Ms. Laurence Levaque, NCWC

Mr. Gembo Tshering, National Library

Mr. Ugyen Tenzin, National Library

Ms. Akiko Ueda, UNDP

Ms. Khando Wangmo, UNICEF

Ms. Noble, UNICEF

Ms. Gama Namgyal, YDF (Youth Development Fund)

that this leads to unfair job competition because the vast majority of Bhutanese do not speak Dzongkha (mother tongue of an estimated 18-20% of the Bhutanese).

A representative of the Dzongkha Development Authority (DDA) argued that the first concern is unfounded because majority of Bhutanese speak the other languages. Moreover, the DDA is spearheading studies on other languages of Bhutan. The Institute of Language and Culture Studies (ILCS) is introducing a course on languages of Bhutan in its new curriculum. The second point was also refuted, as it is well known that the best Dzongkha speakers and writers today come from regions where Dzongkha is not the mother tongue. The good performance of children in schools from all parts of the country is proof that those who do not speak Dzongkha are not necessarily disadvantaged in terms of educational preparedness.

The UNICEF representatives also stressed the need to look at education policies for children from pastoral communities. It was acknowledged that the special school year calendar already implemented was an important step forward.

**Natural resources policies and tourism.** The issue of access to grazing land was raised in Merak Sakteng. In the context of implementation of certain environmental policies, the people may have been denied certain rights. Moreover emphasis on agriculture, restrictions on grazing, and promotion of hybrid cattle may soon have an impact on these pastoral communities. The tourism sector is also pressing to open the Merak Sakteng areas as a source of income and local employment. However, the people seem ambivalent about the idea. Shifting cultivation is also discouraged in relation to forest protection and this has implications for communities such as the Lhops and the Monpas.

**Gender and urban migration.** The National Commission on Women and Children (NCWA) is working on gender issues. Women have equal rights in Bhutan but policies are gender blind. Instead of stressing equality, policies need to address the issue of equity. One issue of concern is the increasing rural to urban migration for socio-economic purposes, which affect all the regions of Bhutan. This results in an increasing vulnerability of women in an urban context where people of different backgrounds and cultures mix.

There are questions about the vulnerability of women from certain groups. For instance, a study undertaken by the Youth Development Fund (YDF) found that girls from certain remote areas in general, including the Lhops and the Merak Saktenpas, are more vulnerable.

It would be interesting to tally the more vulnerable women from rural areas with the household head pattern as published in the Census Maps 2005. In rural eastern and southern areas, the survey shows that the household heads are dominantly male. This is not the case in Central and Western Bhutan. This implies an inheritance pattern, whereby in many areas of Bhutan, women inherit their share of land and the family house while men leave.

#### **IV. Situational Analysis**

As already explained, Bhutan has a national policy covering all groups. However, Bhutan does take into consideration the specific features of its socio-cultural groups by catering to their special requests in terms of development activities and promoting them especially in the media.

Besides Dzongkha as the national language, Lhotshamka (Nepali) is the only other language of Bhutan, which is written. It is one of the daily languages of the BBS radio (Bhutan Broadcasting System). An edition of the weekly *Kuensel*, the national newspaper, is also published in Lhotshamka (Nepali). BBS radio also broadcasts daily in Tshangla (Shar chopkha), the language of the east. Both the BBS and *Kuensel* regularly broadcast and publish features on different aspects of life and culture of the different groups of Bhutan.

The public consultations for the Constitution carried out in each district in 2005 and 2006 were in Dzongkha, and translated in the district's dominant language (Lhotshamka [Nepali], Bumthangkha, Tshangla) in order to reach out to the people whose mother tongue is not Dzongkha.

As for the Dzongkha Development Authority (DDA) and its role in promoting the national language, it has been active in col-



lecting and documenting the different languages of Bhutan. With the assistance of Prof. George van Driem from Leiden, grammar of unique languages is being prepared. The DDA published the first English-Dzongkha dictionary in August 2006. It includes widely-used words from other languages such as Tshangla and Bumthangka (*Kuensel*, 16 August 2006).

Several institutions deal with tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Bhutan. The Division for Conservation of Architectural Heritage and the National Museum in Paro looks after the “tangible heritage.” These agencies are both under the Department of Culture, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. The following institutions of the Royal Government of Bhutan record the “intangible heritage”—the Royal Academic of Performing Arts (RAPA), the National Library and Archives, the Textile Museum and the Folk Heritage Museum. The RAPA, for instance, has regularly included in its national repertoire dances from all the ethnic groups of Bhutan. These agencies also fall under the Department of Culture, Ministry of Home and Cultural affairs.

The Institute of Language and Culture Studies (ILCS), which is under the Royal University of Bhutan, is also actively involved in the documentation and propagation of the nation’s “intangible heritage.” Under two UNESCO funded projects, it has been conducting video documentation of several little known rituals throughout the country. The ILCS also presented the candidature file of The Drametse Ngacham (a religious dance from eastern Bhutan) for the UNESCO Masterpieces of Intangible Heritage. This dance was proclaimed Masterpiece of Intangible Heritage in 2005.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), which is a Royal Government of Bhutan think tank, has been very active in collecting and publishing stories and rituals.<sup>7</sup> CBS has also been active in publishing in 2004 the first monograph on the Monpas by Seeta Giri entitled “The Vital Link, Monpas and their Forests.”

Two exhibitions on Bhutan were organized abroad. One was on textiles and held in the USA in 1994. The other one was in Europe in 1997-2000. Both presented cultural artifacts from different ethnic groups. The exhibition in Europe entitled “Bhutan, Mountain Fortress of the Gods” had special sections on the way of life of the Layaps, the Merak Saktengpas and the Lhotshampas.

**The Lhops.** Since 1999, the Tarayana Foundation has been very active in empowering and promoting the Lhops, the small ethnic group and very close-knit society who live in the southern Samtse district. In 2005, Tarayana organized an exhibition in Thimphu in order to present Lhops' culture as well as give them more exposure to the outside world. Tarayana also sponsored a study on their unique way of life and customs. Tarayana's aim was to alleviate this group's poverty and give them educational facilities in accordance with the motto of the foundation—"Helping the vulnerable and the disadvantaged help themselves."

However, Tarayana's goals and the Lhops' customs often need to be negotiated, as the Lhops have agricultural practices, which the national government discourages because they are deemed damaging to the environment. Such practices include shifting cultivation and goat rearing. The aim is to share with them development without taking out their cultural uniqueness.

With the assistance of different international donors such as Save the Children US and Helvetas, Tarayana has been sponsoring children's education through scholarships, providing agriculture tools, and supporting efforts such as starting a paper factory, nettle weaving activities, and furniture making.

**The Monpas.** The Tarayana foundation has also been active in the Monpa region of Zhemgang district, especially in sponsoring children education. The Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park under the Ministry of Agriculture has been a great support in this area. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has also been giving small grants for bamboo and cane regeneration.

The department of tourism plans to open the Nabji Khorphu area trek, which goes through Monpa areas. The tracks are being improved and the Monpas may economically benefit from this opening.

The SNV (or Dutch Cooperation) has been in Monpas since 1993. It is present in the Zhemgang district through the Integrated Sustainable Development Programme (ISDP) and with the Dzongkhag's Rural Access Planning Programme of the Ministry of Agriculture, which concern the six central districts. The SNV, through these programs, has been concentrating on rural infrastructure (roads, schools) as well as on capacity building (training

local leaders and officials in finance, management, decentralization and technical trainings). Helvetas, on the other hand, assists the Zhemgang district in Local Development Programs. The entire populations of these districts, including the Monpas, have been reached by these projects.

**The people of Merak Sakteng.** This group, which lives in the east of the Trashigang district, may be more prone to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) and therefore may be exposed to greater threats of HIV/AIDS. Different agencies give them special attention in the context of the national health policy. The WWF, through the Wildlife Sanctuary Project of the Royal Government of Bhutan, is supporting this group. The project specifically provides capacity development for the community, supply of agricultural tools, CGI sheets for their roofs, fuel-efficient stoves, construction of a community-school at Jongkhar, and the development of mule tracks. Through the Second Eastern Zone Agriculture Programme, the SNV has also organized milk producers and farmers groups in Merak.

**The Layaps and the Lunanaps.** These groups are pastoralists and not poor by Bhutanese standards. The priority is on the development of communications so that they can access the main valleys. Their desire to keep their way of life has been taken into consideration. For example, mountaineering was forbidden in Bhutan in the 1980s because of their objections.

In contrast, government allowed the harvest of *cordyceps sinensis* in Lingshi, Laya, and Lunana in 2004 upon the request of local people in order to improve their economic status. A kilo of Cordyceps fetched more than \$2,000 at the auctions in July 2006. This brought considerable cash income to the people of these regions. These groups also have a different school year, which takes into consideration their geographical and socio-economic constraints.

In 1999, the Public Health Division of the Ministry of Health tried to improve the water supply in Lunana, using the framework of the national rural water supply scheme. This was because 50 percent of the villagers drank contaminated water in this area. The Public Health faced opposition from the beneficiaries themselves because they had to walk for at least five days to carry the

equipment up to their village. In response, the Public Health Division is now trying to bring the equipment by helicopter.

## V. Conclusion

As already mentioned, the relevance of the term “indigenous” for Bhutan and the whole of the Himalayas has been questioned considering Bhutan’s characteristic as an ethnically diverse country albeit with a small population. Moreover, the policies of the Royal Government of Bhutan applied equally to all the people, regardless of ethnic background, to ensure that people live in harmony. It also avoids communal tensions that could result from favoring one group over another.

Because of the complex ethnic set-up of Bhutan, the lack of historical data and the equality policies promoted by the Royal Government of Bhutan, the assessment of the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People (1995-2004) as requested by ICIMOD presents its own particularities.

“Minority groups” in Bhutan are understood as “economically disadvantaged and vulnerable groups” and not as “ethnically different.” The term “indigenous peoples” is not used, neither is the term “tribe.” The researchers preferred the term ‘socio-cultural groups’ for this assessment.

The main issues that Bhutan wants to raise awareness about and tackle in the future are the following:

**The rural-urban migration.** When 40 percent of the population is below 15 years old, this implies an employment and labor issue. This means that some youth will be more vulnerable to all sorts of abuses. There should be no gender discrimination for any of the job in any sector. Government shall assist them through different programs, and it is their vulnerability, which would be the criteria for assistance, not their origin.

**Rural poverty.** The second issue is to alleviate rural poverty in regions, which need assistance by (a) improving infrastructure and communications, (b) building local capacity, and (c) providing in-

come-generating jobs based on local resources. The draft constitution emphasizes that “all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics or other status” (Art. 7.15). Furthermore, it states that the “local Royal Government of Bhutan shall ensure that the local interests are taken into account in the national sphere of governance by providing a forum for public consideration on issues affecting the local territory” (Art. 22.3).

Bhutan appears to follow closely the recommendations mentioned in the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989) as well as in the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention (1957). This is because of socio historical factors that shaped the process of development that started in 1961, and the policies that government adopted. However, Bhutan would prefer to address these groups as “socio-cultural groups.”

It is very important that Bhutan, as a state member of ICIMOD is represented in the institution’s discussions regarding the Indigenous People’s Decade, as well as in the formulation of recommendations towards project proposals that would benefit the socio-cultural groups in Bhutan and their potential donors.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the questions we asked include the following: What is your organization/agency/department/commission doing for minority groups in Bhutan? How would you define minority groups in the Bhutanese context? What are your projects/policies that reach out to these particular groups? If you do not have any specific projects/policies regarding these particular groups, how do you think that you reach out to them? What are your alternatives?

<sup>2</sup> The linguistic attributions are based on G. van Driem’s extensive studies in Bhutan. See bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> I will not deal here with the problem of the term Mon. Cf. F Pommaret, 1994 and 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Aris (1929). *Bhutan: the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom* (Aris & Philips, Warminster), 121-122; and B. Michailovsky and

M. Mazaudon (1994:546). See also Part I of R. Schafer (1966). Introduction to Sino-Tibetan (Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden).

<sup>5</sup> See Dorji, Jagar (2003). *Lhop, A Tribal Community in South Western Bhutan, and its Survival Through Time* (Paro: NIE); Dorji, Jagar (2000), "The Lhops of Western Bhutan," *The Tibet Journal*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, Summer, 52-59; Sharma, B. Deben (2005). *Lhops (Doya) of Bhutan. An Ethnographic Account* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House).

<sup>6</sup> The Bodic Division comprises different branches, one of them being the Bodish branch already mentioned earlier on. Rai and Limbu languages do not belong to the Bodish section but to the eastern Himalayan section. R. Schafer, 1966, Part I, 3 and M. Gaborieau, *Le Népal et ses populations*, Editions Complexe, Bruxelles, 1978, 107-122.

<sup>7</sup> This can be downloaded from <[www.bhutanstudies.org.bt](http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt)>.

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