

Nation in Transition: Can Bhutan Become a Model of Progress in the VUCA World?

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Abstract:

The Kingdom of Bhutan, which the outside world came to know properly only in the last half of a century, is seen as the last bastion of Himalayan Vajrayana Buddhism. Today, it is also popularly known for its pursuit of Gross National Happiness. The country, however, is going through unprecedented change heightened by the fast process of globalisation and digital revolution. Will the country succeed in becoming a different model of human progress or join the global meld? Can its traditional cultures and historical continuity survive the global trends? An understudied area until recently, Bhutan is now under sharp focus with a burgeoning academia and growing international attention. It is being increasingly seen as a developmental experiment.

Kuzuzangpo la.

How wonderful to be back in Oxford and see so many old friends, colleagues, and familiar faces. Friendships, meetings, chance encounters, and even passing glances hold profound spiritual and social significance in the Himalayan Buddhist culture. Specially in Bhutan, the connections between people, called 'drelwa', holds great value and power in building strong spiritual relationships, social capital, political alliances, and community solidarity. They signify reaping results of past associations, enhancing present relations, and planting seeds for future connections. In this nexus of the intricate and inconceivable karmic pathways, crisscrossing fields of invisible energy or vibes, and the existential entanglement in samsara, the Bhutanese believe that it is karmic connections, what we call 'ledrel', which brings people together. It was, I believe, such a *ledrel* or karmic connection that led Michael Aris, a young British man, to Bhutan in the 1960s, when foreigners were extremely rare in our part of the world, shown here sharing a ceremony with Bhutanese royals.

It was also, I suppose, such *ledrel*, which brought me to Oxford. I still remember the cloudy afternoon on 29 September 1997, when Barbara Spencer picked me up from Gloucester Green bus station and brought me to her house in Wolvercote Green. She asked me if I have contacted Michael Aris, whom I have not met yet but corresponded a few times. I told her I have sent letters but not heard from him. Barbara then dialled the number for St Antony's lodge for me. When I asked if I can speak to Dr Aris, a deep voice responded "Are you the Bhutanese monk Karma Pungsho". "Yes, I am, Dr Aris" I said. "Dr Aris has gone out but he asked me to take your number in case you called," said the person. He was St Antony's college porter.

A few minutes later, Michael rang me saying "Kuzuzangpo la, Oxford phebs chi ga" he said. He was the first and the only foreigner I have met who impressed me with his knowledge of Dzongkha then. When I asked him if I could come and see him, he said he has a car and will come to see me. A bit later, Michael showed up at Wolvercote Green and then took me on a tour of Oxford.

After that first meeting, Michael and I spent much time together talking about things, places, and people we had in common and a strong bond grew between us, mainly due to our common interest in Tibet, Buddhism, and specially Bhutan. He also introduced me to Kim, , Anthony and Marie Laure Aris, Roderick, and Ara Bella, whom Michael made me marry by conducting a Buddhist wedding ceremony on my first Boxing Day in the UK. Bhutanese who heard I married Arabela thought I married her myself, not that I married her off. When I returned to Bhutan with Anthony and Marie Laure Aris in 2000, many people in Bhutan assumed that I have returned with my in-laws. Short of marriage, I became an ‘honorary’ member of the Aris family.

These memories, so intimate and warm, seem like from another lifetime. Yet, one of them is still vivid and strong: the tragic loss of Michael to cancer over a year and half later on 27 March 1999, on his birthday. In the last days of his life, Michael was very anxious about Suu who was under house arrest in Burma, about Kim and Alexander, and also about the state of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies at Oxford. I remember Michael, then in his final days, meeting Lisbet Rausing and other supporters to secure the position for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies at Oxford. Anthony, Marie Laure, Charles, and Ulrike and many others after him continued that mission and here we are today, celebrating 25 years of the Aris Centre for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, a solid outcome of deep connections and commitments, and also 10 years of the annual Aris Lectures. My heartfelt congratulations to Charles, Ulrike and everyone who contributed to this. Let’s give them a round of applause.

During my time at Oxford pursuing a doctoral degree, I remembering comparing myself to Frodo on a precarious journey beyond the familiar traditional shire to the vicious academic Land of Mordor. Michael Aris was my Gandalf whom I lost too soon and without whom I had to make the rest of the journey. Michael was not only my guiding light in finding my ways in the alien Western world and the intricacies of academic life, but he opened my eyes to my own world.

Until the end of the twentieth century, my work had focussed on Buddhist studies, particularly its philosophical systems. I had nearly spent half of my life abroad and was not even fluent in the national language of Bhutan. The conversations with Michael and his work revealed to me that Bhutan remained a largely uncharted area of study, with only a few foreign researchers who could gain access to Bhutan, speak its languages, and even fewer Bhutanese who took up academic study of the country. With no barrier to access, intimate connections to the communities, advantage of having several Bhutanese languages, and over a decade of education in Bhutan’s high religious culture, it was opportune for me to take up academic study on Bhutan and its cultural heritage. It was thus with Michael’s inspiration and such a realization of my advantage that I started working on Bhutan. tyuSadly, Michael did not live long enough to see my works on Bhutan, a continuation of academic enterprise he started long before I was born. Today, I stand here with you to share some of the insights I gained through lived experience, my academic work and social engagements in Bhutan for over a quarter of a century.

I see absolutely no need to introduce Bhutan to this audience as most of you would have been there or read about it, and some of you are indeed very well informed about the country. On a flight to Beijing I was sitting next to a Chinese. We introduced each other and I clearly said I am from Budan, Chinese for Bhutan. Fifteen minutes later into the conversation, she turned to me and asked: “So, what do you eat in Africa?”. Twenty years ago, most people did not know where to place Bhutan on the map. In recent decades, Bhutan has become better known

and has been variously described as the last Shangrila, as a bastion of Vajrayāna Buddhism, and more commonly as a country associated with happiness, even being considered by some as the happiest place on earth although one may take that last portrayal with a pinch of salt. No doubt Bhutan is an exotic country and it has managed to build a happiness brand. What I hope to do today is to give you a more realistic, objective picture of its past and present situation.

Firstly, I can confirm that Bhutan is a very colourful society with a complex, diverse, and sometimes even confusing and contradictory cultural composition. For instance, one can find a robust culture of celibacy with numerous monks and nuns and at the same time, a very libertine sexual character among the Bhutanese men and women. It is considered a vulgarity to directly mention sex organs but grotesque phallic symbols, many of you here would have seen, are ubiquitous on houses and in art and religious festivals. It is a male dominated society but vast majority of the population practiced a matrilineal system of inheritance. Similarly, one can find a serene Buddha figure in meditation right next to a wrathful animal headed blood drinking diety in open sexual union with a consort. How has such complexity and diversity come to be? How do we explain and reconcile the contradictions?

The primary factor for such cultural diversity and complexity, I would argue, is Bhutan's geographic location on the southern slopes of the Himalayas and its natural topography. Bhutan, as you know, starts in the plains to the south, its lowland starting around 150m above sea level, and rapidly goes up through steep foothills, narrow gorges, the spacious valleys in the midlands, and alpine highlands all the way to snow capped mountain peaks, the highest of which is 7570m above sea level, the peak of Gangkar Punsum, the highest unclimbed point on earth. In about 120km as the crow flies, not a lot longer than the distance between Oxford and London, Bhutan covers many bioclimatic zones which contain a wide range of flora and fauna, making Bhutan a biological hotspot. One can go from above treeline to subtropical forests in matter of hours. Such diversity in natural surrounding inevitably resulted in great cultural difference among pre-modern societies which relied heavily on their immediate surroundings. I grew up eating buckwheat as staple food in my village at 3200m above sea level while my cousins in Eastern Bhutan had maize for staple food and in Western Bhutan has rice as staple food. My district was known for wool work while some parts of Bhutan cultivated cotton or fibre, and yet other parts produced silk for clothes.

Not only is Bhutan steep and rugged going north to south, even going east to west, the country is fiercely divided by deep valleys, big rivers, high passes, and thick forests leading to isolated lives which has resulted in rich diversity of valley cultures, languages and dialects. Bhutan is indeed a very vertical country.

While we can say that Bhutan's high religious culture has common origins and family resemblances with that of Tibet, its folk culture based on heavily forested surroundings is very different from that of the Tibetan plateau. Bhutan's dress culture such as kira, and foodways such as the habit of chewing betel and eating large amounts of chillis suggest closer connections to cultures in the Indian sub-continent than to Tibet.

The second factor is Bhutan's geopolitical and cultural situation. If one asks a young Bhutanese person to describe Bhutan, a typical response would be that "Bhutan is a small landlocked country sandwiched between the two Asian giants of China and India." This is no doubt an accurate description of Bhutan, and it underscores the precarious geopolitical reality, which is acutely felt during tensions such as the Chinese and Indian military stand off in 2017 at Doklam, a disputed territory. Demographically, we remain today a tiny tribe squeezed

between the two most populated countries on earth. This has become even more precarious now given Bhutan's declining birth rate.

As a cultural historian, I like to go a bit deeper than Bhutan's current geopolitical situation and to see how the Bhutanese valleys, such as Paro and Bumthang, pictures of them taken by Michael Aris in 1960s, for many centuries have been the meeting points and melting pots of two of Asia's greatest civilisations: the Indic civilisation to the south and the Sino-Tibetan civilisation to the north. Throughout many centuries, the high religious, philosophical, and artistic cultures of these two civilisations merged in Bhutan and to this day, to give you an example, we can see the Chinese peony sitting next to the India lotus on our wall paintings, the Chinese Ngangpa or goose neck design next to the Indic chotsi or stack of scripture designs on a Bhutanese cornice.

Like Tibet, Bhutan received its Buddhist heritage after Buddhism has gone through several phases of development in India, three of which are the spread of mainstream Buddhism based mainly on renunciation and monasticism from the time of the Buddha, the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, an expanded version growing out of mainstream Buddhism from around the beginning of the Common Era, and the syncretic tantric form of Buddhism also known as Vajrayana from around the middle of the first millennium. All these phases have developed in India by the time Buddhism was transmitted to Tibet and Bhutan from the 8th to 14th centuries, thus leading to the depth and diversity of the Buddhist traditions in these places.

However, unlike Tibet, Bhutan did not go through serious cultural disruption in the past which affected the transmission of these cultures. Until the second half of the 20th century, Bhutan remained a isolated place, not because of a deliberate policy of isolation, as our neighbour Tibet did in the 18th and 19th centuries, but because of its geographic location and physical inaccessibility. It is the snow capped mountains to the north and the malaria infested terrai jungles to the south which kept Bhutan isolated and protected.

This isolated situation has helped Bhutan enjoy a unique cultural continuity. To the south, Indian cultural landscape went through significant changes a thousand years ago through Islamic invasions, then five hundred years later through colonization, and then a haphazard process of modernisation. To the north, China and Tibet went through dramatic changes with the spread of communism and then through the tragic Cultural Revolution, which almost wiped out their past. In contrast, Bhutan was never colonized, had no major natural calamities or internal upheaval which disrupted its cultural continuity.

Due to the geographic isolation and difficulty of access, Bhutan has also remained a country which was poorly studied. Before the twenty-first century, it was mainly the Aris brothers through whom Bhutan was known to the outside world. Michael wrote extensively about Bhutan and Anthony published many works on Bhutan. There was only a handful of researchers working on Bhutan, including old friends such as John Ardussi, Francoise Pommaret, and Yoshiro Imaeda. However, like many other aspects of life, scholarship on Bhutan also began to change in the recent years.

In the last sixty years or so, Bhutan has gone through a tremendous process of change through modernisation, which the country actively sought, and globalisation which came in with great speed and intensity. When people ask me to describe Bhutan today in one word, I often say Transition. Bhutan is going through a serious transition.

From an isolated hermetic kingdom sixty years ago, Bhutan has today joined the global meld. Not only are Bhutanese physically travelling to many countries and also seeing many visitors from outside in Bhutan, television and internet which were introduced in 1999 brought the outside world tumbling into their living rooms and individual lives. When I grew there was a popular saying in my village “Jaza nami thama, Jatsa is the end of sky.” Ura, my village is on the eastern edge of Bumthang and Jatsa on the western end. Most people did not travel beyond my district and going to Jatsa was considered as going very far. Today, Jatsa is one hour and fifteen minutes by car and in 2018 I discovered I have more first cousins living in New York than anywhere else. Our world have exploded from Jatsa being the end of sky to people from my village living in many parts of the world. The world has also come to us with some 500 tourists attending the village festival.

Smart phones and social media has penetrated into even the most remote corners of Bhutan with nationwide fibre optic network, and almost 100% coverage of telecommunication facilities. Starlink has arrived a year ago. Even illiterate grannies are busy on Wechat and Whatsapp. In one recent report on ChatGPT, Bhutan ranked top with approximately 15.96% of its population using the AI tools.¹

Bhutan was totally a rural community sixty years ago with not a single street. The capital was the dzong with some farm houses around it. We can see this in the photos taken by Michael Aris in 1960s and the same areas are now filled with houses. Today, almost 50% of the population live in new urban centres. Moving from a close knit rural community with age old community solidarity systems to a new urban environment with no clear social support systems comes with many kinds of challenges.

We may estimate that some 20 percent of the population may be literate sixty years ago. They would be religious priests and some aristocrats who had home schools. The vast majority of some 80% were illiterate and passed down their knowledge, values, and skills in oral forms. Today, literacy has nearly reached 80% but before the literary culture could take roots among the masses, the audio-visual culture has come with such great force that one can say Bhutan moved from an oral past directly into the audio-visual and digital present.

Economically, Bhutan has moved from subsistence farming to a consumeriest market economy. However, this and the new education and administrative system in which white collared desk jobs were preferred over manual work, led to the decline of agricultural productivity and made Bhutan heavily dependent on imports. Bhutan sixty years produced even surplus rice and maize to Tibet and the only basic commodity Bhutan had to import was salt. Today according to government figures, Bhutan imports some 65% of the rice. Consumption in general has shot through the roof and with a vast majority of basic commodities being imported from outside, mainly India. Politically, Bhutan has moved from a traditional monarchy to multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy in 2008.

As a cultural scholar, the most far reaching change I have witnessed is in the inner world of intangible cultures, our world view, mindset, and value systems. The two building blocks of traditional Bhutanese worldview or cultural identity are our nature based pre-Buddhist animistic and shamanistic belief system and the mind-centred Buddhist thought and outlook. In the pre-Buddhist belief system, Bhutan viewed nature as a living forces with numerous mountain deities, river and lake spirits, cliff gods, forest guardians, tree spirits and so forth. In

¹ <https://coinjournal.net/news/the-most-chatgpt-addicted-countries/>

this worldview, there are many invisible lifeforms such as *lha*, *lu*, *tsen*, *dre*, *gyalpo*, *srinpo*, *gongpo*, *theurang*, etc. as there are visible life forms including humans, animals, insects, birds, fishes, etc. Human life was a constant effort of negotiation to maintain a harmonious relationship with these forces. Many festivals and rituals are forms of nature worship to appease these forces of nature. This belief system and associated practices such as demarcation of *nekhang* or residences of territorial deities, *ridam* or mountain closure, has mainly contributed to Bhutan's pristine environment and the environmental conservation efforts for which Bhutan is today well known in the world. Bhutan's current status of over 70% forest cover and its acclaimed status as the first carbon negative country are no doubt rooted in this pre-Buddhist belief system with immense respect for nature.

The Buddhist teachings, claimed to have been introduced in the 8th century and which has gained ground in the subsequent centuries, brought in a new way of looking at life and existence as a whole through the lens of the mind. Considering mind as the primary ingredient of happiness, it brought in a culture of understanding the ordinary state of the mind, the different types and levels of consciousness, the many aspects or factors of mind or the inner spirit, and most importantly transforming the mind from the ordinary consciousness of a sentient being into the enlightened spirit of the Buddha.

These are the two traditional layers of Bhutanese worldview and cultural identity. To this, one may now add a third layer of secular scientific worldview which Bhutan has acquired in the last sixty years, mainly through exposure to the West and mainstream education system. If you asked my dad, where he is located. He would proudly claim that he is in the holy Bumthang district in the glorious kingdom of Bhutan, south of Tibet and due north of Bodhi Gaya, the epicentre of the world. If you put the same question to my nephews and nieces, they would say they are from a small peaceful landlocked country sandwiched between India and China. Today, one could say there are two Bhutans: modern Bhutanese who read and write in English and live a modern life in urban centres, and traditional Bhutanese mostly based in rural villages speaking local vernaculars and living a traditional life. There is a significant shift taking place in languages and the inner values system, outlook, worldview and mindset.

The point I wish to underscore is not just that Bhutan is changing. The whole world is changing and Bhutan has also changed in the past. What is notable and quite alarming is the speed of change in Bhutan. Most Bhutanese of my generation have seen motor road, electricity, television, internet and social media all arrive in our communities in our lifetime. As a cultural historian, I often say that Bhutan has changed much more in the last sixty years than the 600 years before that. There are perhaps very few places on earth where the change has been as fast and dramatic as they have been in Bhutan.

No doubt, such change has also brought about many good things including improved living standards. Infant mortality rate, for instance, dropped from 216 per 1000 live births sixty years ago to 15 today on par with developed economies while life expectancy has more than doubled from 35 then to about 75 years today. Literacy has increased from 20 percent then to now almost 80 percent, and safe drinking water and electricity has reached almost all households. In so many areas, Bhutan has seen impressive development and improvement.

Even in the case of the people academically working on Bhutan, there were only 16 PhD theses on Bhutan in the 20th century, six of which are by Bhutanese. According to the wonderful records maintained by a friend, Dr Dorji Penjore, since 2000 the number has

drastically risen and we have over 209 PhDs in the last twenty five years, vast majority of them getting their PhDs from Australia. Add to this more than double the number of Master's theses. Human resource for research and development has definitely increased. This positive development may be the fulfilment of Michael Aris's aspiration for Bhutan "to produce scholars who combine a knowledge and appreciation of its traditional heritage with the new perspectives and methodologies of our own age."

Yet such rapid and sweeping changes in a society come with many problems such as high trade deficit, rising public debt, food insecurity, import dependence, and above all a growing case of stress, anxiety, and confusion, which often become manifest through social ills such as substance abuse, depression, and suicide, with some 100 young taking their own lives each year. Such a problem was unheard in the past in a society where the first step of spiritual practice was meditation on the rarity and preciousness of the human body as a vehicle to reach the state of enlightenment.

In the midst of such chaotic change and confusion, one needs a developmental compass to find a sense of direction. This came in the form of Gross National Happiness when the 4th King, who pronounced in 1970s that "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product" for Bhutan, purportedly in response to a journalist who asked for the GNP of Bhutan. His Majesty, the 4th King, crystallized in this term, Gross National Happiness, the Bhutanese ethos of happiness and harmony, which remained diffused in the society. He ruled the country in this spirit reminding his people that modernization should not be conflated with westernization. He became a champion of environment conservation and of Bhutan's cultural and spiritual traditions.

However, not much was said about GNH and there was no formulation of the GNH in 1980s when I went to school. It was towards the end of 1990s that our first Prime Minister, Jigme Y Thinley, officially formulated GNH as Bhutan's development philosophy with the four pillars of socio-economic development, good governance, cultural preservation and environment conservation. Since then, Bhutan campaigned to place happiness on the global development agenda and also promoted it at home through awareness campaigns with the new Dzongkha term *Gyalyong Gakyi Pelzom* coined to render GNH. Although people lived in the spirit of GNH, most people did not know what the new term meant. While visiting Bhutan in 2000, I remember some former senior officials asking me if GNH was a new office being setup. This changed with successive aware campaigns. Ten years later, not only has it become popular among the locals, Bhutan have successfully campaigned to establish 20 March as the International Day of Happiness through a resolution in the UN in 2012.

The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies, a government thinktank which was tasked to formulate and operationalize GNH, took this further in the past two decades to break down the four pillars into nine domains of health, education, living standard, time use, psychological wellbeing, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, good governance, and ecological diversity and resilience, and measure them through 33 indicators, and some 124 variables.

Dividing people into four sets of those scoring below 50% as unhappy, from 50-65% as narrowly happy, from 66-76% as extensively happy, and above 76% as deeply happy, they have carried out five surveys which showed that 40.9%, 43.4% and 48.1% of the population were extensively or deeply happy in 2010, 2015, and 2022 respectively.² If 0 represents being all

² Ura, Alkire, et al. *GNH 2022*, Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies, 2023.

Bhutanese being unhappy all the time and 1 represents all being happy all the time, it was around 0.74 in 2010, 0.75 in 2015 and 0.78 in 2022.

Even in this endeavour of formulating the GNH index, Oxford has made its share of contribution. Dasho Karma Ura, an alumnus of this University, was the main thinker behind the GNH index and the GNH survey results and data were analysed and aggregated using a methodology for multidimensional poverty proposed by Professor Sabina Alkire and Prof. James Foster of Oxford Poverty and Human Development Institute.

It may be noted here that this survey is different from the World Happiness Report published by Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre. Although Bhutan ranked only 95 out of 156 countries in 2018 and Bhutan has not featured in the report since then, the World Happiness Report has come about a result of Bhutan's campaign at the UN General Assembly "to give more importance to happiness and well-being in determining how to achieve and measure social and economic development."

In pursuing Gross National Happiness, the government took a cautious and measured approach to development with due regard to environment, culture, and human wellbeing as a whole. This approach is reflected in the national policies such as the high value, low volume tourism policy, the commitment to keep 60% of the country under forest cover, 52% as protected areas, the building regulations which require local architectural designs, and so forth.

In the meantime, digital revolution which swept across the globe began to have its share of influence on the Bhutanese populace, particularly its youth, who make up some 60%. Young Bhutanese could easily see life and opportunities in the developed countries in real time. This led to a rise in expectations which a small and poor economy could not meet.

Bhutan's economic development has not, and perhaps couldn't have, grown commensurate to the rise of exposure and expectations. A book called *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and Happiness* was published in 1999 outlining the vision and goals for Bhutan in the first twenty years of the 21st century. This document, which in my view is one of the best written and designed vision documents by the government, contained some 100 milestones to reach by 2020 under the four pillars of GNH. Out of the 100, some 13 were not achieved on time, and the main ones among those being related to the economy such as installed capacity for hydroenergy, agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, and development of cottage, small and medium industries. While education, which was successful at least in terms of quantity, produced many young school and college graduates who joined the work force, the job market did not expand proportionately leading to a serious problem of youth unemployment, which still looms around 17 percent.

Faced with lack of gainful and meaningful employment at home and the option of seeking better opportunities abroad, Bhutanese youth began to emigrate in droves to places such as Australia, Canada, Middle East, India and Japan, and some of these countries leveraged this for their labour needs, facilitating emigration with attractive educational opportunities and visa fee concessions. These pictures of youth queuing for the English language test and the crowd seeing off family members at the airport capture this. Today, nearly 10 percent of the population are living abroad.

Instead of reaping the demographic dividend, Bhutan turned into a supplier of English speaking, docile and hardworking labour forces for countries such as Australia and Canada. Even the number of Bhutanese working and studying in the UK has also increased drastically from a few dozen of us 15 years ago to over 600 today.

To counter the various economic challenges at home and persistent emigration of the productive citizens, Bhutan is now taking a new approach to development under the leadership of the 5th King, who is also an alumnus of this University. While remaining rooted in traditional value system and the pursuit of GNH, which His Majesty the 5th King describes as ‘development with values’ Bhutan has today adopted a forward looking, nimble, bold and risk taking approach. Acutely aware that Bhutan’s living standards and quality of life has to improve to reach a level on par with the developed countries to retain the young workforce and bring back those who have left, there is a move to expedite economic productivity by tenfold and take Bhutan to high income level by 2050.

To this effect, Bhutan today is embracing cutting edge technology as is demonstrated by its successful investment in Bitcoin, only fourth after US, China, UK and Ukraine, its adoption of National Digital Identity based on blockchain technology for all public services, the use of crypto transactions for tourism, and the establishment of the first fully reserve Digital Bank.

By far the most significant of this new movement is the project of Gelephu Mindfulness City, a special administrative region covering 2600 sq km, nearly 7% of Bhutan’s land mass. With a separate executive, legislative, and judiciary systems from the rest of Bhutan, this is an autonomous entity within Bhutan, led by His Majesty himself. In terms of business, it has already adopted Singapore’s laws for corporate, commercial, and company governance matters and Abu Dhabi Global Market regulations for financial services. It currently focusses on the eight clusters of business including spirituality, health and wellness, education, agritech, Green Tech, finance and digital assets, aviation, and tourism.

Imagine having an opportunity to design a new city, what kind of environment, architecture, community systems, economy, and governance would one choose. GMC is a vision to build such a futuristic city, one which is environmentally sustainable, economically prosperous, and spiritually peaceful and enlightening. With a visionary and entrepreneurial King at its helm, the GMC project adopts a sandboxing approach to experiment a bold idea to try out innovative policies and practices in limited area but to be gradually rolled out to the rest of the country in what the King calls the Diamond Strategy.

In taking up these new projects and others such as the Dessung guardians of peace, Gyalsrung national service and now Pelsung innovator programme, the King is a set on a mission also to change the mindset of the youth by rethinking one’s identity from a small landlocked vulnerable country to a new generation of bold young nation ready to do business and to reframe Bhutan’s geopolitical situation from country caught between two large powers to an economic hub and commercial gateway, just as Bhutan was a cultural corridor in the past. This royal vision and initiative to build a city which is mindful, prosperous, and sustainable, taking advantage of Bhutan’s green energy, communal solidarity, cooperative citizenry, and above all visionary leadership, is today the most happening thing in Bhutan and one which is beginning to attract the curiosity and interest of the world. There is evidently an open invitation to everyone to come and join in this venture.

The Loden Journey

My update on Bhutan could not possibly end without a brief mention of what I and my colleagues have been engaged in through the Loden Foundation, which was born here at Oxford in 1999. Inspired by my upbringing and Buddhist education, I wanted to do something for the people of Bhutan. One such opportunity came when my friend, Robert Miles, the head porter of Balliol, shared how he could not finish school due to financial difficulties and would like to help a child with a similar difficulty. I took his contribution of

£50 to the headmaster of Ura School, who used the funds to buy uniforms and stationeries for our first student beneficiary, Tenzin Pelmo, who was six years old then, and came from a family of seven sisters. Other friends like Anthony, Marie Laure, Elizabeth Chatwin joined in with more funds and we established the Loden Foundation in 1999, our first event graced by Dame Joanna Lumley and the second in 2001 by His Majesty, the 5th Druk Gyalpo, then the Crown Prince. Tenzin, our first beneficiary, is now a history teacher, mother, and joined the Loden board of trustees last year.

With growing awareness of the importance of early childcare and development, we launched free preschools in clustered rural communities as such commercial services only existed in urban areas.

In spite of the success in school education, skilled human resource remains a major challenge in Bhutan. To ease this problem, we began the Loden scholarships to support deserving youth seek higher education in universities and technical training institutes, mainly for expertise which Bhutan stands in need.

As Bhutan faced a new challenge of youth unemployment at the turn of the century, I and my French friends, Anne and Gerard Tardy, started a business education programme to help young people start social enterprises. This led to the launch of Loden Entrepreneurship Programme, through which we inspire, motivate, and train young people to become social entrepreneurs, and fund start-ups so that young people become job creators instead of job seekers. We trained nearly 6000 aspiring entrepreneurs and funded 320 social enterprises with collateral free and interest free capital, while also encouraging them to pursue not only the single bottom line of making profit but a greater cause to benefit society through job creation, import substitution, value addition, and social innovation.

Batch by batch, we strive to groom a community of conscientious Bodhisattva entrepreneurs who wish to benefit both oneself and others. As Bhutan's fledging private sector grows, we hope to foster a culture of intelligent business, which is socially responsible, culturally sensitive and environment friendly, and contribute to build a culture of responsible production, mindful consumption through that a caring, wholesome, and sustainable economy – a GNH economy.

This year, we have launched Loden Tewa, a centre for social venture through which we plan to help some of the successful enterprises scale up for greater impact and benefit.

The values of wisdom and compassion that Loden imparts through our education and entrepreneurship programmes undoubtedly come from Bhutan's cultural heritage, particularly its Buddhist tradition, which I had the fortune of studying and experiencing for most of my life. When I finished my studies at Oxford, I was offered a job to work on Buddhist manuscripts in the Bodleian, British Library and Cambridge University Library. These manuscripts were brought out of Tibet by the Younghusband Expedition in 1903 and being properly digitised and studied in 2003 as part of the centenary commemoration. My work at the UK libraries revealed to me the need and opportunity to preserve the numerous monastic archives in Bhutan, which remain prone to damage, theft and destruction, and inaccessible to wider readership, as well as the efficacy of the new digital tools to do so relatively easily. Around that time, our colleagues Rob Mayer and Cathy Cantwell asked me to photograph a text from a collection of manuscripts in Gangteng monastery in Central Bhutan. In 2002, I digitised a 46 volume collection of beautiful manuscripts at Gangteng monastery using one of the earliest digital cameras in the market. This began the successive projects of digitising entire temple and family archives to both preserve the archives in digital surrogates and make them available to wider readership, and at the same time help safeguard the original manuscripts. Funded mainly by the

Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library, our team has now finished digitising 75 libraries containing almost five million pages of manuscripts, and one of the grants was administered by the Aris Centre here at Wolfson.

When I and the team journeyed to digitize the Neyphu temple archive in 2010, the road was washed away by monsoon showers. My friends went to look for help to carry the equipment while I waited at the roadside wearing my bamboo hat. An old man of around 80 years waddled towards me and seeing my bamboo hat chanted:

*shar dagar shar gyi boe lo // nyim shar tse rang gi boe lo bey // chhap chapse ro gi boe lo mey
// chharp chapse ro gi boe lo ben // nyim shar tse rang lu jye min du //*

The bamboo hat from eastern Daga region,
You are my bamboo hat during sunny days
But someone else's during rainy days.
If you are someone else's during rainy days,
What use do I have for you during sunny days?

“You chant this to an unfaithful partner”, he said.

Impressed by his short ballad, I asked him for more and he agreed to chant over a drink although he was already a bit tipsy. We sat by the roadside and he chanted many more beautiful ballads. The encounter made me worry that when he dies, the wealth of oral literature he possessed would likely die with him. It dawned on me how our rich and unique oral traditions could vanish easily while the nation is enamoured by what is popular and common across the world. Moreover, given only some twenty percent of Bhutanese were literate in the past, relying solely on texts in our efforts to study Bhutan's past would leave us with only a limited understanding.

Thus, feeling the urgency to document and study the oral traditions, which are far more endangered than the texts, Anthony Aris and I approached Arcadia Fund to launch a five-year nationwide project to record oral and intangible cultures. This, we successfully did from 2013 to 2018 in collaboration with the University of Virginia producing over 3000 hours of audio visual recordings of folk songs, stories, ballads, poems, jokes, dances, culinary recipes, healing practices, ethnobotanical knowledge, folk knowledge and customs, games, sports, etc.

In the past decade, I have also been building using my own resources the Bodhitse Centre for Study and Contemplation in Thimphu, where we have a library of books on Buddhism and carry out study and meditation sessions. Do visit us when you are in Thimphu.

Since my return to the village festival with Anthony and Marie Laure in 2000, I have also been returning to my village almost every year to help organize it. While many villages in the region stopped observing the festivals, we persisted against many challenges seeing these cultural events as the main social channels for transmission of values, principles, knowledge and skills. They serve as the social cement to bring and hold the community together, as opportunities for meeting one's relatives, for elders to groom the younger ones, and for younger ones to emulate the older. The festival is a purely local village affair. Yet, we see now around five hundred visitors to the festival. Thus, we are expanding the spectator's gallery which also houses the classrooms for little monks and resting place for old people

who spend their day circumambulating the temple. On behalf of the village, I extend our invitation to come and join us in the festival.

In conclusion, in spite of the sense of peace, tranquillity, and security the picture of my village may give you, we live today in an era of tumultuous change and unpredictable future. In a period of just four years, three governments in Bhutan's neighbourhood has been toppled by political unrest. The world we inhabit is clearly in a VUCA state -- volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Even remote places like Bhutan are not spared. Climate change, demographic shifts, and economic issues pose serious challenges.

Bhutan's story of modernisation and its efforts to cope with these challenges began with a cautious and measured approach. Yet, it is now adopting a more entrepreneurial, proactive, nimble, and mindful one. I would say the story of Bhutan's development is not a straightforward one: neither one of proven success nor one of a failure. It is an unfolding story. Bhutan is not only a meeting point of two of Asia's greatest civilisations as it was in the past, it is today an exemplary case of rapid convergence of the raw tradition of the East with the modernity of the West.

Ideologically, it is neither on the conservative right nor on the liberal left. It carries strong vestiges of feudalistic tendencies from the past but strives to promote socialist-type welfare state, while also witnessing a capitalistic trend resulting in more disparity between haves and have nots. Its system is marked by a very strong monarchical influence as well as a growing democratic fervour, and by traditional symbols and rituals as much as by modern spirit of creativity.

As innovative as it may be, it is not a case of *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on to which to write only new things. It is a tricky balancing act of keeping the old and embracing the new, fulfilling internal needs and meeting external demands, catering to youthful ambitions as well as to age old wisdom, perhaps not dissimilar to the case of this old University.

No nation is perhaps putting more effort into juggling the multiple factors of holistic human development as Bhutan is doing today. And it is this tendency -- being cautious and bold at the same time, nimble yet mindful, forward looking yet deeply rooted in traditional values, right from the top leadership -- that is the strength of Bhutan.

In being a latecomer to modernity, Bhutan had the opportunity and advantage to assess and rethink the course of human development, to reexamine the prevailing mindset and normative social and economic behaviour, and to seek an better alternative. In Gross National Happiness, Bhutan offered an alternative economic paradigm, and in Gelephu Mindfulness City, it is once again offering a new design and purpose for urban living.

The journey Bhutan is going through is as colourful, complex, and often paradoxical like its traditional culture I described at the beginning. Bhutan is at an inflection point, as His Majesty the 5th King puts it. It stands at a juncture between the past and future, between the old and the new, as we say in a local proverb, *la ma gye labtse gu, chu ma ge zampi bu*, "on the pass, yet to cross the mountain, on the bridge, yet to cross the river". The question now is not about 'to cross or not to cross', it is about HOW to cross and HOW to evolve because evolution is no longer a choice.

The next couple decades will show whether Bhutan can successfully become a model of sustainable and holistic development, or succumb to the forces of globalisation and usual materialistic pursuit of money and power even at the expense of our shared planet. A successful story of Bhutan can be a hope for humanity. In its unfolding story, we shall witness not only the destiny of a small, distant kingdom but the possibility of a different trajectory for humanity, a better version of the world, a world with enduring sense of peace, prosperity and fulfilment, a world where economic development and environmental conservation go hand in hand, where inner spiritual wellbeing is sought as much as external material comfort, and a world where wisdom of the past inform the prospects of the future.

I would like to finally end by reflecting once again on the importance of connections and relationships, on how one country, particularly a small one, cannot work alone in forging such future, let alone become an example to the rest of the world. Bhutan in general, and the modest efforts we make through the Loden Foundation in particular, will depend on the good will and support of many friends around the world, as was the case in the past, and not the least from those in this wonderful city and University, which has a longstanding and special connection to Bhutan, a special *ledrel* connection. It has been for me a privilege to be part of this. This meeting marking 25 years of the Aris Centre for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies and the 10th Annual Aris Lecture, no doubt is a reinforcement of that connection, an auspicious connection, a good *tendrel*, as we call it in Bhutan. Let me end here with the deep gratitude to Ulrike, Aris Centre, and Wolfson for the invitation and all of you for coming this evening.

Kadrinche