

Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant Report (2009)
Thimphu, Bhutan
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My fellowship from Scott Kloeck-Jenson funded my first prolonged research trip to Bhutan. During my visit I focused on improving my background knowledge of the country, learning the language, and building a network of contacts I will need in order to do successful fieldwork in the future.

On arriving in Bhutan I planned to look at how international development discourses inform a poverty reduction program funded by its monarchy. This royal program is called *kidu* and has evolved from a long-standing tradition whereby citizens can petition the King for aid. Crowned in 2006, the Fifth King began adapting this tradition into an institutionalized form of poverty relief where he went out to the districts to dispense aid rather than waiting for petitions in the capital. In recent years, the fifth King has been very active in the eastern part of Bhutan and I planned to make visits to some places the King had already been. I was particularly interested in how older traditions like *kidu* were being adapted to the modern development context and what effects this had on everyday life. I looked forward to my visit to the rural areas to see how this played out on the ground.

As often happens with preliminary fieldwork, I soon found my original plans changing. I quickly discovered that I needed to do far more background work before doing effective in depth interviews or fieldwork in rural Bhutan were a realistic goal. Beyond my linguistic limitations, interviewing people without a proper introduction or the right institutional letter of support proved difficult. People were often circumspect in speaking with me when they discovered I was not working with any organization. These

realizations combined an untimely illness just prior to a planned trip to visit some villages near the end of my stay undid my plans to get outside of Thimphu, the capital city.

Despite this setback I found my stay in Thimphu to be helpful. I made use of archives at Bhuan's National Library, the UNDP, the Indian Embassy's library, and the Center for Bhutan Studies. Each library had held many sources unattainable outside of Bhutan. Although all were helpful, the Center for Bhutan Studies, Bhutan's only research institute, proved to be the most enriching. My presence in the library and attendance of a conference on storytelling sponsored by the center put me in touch with several scholars who gave me materials I would not have found elsewhere. These scholars were very knowledgeable about Bhutan's history and culture and offered constructive criticism of my research topic and answers to my many questions.

During my stay, I also began to seriously study Dzongkha, the national language. With help from a tutor, I learned the basics of the language. When not working with my tutor I used TV shows, newspapers, a few children's books, and other materials not available outside of Bhutan to aid me in learning the language. By the end of my stay I was speaking a rudimentary Dzongkha; not yet good enough for interviews, but an important first step.

Being in Bhutan also gave me a chance to witness first-hand the changes that are occurring in the country. Attending the first officially registered and approved political demonstration in Bhutan gave me a condensed view of many of these changes. The demonstration was held as a memorial to six children who drowned in a flash flood just south of the capital. The organizers and the supporters at the rally felt that the

government had not done enough to take care of its citizens and expressed their sympathy for the families who lost their children in the flood.

On several levels the march showed how traditional meanings and ideas are being recast in the context of democracy. For example, the demonstrators used of images of butter lamps, something traditionally offered for the merit of the deceased, on their banner. Furthermore, supporters met at a religious site built as a memorial to the 3rd King. This both tied the march to another memorial and also showed how traditional public spaces are being used for new political and social ends. Traditional symbols and practices remain central to new forms of social expression in Bhutan.

Critics of the march pointed to both cultural and practical shortcomings of the march. Some considered such political demonstrations to be “un-Bhutanese” and something that went against the peaceful spirit of Bhutan’s society. Others did not attend because they suspected that the leaders and organizers of the march were using it to build political capital for their own advantage. The demonstration revealed some of the ways people are trying to make sense of the new democracy. It also made clear to me that politics remains a very sensitive topic in Bhutan.

Coming to a better understanding of the political change in Bhutan through my archival research and experiences like the one just described provided a useful background for gathering information about *kidu*, the King’s welfare program. While many people praised the King’s generous actions, others complained that it was creating a “*kidu* culture” where people expected handouts and did not adequately take initiative to provide for their own well-being. Other people pointed to the traditional roots of *kidu* in broader practices of charity and giving. Some of these traditional forms of gift giving and

reciprocity, I was told, were now considered to be forms of corruption under the new democracy. Likewise, many people told me that the King is now the only one who is supposed to give *kidu*. These conversations about the other forms of *kidu* and attitudes towards generosity helped me better understand how central certain forms of gift giving and charity are for political and economic relations in Bhutan and some of the changes they are undergoing. It began to push my research in the direction of looking at these changes in light of recent political and economic developments.

It also made me realize that a smaller scale study might be more feasible in Bhutan rather than the sort of macro-level study I had originally intended to pursue. Focusing on charity and forms of cross-class giving avoided the political sensitivity of studying the monarchy directly while still connecting to many important changes throughout society in Bhutan. Now that I have returned I am trying to use these insights to rethink my research. Although I am not sure where my research is headed, I am now considering a shift in my research in the direction of studying forms of charity or cross-class giving and using this to understand some of the broader changes in Bhutan. An approach that I hope will prove fruitful.