



## MARRIAGE IN BHUTAN

### *At the Confluence of Modernity and Identity*

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#### INTRODUCTION

This article is an exploratory study of the changing concepts and practices of marriage in contemporary Bhutan. Lying in the foothills of the Himalayas, agriculture is the main occupation, providing livelihood to 67 per cent of the population in 2007, but contributing to less than 19 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (National Statistics Bureau 2010: 74). The country's key sources of revenue are electricity and tourism. New businesses and industries, and the expansion of civil service, higher education, and infrastructure have meant a range of new occupations, an increase in the urban population, continuing inequalities, and growing social and economic mobility.

A country that was never colonised, Bhutan has had a continuing and strong political emphasis on the preservation of its cultural identity. The last is derived largely from two main Buddhist ethnic groups: the Ngalong of the west and the Sharchop of the east, jointly known as the Drukpas. A third main ethnic group is the Lhotsampa of the south, an ethnic Nepalese population predominantly Hindu with a small portion of Christians (Turner et al. 2011: 189). Since March 2008, Bhutan has been a constitutional monarchy, with one party elected to most seats in the national assembly. The formal change in the political system has not meant a break in the development and policy discourse and ethos of the state. This is summed up in the idea of Gross National

Happiness—a balance between material and emotional happiness—and the maintenance of Bhutanese cultural values. However, sections of Bhutanese society voice the worry that the latter may be lost as social norms change with the impact of commercial globalisation and the adoption by urban youth of ‘Western’ ideas and lifestyles.

Modern education, including university education, and particularly that of women has been an important factor of change. New channels of information and communication, including the Internet and mobile phone have also had an effect. Singer’s (1972) studies on tradition and modernity in India are illuminating in this context. There always been (indigenous) innovation and, furthermore, modernity does not simply replace ‘tradition’. Most crucially, ongoing and new practices, often initiated among privileged groups who see themselves as ‘modern’, are claimed and contested as being both modern and traditional. This process engenders trends of change, furthered as these concepts and practices redefine each other and travel beyond the ‘modernising’ elite. In Bhutan, the state has played a critical role in the construction of and attempts to assert a unique cultural identity and associated practices, while also initiating technological and educational modernisation. This gives particular salience to the intermeshing and mutual reconstruction of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ practices and concepts pertaining to the institution of marriage.

Scholarly or literary writings on Bhutanese kinship, marriage and social life are scanty. This article draws on these materials, but more extensively on interviews, participant observation, and reports in the print media<sup>1</sup>, to explore continuities and shifts in various dimensions of marriage. Though most of the informants resided in the capital city, Thimphu, they had active and ongoing kin ties in different parts of the country. They included 12 men and 12 women, between 24 and 84 years of age, and of varied marital status. They were predominantly Buddhist with one Hindu, one Christian and one atheist. Other than one retiree, one home-maker, and three farmers, all were employed and most were of middle class. Some of the last, migrants to Thimphu, were of old noble families, but most were ‘commoners’ and not elite.

Traditionally, in Buddhist Bhutan, there were four caste groups: *Gyal Rig* or the royal caste, *Je-Rig* or the ministers/noble caste, *Mang-Rig* or the common people and *Dheul-Rig* or the butchers, who were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The first two castes were the landowners, with position, rank, and privileges in rural society and at the court. There was a belief that the people were born in a privileged caste because of their good deeds in a previous life and would have a good heart. One informant, Dorji, who had a monastic education and taught law in the capital, defined good heart as ‘someone who recognizes the *dharma* (Buddha’s teachings or religious law), believes in the law of *karma* (one’s actions in this and past lives, which determine one’s

destiny), cares for and respects parents and siblings.' Though some informants questioned the equation of high caste and good heart, this understanding did act as a justification for the social status and wealth of those of the high castes. Today, the elite is no longer exclusively from the high castes, though many are related to the royal family or claim to be descendents of ancient 'noble families'. Members of big business houses in urban areas and owners of land, cattle, and big houses in rural areas also fall into the elite.

Two-thirds of the informants had completed secondary or a higher education that was imbued with 'Western' thought and culture as was the new media they increasingly accessed. They narrated and reflected on their own marriages and that of their contemporaries, parents, and children, who lived in various parts of the country. They also spoke of radical trends evident in Thimphu, such as live-in relationships among young, urban, working professionals and online dating. Informants' responses on changing marriage practices were strongly embedded in beliefs and statements regarding moral, religious, and social values, linking the group to tradition and recognition of the individual to modernity. They opined on the (non-) desirability of specific trends and social change in general. The analysis has been framed by these attitudinal themes.

Within the small, face-to-face communities of village society, people were embedded in the family and its network. Kin were tapped at sickness, death, and in paying off debts and they asserted a social and moral pressure. Parents, elder siblings, grandparents, and immediate kin arranged and decided on an individual's marriage. Across ethnic groups, marriage was considered a sacred institution, valued and respected. Not all marriages were happy or successful, but spouses remained together rather than harm the reputation of their kin, since a separation or divorce was viewed as immoral.

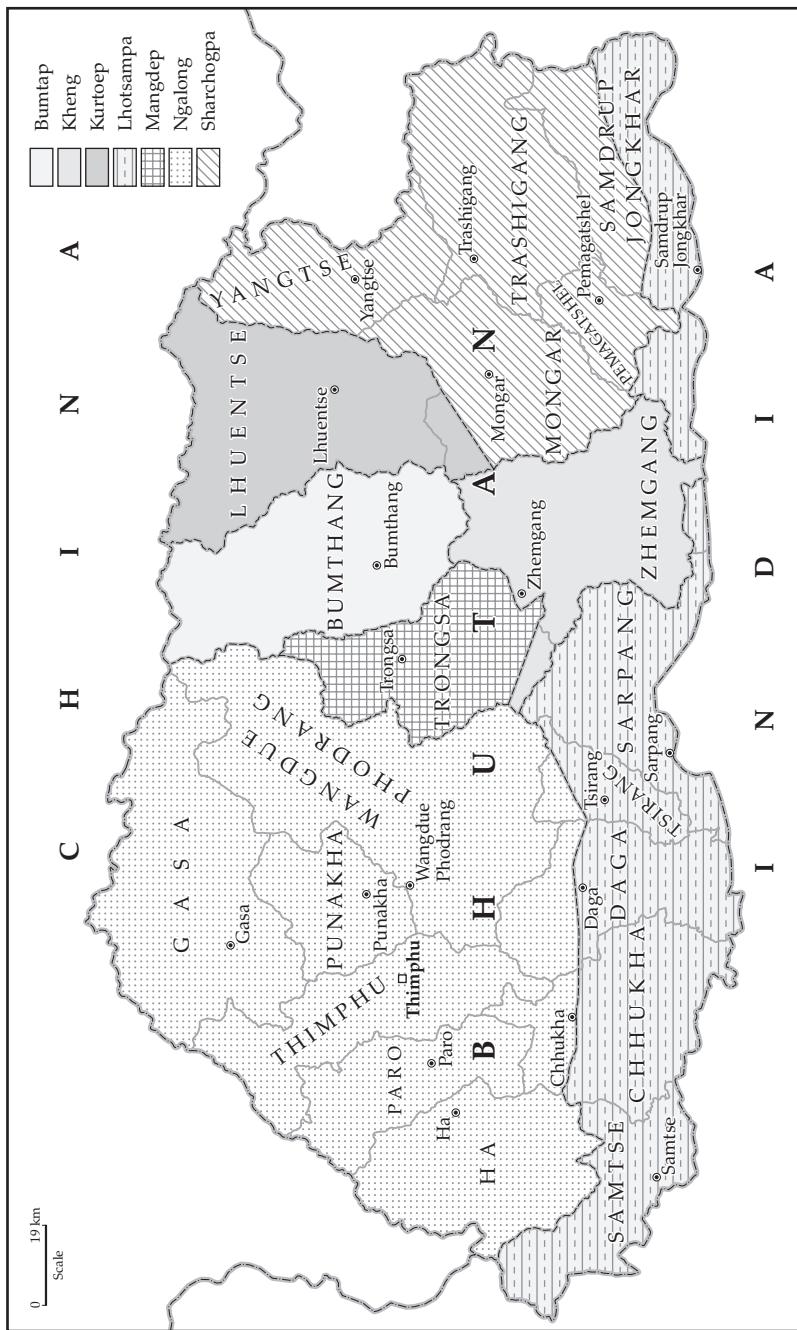
Varied marriage practices were in vogue among the different ethnic groups. These included preferential cross-cousin marriage, child marriage, polygamy, and polyandry. There were differences in rules and in practice between elites and commoners and between Buddhists and Hindus. The emphasis on arranged marriage was apparently contradicted by a practice of courtship prevalent particularly in Eastern and Central Bhutan, exoticised as 'night hunting'. Continuities in attitudes and practices in each of these features are discussed in the sections that follow, starting with those documented traditions that many informants were uneasy with.

## TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE RULES AND PRACTICES

### First-Cousin Marriage

According to Dorji (2003), the Sharchop preferred first cross-cousin marriage and then more distant cross-cousins, while parallel-cousin marriage was

Map of Bhutan showing the major ethnic groups by region



considered the equivalent of brother-sister incest. *Sergamathang* refers to the first cross-cousin (mother’s brother’s daughter or father’s sister’s daughter) among the Sharchop and literally means golden cousin (ibid.: 23–24). The terms for cross-cousins are also that for affines: *mathang* is female cross-cousin and sister-in-law, and *kothkin* is male cross-cousin and brother-in-law. In the related Buddhist groups of Kurteop and Kheng (of the north-east and centre respectively) too, first cross-cousins are reserved for each other as children. However, in western Bhutan such marriages are taboo.

Dorji argues that cousin marriage was a bonding factor in creating communal identity and social organisation, and it determined social status by preserving family wealth and lineage and, thereby, caste. The practice is linked to the value given to endogamy and the idea of ‘bone’. ‘It is believed that marriages between same “bones” ensure purity of the descent. Families’ status is differentiated according to “bone quality”’ (2003: 31). In one contemporary case, an eldest daughter was married to her only male cross cousin of the first degree, her mother’s brother’s son, who was 14 years her senior. It was an arrangement made by the girl’s maternal grandfather and uncle in order to preserve the ‘pure’ blood lineage, which they claimed went back to the Tibetan royalty. She was especially groomed for him, an incarnate lama in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and received a traditional religious education. Her sisters address their brother-in-law as brother, while giving him the respect due to an incarnate lama and brother-in-law.

Dorji’s household survey on the preference and prevalence of cross cousin marriages in two selected *gewogs*<sup>2</sup> of Mongar district in Eastern Bhutan is illuminating. The gap between stated marriage rule and practice is prevalent in most preferential systems (Trautmann 1982). It is the contrast between the two blocks in the same district, which is of interest to our discussion and may be an indication of directions of change.

TABLE 2.1: Preference and prevalence of cross-cousin marriages in two blocks of Mongar District

	<i>Khenkhar Gewog</i>	<i>Mongar Gewog</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of households surveyed	90	90	180
Number of people preferring cross cousin marriage	89	82	171
Number of people preferring non-cousin marriages	1	8	9
Number of cross cousin marriages	44	26	70
Number of non-cousin marriages	143	196	339

Source: Dorji (2003: 25), reproduced with permission.

Dorji concludes that the greater prevalence and preference of the practice in the Kenkhar gewog is because of its distance from modern life. Kenkhar gewog is one of the remotest blocks in Bhutan and it takes more than three days to reach there on foot. Mongar gewog, however, is located close to the east-west highway and the district headquarters, with direct links to modern, urban life. It has access to the regional hospital, school, market, and banking and telecommunication facilities. Dorji argues that modern knowledge regarding the ill effects of consanguineous marriage must have been a factor in the reduced practice. This factor was also cited by one of my informants who, despite his traditional Buddhist education, considered cousin marriage 'immoral and unhealthy'. Tenzin, another informant, said that cousin marriage had come to be seen as 'shameful' in his village. These expressions may be seen as justifications of changes in marriage practices other than the decline in cousin marriage. Tenzin had used such arguments in his refusal to marry his cousin, who remained embittered with him. He also confirmed Dorji's (2003) findings in attributing the decline in cousin marriage 'to young people arranging their own life partners' and their desire to marry for love.

As Dorji's data shows us, cross-cousin marriage remains the stated ideal in both blocks; hence further explanations for the varied shift in practice have to be sought. The decline in the practice may be linked to the occupational and economic differentiation of kin groups and the local community and its effects on the criteria of eligibility (Kapadia 1995).<sup>3</sup> Cousins 'left behind' may no longer be a good match. In such a context, non-cross-cousin marriage enables class endogamy and upward mobility.

### Polygamy and Polyandry

Polygamy and Polyandry are continuing practices among the northern Buddhists, the rural and urban, and across classes. Sororal polygamy (sisters marrying the same man) is preferred, marriage to two women being the most common. Economic and social purposes as well as practical convenience are cited as the motivating factors. The southern Hindus practice polygamy, but not polyandry and sororal polygamy is rare.

Fraternal polyandry in which brothers share a wife is common amongst the Bjops and the Brokpas, nomadic herding communities living in the sub-alpine regions in the northwest (Laya—a block located in north of Gasa district in western Bhutan) and northeast (Merak and Sakteng—blocks located in north of Trashigang district in eastern Bhutan). These Buddhist groups have a distinct language, and economic and cultural practices. Dorji argues for the functionality of the system, given an ecology and economic organisation that

divide family members, especially men, between summer pastures, highland and lowlands, cattle-keeping and trade. It also keeps land and cattle within a household.<sup>4</sup> However, fraternal polyandry not only facilitates household management and a better standard of living but also, as in Levine's (1988) study of the Nyinba in Nepal, it is in keeping with societal ideals of fraternal friendship, a 'good family man' and a powerful household that enables political power.

Inheritance is patrilineal, but the elder brother tends to inherit a larger portion of the land (Pain and Deki 2004: 427).<sup>5</sup> Though he dominates the family, brothers take turns in spending time with the wife. She becomes the nodal point of the family and knows who the father of each child is. Polyandry was also practised among rural elites and nobles of eastern Bhutan with the similar intent of preventing the fragmentation of family wealth and maintaining status. One husband would work as a courtier in the Royal Court,<sup>6</sup> another might engage in trade and one would stay back at home with the wife. The wife would make occasional visits to the husbands living away from the main home and had to have excellent personal skills to ensure good relations with and amongst the brothers.

### Child Marriage

Arranged marriages are conducive of child marriage, found among the rural elite in northern Bhutan, Hindus in southern Bhutan, and also among other Buddhists and Hindus.<sup>7</sup> In Dzongkha, the national language, and in local dialects it is called *chung nyen*, literally meaning small marriage. Parents agree to marry off their children once they are physically and mentally mature, but the age at marriage could be as low as 12 years. According to an unnamed interviewee cited in Dema (2009), the recently enacted legal age for marriage of 18 has little relevance among nomadic groups in Laya. For neighbours and relatives, who meet at the summer pastures, this is an opportune time to marry off their children. Young brides, between the ages of 10 and 16, are sent to their husband's home to manage domestic chores (Dema 2009: 1, 2).

### THE SACREDNESS OF MARRIAGE

Trends of change and diversity of views were discernible with regard to the idea of the sacredness of marriage. For those who affirmed the idea, there was a range of meanings—religious, moral, and social—through which they upheld marriage as an institution and a lifelong relationship. For both Hindus and Christians, love, passion, children, and family life were necessarily tied to marriage, which was a religious rite and duty. For Buddhists, the religious character was more indirect and complex. Informants explained it in terms of

their understanding of aspects of Buddhist philosophy. Dorji, the informant mentioned earlier, commented, ‘human life is the foundation of *choe* and *jigten*, religion and secularism.’ Another informant pointed to the belief that it takes eons to be born as a human being, *melu rimpoche* (making human life rare and precious). Marriage, which will give birth to a new human life, a rare gift, is thence sacred. Marriage was also described as the union of *thap* and *sherab*, of Skilful means and Wisdom, the first being male and the second female. The connection between spouses is described in terms of karma, and deeds in a previous life. Tobgay, an informant, said, ‘I and my wife met as a result of previous karma’ and he asserted that nothing can break their relationship as long as their karmic connection is alive. In such interpretations, whatever the changes in society and economy, the institution of marriage must be respected.

There were non-religious dimensions to the idea of the ‘sacredness’ of marriage, emphasising it as socially essential. One, which we have discussed earlier, is the significance of endogamous marriage in preserving and continuing ‘blood’ and ‘bone’, caste, ethnicity, and thence status and society itself. That marriage defines a person’s place in society is an idea and a social norm that children are socialised into, particularly important for the elite. The sacredness of marriage is tied to the importance of having children. This entails mundane concerns—children as a person’s social security, especially in illness and death—that along with religious connotations bring commoners within the ambit of the value. The notion of marriage as a life-long relation is also glossed in moral terms not tied to any one religion—it is the basis of a happy family life and demands respect, trust, and faith. In this is inserted an ethic that there is a difference between sexual relationships within and without marriage.

Some informants rejected marriage as sacred because of their personal experiences of unhappy marriages and faithlessness or that ‘marriage is a game for the Bhutanese’, as one informant, Meto, observed. They had become cynical about the institution of marriage. Others cited positive and negative features of marriage and continued to uphold the institution on grounds of functionality rather than the religious. Some informants were rueful that the material dimension and purpose had become even more important in match-making and the life of a marriage resulting in the derogation of the ‘sublime and religious’ purpose of marriage.

A number of informants decried the rules of caste/lineage endogamy in a manner that critiqued marriage as a religious institution. The decline of lineage, caste, and tribe endogamy has accompanied the questioning of the sacredness of marriage as well as arranged marriages to which we turn after discussing the variations in practice between the elite and commoners.



## THE WEDDING AND THE MARRIAGE: ELITE AND COMMONER VARIATIONS

Two main features demarcate elite and commoner marriage among the Buddhists and the Hindus. The first is the emphasis on class-caste endogamy, in the case of the elite, and ethnic endogamy among the commoners. For the Hindus, inter-caste marriage among the upper castes has become acceptable, though not preferred, but marriage between a high and 'low' caste was still not recognised. Among Buddhists, family history, the original home towns, wealth, education, and the astrological calendars (both Chinese and Tibetan) of the proposed pair are matched. Gazom, a librarian, stated that 'If the elites ever marry commoners, it is like the story of Romeo and Juliet'. Traditionally, maintenance of the pure bloodline was 'imposed' among the upper castes and this fostered the practice of cross-cousin marriage.<sup>8</sup> Travers' study of the matrimonial strategies of the Tibetan aristocracy between 1880 and 1959 reveals that despite an occasional marriage outside the exclusive group, maintenance of prestige and respect for the endogamy rule were of primary concern (2008: 1, 15). Nowadays even the members of the royal family marry outside the 'pure bloodline'.

The second difference between the elite and the commoners is with regard to the wedding, which is observed with elaborate and expensive formalities among the elite and with minimum ceremony among commoners. After completing the marriage talks, in which the bride and the groom are consulted, the elite again consult astrologers to fix the date and time of the ceremony. The not-so-well-off find basic astrological information in newspapers. A marriage ritual is then conducted, depending on convenience, at either the bride's or groom's home. In Buddhism, there is no religious ritual specifically dedicated to marriage. The wedding among the elite is a mix of local practices, elaborate prayers conducted by monks, and secular celebration.

Social status demands a grand ceremony of *shudrel phuensum tshogpa* (auspicious seated lines), a ceremony that is also performed on occasions other than marriage. Guests must be seated in neat, straight lines and served fruits and sweets as symbols of *tendrel* (good luck and prosperity). Eleven to 21 items are served, starting with oranges, a symbol of fertility.<sup>9</sup> The senior members of the family, who were involved in the marriage talks in the first place, orate on the significance of the marriage. The *lapa marchangi genpai tendrel*, (ritual of holding wine) follows next. The bride and the groom drink from the same cup in the presence of the family, relatives, and friends, symbolising they are of the same family. After this, the family and friends present *khaddar* (silk scarves of auspiciousness) to congratulate the bride and groom, and join in drinking, eating, and traditional dances. Particularly in urban areas, elite families may hold a grand modern party instead of a ceremony. The rich and powerful,

who are expected to present expensive gifts, are invited. The gifts help the young couple in setting up their new home and thereby offset the costs of the celebrations.

In rural Buddhist society, both the elite and the commoners hold a simple ceremony, with invitees presenting the khaddar to the couple and a small bamboo container of locally brewed wine towards the celebrations. Traditional, conservative commoners invite monks for a purification ritual and prayers, the extent depending on the resources of the parents and the betrothed couple.

Among Hindus the marriage rituals include a *puja* (ritual of worship) at the groom's home and the celebrations, which last for three days, at the bride's. The religious ritual is critical to legalising the marriage. Elite Hindu families also spend a lot of money on the wedding, inviting guests from their varied social network.

The grand marriage ceremony acts as a pressure to keep the couple together. Tshendu, thinking of an unhappily married friend, said that 'pompous marriages have obligations for the bride and the groom to live up to the celebrations. Even if you are not happy, you cannot move out of the marriage, it binds you like a stick'. 'Having a tendrel is more an aristocratic system and is not common for the ordinary people', said another informant. A commoner's marriage may not be anything more than just the community's acceptance, in the course of time, of a couple who has been living together as husband and wife. Not just Buddhists in the rural east, west, and centre, but migrants to Thimphu also follow this practice. In such marriages, little attention is said to be paid to the family background. They are often associated with the 'looking for a maiden' custom, post-marital residence in the home of either of the partners, and easy divorce.

Pain and Pema argue that the absence of ritual causes instability in marriage and suggest the latter as an important factor behind matrilineal inheritance of land in parts of Bhutan (2004: 431). Pelzom, a pious Buddhist who grew up in the rural east, where her parents still reside disagreed. She said that in the ceremony-less marriage, 'the couple comes in front of the society'. The society, witness to the marriage, can be called on for assistance during bad times, can demand that the couple remain together, and even provide legal assistance to the 'wronged' partner. Therefore, the marriage may not be as loose as it appears to be. This is important for marriages made through the custom of 'Looking for a Maiden', as we will soon discuss.

Since 1964, the Bhutanese Marriage Law demands a wedding certificate to legalise the marriage. A trend has surfaced for Buddhist and Hindu urban, middle-class couples to visit a court, obtain a legal marriage certificate, and host either a lunch or a dinner party for their family and friends, who bring gifts. The legal certificate may be obtained only because it is required by the

government in situations such children's school admission, scholarships, and job transfers. In some cases, a marriage certificate is obtained after some years of living together.

The last is becoming popular amongst young people in modern, middle-class families, drawing both on the tradition of the ceremony-less marriage of commoners and elite ideas of Western lifestyle. Views on this emergent idea and practice are mixed. In the opinion of some, it trivialises marriage and the sexual relationship and evades responsibility. They suggest that the practice of live-in allows for exploitation of women ('Bhutanese men use and dump them and look for better ones', as one informant said), promiscuity, unsafe sexual practices and their associated risks. Others, however, see it as a rational choice for young working professionals, who are economically independent and who wish to focus on their careers and not start a family too early. Both Kado (a Buddhist) and Dhan (an atheist) argued that the practice allows partners to get to know each other and decide on the feasibility of marriage. Even though his relationship ended, one informant claimed it taught him 'how to manage money, home, shop and even how to behave with the neighbours'. Though some opined that mutual understanding was all that was required to make the relationship work, some of this view were also worried about the 'misuse of partners' and unwanted pregnancies.

One important difference with the earlier practice of ceremony-less marriages, as another informant pointed out, was the absence of the social witness and legal protection. The couple now had to solve their problems on their own, with no support, especially as rural parents often did not know that their children were in a live-in relationship. This highlights how marriage is embedded in wider relationships. Ceremony-less marriage and live-in relations also take us back to our earlier discussion on perceptions of marriage as a sacred institution. In the background of our discussions so far has been issues in arranged and love marriages. We now focus on evaluative views on the two.

## LOVE VERSUS ARRANGED MARRIAGES

As discussed at the start, cross-cousin marriage and child marriage, endogamy of 'blood', caste, ethnicity, and practices such as polygamy and polyandry are closely linked to arranged marriage. According to a number of informants, arranged marriages are dominant, particularly in villages. In the villages of eastern Bhutan, it may be between children of neighbours if not of kin; in other parts, despite being a closely connected society, the young couple are likely to be strangers to each other at first. Some say that women who are illiterate or school drop-outs see this as the best option in their life. Arranged marriages also ensure caste endogamy for the Hindus. However, the discussion

on commoners' marriage, for whom 'blood' and class endogamy is not critical, indicates long-standing alternative practices.

As with the idea of the sacred, arranged marriage implies a relationship not only between the spouses, but a relationship between families and emphasises inter-generational ties. An important perception upholding arranged marriage, as elaborated by various informants, is that parents know their children and through their experience and wisdom will come to a good match for them, ensuring personal, social, and economic compatibility. Not only are the latter important, these marriages are embedded in a circle of social support, and the parents take on practical responsibilities such as that of raising the grandchildren. It is these perceptions as well as a rejection of child marriage, new aspirations following education, and new ideas of romance that are leading to divergent and troubled views on arranged marriage.

Informants narrate stories of arranged marriages that were 'successful', thanking the wisdom of the match-maker—a parent, elder sibling or uncle. Social backgrounds and incomes of the pair were similar and the personalities were a 'perfect' complementary match'. It was striking that in these stories either the wife was cool and patient or accepted that her husband made the decisions, even as he respected and consulted her on her views. The stories of unhappy arranged marriages, on the other hand, were ones in which the wife came from a richer family or the match-makers had not learnt enough about the prospective partners and the man turned out to be a wastrel or the woman had hidden a pre-marital pregnancy. Others pointed out that interference from the parents when there are marital problems, rather than being a social support, can in fact further complicate matters. In cross-cousin alliances, couples may have to remain in unhappy situations or else families may be torn apart.

Even informants of a similar age were divided in their opinions of arranged and love marriages. Some said that the choice of the partner can be left to the wisdom of the parents, who are to be obeyed, respected and revered. Gazom, describing her own marriage, and others talking of their observations, suggested that in a well arranged match, love will follow the wedding. One informant interpreted a Bhutanese saying, '*Nyen bu da bumi loden*'—marriage is the son's and daughter's wish—to argue for love marriage, but with parental guidance, including advice on astrological compatibility. Dema, another informant, drew on the idea of karma to point out that it was not possible to know whether somebody would have a love or arranged marriage.

Others suggested that parents have not understood that the world has changed and their children have changed, that matches that do not take into account the latter's new ideals, aspirations, and interests lead to unhappy marriages. For some, resistance was primarily to early marriage as they wished to pursue higher education and marry only after getting jobs, by when they

would also not be amenable to an arranged match. Dhan, an informant, questioned the concept of marriage itself, yet hoped for a love marriage, inspired by his elder sister's happy inter-religious marriage—between a Hindu and a Buddhist. Successful self-choice or love marriages were recounted in both rural and urban settings. The four rural informants, all farmers on the outskirts of Thimphu, described their own marriages and that of others in their village in these terms.

Yet, love marriages were not always accepted. Gazom's parents, who had themselves fallen in love and married, arranged her marriage with a man other than the one she was in love with. Kizom's first marriage angered her kin. Her husband, a primary school headmaster in her village, was not of her own ethnic and religious community. Strong parental objections and even ostracism by the community could follow such cases. Informants narrated tales of parental intervention in preventing or breaking up love marriages due to religious, caste, or class differences that were thought to jeopardise status. Critics of love marriage said that such incompatibilities inevitably led to problems in these marriages and did not allow for a harmonious family life. This was not Kizom's view, though her own inter-community marriage had ended when her husband left her. 'Many of the village girls competed to have him as their husband,' commented Kizom, adding that because of her illiteracy she was unable to 'fight back the woman who intervened in their marriage.'

Many of the informants who had had love marriages did not have an articulated rejection of marriages arranged by their elders. However, ideas of romance and love and constructions of an ideal marriage were elaborated by those who argued for self-choice. Affection, care, cooperation, honesty and understanding, compatibility based on common interests, effective communication, trust, advisor-companion-best friend, soul mate, pure love are among the ideals that were voiced. These views subtly pushed love marriages into a domain of individuality that earlier self-choice marriages did not emphasise. Much greater demands were being placed on the individual, inter-personal relationship even as the idea of 'finding one's life partner' expressed the continuing investment in the institution of marriage.

Perhaps it was this that led to the disenchantment with love and love marriage, noticeable in the narrations of a number of men. Tsulthrim, thinking over his own experience, said that pure love was driven out by differences in background. Tshendu commented that 'in love marriage, feelings and things can change with time. Love can fade'. Partners changed after the marriage, becoming very different from what they were like during the courtship—becoming a wastrel or taking to religion. A number of informants felt that often physical love had been paramount in the idea of love and that young people were possessive and did not take time to understand each other. They

argued that these were the factors behind divorce and suggested a trend towards increasing divorce concomitant with the trend towards love marriage.

For many, their notions of romance were tempered by a touch of realism and social desires. One feature, common across much of the sub-continent, is the wish for a traditional wedding that signifies parental acceptance, simultaneous with the idea that parents should not intervene in the relationship. Seldon was not disillusioned with love, but suggested that marriage entails responsibilities and if it is to work, sacrifices have to be made. Her husband had an affair, which she forgave as neither wanted to give up on the marriage. Lhekzom attributed the success of her marriage to the positive lessons she learnt from her first, failed marriage. Dechen mentioned that she and her husband have their own share of arguments. She feels there is a loss of identity and privacy for women even in love marriage and that it is women who make sacrifices for the sake of the husband and the children. This may be compounded if, as Kamal said, when speaking of his own self-arranged marriage, men want their wives to have their mother's characteristics!

For Seldon, Lhekzom and Dechen the quality of the conjugal relationship and women's position was not really different in arranged and love marriages. Further, 'even in a successful love marriage, the couples struggle to make a living, raise a family and survive. In such a situation, the couples have no time to relax and experience love'. Starting from the other end, informants had suggested that love develops in a well-arranged marriage. They also pointed to cases where a love relationship was arranged into a marriage. Kamal had been introduced to his wife by friends and they chose to marry though they did not experience 'romantic love'. There were cases of active intervention by the senior generation who would push a couple to marry because they were in a relationship or because one of them had expressed love for or courted the other.

Concerns regarding compatibility, common interests, getting to know each other, affection and trust, suggest that a necessary condition for love or self-arranged marriage to become a practice are opportunities for hetero-social interaction. A couple must be able to spend time together without the immediate pressure of marriage. College education has provided one such possibility. Many of the cases narrated, including that of Seldon, was that of a high school or college romance. Others were office romances, meetings with common friends, or interaction while working in the fields, at weddings, village festivals, and other such occasions. Lack of such opportunities, as informants pointed out, acted as a break on self-choice marriages in conservative communities like the southern Bhutanese Hindus. Young and not-so-young people were drawing on both traditional and modern forms to meet and court prospective lovers and spouses—the custom of 'looking for a maiden' and online dating. In

the last section of the paper, we discuss dimensions and implications of both these forms, with expressed ideas of traditional and modern marriage in the background.

## COURTSHIP: OLD AND NEW PRACTICES

### Looking for a Maiden

The long practised courtship custom of 'looking for a maiden', that appears to contrast with arranged marriage has received attention in the media and in studies. It has been both romanticised and demonised. Its advocates see it as an open expression of love, leading to a self-chosen, intimate, and sexual relation, courtship, and then marriage. Critics view it as an exploitative practice, wherein girls and women are subjected to sexual harassment and even rape.

'Let us go for a stroll', 'youth on stroll', and 'strolling for women' are other terms by which it is referred to in various dialects. The custom has been and is practised in rural settings in all regions of Bhutan,<sup>10</sup> but is particularly part of non-elite culture in the east and centre. Tshendu recounted that 'looking for a maiden' had led to the marriages of half the people in his village in eastern Bhutan. There was a broad sequence of activities that this custom built on. Girls and boys met and interacted while farming or collecting firewood, dried leaves, and fodder in the woods. They got to know each other in the course of these activities and could subsequently socialise after the day's work. Through secret signals between a young woman and man, attracted to each other, she would indicate her readiness to open the door should her lover visit at night. In time, they or their parents would decide that they must marry, which, as outlined earlier, could be with minimum ritual and residence in either partner's natal home.

The local terms had a positive connotation, but the male initiative that they embraced was a precursor to the contemporary shifts and controversies in the custom. It is now known more popularly as 'night hunting'<sup>11</sup> and its relevance and implications have become a topic for discussion among the educated. There was a noticeable gender divide in the views of our informants. According to Kizom and Lhekzom, it was a game young men played so as to enjoy physical sex without responsibility. Since there was no concept of rape in eastern Bhutan, sexual harassment of girls was not acknowledged. The doors and windows of the homes of the village poor were not strong, the traditional wooden latch could be opened from outside, and men could enter uninvited. At times, parents woke up and drove such intruders out. Girls would sleep near elderly women to deter young men. Kizom said that she remained safe because she was physically strong and could fight unwanted advances.



Given that it is a legitimate path to marriage, young women are kept on the razor's edge between encouraging flirtations to achieve a desired marriage, deflecting harassment, and losing their reputation. The prevalent idea that the more attractive girl is visited by more men could easily slip into the label of promiscuity, making a marriage more difficult for her. A number of the informants spoke of women who had children outside marriage as a result of 'looking for a maiden' liaisons and the difficulties that they and their children faced. The problem, usually, arose as the father did not accept the liaison as a marriage and the children as his. Penjore, however, does not agree that the children suffer any legal or social disability, and he relates this to sanctions of the small community of his field study as well as the 1980 Marriage Act, which obliges men to pay child maintenance for children born outside marriage (2009: 147–49).

Dorji, Tenzin, and Raju were among the male informants who spoke in favour of the custom. It provided a platform for courtship, cross-sex joking and socialising, and getting to know a possible marriage partner. Traditionally, 'shyness of sexual expression' was absent. They insisted that theirs was not a culture in which women or girls are bullied and that it was difficult to enter into a house uninvited. Whether or not this was true in the past, many suggest that with electricity, glass windows, and modern door latches men cannot hide, and can be found nowadays. Dorji's own marriage was through this approach of courtship. Tenzin saw it as a route to love marriage and out of arranged and cross-cousin marriage, even while acknowledging that it could be misused.<sup>12</sup> A number of men narrated how the term was also used to describe the night-time 'hunt' by groups of young men for girls to 'have some fun' with. Kado saw this to be a consequence of changing norms of non-marital sexuality: it had not been a taboo earlier, but nor had casual sex been acceptable.

In drawing together the diverse views and stories, what emerges is that the traditional custom was a form of flirtation and courtship that was intended to lead to marriage. That it did not always do so was accepted, more for men than for women. The latter suffered, not because it was known that they had had pre-marital sexual relations, but because of the label of promiscuity. It also made them vulnerable to forced and unwanted sex. Thus, this open expression of individual love and intimacy was not based on gender equality, though social sanctions in small communities provided a modicum of security to children born outside marriage. Many rural women and urban and rural men continue to take this route to meet, get to know, and court possible marital partners, not always in keeping with earlier rules of cousin marriage and endogamy. This traditional form has become a part of contemporary life, especially with changing aspirations and desires that followed increasing geographical and



economic mobility. The mobility, however—with its implications for the breaching of community and class endogamy—has also created many of the difficulties.

Students from nearby colleges, truck drivers, and civil servants on rural tour are more eligible as husbands than local farmers and a route out of the hard labour of village life. Young women are happy to be ‘courted’ by these ‘outsiders,’ who, however, may have a temporary relationship in mind. These men ‘succeed’ by promising marriage, but are themselves looking for a ‘better’ marriage or have a wife elsewhere. Their desperate attempt to seek the woman’s consent to sexual intimacy is captured in the saying, *San phamai phazhing yang bee, ngazi gongphai khab yang me thun*, meaning ‘even parental land will be given at night; not even a needle from a lapel will be left behind in morning’. Penjore (2009) also found that ‘false promises of marriage’ had become linked to the custom, though he argues that the girls can always protect themselves since the activity takes place at their homes (ibid.: 113, 115–116, 149). His conclusion was based on the views of his mostly male respondents, for few women were ready to talk to him about the custom (ibid.: 4–5, 146). Critically, local community sanction has little force for such passing outsiders.

Female aspirations and agency as well as male hubris are all part of the contemporary practice, if not also of the traditional form, as illustrated by the following, apocryphal case. This was an instance in which social gossip is used to bring state law into the process to the advantage of the woman.

A young woman, about 16 years old, who had dropped out of high school, was living with her married, elder sister. The latter invited a civil servant posted in their block for dinner to their village home. She served the food late so that it was no longer possible for him to walk back home. At night, she sent her younger sister to the room in which she had prepared his bed. The man was happy to sleep with the young woman and returned to his home in the morning, with no sign of returning any time soon. After a couple of weeks, the elder sister warned the man that he should marry her sister or she would file a case of rape under the new laws according to which her sister was underage. Village gossip and public knowledge of the incident made this a real threat, so the man married her. However, he neglected her and planned to leave her once she completed 18 years to fulfil his own dream of marrying an ‘educated and glamorous woman’. Meto, the narrator, critical of young rural women who accepted the custom of ‘looking for a maiden’, said that civil servants refer to this incident as the ‘trap game’ and adds, ‘But the couple have now compromised with each other and are living a happy life. They are glued together. He spends less time with his friends.

## Online Dating

Young, urban men and women spend time in online chat rooms while at work, at home, and from cyber cafes. In Tsulthrim's words, 'I did it for the sake of fun and chatted with nameless and faceless identities. I don't mind socializing'. Online chatting even helped him improve his typing speed, he points out! Many informants and their friends and relatives used online chat rooms as a platform to date, make friends, court, and perhaps find a marriage partner. Even without meeting face-to-face, they 'can find out if they are compatible and if not, would stay as friends'. It could give women the initiative in deciding whether to take a relationship further or not. People usually met online as strangers, but occasionally through mutual friends. For young people, online dating has opened the world to romance: Kamal's daughters had met their husbands online, one a Hindu from India and one a Buddhist living in the US. Both the marriages are inter-community, but it was the younger daughter's to an Indian Hindu that he had resisted initially and still worries about, because of the 'conservative social norms that are harsh on women' in India. For his elder daughter, it was a second marriage, and she decided to remarry only because the man accepted her daughter from her first marriage. Though they met and dated online, some relatives had put them in touch with each other.

However, stories of disappointment and cheating were as frequent as stories with successful and happy ends (Editorial 2008). Sad endings were foretold, suggested one informant, as young people seemed to 'blindly fall in love at first sight', or rather first chat, and assume that marriage was the natural end. Despite traditional, rural social gatherings and modern, urban parties, cross-gender socialising of young people where intimacy is not oriented to possible marriage, is not easy or common. The dangers cited more often were that of 'faceless and nameless identities', who could lie and cheat, or the 'addiction to flirtation' without social control. Some informants, such as Dhan, had created false identities and persona to conduct one or more online flirtations. When the woman wished to meet him in real life, an appointment was made but not kept. Some ignored and pretended not to know the person when they realised that he or she was nothing like what they had described themselves to be online. Others decided that an online date had nefarious or material ends in mind, rather than a romantic connection. Some spoke of how they suffered heartbreak when they discovered that the 'friend' was not who he said he was or had another long-standing relationship or marriage and they themselves were just 'time pass'. 'It is difficult to find a person who is wife or husband material online', said Meto. Many of these informants were of the view that the stories of online dating leading to marriages were only in movies and newspapers. Yet, online dating has become a social practice for educated

urban youth, driven by the desire for flirtation, and even more by the hope of a romantic love leading to marriage.

## CONCLUSION

In delineating marriage patterns in Bhutan, both continuities and the remaking of tradition are evident, as is the recasting of modernity. Thimphu can be viewed as a microcosm of the country, but also containing an avant garde. Our informants, whatever their age, related not only to their own experiences, but also that of their kin, neighbours, friends and colleagues of various ages and from varied ethnic groups and regions. They spoke of values and practices that called on ideas of a unique cultural identity and the centrality of the social group and tradition, even as they spoke of individual desires and strategems to make a life of love, marriage and family. Thus, arranged marriages were to provide the desired love relationship and love marriages were not only to be a lifelong fulfilment of individual desire and bonding, but were to be embedded in traditional social networks and identity. Marriages brought generations together even as they separated them in their aspirations. Weddings could be both modern and traditional, religious celebrations and secular parties.

This intermeshing of ideas and practices of tradition and modernity were in part possible because of the fluidity in both. This was based on the diversity of practice that each contained—ethnic and religious in tradition, in the sources and possibilities in the modern, with status and class as aspects of both. It was also based on an unnoticed continuity of ideas between traditional values and the modern. Most critical in the latter was the common emphasis on the institution of marriage, a harmonious family life, and the gendered model of the conjugal relationship. Though women were educated and in new occupations and despite flexibility in traditional post-marital residence, the expectation that they would ensure that the marriage worked was common to both. While the link between endogamy and the sacredness of marriage was questioned, new secular and religious interpretations upheld support for endogamy. Aspirations for self-choice and individual self-love could cite traditional practices such as ‘looking for a maiden’ and ceremony-less weddings to culturally embed their radical choices.

The contradictions and growing divergence in views, the divide between the old and the new could, however, be too deep to cross. Men and women differed in their views of traditional practice and its modern translations. The urban young and those educated in the ‘modern’ values contrasted with the villagers and nomads in the north and the west, the Hindus in the South, and the traditional elite in their neighbourhood in their romantic desires and advocacy of individual choice over social group and marital practices. While it

remains a question as to whether the young are the trendsetters or will remain a small section, today, the practices claimed as custom and those highlighted as the new deeply influence each other.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork was conducted in 2008-09. My own family's marital history informs the study, such that my personal engagement in Bhutanese society has meant a constant struggle to see along with and beyond my own subjectivities. Interviews at the first meeting took the form of 'story-telling' or life history narratives.

<sup>2</sup> A group of villages make up a gewog or block. It is the lowest unit of administration and government in the country.

<sup>3</sup> Kapadia (1995) has discussed such factors in the decline of cousin marriage in South India.

<sup>4</sup> These motivations have been discussed in a range of writings on polyandry and polygyny among non-Buddhist groups, including Mazumdar (1962), Berreman (1963), and Gupta (1990).

<sup>5</sup> There are commonalities also with the Sherpa in Nepal studied by Ortner (1978) and groups across the border in Tibet.

<sup>6</sup> From 1900 till late 1940s, the Royal Court was located in Central Bhutan. Many courtiers spent long periods away from their native homes to serve the monarch.

<sup>7</sup> The Hindus, many of Nepali origin, also follow caste endogamy, but do not have a dowry system.

<sup>8</sup> Till the late 1940s, bone monitors from the Royal Court visited the districts and the villages once in three years to check that there had been no 'mixing white and black bones'. If there was such a marriage, a fine was imposed and the couple was forced to divorce.

<sup>9</sup> The belief is that just as a single orange, when peeled, has many small fruits, so also a couple will be blessed with many children.

<sup>10</sup> Penjore (2009) points to a similar custom among Sherpa communities in Nepal and the matrilineal Na in Yunnan, South East China.

<sup>11</sup> There are various theories as to how this name was given to this custom, ranging from the predatory practices of public school and college boys to the ethnocentric view of outsiders. Penjore (2009), who undertook an ethnographic study of the custom in a village in central Bhutan, suggests the last theory.

<sup>12</sup> That the traditional form could be the path to non-conventional matches parallels Ahearn's (2002) finding that the traditional form of elopement among the Magar in Nepal could result in 'extremely inappropriate' marriages.

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