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Good Governance, Gross National Happiness, and the Care of the Other.

In the tv show *Supergirl*, the CEO of a major media company opts to quit and when pressed as to why, remarked that she was no longer happy and decided to travel to the happiest place in the world: Bhutan. In a talk on Shangri-La, an ex-business mogul abandons his lucrative career and sets off, with the backing of National Geographic, on a quest to find the mythical land in five episodic installments. During a brief exchange in a knick-knack store in my current home of Boulder Colorado, the store-owner went starry-eyed and told me about this amazing place called Bhutan and how she wished to live in a country that “had things figured out.” These examples highlight one of the central challenges of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said (1978): how to discuss something on its own terms, and not simply as a mirror of what Western longings hope it to be. Gross National Happiness (GNH) runs the risk of being such a mirror. That is, people outside of Bhutan take the idea of GNH and fit it into their often romantic ideas of happiness and Buddhism. When they do this, they miss something important. GNH is the byproduct of a history and culture that should be understood on its own terms, including the impacts it has on people living in twenty-first century Bhutan rather than in a mythic Shangri-La. In Bhutan, GNH articulates a central moral objective of governance on compassionate rulership, at times translated as dharma, to be understood as a legible and credible means of assessing the country. Today, I will discuss how this articulation is drawn from history and adapts in the contemporary. To do so, I will bring the historic tradition of Buddhist advice literature into a comparison with the Fourth King’s framing of the four pillars of GNH and how that has since been re-formulated into a democratic assessment through the current survey metrics. I will conclude by considering how this impacts the ways that Bhutanese live and understand their contemporary world.

My research draws heavily from religious scholars of Buddhism, sociologists of policy, and historians of Bhutan, while my interpretations are couched within anthropological theory of symbols

and meaning. Building from the work of Geertz (1973), humans are creatures that produce and are informed by the symbols that surround them. Similarly, anthropologists like Benjamin (1969), Basso (1996), and Trouillot (1995) have argued that history isn't simply a repository of past events, but a living system of semiotic truths that find new meaning and do work in the present. From this lineage of scholars, I contend that GNH is indelibly tied to history and actively expresses itself in the contemporary through people as a source of culture.

From the outset, I need to start with something fairly obvious: GNH is a translation. It is not just a translation from Dzongkha into English, but a translation of thousands of years of political and religious philosophy that have been brought into a new conversation of geo-politics. The very instance by which the name was coined was used to respond to why Bhutan's GDP was so low (Phuntsho 2013). Like all translation, it sits at a juncture between two ways of seeing the world and attempts to mediate across the divide that comes from different understandings. It isn't surprising then that the word that has gained the most attention is happiness. Happiness is a familiar unknowable, highly desirable, oft sought but rarely captured (Ahmed 2010). What I hope to show is that when the Fourth King said "In Bhutan, we care about Gross National Happiness," he was attempting to convey a long history of valuing compassion rather than production as the measure by which the country is to be judged (Munro 2016).

It is important to understand what informs the idea of a compassionate government from a history of Buddhist advice literature. While the lineage of this writing dates back to as early as 300 BCE with the Arthashastra, the most well-known of this literature, categorized broadly under the term *nitisastra*, would be the writing of Nagarjuna and his famous synthesis of Mahayana Buddhism in *Letters to a Friend* (Rinpoche 2005). Drawing this history of literature into one, twenty-one volume synthesis was Jamgon Mipham's *A Treatise on Ethics for Kings: An Ornament For Rulers* in 1895 for the Derge prince, translated by Jose Cabezon in 2017. I use this synthesis as a model of *nitisastra* literature that serves as an ideological core for GNH.

Thematically, nitisastra is a form of advice literature on ethical conduct that is based around how such behavior cultivates compassion within others. Using allusion and allegory, nitisastra's short-verse form positions one to consider how power brings about greater obligation to others, not less (Cabezon 2017). In this way, the advice literature from monks to kings works to remind monarchs of their role in the betterment of others and to caution against the dangers of neglecting this responsibility. Agency is circumscribed within obligation, and unlike an example such as Machiavelli's The Prince, a monarch's divine rule is always conditional upon their capacity to promote and foster the moral health of their kingdom (French 1995). In a style reminiscent to contemporary scholarly citation, monks writing nitisastra would either quote or paraphrase the language of earlier scholars in order to assert their moral legitimacy. By doing so, this highly intertextual discourse tied scholars and monastic thinkers of the Buddhist world together. Rather than viewing this literature as provincial to India, Tibet, or Cambodia, nitisastra found their way across a multitude of Buddhist kingdoms. For example, the original texts that Cabezon translated of Mipham's that I focus on here came from Ladakh and Bhutan (Cabezon 2017). Through practice of enlightened compassion as a ruler, the monarch moves closer towards the elevated status of the Dharma Raja, a mythic ruler of enlightened capacities that conquers and rules through the compassion fostered within the self. The most well-known of these would be King Ashoka of India who upon witnessing the suffering caused by martial conflict, took up Buddhist practice and built a kingdom through much of what is now India through Dharma (Strong 1983). Turning to an example within Bhutan, the Zhabdrung's Nga Chug Dug shares much of the same language of a Dharma Raja such that one could argue for the Zhabdrung was also a model of Dharma King to be emulated (Givel and Figueroa 2014). Additionally, the formation of the monarchy in 1908 conferred the title of Druk Ghelpo as the protector of the Dharma. The threads of dharmic consideration build upon a shared past that inform upon how the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck conceived of GNH in the 1970s.

To illustrate the parallels between nitisastra and GNH, I'll briefly compare examples of proper conduct that Mipham described in 1895 with the four pillars of GNH which are good governance, sustainable development, preservation of culture, and environmental conservation (Ura et al 2012). As an example of good governance, Mipham states that as a ruler one must always be mindful of how their actions impact the lives of their subjects. For sustainable development, one should generously redistribute wealth from taxes back to one's citizens to support the growth of the kingdom. Mipham stressed the importance of protecting and promoting monks within the kingdom for the promotion of enlightenment for all which could be understood as a Buddhist-specific preservation of culture. Finally, a recognition that one's kingdom extends not just to human subjects but non-human as well produces a moral argument for ecological conservation (Cabezon 2017). Within the language of the earlier nitisastra and the Fourth King's explanation of GNH, there are shared themes of a compassionate ruler as a protector of the dharma.

At the same time, it is crucial not to reduce the idea of GNH to just nitisastra rewritten. The fourth king had a Western education just as he had training within the Bhutanese context unlike Mipham or Asoka or Nagarnajuna (Phuntsho 2013). Additionally, the challenges facing Bhutan in the 1970's were not the same ones that were facing the Derge kingdom at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the establishment of Ashoka's kingdom in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. As Dasho Karma Ura notes, the Fourth King reached an understanding of the four pillars while traveling the country was in part a means to bridge this lineage of thinking that he was familiar with into the needs he saw from those living in Eastern Bhutan (Munro 2016). Building on the metaphor of translation, anthropologists Shore and Wright (2011) suggest that policy creation is itself a form of translation, from the vision of one person to a bureaucracy, from a governing body to citizens, from an organization to those within the system. The fourth king was working to translate through multiple senses, bringing an understanding of older systems of compassionate rule into modern system and to make it understood to the wider world. This

translation would ultimately have to find a new voice as it moved in 2008 from the responsibility of a monarch to the shared responsibility of a democratic collective.

GNH's contemporary form works to produce this democratized and shared responsibility of compassionate governance in two ways: first, as a system of indicators by which to help make the circumstances of the country legible for the governing body and second, to promote and incentivize the improvement of the country's GNH through algorithms of care.

From the original four pillars, the GNH survey was expanded to the nine domains with their corresponding indicators of psychological well-being, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards (Ura et al 2012). As indicators, these domains serve as useful tools to make visible that which is obscured through the process of surveys administered around the country (Porter 2015). Transformed from responses into data, this information is then mapped into the results published through the Center for Bhutan Studies which is presented as part of the discussion for policies enacted in Thimphu (Ura et al 2015). In addition to the people surveyed, the labor of gathering, compiling, quantifying and publishing this information draws the country as a whole into the creation of GNH where previously this system was relegated to the monarch and his advisors.

From the data and the findings that are published, the algorithms used to calculate Bhutan's GNH incentivize an attention to those most in need of support. While a discussion of how GNH is calculated is the topic of its own paper, a brief review is necessary in order to show how the algorithm itself produces compassionate policy (Ballesteros 2015). Bhutan's national GNH is a percentage score based on the responses of those surveyed, measuring both the number of people who achieve the desired benchmark score and the degree of success for those who did not reach that level. Based off the Alkire-Foster multivariable poverty index (Alkire and Foster 2011), this algorithm produces several key effects. First, it directs the focus of policy towards areas of concern, rather than areas of success. The

national GNH doesn't change if the people experiencing the highest scores continue to improve. The number only shifts if those who aren't at the benchmark level have higher responses. To compare it to Gross Domestic Product, there is no such thing as a trickle-down GNH; it is always a bottom-up approach. Second, because the GNH score is a percentage between 0 to 1, there is an end point for GNH. I argue this facilitates compassionate governance because unlike GDP with its assumption of unlimited growth, the government is not incentivized to abandon those who fall behind in the chase for ever-higher wealth accumulation (Verma 2017). Just as the indicators allow policy-makers to perceive areas of need within the country, they are also incentivized to target those areas of concern. Returning to the themes of compassion seen in *nitisastra*, the objective of compassionate rulership is the cultivation of care across all people, not just those at the highest echelons of hierarchy.

In conclusion, the system of GNH is one of repeated translation, working to bring a concept of compassion that has held cultural value over thousands of years into a democratic and measurable quantity in contemporary Bhutan. By presenting this historic analysis of GNH through the theory of anthropology serves emphasize the human agency of the processes (Penjore 2013). Rather than policy in the abstract, it is one made up of human interaction and choice. Specifically within the context of the Himalayas, anthropologists (ex. McGranahan 2010; Pommerate 2004; Childs 2004) have emphasized that Himalayan politics can be best understood through spheres of influence; local lamas and kin networks are crucial to how people understand their relations to the larger collective. As I've argued here, older systems of understanding relationships do not simply disappear but find new voice as new challenges arise. By framing GNH as a human endeavor through time and symbols, it allows new questions for how these systems of value impact how people view and interpret their world.

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