

"Girls Should Come Up"

Gender and Schooling in Contemporary Bhutan

by

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation is based on fifteen months of ethnographically-informed qualitative research at a liberal arts college in the Himalayan nation of Bhutan. It seeks to provide a sense of daily life and experience of schooling in general and for female students in particular. Access to literacy and the opportunities that formal education can provide are comparatively recent for most Bhutanese women. This dissertation will look at how state-sponsored schooling has shaped gender relations and experiences in Bhutan where non-monastic, co-educational institutions were unknown before the 1960s. While Bhutanese women continue to be under-represented in politics, upper level government positions and public life in general, it is frequently claimed at a variety of different levels (for instance in local media and government reports), that Bhutan, unlike its South Asian neighbors, has a high degree of gender equity. It is argued that any under-representation does not reflect access or opportunity but is instead the result of women's decision not to "come up" and participate. However this dissertation will dispute the claim that female students could choose to be more visible, vocal and mobile in classrooms and on campus without being challenged or discouraged. I will show that school is a gendered context, in which female students are consistently reminded of their "limitations" and their "appropriate place" through the use of familiar social practices such as teasing, gossip, and harassment. Schooling, particularly in developing nations like Bhutan, is usually implicitly and uncritically understood to be a neutral resource, often evaluated in relation to development aims such as creating a more educated and skilled workforce. While

Bhutanese schools do seem to promote new kind of opportunity and new understandings of success, they also continue to recognize, maintain and reproduce conventional values around hierarchy, knowledge transmission, cooperation (or group identity) and gender norms. This dissertation will also show how emergent disparities in wealth and opportunity in the nation at large are beginning to be reflected and reproduced in both the experience of schooling and the job market in ways that Bhutanese development policy is not yet able to adequately address.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER	
1 "CHOOSING" NOT TO "COME UP": AN INTRODUCTION TO GENDER AND EDUCATION IN BHUTAN	1
Talking About Gender	6
2 COPING UP: FIELDWORK AND METHODS	17
Language Context	20
“So You are Studying us”: Participant Observation	23
The View from the Back of the Classroom	28
Video Elicitation	30
Do “Real” Anthropologists Use Focus Groups?	32
Formal Interviews	34
Grey Literature and Other Kinds of Texts	37
Research Assistants	39
My Not-so-secret Agenda	42
3 CONTEXTS, HISTORIES, INTRODUCTIONS	46
“Educational Pioneers”	50
Reflecting New Differences	56
Life at “ The Peak of Higher Learning”	61
Cooperation and Campus Politics	68
Hierarchy as a Social Organizer	70

CHAPTER	Page
Talking in the Dark.....	71
4 " ITS LIKE A ONE MAN SHOW, MADAM" : CLASSROOM	
INTERACTIONS	78
Classroom Ethnography and Classroom Interactions.....	80
The View from the Front of the Classroom.....	82
The View from the Back of the Classroom.....	88
“Silly Questions are too Stupid” : Student Views	92
Unwelcoming Classrooms.....	96
A Case for Rote Learning?	99
Interuptions to the Classroom	102
5 "COOPED UP" : GOSSIP, GENDER AND SPACE	105
Everyone Gossips about Everything	109
Gossip and Space	112
Objects of Gossip.....	115
“Cooped Up”: Gender, Gossip and Space.....	123
Spoilt Girls: Visibility and Becoming the Object of Gossip.....	126
6 " TOO GOOD TO TEACH": LEARNING TO ASPIRE, LEARNING	
TO WAIT	131
An Investment or a Gamble?.....	133
“Sherubte was not my First Choice”: Learning Aspirations.....	139
Narrowing Possibilities: “the Best and only Option”.....	143

CHAPTER	Page
“Too Good to Teach”	150
Who can Wait for Something Better?	153
I want to be a Sunflower.....	159
7 CULTURAL PRODUCTION, CHANGE AND CONTINUITY:	
CONCLUDING REMARKS	161
REFERENCES	170
APPENDIX	
A FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT	185
B SUMMARY OF ALL INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	187
C SAMPLE END OF SEMESTER EXAM QUESTIONS.....	191
D LIST OF MATERIAL FOR RCSC EXAMINATIONS.....	194
E IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENT.....	197

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1.	World Food Program First Day Cover	53
2.	Group of Students in National Costume.....	63
3.	Sherubtse Campus	66
4.	Sherubtse Classroom.....	85
5.	Classroom Observation Summary.....	89
6.	Screen Still from Video Elicitation.....	95
7.	Preparing for Convocation	103
8.	Wooden Phallus	107
9.	Phallus Painted onto Wall.....	109
10.	Procession during Monsoon Football Match.....	150
11.	Decorations for Teacher's Day	151

Chapter 1

"CHOOSING" NOT TO "COME UP": AN INTRODUCTION TO GENDER AND EDUCATION IN BHUTAN

This is an ethnographic account of a tertiary level educational institution in the Himalayan nation of Bhutan. It will provide a sense of daily life and experience at the institution in general and for female students in particular. Formal schooling is a fairly new resource for most Bhutanese, particularly Bhutanese women because before the advent of formal, co-educational schools in 1960's, opportunities for education and literacy were concentrated at all-male Buddhist monasteries. I will show that formal schooling has provided important opportunities for Bhutanese to pursue higher education and careers outside of subsistence agriculture. However, school remains a gendered context, in which female students are consistently reminded of their "limitations" and their "appropriate place" partially through the use of familiar social practices such as teasing, gossip and harassment. Furthermore schools are beginning to both reflect and reproduce the emergent disparities in wealth and opportunity in Bhutan more generally.

There is a long and rich history of scholarly work and training within a Buddhist tradition but social science is a new field of inquiry and scholarship to Bhutan. Historically Bhutan, which by policy was wary of foreigners, has been reluctant to allow outside researchers into the country, a stance that has only recently begun to relax. Ethno-historians who found

colleagues and collaborators among local Buddhist scholars were among the first outsiders to produce scholarly accounts of Bhutan (see for example Aris 1979, 1989 and Olschak 1979). The majority of anthropology done in Bhutan continues to focus on textual and religious concerns. While more recently some scholars have started to produce ethnographic accounts of particular Bhutanese ethnic minorities such as the Lhops (Dorji, 2004 and Sharma 2005) and the Monpas (Chand 2009 and Giri 2004) or traditional cultural practices such as specific forms of marriage (Dorji 2004, Dorji 2008 and Penjore 2009) or archery (Dorji 2000), contemporary life ways and experiences remain largely understudied. This dissertation then joins the small (but hopefully growing) number of ethnographically informed work that seeks to engage with the everyday concerns and experiences of Bhutanese in a developing nation that is grappling with issues of social change and potential cultural loss (see for example Kinga 2005a, Ueda 2004, Phuntsho 2000 and Zangmo 2009).

In developing nations such as Bhutan, anxiety about cultural change and loss is often expressed in response to the potential destructiveness of mass media or increased consumerism. Frankly, one of the reasons that I wanted to write a dissertation about schools and their potential for social change in Bhutan was that I was tired of the persistent but often poorly substantiated claims, such as the one below, that

television was the main source of recent social changes in Bhutan (see also Dorji and Pek 2005, McDonald 2004 and Wangdi 2005):

“Ever since television arrived in Bhutan in 1999, more people have been opting out of the agrarian lifestyle that supported their ancestors and is still the mainstay occupation. Now young people flock to Thimphu for their education and chance at jobs that promise plush benefits (like working behind a desk, with a computer, and not in the fields). No one has officially drawn the connection between the introduction of mass media and the swelling of the population in Bhutan’s capital city. But no one can deny it, either, A generation ago, it wouldn’t have occurred to young people to leave their families and their villages” (Napoli, 2010: 49).

Television and other forms of media are such a significant cultural battleground in other parts of the world where its content is keenly watched by scholars and social commentators for shifts in social meaning. The mass media and new consumer desires so often become the focal point of anxiety, both academic and otherwise, about change.

Schools on the other hand, perhaps because of their seemingly mundane nature, are often underestimated sites of both cultural continuity and cultural change. This is particularly true in Bhutan, where the state-sponsored schooling system is just over 40 years old, but the 1999 advent of television has generated far greater scholarly and popular concern.

Formal education is an increasingly universal experience, yet in many studies of developing nations, the effects of schools are largely treated uncritically and with little attention to the important political, cultural, and social implications of these relatively new and foreign institutions.

Schooling is implicitly and uncritically understood to be a neutral resource, often evaluated in relation to development aims such as creating a more educated and skilled workforce. In the case of Bhutan, this belief about education's inherent, positive value and instrumental role in "preparing" students for the workplace and the job market is seen everywhere from policy documents to media accounts to casual conversation to meetings that I attended at Sherubtse college, the institution where my fieldwork was based.¹ This assumption is sometimes even found in academic work within the anthropology of education. Much of this work continues to be set in the American school system with a particular focus on minority groups who are seen to be "failing" or at the very least not excelling (see, e.g., Anyon 1995, Jacobs & Jordan 1993, Lipka et al 1998, Ogbu 2003 and Smith-Hefner 1993). Education here is understood to be a largely benign force and "failure" is largely attributed to intervening socio-political or economic structures or the mismatch between the culture of schooling and the home culture of the students.

¹ There was only one conversation I had during the course of fieldwork in which education was described as having value beyond the instrumental. Namgay Bhida, a student I interviewed whose major was *Dzongkha* the national language, told me that she felt her classes were making her a better, more reflective person. The course material for *Dzongkha* is largely religious and philosophical texts.

Critiques of these kinds of works by other anthropologist of education (see, e.g., Gilmore et al. 1993, Lee 1996 and Levinson et al. 1996), provide effective tools to unpack the benign image of schools found in most writing and research concerning education in the developing world, and in Bhutan in particular.

Outside the American school system, most studies of schools in developing nations see them as places where ideas around modernity and tradition face off, particularly in relation to identity formation (Lukens- Bull 2001, Pigg 1992, Tobin et al. 1989, Watson 1977, Waston-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992). Women, in particular young school-aged women, often become the focal point for anxiety around modernity and cultural change (see, e.g., Adely 2004, Aheran 2001, Gordizons-Gold 2002, Jeffery & Basu 1996, Kirk 2004, Mirembre & Davis 2001, Seymour 2002, Stambach 1998 and Vavrus 2002). This emergent body of literature on gender, cultural change, and education often identifies schools as institutions that can produce new forms of oppression for women by, for example, undermining the traditional authority of mother-in-laws (Anheran 2001), shifting but also re-inscribing cultural assumptions about what constitutes a desirable, suitable wife (Seymour 2002) or setting up new, troubling boundaries between educated and uneducated girls (Lesorogol 2008). Unqualified claims that formal education empowers women in developing nations often ignore the actual contents and experiences of schooling which may in fact cultivate compliance and conformity to restrictive gender norms (Jeffery & Basu 1996, Jayaweera 1997, and Stormquist 2002).

Modern formal schools are a new institution that the average Bhutanese has come to embrace.² In just two generations, school enrollment has grown by leaps and bounds. Demand for schooling already outstrips the government's ability to provide appropriate facilities for all its citizen, giving rise to a emergent private school industry, an industry fueled by the willingness of families to invest substantial money in their children's education. Concerns about the quality of education are hotly debated in online forums. Newspapers are filled with education-related stories, many of them critical enough to test the limits of Bhutan's burgeoning democracy and free press.

Formal education had already created a new class of city-dwelling, civil servants. It had allowed for a social mobility that was not possible in previous generations. It has made possible new kinds of modern institutions like hospitals and the media that are new to the Bhutanese experience. Most interesting to me was its potential to give Bhutanese women increased access to literacy and its attendant rewards, including the ability to participate more completely in public life. The latent promise that formal schooling has to refashion or reinscribe gender norms and relations at a national level is enormous but remains under-studied.

Talking about gender: Is not as bad really good enough?

Gender is an awkward topic to pursue in Bhutan. There is such a consistency and defensiveness to how people talk about Bhutanese women and

² In comparison, for example, the public health sector still struggles to convince women to deliver their babies in a hospital setting.

their cultural and political positioning. This is true of both official and casual conversations.³ A chance encounter with a female legislator (recounted below) early during my preliminary research for this project, alerted me to some of the difficulties in talking about gender:

“Today at the folktales conference I sat next to a young, newly elected female legislator. She was working on some really interesting legislative issues this session that could have a huge impact on women in Bhutan including the soon to be revised marriage act. I told her about my own research but when I asked if I could interview her she became very hesitant. I thought she was just being so shy so I pressed her a little. Finally she told me she would talk to people and see if she could talk to me. She suggested that maybe she could “bring a friend” to the interview. Confused, I asked why she would need to ask if she could talk to me. Why would she need to bring a friend? Gender is a sensitive topic, she responded, I don’t want to say anything wrong” (Field notes, June 2009)

I began to sense that there was a “right way” to understand gender and gender relations in Bhutan. Were there consequences for getting it “wrong”? Or was the legislator being overly-cautious? Needless to say despite several attempts on my part, the interview never happened. I could not help wondering why it was that she was unwilling to talk about her

³ This is also true of some academic work on gender in Bhutan which seems to similar argue that Bhutanese women enjoy a remarkable degree of equality (see for example Crins 2008)

work with me in the context of my own research. Why was talking about gender hard? Or was the problem on my side, that somehow like the brash foreigners that Bhutanese complained about, did I seem like I was pushing my own political agenda on her? These were questions I came back to again and again during the course of fieldwork. Were my own politics and training making me read too much into something that was “only teasing” or “by their own preference”?

There is complete gender equality here I was told again and again. However the numbers seemed to say otherwise. For example, a 2010 survey by the National Statistics Bureau of found a surprisingly high level of acceptance for domestic violence. Nationwide, 65 percent of women felt that their husband or partner had a right to hit them, while a quarter of the women surveyed felt that men were justified in beating their wives or partners if they refused sex or burnt food (Lamsang, 2011a). A 2009 report by the Tarayana Foundation (a well established and well respected local NGO- equivalent) found that Bhutanese women are underrepresented in both political positions and the civil service. Only 10 of the 70 parliamentarians are women and there are no female ministers and ambassadors nor are there any women at the cabinet rank.⁴ The government continues to be the most significant and best respected

⁴ A local academic who I spoke to argued that Bhutanese women are politically interested and involved as volunteer party workers and organizers and that it is a foreign concern with the top level political position as evidence of political engagement that is troubling. However I would note that this kind of voluntary political labor is as sadly just as frequently undervalued in Bhutan as it is in other national contexts.

employer and while women make up 29.5% of the more 18,000 government servants, most of them are working in lower-level clerical type positions (Tarayana Foundation, 2009). The standard counter to figures of this sort is that the only reason there are not more women in politics or in upper level government position is because they choose not to pursue these positions. Opportunities are available to everyone; nothing is holding women back but themselves. The problem is really with Bhutanese women, they should “come up”.

The 2009 Tarayana report goes on to argue that women are in fact *more* than equal. Women are actually favored by the law, an assertion that Tarayana embedded in their very definition of discrimination:

“The definition of discrimination is understood by and large and there is no overt discrimination of any kind as men and women enjoy equal rights under law as well as in traditional norms and social settings. There may be however subtle discriminations in language usage, and in some religious beliefs. There are also *subtle discriminations in favour of women* in traditional inheritance norms and also in the Amendment of certain sections (1995) of the Marriage Act of Bhutan (1980). We also recognize that *women tend to use these subtle disparities to their advantage at times particularly when not keeping to their words or when not wanting to take responsibilities seriously by stating that they are “just*

ignorant women” incapable of knowing such things“ (from Tarayana Foundation, 2009 emphasis added) .

The passage is extremely telling of the ambivalence around gender in Bhutan. There is both an insistence that there are no difference between men and women in the present or the past but at the same time there is also a tendency to argue that the differences in fact favor women and are a source of manipulative power. One example of this is the persistent rumors I heard in the capital that young school-aged women actively use statutory rape laws to their financial advantaging by luring rich men into sleeping with them and then proceeding to blackmail them after revealing their age.

Similarly the predominance of matrilineal land inheritance patterns in certain areas of Bhutan is frequently deployed as further evidence of how Bhutanese women are “favored” by the law. I was also repeatedly reminded, that nothing that women faced in Bhutan was as bad as some of the severe forms of gender discrimination that were seen in the rest of the South Asian region. Divorce was not stigmatized; virginity was not a requirement for marriage. There was no dowry or child marriage or mistreatment of widows or sex selective abortion.

Initially I found this insistence frustrating but also confusing. Was being “not as bad” really good enough? Pain and Pain (2004) had already provided compelling evidence that in the case of Bhutan, land was not a source of power in the same way as it is in the rest of South Asia. They were able to show that these inheritance practices allowed men to stay mobile while tying women down and

making it impossible for them to engage in politics, religion or trade, the real sources of power and privilege. And what about some of the ways in which the law did seem to discriminate against women's interests? Abortion is completely illegal, the penalty for rape is only 3 to 5 years in prison (the same amount of jail time you would receive for "smuggling tobacco products" under the new and controversial Tobacco control act) and women who are not able to convince the father of their child to legally acknowledge the child are often unable to register the child for full citizenship rights.⁵

While Bhutan and my work there might not be in the kind of post-feminist context the researchers writing about gender and women's issues in the West find themselves in (see for example Hall and Rodriguez 2003, Mendes 2011 and Tasker and Negra 2007), there is something eerily familiar about these arguments. Here too there is a dismissal of gender as a topic or category worthy of exploration or discussion because after all equality has already been achieved. Similarly there is a claim that women themselves are uninterested, rendering these concerns irrelevant. In fact the argument often goes, equality might have come too far, making men the innocent victims of gender politics gone wrong.

The attempt by a newly formed student group (led by two progressive political science faculty members) to amend the way in which student leaders were chosen at the college where I conducted field work, brought many of these issues into sharp focus. In particular it challenged

⁵ This has serious consequence since this means that the child will be not be able to apply for a citizenship ID card which would allow them to continue studying in government schooling after class ten and eventually vote and own property.

the claim that the only barrier to women's political participation was their own reluctance to "come up." Prior to this proposal, female students were only able to contest for two positions within the student government, the junior and senior women's representative. These roles were largely ceremonial; women's representatives were most visible serving tea and refreshments to high-ranking visitors. They were reputedly almost always chosen based on their perceived beauty and grace. The proposed amendment sought to reserve seats for female students at every level of student government and potentially put them in positions where they would be involved in more of a leadership role. The protest over this amendment was loud and angry. During an assembly set up to for students to discuss the proposed amendment, male student after male student took to the microphone to argue that women were physically too weak to lead, that the system worked and did not need to be fixed, that it would take opportunities away from qualified men, that the amendment was coming from the faculty and not the student, and that no one really wanted these changes. The argument that no one wanted a change proved to be false since a majority of students subsequently voted for the amendment. Yet the protest did not end. One female candidate called the campus radio station to argue that she would not even vote for herself (incidentally she won the race that she was in) and the male candidate who eventually won the highest office used his campaign speech to dramatically describe the amendments as "waves of destruction" that were "destroying the charm of

Sherubtse.” The events around this amendment suggested that women might not find it so easy to “come up”, that perhaps the opportunities only existed as long as no female students attempted to take them up.

I also realized that while the loudest voices might have been the ones protesting the changes, the silent majority who voted the amendment into place felt differently. There might have been more diversity in the way that people on this campus understood and thought about gender but it was also clear that some voices were allowed to be louder than others. This dissertation is a part an attempt to convey this complexity of female students’ experiences in an educational setting which both holds them back and yet vehemently blames them for any opportunities they might “choose” to miss. How do female students come to make the choice not to “come up”? What experiences and understandings inform these choices?

These questions and this dissertation more generally are clearly influenced by feminist theories, in particular the deep suspicion that feminist theories tend to demonstrate toward the entrenched, the institutionalized and any assumptions about the “natural-ness” of gender, gender roles and experiences. However also important to the framing of these questions is the anthropology of education with its commitment to producing accounts of schooling that are sensitive to both context (be these contexts cultural, historical, or political) and individual experience . In many ways with their shared concern for reform and social justice as well as their attention to the arbitrary nature of social categorization like

gender and ethnicity, the anthropology of education and feminist theories are predictable allies. Both approaches also largely reject assumptions about the possibility of “scientific objectivity” and see the often messy, ambiguous and shifting relationships between “the observers” and “the observed” as potentially productive rather than cause for panic, a stance that I found important for my own project.

This focus on transformation and social justice means that both feminist and anthropology of education approaches tend to be flexible and willing to take advantage of analytical tools and theories developed by other disciplines. One example of this is the increasing use by feminist scholars of intersectional theory, which was originally developed in legal studies as a way to highlight how multiple forms of inequality could compound to create new and sometimes unrecognized forms of disadvantage. I took my cues from this openness to diversity as I assembled and then used the analytical tools that I thought offered the most useful avenues to understanding my findings. So while trying to understand the difference between female and male experiences of classrooms, I drew on work that has been done in anthropology of education looking at interactions and communication within classroom settings. However while looking at campus life outside the classroom I turn to spatial analysis to show how spaces and gossip intersection to create highly gendered experiences.

However this dissertation is more broadly an ethnography of schooling in Bhutan. The central question it asks is: What is it like to be at a Bhutanese school? It will also explore related concerns such as: What happens in classrooms and on campus? How does the experience of schooling shape a sense of the future? What values does schooling teach students to embrace? Are the values that stick, new and “modern” ones that replace traditional ideals? To address these questions I used what Levinson and Holland (1996) have identified as the “cultural production” approach, which also comes out of the anthropology of education. This approach with its emphasis on the on-going, dialectic nature of meaning making within school settings, allows me to highlight the complex interplay between structural forces and individual action and experiences. In particular it draws attention to the way in which institutions and individuals, schools, teachers and students are simultaneously producers and products of this interplay and the meanings its generates and sustains .

Chapter two will discuss the data gathering methods used for this project. Chapter three provides a broad overview of education in Bhutan as well as an introduction to the field site, Sherubtse College. Chapter four is concerned with classroom interactions in general and what the classroom environment is like for female students in particular. Chapter five uses gossip and space as analytical tools to explore some aspects of daily campus life, again with a focus on female students, whose ability to move through the space of campus is particularly restricted by the threat of gossip . Chapter six looks at the way schooling in general and Sherubtse

specifically, shape students' aspirations and sense of possibility. Chapter seven offers a final summary of the dissertation's main arguments. In particular it offers the cultural production approach as a way to understand how gender and emergent class differences can become accentuated and reproduced in the school setting.

Chapter 2

COPING UP: FIELDWORK AND METHODS

“Things I have learnt so far in my first weeks in Kanglung include:

1) I can buy Thai shampoo and Singaporean instant noodles in almost every shop but fresh vegetables are another story; 2) No matter what time I get up in the morning or how much I practice, I don't think I will ever manage to look tidy let alone elegant in a *kira*.⁶ It might be time to stop fretting and embrace my inner frumpiness; 3) Loads and loads of examples of Bhutanese-English, partially thanks to the students, partially thanks to my colleagues. My current favorite is “coping up” as in “How are you coping up?” and “Are you coping up? “ I have yet to figure out the correct response. Do I say, “I am coping up” or “I am coping up just fine”? Or just “Fine, fine! You?” But honestly, how am I “coping up”? (Field notes August, 2009)

It is probably an anthropological cliché to say that dissertation fieldwork rarely goes according to the tidy, carefully worded plans that we submit to our universities and potential funding agencies. In theory we already know this and are more or less prepared for things to change but at least in my experience, the relative isolation of the field experience coupled with what feels like a loss of

⁶ *Kira* is the Bhutanese women's national dress, which as a Bhutanese woman I was expected to wear everyday that I was on campus in an official capacity.

control can actually amplify these “surprises” and make them almost jarring. However, these disruptions can actually prove to be productive, probably another anthropological cliché⁷. This chapter is about both what I thought would happen and what actually happened in the field. In retrospect the uncertainty and need to think on my feet that characterized my field experience made me far more open to discovery and to the unanticipated than my original plan allowed.

My plan was to spend a full academic year at Sherubtse College in Kanglung, a small town in eastern Bhutan, a region that is considered more impoverished and also more tradition-bound than the rest of the country. Kanglung is also fairly isolated geographically and currently only accessible by road. It is a full two (long) days car journey from the larger, more cosmopolitan towns in western Bhutan, including the capital Thimphu, and a full day from the nearest Indian border town. Given Kanglung’s relative isolation and my own lack of mobility,⁸ especially once I was made responsible for teaching classes, there was a pervasive sense during my time in the field of being “far away” from the rest of the world even though I was technically “at home” in my own country.

Sherubtse is the oldest, and until very recently the only, liberal arts and sciences post-secondary institute in the country. The school draws its students from across the country and admissions are completely merit based, depending on students’ scores in the national class twelve exams. While not as prestigious as a

⁷ Geertz’ famous account of the police raid on a cockfight he and his wife were attending is a famous example of the potential fruitfulness of the unexpected (Geertz 1973).

⁸ Public transport was scarce and there was effectively only one, not always reliable, taxi in Kanglung which was vied for by everyone. My mobility was also affected by my status as an unmarried female.

government scholarship that would allow students to leave the country for a professional degree (such as medicine or engineering), or as desirable as admission to the newly established Business College in Gaeddu or the College of Science and Technology in Phuentsholing,⁹ a place at Sherubtse still demands a much higher than average performance in the all important class twelve exams. At the time of my research, enrollment was 950 students, nearly 40 percent of whom were female. I imagined that the relatively small size of the college would make the study feel like a “textbook” village ethnography and in some ways this was true.

As topics for anthropological research become more specific to particular kinds of institutions (for example banks, hospitals, factory floors) or particular kinds of practices (for example belly dancing, boxing, plastic surgery) there is more room for anthropologists to compartmentalize their daily, personal activities from fieldwork, so that engagements with the field can almost become scheduled. This was not the case for me. I felt like every moment of my time in Kanglung was fieldwork, everything I saw or heard or participated in was worthy of note and I felt like I was always “on.” I suspect that this feeling of being consumed by the experience of the fieldwork is made possible by living “full-time” at the field site which is becoming less and less of a requirement¹⁰ for anthropological research.

⁹ This is the second biggest town in Bhutan, sitting on Bhutan’s southwestern border to India.

¹⁰ Or even a possibility, given the shrinking funding for field work and the demands of family and other personal commitments.

From the very conception of my project I was concerned with the slipperiness of gender as both an analytical category and a lived experience, so I felt compelled to come up with a suite of methods which I hoped would allow me to get at both the influence of gender and its cultural/ social construction. I had already encountered surprisingly strong resistance to talking about potential or perceived gender difference and inequities in the summer of 2008 while interviewing long-term Bhutanese educators as part of a pilot study for my eventual dissertation project. So I was aware that I would have to find ways to look beyond interview data to get at my research questions. This continual insistence that Bhutan is characterized by gender equality is something that colors both my experience of fieldwork and my eventual attempts to make sense of school experiences and outcomes.

Language context

Bhutan is a complex linguistic setting. Dzongkha, the only indigenous Bhutanese language to have a written script and literary tradition, has been the official language of the country since 1961. While Dzongkha is the mother tongue of most western Bhutanese, it was already used as the language of the royal court and the government since the twelfth century (van Dreim, 1994). There are 18 other regional languages spoken in Bhutan (van Dreim, 1994). The language spoken in the east of the country where Kanglung is located is called Sharchop or Tshangla. By many accounts (including van Dreim 1994, Namgyel 2003) aside for Dzongkha, Sharchop is the Bhutanese language with the most native speakers.

Sharchop is widely spoken in Kanglung and on Sherubtse campus. Students and faculty from around the country seem to quickly learn it. Most faculty and students spoke multiple Bhutanese languages and seemed to switch between them effortlessly, often within the course of a single conversation. However English is the medium of instruction at almost all Bhutanese formal secular schools. At most educational institutes including Sherubtse, all classes except Dzongkha and *Diglam Namzah* (or Bhutanese etiquette) are taught in English. In my research proposal I wrote that I would conduct all focus groups and interviews in English. I had three reasons for doing this: 1) English is “the” language of modern Bhutanese education and to date most studies of formal education in Bhutan have utilized it; 2) Using English made it easier for my project to meet university Human Subjects requirements and 3) Unlike many other Bhutanese, my linguistic skills are limited to Bumthangkha (the language of my mother’s home district) and some Dzongkha.¹¹ I already suspected that at Sherubtse, Sharchop use would be far more significant than the two Bhutanese languages I did speak.

Namgyel’s study (2003) looking at linguist choices among Bhutanese educators and students, is able to show how choices about which language to speak and switches between languages are informed by context. For example he found that language use among friends was characterized by a mixing of languages while at work and school most respondents used English with some switching into Dzongkha, particularly for words that were “culturally and

¹¹Since most of my own formal education happened outside of Bhutan, I did not learn Dzongkha in a school setting. I have to shamefully admit that this means that I am particularly clumsy at using and understanding the honorific.

contextually appropriate” such as *Lyonpo* for minister or *Dzongkhag* for district (1993:116). Two other relevant findings were that: 1) language choices seemed to reflect the status of the addressees, so for example students and faculty seemed to use English with those of higher rank, such as principals and 2) that frequent switching between languages often seemed to imply “ a certain degree of informality with these interlocutors” (1993:120). To sum up, English was used in formal situations within the school setting while informal settings were characterized by switching between languages and mixing languages.

I found these findings reflected in the language context at Sherubtse during the course of my fieldwork. English was used for all formal written communication and for the most part all meetings were in English.¹² Most of my interactions particularly within the classroom and with colleagues and students were in English. Nearly half of Sherubtse’s faculty was foreign (largely from India) so this made school even more of an English language context. As I had anticipated, apart from English, the language I heard the most on campus was Sharchop¹³, especially in casual conversation. I was endlessly impressed at how quickly my students who had just moved to the East picked up this new language. I am unfortunately less linguistically gifted and was not able to pick up enough during my time in the field to sustain real conversations.

¹² In fact for this reason the Dzongkha department always sent the same representative to all meetings, a younger teacher who had gone through secular schooling and spoke good English.

¹³ Based only on my own impressions and not a systematic survey or study I would say Dzongkha and Nepali were the other two languages that were frequently spoken in cause settings. I do not speak Nepali.

While participant observation on campus happened within this linguistically rich setting (where I occasionally had to ask for on-the spot translation help¹⁴), my interviews and focus group meetings were always conducted in English. Certain students and teachers did have some difficulty expressing themselves in English but we were always able to understand each other. Ultimately being able to see (and hear) these differences helped to inform my understanding of the way in which regional and socioeconomic differences shaped academic ability and opportunities.

“So, you are studying us?”: Participant Observations

From the onset I planned to live at my research site for a whole academic year, allowing myself to be drawn into the daily rhythms of the institution and the people who inhabit it. I took field notes each day, recording observations and experiences which I later used both as important details for my dissertation and as a starting point for my interview and focus group questions. In anticipation of my time in the field I spent over a year and half communicating with the research division of the Royal University of Bhutan, which since 2003 has been the umbrella institution for all publicly funded post-secondary schooling in Bhutan, getting approval and support for my project. I talked to friends and family about

¹⁴ On one occasion I was with a group of faculty helping to prepare answer sheets for an upcoming exam, dull and monotonous work. One of the Dzongkha teachers was talking in Sharchop about a weekend trip to a festival in a nearby village, a story I could only half follow. Suddenly, much to my shock the woman sitting next to me, jumped up and shouted at him for a few minutes, ending her angry diatribe with a warning in English, “I will report you!” In the confusion that followed I learnt that the man had made some particularly off color, sexually explicit remarks about some of the young women he had meet at the festival. Sometimes asking for clarification in situations like this helped to produce insights that I might otherwise have missed.

finding accommodation in Kanglung, a town I had never visited before. Later I realized that despite these logistical preparations, other than “showing up” and “being there” I had not really thought about how this “drawing in” would work.

I initially greatly resented attempts by the college to make me part of the faculty. However, I learnt very quickly about the college’s precarious recruitment practices which continue to rely heavily on reluctant Indian lecturers, resulting in several no-shows at the beginning of each semester. As an eager-to-please newcomer, I was easily caught in the scramble to deal with staffing gaps and pressed into teaching in the sociology department. In the fall I co-taught Introduction to Sociology and in the spring I taught Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. Ultimately it was this grudgingly accepted position that provided me with a structured and locally comprehensible way in which to be “drawn in”.

My eventual position as a member of the tiny newly-created, two-person sociology department (one room, three windows, two desks, one computer, 1/3 of a printer¹⁵) allowed me important access that was initially denied to me including the ability to attend staff meetings, involvement in faculty extra-curricular duties, getting to see and read (and collect) internally circulated documents and memos as well as being added to an intra-net based college message board which was one of the few public forum to discuss both day to day affairs and bigger issues such as philosophies on discipline and teaching. Some of the richest ethnographic

¹⁵ The printer was shared with two other brand new departments: history and political science. The three departments together made up the social sciences block, which shared resources in a variety of ways.

insights came out of my participation in the college as a tentative member of the faculty.

Initially, this new identity was hugely disturbing to me and I worried constantly that being marked as a lecturer, part of the establishment, would negatively impact my ability to build rapport with students, that they would trust me less. However my sense of obligation to the students eventually overcame my fears. Knowing that I would be racked with guilt if the students¹⁶ had no teacher made me decide that I would just have to adjust my research plan and rework some of my expectations.

Gradually over the course of the year, several realizations made it clear that I had probably been naïve about what kind of relationships I could expect to have with students. Firstly, the hierarchical nature of social life at the college meant that my age would inevitably define my relationships with students (this was true even with some of my younger colleagues¹⁷ who insisted on addressing me as “Madam Dolma” even when we were socializing off campus). In other words, even if I had not been a member of the faculty, the influence of age would still have meant that only particular kinds of relationships were possible. Often, even with students I became close to, this meant that our interactions were strongly marked by more formal language, constant deference and also a sense

¹⁶ In my second semester at Sherubtse, I learnt that students in a course that was effectively never taught (because the assigned lecturer never arrives and was not replaced) were still expected to sit for an exam on the course that would carry the same weight on their transcripts as their other courses for the semester. Two weeks or so before the exam they were given a photocopied textbook and told to use this to prepare for the exam. While this story upset me it also convinced me that my decision to teach was the right one.

¹⁷ Assistant lectures who had been placed at the college after completing their BAs. They were often the same age or just a little bit older than the students that they were teaching.

that because of my age¹⁸ as well as my (perceived) economic and social position, I was expected to graciously entertain certain kinds of requests for help and support.

At the same time, I also realized that while students treated me like an elder, an adult, they did not necessarily view me as exactly like other faculty. For example, though students repeatedly told me in interviews and informally that faculty and administration excessively policed their personal lives in general and their love lives in particular, students (especially those who knew me well) were eager to talk candidly about romance, often bringing up their experiences and opinions without prompting. I really came to understand that I was viewed as different from other teachers when an older¹⁹ student (referred to as a continuing education or CE student,) a former teacher returning to school to earn his BA,²⁰ came to “congratulate” me for losing my temper in class one day. I was embarrassed by what I considered a failure of patience on my part but he genuinely felt that by raising my voice and berating students for not doing their reading assignment I was “finally showing the right attitude” to my students. Classroom observation, which was another research method that I used, showed me that while there was huge range in teacher –student interactions, I was

¹⁸ Most students were in their early twenties about ten years younger than me.

¹⁹ CE student tended to be in their late twenties or their thirties. Many of them, particularly the male CE student were already married with children.

²⁰ This student was from the generation in which students only needed to have a class ten education to enter teachers training college. At the time it was possible to gain a score that was good enough to enter teachers training but not high enough to continue to class eleven. Now students must have a class twelve education to be eligible for teachers training college.

somewhat less authoritarian and more easygoing²¹ than the average Sherubtse lecturer.

I had also failed to consider my colleagues as potentially rich and enthusiastic sources of insights and observation and stories about their own educational experiences both as teachers and students. My younger colleagues in the newer social science block were particularly curious about my study and often asked me thought-provoking questions, such as the question that is the sub-heading for this section.²² Their questions forced my thinking in new directions, but they were also wonderfully generous in sharing their own experiences and opinions. Having had a little time to reflect on their own education and how it related to their career trajectories and ambitions, they proved particularly helpful in enabling me to better understand how the aspirations of young Bhutanese were being shaped and realized.

While being part of the faculty did afford me a mostly comfortable vantage point, I felt a need to compensate for what the position made invisible, namely the daily experiences of students. To try and seek out these experiences I attempted to participate as much as I could in the kinds of activities and events that punctuated campus life for students, but which faculty members typically choose not to participate in or attend.²³ This included sporting events, school dances, compulsory evening prayer at the college temple, competitions,

²¹ One of my students consistently described me as “jolly.”

²² My colleague, as assistant lecturer in the sociology department may have only had a BA in the subject (typical of the new social science department) but after a careful reading of my project proposal he was very quick to point out that this would mean that I was studying him and what he did and felt.

²³ In fact I was told on multiple occasions by faculty that they actively avoided many of these events because they saw them as dull and a waste of time.

compulsory “social work,”²⁴ preparation and practice for the visit of dignitaries, weekly assemblies, school talent shows, and other extra-curricular activities including volunteer work, club activities and a leadership course. While there were many occasions when I was able to just “hang out” with students in less formal settings, including on class picnics, over tea at the college canteen and on sunny days after lunch sitting on the steps of the social science block, these encounters continued to be sharply marked by the teacher- student relationship.

The view from the back of the classroom: Classroom Observation.

Another method I used was classroom observation, which is a frequently deployed technique in the field of educational anthropology. Once I had gained the permission of the course instructor, I would attend their class once a week for four or five weeks, always on the same day. The first time I came I would explain my project and my presence to the students and invite questions, then I would sit in the back of the classroom and take notes. After the group seemed relatively comfortable with my presence, I would ask permission from them to film an entire class session. This was then edited into a 10 to 15 minute clip that was used for video elicitation during my focus group sessions.²⁵ I hoped that spending time in a variety of classrooms, observing interactions between both teachers and students and among the students would provide me with insight into aspects of the

²⁴ This is a misnomer since usually this entailed activities such as cleaning drains, cutting grass and weeds and once, memorably, catching stray dog in order to have all the campus strays vaccinated against rabies.

²⁵ This meant that I could not film the chemistry lab class because by the time they were used to my presence, they were undergoing practical exams and did not want to have to face both a camera and an examiner. Several students in the history class also asked to not be filmed and so I was careful to not include them in the frame as much as possible and edit them out of the clips used in video elicitation.

educational experience that might be missed in interviews and focus groups. In particular I was interested in finding out if interactions and expectations in classrooms created or reinforced gender or other kinds of social difference.

Faculty reactions to my request to observe their classrooms were interesting in and of themselves. Those who seemed hesitant to have me in their classrooms never told me outright that they were unwilling. Instead they often delayed the day that would be “most convenient” or just “forgot to inform” me where the class would be held or when. Female teachers overwhelmingly were less eager to have me observe their classes.²⁶ In fact of the six classes observed only one, the computer science course, was taught by a woman. The teachers who did welcome me into their classes were often particularly enthusiastic and often asked me for “feedback” on their teaching. While their teaching and classroom management styles varied greatly, in general all of them seemed to be successful in holding the attention of the class and many of them were considered by faculty and students to be “good teachers”. Given that there is very little classroom observation done at Sherubtse, and I had only heard of it being used to check on teachers who had generated substantial student complaints, it was perhaps not surprising that teachers who were confident in the classroom and open to the potential for critique were the most willing to have me there.

While I had ambitiously hoped to visit at least ten different kinds of classrooms, my own responsibilities and the reluctance of some faculty to allow

²⁶ I am not sure why this was the case since of course none of them explicitly told me I was unwelcome. I think in general it might be related to my sense that Bhutanese women are generally uncomfortable being in positions of authority and control.

me to observe their classes meant that I was only able to regularly observe six kinds of classes. They were: 1) a biology class; 2) a history class, 3) a computer science class; 4) a math class; 5) a chemistry lab class and 6) a *Diglam Namzha* or Bhutanese etiquette class. I was also able to attend several sociology classes taught by my colleagues as well as a smaller set of leadership classes for the Sherubtse Student Leadership Program. This gave me a sense of the range of classroom experiences that were offered at Sherubtse. Often it was in the classes where the course material was the most beyond my comprehension (like the computer science and math class) that I was least distracted by the actual content of the lesson and could best concentrate on interactions and behavior. Video elicitation used during focus groups allowed me to compare my observations and assumption to those of students.

Since as an instructor, I was already in a Sherubtse classroom on an almost daily basis it would be easy to assume that I already had a sense of the typical classroom experience. Apart for arguing that I needed to get at the range of classroom experiences beyond my own classroom and my own discipline, I also quickly learnt that things look very different from the back of the classroom. It was by being a visitor seated at the back of a classroom that I was able to notice interactions and behavior that were less visible from the front of the classroom.

Video Elicitation

As mentioned earlier I was able to film a full class period in four of the classes that I was regularly observing, namely: math, history, computer science

and biology. I then watched the footage of the whole class again and logged the interactions or events that I found remarkable, typical or ambiguous. I then had the footage of each of the classes edited to shorter segments which could be shown during focus group sessions. The idea was both to try to stimulate conversations about what goes on in classrooms, and to compare my own understanding and interpretation of the classroom experience with student understandings and interpretations. This use of video elicitation was directly inspired by Tobin, Wu and Davidson's ethnography *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and United States*, which makes extensive use of the method. While this method was intended to provoke what the authors refer to as "insider explanations" (1989:7), it also was an attempt to create a "multivocal ethnography," one in which there was an "ongoing dialogue between insiders and outsiders, between practitioners and researchers" (1989:4). The authors developed this approach after seeing Linda Connor, Tim Asch and Patsy Asch's pair of ethnographic films about Jero, a Balinese medium. The first film, *A Balinese Trance Scène*, shows Jero going into a trance for a client. The second *Jero on Jero*, showed Jero watching the first film with Linda Connor and talking about it. The idea with both the films and with Tobin et al's own project was to create a multi-layered, reflexive dialogue, that allows informants to react to the ethnographer's interpretation and ethnographers to in turn respond to these reactions.

While my project was not overtly comparative like Tobin et al's , and utilized a range of other methods, I hoped that the use of these video clips might

create a more unpredictable, open dialogue about school experiences than an interview would. By showing students the clips, I was able to show them what I thought was important or interesting and they could react to both my understanding of the interactions in the clip as well as the contents of the clip.

Do “real” anthropologists use focus groups?

I was surprised by the reactions of some anthropologists, including anonymous grant reviewers, to my decision to use focus groups as one of my methods. There was a sense that focus groups were not only incapable of collecting nuanced information but might even focus attention on the “wrong” information. In particular, critics were concerned with the way in which focus groups might produce findings that showed too much consensus, findings that were too normative. However, it was partially because of this tendency towards consensus that I thought focus group might be a useful method for my project.

In using this method I was drawing on Fingerson’s work (2006) which used mixed- gender focus groups to look at experiences and interpretations of menstruation among adolescent girls and boys in Indiana. She found that in these interviews “teens build upon each other’s talk and discuss a wider range of experiences and opinions than may develop in individual interviews” (2006: 7). She also argued that using group interviews allowed her to tap into “a peer culture where teens hang out and develop their views *in collaboration* with their friends” (2006:7, emphasis added). In other words, Fingerson found that because teens spend so much time with their peers and are already hugely influenced by them

when it come to beliefs about the body, gender and menstruation, a group interview mirrors the kinds of social interactions that they find comfortable and normal. This method plays off a group dynamic which is already found among young people, drawing on their familiarity with discussing these kinds of issues in a group setting.

I had originally decided to use focus groups to tap into a “peer culture” that might provide a normative understanding of gender roles and expectation. I thought it would be useful and interesting to compare responses here to what students would tell me in individual interviews. However, it became apparent that focus groups were particularly well suited to the context of my project. Sherubtse students took focus groups far more seriously than individual interviews; appointments for individual interviews were frequently broken or forgotten about, but I only had one no-show to a focus group. I suspect there were several reasons for this: 1) the two research assistants who helped with focus groups, Tshering Dorji and Pema Tshoki,²⁷ were diligent about reminding participants that they had agreed to be there, 2) students were more comfortable coming to meet with me when they knew that they would not be alone and found the group setting less intimidating, and finally 3) students seemed to actual enjoy focus groups and the opportunity they provided to discuss their school experiences and their opinions, often prolonging discussions well beyond the scheduled time.

²⁷ While I changed the names of all the other people I interacted, I decided not to change my research assistants’ names as a way to give them a greater claim to the ways that they shaped and influenced my project.

In total I conducted six focus group sessions; two were mixed-gender, two were all male and two were all female. There were eight²⁸ participants in the first session but because it felt too formal and class-like at this size, Pema, Tshering and I decided to drop to four participants for the second session and found that this was the perfect size to be able to take advantage of group dynamics but still allow everyone enough time to speak. I had my five research assistants seek out possible participants, encouraging them to aim for diversity in terms of disciplinary backgrounds and age. They then provided me with lists of names (and contacts) which I separated by gender. Before each session I would randomly draw four names to generate a set of participants for each session. In total 28 students participated in focus groups.

Focus groups were held in my office after school hours and were tape recorded. We started by watching the video elicitation clips and then discussing them.²⁹ This was then followed by a series of questions that attempted to get at their experiences of and opinions on gender and difference both at school and beyond it.

Formal Interviews

Interviews allow people to say in their own words how they make sense of their lives, their actions and their circumstances. As Seidman points out, the

²⁸ We had planned for six but eight showed up. One participant had told me she couldn't come but in the end showed up without checking with us if she had been replaced, she had. A second participant brought a friend. Since it was the first focus group and I was eager to make it a positive, welcoming environment I allowed both to stay.

²⁹ See Appendix A for the script that I used for focus groups.

underlying assumption of “in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience” (2006: 10). My plan was to do 50 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with students and other key members of the community, but in the end in order to accommodate my obligations to teaching and faculty duties, I decided to do fewer interviews. I formally interviewed twenty-four students, ten male students and fourteen female students. In addition I formally interviewed two male faculty under the age of twenty-five about their school experience, two older faculty who had taught at Sherubtse for over twenty years, six provosts (faculty who oversaw the hostels where students lived), one dean and the college sports director. In total I was able to conduct thirty-six interviews.³⁰

With students I attempted to use an abbreviated³¹ version of Seidman’s in-depth phenomenological interviewing (2006). Rather than having a question script, I asked each student to reconstruct their school experience in as much detail as possible. If they were willing to come for a second interview I used this as an opportunity to clarify details and asked them to reflect on the meaning of their experience. Most interviews took place in my office. Interviews tended to last between an hour to an hour and a half. Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed. I choose students for interviews in a variety of ways. In some cases I met students through my participation in student activities. I met

³⁰ See Appendix B for a list of individuals who were interviewed for this dissertation.

³¹ Seidmann’s approach involved three 90 minute interviews. The first is a focused life history, the second an opportunity to ask participants to elaborate on the details of the experiences that they shared in the second interview and the third interview offers participants an opportunity to reflect on what their experiences mean.

other students through our focus groups. Some students were recommended by my research assistants, other faculty or in several cases other students. There were other instances where I felt like I needed to include particular kinds of students (for example more science students or a CE (continuing education) student or more students from a particular part of the country) and so I asked for recommendations and introductions. Students who knew me better were more likely to agree to an interview irrespective of how much they knew about my project. Female students were much more likely to turn down my request for an interview but male students were more likely to agree to an interview and then cancel or not show up. Much to my surprise, students frequently broke appointments for interviews. The second interview was particularly difficult to schedule. One reason was no doubt how little control students had over their own time. Not only was there a curfew, but students were also often expected to appear for events, work or to receive visitors with very little advanced notice. During the weeks leading up to the convocation for example, many activities including classes were effectively (but not officially) cancelled as groups of students were recruited for a variety of tasks from chopping vegetables to preparing the site. This unpredictability, this sense that things could change suddenly and always being on call permeates student life in important and interesting ways which are explored in other chapters, but it also impacted negatively on my ability to schedule student interviews.

I wanted to interview provosts responsible for managing the hostels all students are required to live in, because students frequently complained about

aspects of hostel life including the strict policing of their movements and bullying or ‘ragging’ at the hands of older students. I was curious to hear the “official line” on both what was restricted and apparently tolerated in the hostels.

The two senior faculty members I interviewed were both Indian contract lecturers who had been at Sherubtse for over 20 years, and I wanted to interview them both to get a sense of the history of Sherubtse and also to better understand the situation of foreign faculty at the college. The two junior faculty members in my interviews had both recently earned their BAs and had just started teaching at Sherubtse. One had in fact been a student at Sherubtse just the previous year while the other had a teaching scholarship in India, which stipulated that after earning his BA, he would be in debt to government for six years of service. One of my research assistants, Jigme Lodey, suggested that we interview a senior administrator and the sports director and took the lead on these two interviews. All the other interviews were done by me alone.

Grey literature and other kind of texts.

Taking seriously Stromquist’s (2002) critique of accounts of schooling that leave the context of schooling unexamined, I had planned to collect textbooks and lesson plans hoping that they would serve as a useful window into the contents of contemporary Bhutanese formal education. For example, in her work in Nepal, Anheran (2001) found that textbooks provided important and gendered understandings of modernity, development and national identity. These

understandings could produce expectations, aspirations and assumptions that are highly gendered.

Textbooks in Sherubtse were, however, scarce and largely makeshift, and teachers often had no control over what was available so they usually assigned whatever could be found.³² Some classes in fact had no textbook and instructors were forced to improvise by providing students with photocopies or detailed class notes. However, I will argue that the absence of texts and their relative arbitrariness does produce particular kinds of messages that are relevant to thinking about Bhutanese education. In particular it seemed to hint at the way in which form was just as, if not more, important than content.

While I was unable to collect lesson plans because of time constraints, I did attempt to collect other kinds of documents that spoke to my concerns with the content of education, including copies of exam papers and circulars, and memos and reports which discussed the content and the quality of education. In retrospect I realize it was naïve of me to assume that I could evaluate the content of classes outside my discipline at a college level, and classroom observations had already made it clear that in many cases the content was barely comprehensible to me, particular in classes beyond the first year. However, I still have interesting things to say about the perceived content of classes particularly in relation to question about the quality of education which was a persistent concern both at Sherubtse and beyond it.

³² Textbooks were issued by the library and loaned to students for the duration of the semester. In very rare cases were there enough textbooks for each student to have their own copy. There was no bookshop in Kanglung or even in the nearby district capital Trashigang.

Another set of documents that I sought to collect was “grey literature” on gender, education and the labor market in Bhutan. The term “grey literature” refers to materials that are usually not found through conventional channels like commercial or academic publishers. It encompasses but is not limited to: committee reports, policy papers, technical reports produced by government and non-government agencies and working papers. Much of the existing research on education and gender in Bhutan was done for internal reports for government institutions and development assistance agencies. These reports not only provide an intimate, behind –the-scenes look at the Bhutanese education system from a historical perspective, but are also a major source of statistical information on educational access and outcome.

Since these documents circulate outside regular and visible channels, finding out about them and then managing to secure a copy is often a matter of luck. However, I was fortunate to have relatives and friends in development aid, the civil service and the media who knew about my project and alerted me to the publication and availability of these sources. I was ultimately able to amass a small but useful library of grey literature which was invaluable to my understanding of the historical, political and economic context of my research problem.

Research Assistants

Once I had settled into a routine of teaching and research at Sherubtse, mid-way through the fall of 2009, I started to recruit students to work with me as

research assistants. In total I had five assistants working with me: two girls and three boys. Two were in their second year of college while three were first year students. All had studied at least one semester of sociology and so had at least a basic understanding of social science research. I had hoped to use them to transcribe interviews and log film footage but it became immediately clear to me that because these files were digital and access to computer resources were extremely limited, this was not a reasonable expectation. In the end, one of most valuable contributions that the group provided was access to their network of friends and acquaintances for focus groups and interviews. This allowed me to reach out to students who I might have otherwise overlooked. I also used the group to develop and test my focus group script and the clips that were selected for video elicitation. For more specific tasks I divided students into smaller teams based on their skills and interests. Pema Tsoki, a second year female student and Tshering Dorji, a first year male student assisted with focus groups; Jigme Lodey, a second year male student, assisted with formal interviews of faculty members; and Pema Wangmo, a first year female student and Sangay A, a first year male student, helped me to get photo release forms signed. This last task was perhaps the most useful since it saved me the most time, but it also required the least engagement with my project. The three other students, who were more involved with the actual content of the project, ultimately shaped the project in ways that I had not anticipated.

Elyacher (2005) writing about her own research assistant argues, following Georg Simmel, that the relationship between the ethnographer and the

field s/he seeks to study is changed with the addition of a third party, the research assistant. She contends the dyadic relationship between ethnographer and field can “limit our ability to make intelligible the actions and identities that we study in the field” (2005: 32). According to Elyascher the presence of the research assistant helps to push that limit; they are able to make “the relationship between the first two become visible and intelligible” (2005:31). The value of this presence of “the third” was most clear to me during focus groups. Pema Tshoki became extremely skilled at gently nudging conversations during focus groups in directions that I would not have considered, as well as in reassuring students that it was safe to be honest during these sessions. She frequently stayed after the session to share her own interpretations of what had been said. Tshering Dorji was similarly good at creating a comfortable atmosphere during focus groups and he too often stayed after the focus group to discuss his feelings and ideas. Ultimately Tshering and Pema not only had a huge influence on what was said during the focus groups, but also on how I came to understand what was said during these sessions. Jigme Lodey’s occasional presence at faculty interviews also helped shape my project. Not only were the interviewees that he selected because of their influence on student life different from people who I would have sought out, but his line of questioning was often far more blunt than I could have gotten away with as a colleague. While I was sometimes frustrated by the kinds of tasks I could not assign my research assistants, I came to appreciate the ways in which they helped me make sense of my project, often by forcing me to find clearer ways in which to describe what I was doing and what I was looking for. I hope

that I will be able to adequately show the shadows and echoes of their crucial presence throughout my work. I hope to partially do that by using their names rather than the traditional pseudonyms that anthropologists deploy, this is a small but I hope meaningful way in which to mark their influence and presence in my work.

My not-so-secret agenda

Perhaps what I found hardest to “cope up” with was the sense of being caught between my obligations to my research participants and my responsibilities to my own project and personal politics. Should I argue with the colleague who tells me (and anyone else who will listen) that she already knew that the girl caught the night before in a boy’s room was a “slut” because of her short, trendy haircut? Or should I keep quiet, smile and nod so that I can try and create rapport and hear the rest of her rant? My choice of a research topic was underpinned by my own commitment to social reform. I was drawn to research on gender and education because both fields share a desire for transformation. I was actively looking for ways in which education could be made more equitable. At the same time, I was a guest of the institution and I had a human need to be liked. I wanted to be as good to my hosts as they were to me, and I also wanted to avoid being pegged as the high-handed moralizing outsider. It was tempting to just smile and nod. Casper, a medical sociologist concerned with women’s health issues who worked with fetal surgeons, however argues that “[t]o assert that I could somehow manage to keep my politics separate from my research, while

simultaneously exposing my informants' politics, would have been the height of methodological hypocrisy" (1997: 241). The implications are clear for my case, hiding my political beliefs and motives would have been hypocritical and dishonest.

Eventually I adopted an often uncomfortable strategy of moving between being an observer (listening, learning and taking notes) and engaging in discussions in a way that more clearly showed where I stood on particular issues. Often I found that I saved the latter approach for one-on-one exchanges. So I took notes and sat quietly during an assembly where students discussed the proposed amendment that would reserve seats in student government for female students, maintaining this stance even when one male student took the microphone and complained that this would create "human resources wastage" because qualified male students would miss out on the opportunity to be leaders. On the other hand, I had a long and honest discussion with a student who had come in to show me a draft of an essay in which she had argued that a girl was obviously "asking for it" if she was drunk at the time of her rape. I also made it a point to always openly discuss my research and evolving findings with anyone who asked, and while I didn't feel the need to state my politics they were almost always clear from the way that I choose to analyze and talk about my ideas and observations. These discussions however were not just a way to maintain ethical responsibility but often were also the source of real ethnographic insight as people responded to, actively engaged with and challenged my ideas and observations.

Cerwonka (2007), writing about her own fieldwork experience in Australia, talks about how knowledge production in the field is embedded in an emotional landscape, so that we partially *know* through what we *feel*. She also argues that there is a close relationship between these emotions and ethics- that in part we can feel what is right and wrong in our bodies. As an unmarried woman living alone, I was vulnerable to many of the same threats to my reputation as the female students and other unmarried female faculty. I found myself restricting my own behavior in ways that I did not always think about consciously. I was allowing myself to feel and react to the same fear of gossip as the people whose experiences I wanted to write about. As someone who is half Bhutanese with permanent ties to the country through blood and affection, these threats were not imagined but frighteningly real. I was able to understand the way that students and some younger faculty felt not just in an abstract way but at a very visceral level. I and the students I was speaking to were actively using emotions like fear and anxiety to make ourselves female in ways that would keep us out of the rumor mill.

What I have learnt since is that, even out of the field, with the distance of space and time, I am still anxious about my ethical responsibilities, particularly my obligations to people. Many of the people I interacted with were good people, or at the very least they were (mostly) kind to me. I worry that because of my focus on gender politics and my attempt to expose inequality, I am at risk of painting them as villains. I am forever conscious of my power as a writer to include or leave out details that would change the way people are perceived. Part

of my strategy to combat this is to acknowledge the ways in which, when it comes to gender, the people I lived with were in a context where power was not centralized but dispersed. While they might be able to enact gender norms in some instances at others these expectations were enforced by forces beyond them. They were caught up in what Grewal and Kaplan have called “scattered hegemonies”, a category in which they include everything from “global economic structures, patriarchal nationalism, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination and [to] legal- juridical oppression” (1994: 17). In the case of my research these forces are as diverse as religious notions of female pollution, funder- driven development directives, the government’s articulation of Gross National Happiness, an educational history shaped by reliance on an Indian model of learning, discipline and morality and local gender hierarchies that see the phalluses as sources of strength able to ward off the forces of malicious gossip and jealousy. However, while I do want to recognize the context that informs decisions and actions, as someone interested in social change and equity, I still do not believe that this absolves anyone of the consequences of their actions or words. Ultimately I hope to write in a way that both paints sympathetic pictures where people can be seen acting in rational ways; but that also shows both the need and potential for change.

Chapter 3

CONTEXTS, HISTORIES, INTRODUCTIONS

The year was 1959... We were eight children from Depong³³ and our parents were reluctant to admit us to school. They were busy lobbying and making false appeals that their children were deaf and dumb. Babu Tashi³⁴ explained to the gathering that value of education, the benefits of admitting the children to school, the regrets that would follow if they were not admitted and the roles that these children would play in serving the parents and the Government in a more fruitful way than now.” (Zangpo, 2002: 7)

“Some principals said that they were thoroughly screening out under-aged children. ‘Many parents are producing duplicate³⁵ health cards to admit their children, some of them as young as four years old, to class PP,³⁶’ the Changzamtog³⁷ school principal said.” (Choden, 2010a)

This chapter provides a social and historical context for this dissertation. I will start by describing the history of modern western co-educational schooling in

³³ A village in the eastern district or *dzongkhag* of Mongar

³⁴ Babu Tashi was the governor of Mongar at the time.

³⁵ The word “duplicate” in Bhutanese English does not always mean a copy. It is also used to refer to a fake, which is the opposite of an original, true document or artifact. In this context the principal means that the health cards are fake, showing the children to be older than they are.

³⁶ PP stands for pre-primary, the level at which a student enters the Bhutanese education system, usually at the age of six.

³⁷ A primary school in the capital city, Thimphu

Bhutan. As well as situating Sherubtse College within it, I will also describe some of the more salient aspects of daily life and experience in contemporary Sherubtse, the field site for this project.

Prior to the 1960's, opportunities for education and literacy were concentrated at all-male Buddhist monasteries. Until the founding of the Wangchuck dynasty in 1907, *dzongs*,³⁸ often described as fortress-monasteries,³⁹ were not only places of religion and learning but also key political centers. Until the first King, Ugyen Wangchuk was able to unify the country in the early twentieth century; Bhutan was governed through a complex and often volatile dual system of government which split power between religious and civil authorities.⁴⁰ The exercise of both political and religious power required literacy. Phuntsho argues that the kind of education available at these monasteries was “rare and access to it was the prerogative of the monks and the upper strata of the society” (2000: 105). He estimates a 15% rate of literacy from the time of the *Shabdrung* Ngawang Namgyel, a Buddhist lama who unified the nation in the 1630's to the reign of the second King in the 1920s (2000: 109). While nuns did learn to read and write, they were not afforded a comparable level of training and respect to monks and they could not participate in political or religious affairs to

³⁸ There are also other kinds of monasteries including ones that were situated in villages and are not political centers. Each major district or *Dzongkhag* has a *Dzong* in its capital from which the district is administered into the present. The Bhutanese official language is also called *Dzongkha*, *kha* means language so that *Dzongkha* is literally the language of the *Dzong*.

³⁹ Dujardin in an article on architecture in Bhutan distinguishes between the “majestic and strategically positioned fortress-monasteries (*dzongs*), dramatically located temples (*lhakhangs*) and monasteries (*gompa*)” (1997: 61). *Dzongs* are frequently built in strategic locations, for example hill tops overlooking valleys or near key mountain passes and many of them were used as fortresses during hostilities.

⁴⁰ This form of government is sometimes described as dual governance and at other times as a theocracy.

the same degree as monks or even educated lay men (Grimshaw 1992, Gutschow 2004, Zangmo 2009).⁴¹ Additionally this dual government was based in *dzongs*, where women were explicitly forbidden to spend the night, in effect, making it physically impossible for even literate women to completely participate in government. Kinga (2002) notes that historically in the dual form of government monks served as key bureaucrats such as administrators, generals and judges. While they were gradually replaced by lay men, they were still replaced by lay men with monastic educations. In other words these lay men were “monk-like” in that they shared “values, beliefs and views with the monastic community” (Kinga, 2002: 29). In fact Kinga notes that, “[t]he higher a government servant in office the more monk-like he had to become” (2002:28).⁴² This is significant because until the foundation of a formal modern education system both access to literacy and gender worked to limit who was able to participate in both secular and religious forms of power.

So, at least initially, the advent of modern schooling created opportunities for a wider array of people to access secular forms of power (by becoming government servants), thus allowing for a significant degree of social mobility. Ueda argues that prior to the advent of the modern Bhutanese education there was little change (and little possibility for change) in the average person’s social position with most of the population engaged in the same kind of subsistence

⁴¹ Phuntsho notes that some aristocratic families hired private tutors so that children could attain basic literacy and numeracy (2000: 105).

⁴² The government is still partially run out of *dzongs*, thought of course they are now too small to house all aspects of the national or even local government. The far more significant change is that monks are no long seen as political actors; in fact monks are by law not even allowed to cast votes during democratic elections.

farming way of life as their ancestors (2004: 330). Recognition of this new mobility is now widespread, ironically during a period in which schooling no longer guarantees government employment and its attendant power and perks. There has been a huge shift in parental attitude to schools, a shift that is remarkable because it happened so quickly. In roughly one generation, parents switched from trying every trick in the book to keep their children from going to school to the contemporary norm that sees parents so eager to admit their children to formal schools that they sometimes falsify documents to give them a head start (as seen in the second quote that started this chapter). Parents and families also make huge sacrifices to keep children in school, even to the extent of taking on debt to finance their continued education.

This was something that I noticed again and again while doing field work for my MA project in Bumthang, a central Bhutanese *dzongkhag*. My MA project was explicitly looking at the social change that more than 30 years of Swiss development aid had brought to the Bumthang region. I was particularly interested in how *Bumthaps*, the local inhabitants of Bumthang, understood these changes. For many of them the most important change was growing prosperity. I found that they chose to spend their new wealth on primarily two things: religious activities and their children's education (Roder 2006). It astonished me that while many of the people I spoke to could recount stories of how their own parents fought to keep them away from schools, these *Bumthaps* were now willing to pay for their children to continue their schooling in India when they failed to qualify

for free government schooling in Bhutan. It was in fact this astonishment that was the initial seed for this dissertation project.

“Educational Pioneers”

While numerous sources note (see for example Lama 2010, Mackey 2002) that several Hindi medium schools⁴³ were set up during the reign of Jigme Wangchuk, the 2nd king (1926 to 1952),⁴⁴ it is generally agreed that the real investments in modern education were made during the reign of the 3rd King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (1952- 1972). The 3rd King, in fact is historically considered the modernizer⁴⁵ who began the process of ending Bhutan’s isolationism both by creating ties with the outside world (particularly its neighbor India) and by systematically building modern infrastructure including roads, the army and schools.

I opened this chapter with *Dasho*⁴⁶ Jigme Zangpo’s recounting of the beginning of his educational experience which coincided with this period of modernization. What stands out in particular is both the reluctance of Bhutanese parents to send their children to these new kinds of institutions and the way in which Babu Tashi (at least the one in *Dasho* Jigme’s memory) explicitly links

⁴³ Hindi medium schools were quickly phased out and replaced by English medium schools. Currently the only Hindi medium schools in the country serve Indian families who are stationed in Bhutan either as members of the Indian army or as diplomats.

⁴⁴ Lama (2010) has even pointed out that not only are there few details about how or when the first modern schools were set up but there are even disputes about where the first modern school was set up.

⁴⁵ In contrast the 2nd King is usually described as the consolidator who worked to successfully tie together the various parts of the kingdom under central control.

⁴⁶ While *Dasho* is a title that can be inherited, it is also a title that can, as in the case of *Dasho* Jigme Zangpo, be bestowed by the King. *Dasho* Jigme Zangpo is currently a high court judge.

education and its rewards to both family and nation. This connection is important because initially education did provide most students with the opportunity to serve their nation by becoming civil servants. Additionally, the rewards of education were often also experienced by the families of these early students. In other words, education was not only an effective mechanism for individual social mobility but also for family social mobility. So both family and country were significant beneficiaries of these early educational initiatives.

Dasho Jigme Zangpo's story is a familiar one to many Bhutanese. The edited volume, "The Call: Stories of Yesteryears" compiled by the Center for Education Research and Development (2002) in which his story appears, is full of similar accounts. The stories usually go something like this: It was sometime in the 1960's and the country wanted to develop. A workforce trained to be "modern" was deemed necessary, but there were no modern formal schools and no tradition of sending children to these schools. So representatives of the government went from remote village to even more remote village, selecting children to go to newly established schools in Bhutan and sometimes even in India. Parents were often reluctant to give up their children; they begged, bribed, lied or even hid their children to keep them from being taken to schools.

Part of this unwillingness came from the large distances between home and these new schools. Bhutan has always been sparsely populated and so the choice of where to locate key infrastructure includes health facilities, roads and schools has always been a difficult and sometimes contentious one. The first schools were therefore intended to draw students from a range of places with

populations too small to justify a school of their own. This meant that for many children in the 1950s and 1960's, schools were hours or even days away from home. These distances are also often used to explain why initially parents were even more reluctant to send their daughters to school, one of the possible reasons that most early Bhutanese classrooms were dominated by male students.

The distance also often posed significant logistical challenges for parents particularly in school where boarding facilities had not yet been developed. Where would their children live? Who would look after them? What would they eat? In many cases parents had to build small temporary shelters or huts near the school. If the children were very young, a family member might have to live with them in the hut helping them with daily tasks like cooking and cleaning. Sometimes older siblings in the same school were expected to provide younger siblings, who might only be a few years younger, with this kind of help. Parents were often also expected to provide their children with enough food or "rations" to last the school year and this sometimes entailed physically carrying food long distances for their home village to the school. In addition to this since 1974, the United Nation's World Food Program has run (and continues to run) a school feeding program in Bhutan (see figure 1). Their goals have explicitly been to increase school enrollment and attendance while preventing drop-outs.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ <http://www.wfp.org/countries/Bhutan/Operations> (retrieved May 2011)

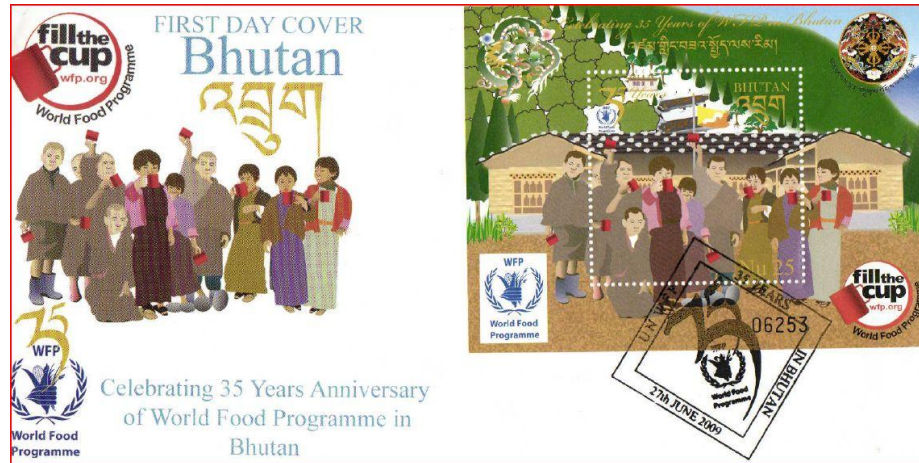


Figure 1: First Day Cover Celebrating 35th Anniversary (1974- 2009) of World Food Program in Bhutan, highlighting the school feeding program

Another reason for parents to be unenthusiastic about sending their children away to school was related to the perennial need for household labor, among most of the Bhutanese at the time, particularly families with land who were engaged in labor intensive cultivation and animal husbandry.⁴⁸ The loss of any able-bodied family members was a significant source of financial hardship. While even financially disadvantaged families could see the spiritual and social value of sending one or even two sons to receive a monastic education,⁴⁹ the idea of educating all the children in a family was a new one and had to prove its value before people were able to embrace it.

⁴⁸ Most Bhutanese continue to work in the agriculture sector. According to 2007 Bhutan Living Standard Survey, two thirds of all employed Bhutanese work in agriculture, in rural areas four fifths work in agriculture (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007a).

⁴⁹ Many Bhutanese families, particularly rural families, feel that at least one son should be monk. Ueda (2004) suggests that families also saw having a monk in the family as a way to ensure that they would have someone in the family who could be relied upon to perform important religious ritual for the wellbeing of the family. Kinga (2002) notes that historically there was actually a “monk-tax” that required families with more than three sons to send one away to a monastery to become a monk.

My mother and her brothers were selected to be sent to school around the same time as *Dasho* Jigme Zangpo and spent the next 15 or so years of their lives making the long trip back and forth between their schools in the India and their home in Bhutan. In the early days there were no airplanes, no cars, no roads, and no telephones. Often the parents were illiterate so there was also no consistent way to communicate with the family at home. The trip was made on foot and horse and it took days, even weeks just to reach Bhutan's southern border with India. In "The Call: Stories of Yesteryears," the 2002 publication re-calling this educational past, the then minister of Education, *Lyonpo*⁵⁰ Sangay Ngedrup refers to these young travelers as "our educational pioneers" (Center for Educational Research and Development).

Many of the stories included in the publication recount the great hardships that were involved in securing an education, starting with the reluctance of parents to send their children to school to the general lack of educational infrastructure (including dorms, toilets and even classrooms), the distance, the homesickness, the lack of basic supplies from firewood to food, to a perennial shortage of qualified teachers. Despite the huge growth in the education system since the 1960's and 70's, when these early accounts were set, it seems that some students, particular those who attended rural schools, continue to face some of the same challenges as these pioneers. Adequate food continues to be a problem and the World Food Program continues to support school feeding programs in Bhutan.

⁵⁰ *Lyonpo* means minster in Dzongkha.

In 2010 they feed 36,000 students twice a day or about 20 percent of all students in Bhutan.⁵¹

Many students at Sherubtse are still “educational pioneers” in the sense that there are among the first in their families to pursue formal education.⁵² Many of them continue to tell stories of the great hardships they had to face in their pursuit of education. Distance continued to be a problem for many. One first year student, Kamal Rizal, told me that when he was in primary school it was such a long walk to and from school that by the time he got home it was dark and he was tired so there was rarely time or energy for homework.⁵³ Several told me of the difficult and dangerous journey to and from school during school holidays, especially during the monsoon season when landslides were frequent and potentially deadly. Yonten Samdup who came from a particularly remote area of central Bhutan, talked about how his primary school was too far from home for him to go back and forth and yet the school lacked boarding facilities so like earlier educational pioneers, his family had to build him a hut near his primary school so that he could attend. And though they seem to now be in the minority, not all parents are eager or committed to sending their children to school. Karma Chuki, told me that her parents had decided not to send her three older sisters to school. She was the only one of her siblings to go to school and then only after

⁵¹ This is based on AUSAid or the Australian government’s Aid program which is a major donor to WFP school feeding efforts in Bhutan.

<http://www.usaid.gov/country/country.cfm?CountryID=9765303>

⁵² According to the 2010 Annual Education Statistics, there are 210,000 illiterate people in Bhutan, a substantial number when you consider that the total population is only 646,000 (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2010).

⁵³ According to the Education Section Review Commission, the 2003 National Education Assessment found that distance to school was strongly linked to school performance, that “the shorter a pupil traveled to school the better their performance” (2008: 23).

her older sister intervened, by taking Karma to live with her in another town so that she could make sure her little sister attended school. Kinga Lodey told me that his parents often made him stay home from school to guard their corn fields against wild monkeys and that it was only after he became extremely distressed about what he felt that he was missing that his parents finally allowed him to attend school uninterrupted.

Reflecting new differences

The modern Bhutanese educational system has seen significant changes since its early days. One of the most important changes is that the number of schools and students has dramatically increased in a very short period of time. In 1961 less than 500 Bhutanese children were attending schools, by 1969 only 20 Bhutanese students had completed high school (Ezechieli 2003, Phunthso 2000). In contrast, according to the 2010 Annual Education Statistics, 49 years later there were 170,500 Bhutanese students in nearly 550 schools (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2010).

Despite this impressive gain in terms of access for Bhutanese students, new divisions that have an important effect on educational experience, opportunities and outcomes are emerging. In particular, household poverty and living in rural Bhutan have a clear and negative impact on educational access, experiences and outcomes. With increasing evidence that households in rural Bhutan tend to be poorer (National Statistics Bureau 2007a, National Statistic Bureau b, Santos and Ura, 2008), some students are doubly disadvantaged. The

framework of intersectionality (Collins 1990, and Crenshaw 1989 and 1991) offers an analytical vantage point to consider what these differences might mean for student experiences. Berger's work with HIV-positive women in Detroit who were also "sex worker, drug user (primarily of crack cocaine), and law breakers (engaging in criminalized activities) in every sense of the word" (2004: 2) was able to show how multiple but splintered sources of potential disadvantage, rather than being weakened by their decentralized nature, might actually compound and "create new and (often) unrecognizable forms of discriminatory encounters in everyday life" (Berger, 2004:19). This strand of analysis has been used primarily in the US and often in the context of the law (see, e.g., Crenshaw 1989). However, it also offers a powerful tool for analysis beyond the American context particularly because far too often developing nations like Bhutan are treated as if they were homogenous, overlooking critical gender, class and regional differences.

At the same time some students have particular educational advantages. Not only are some families better able to afford for their children's continued education but studies by the Bhutan Board of Examinations (BBE) suggests that children of civil servant and corporate employees fare substantially better in school than the children of farmers and business people (Wangmo 2010a, 2011b). This data comes from class ten and twelve exam results from 2009 and 2010 conducted by the BBE. According to the BBE secretary, Dr Phub Rinchen: "civil servants, in both rural and urban centers, are more conscious about the academic performance of their children and they take the effort to tutor them at home"

(Wangmo 2009). Considering the wealth, literacy and lifestyle difference between the average Bhutanese farmer and civil servant, these findings suggest that class differences may increasingly impact educational attainment and experiences.

Today, about 16.3 percent (or 16,500) primary-school aged children are not in formal school (Education Sector Review Commission, 2008: 21).

According to a 2007 UNDP report on poverty reduction, one of the most important reasons for children not attending school was what they referred to as “economic compulsion.” They found that 44 percent of absences were from families who could not afford school or that needed the child to work (Osmani et al, 2007: 42). While there are no fees for attending school, families must still pay for uniforms, school food fees and other kinds of contributions. Additionally, Dorji (2005a) found that household labor needs continue to affect decisions about education. He found that along with the cost of essential school expenses, the need for household labor directly influences non-enrollment and drop-out rates. In particular he found that because of these concerns poor and rural-dwelling children are less likely to attend and complete school. So while once it was distance and access that were the major obstacles to attendance, household poverty is now the leading reason for Bhutanese children to be out of school.

As Dorji’s findings on the impact of household labor needs on school attendance hint, the divide between rural and urban inhabitants is beginning to grow. This emerging difference between urban and rural Bhutan is increasingly visible and discussed. In particular there is a developing concern with the correlation between rural Bhutan and poverty (see e.g.. Dorji & Pek 2005 and

National Statistics Bureau 2007a, National Statistic Bureau b, Santos and Ura, 2008). Urban spaces are a recent phenomenon for Bhutan⁵⁴ and so are the differences in opportunity, resources and wealth that are beginning to be noticeable between urban and rural Bhutan. Schools and school experiences are beginning to reflect these differences.⁵⁵ The Education Sector Review Commission for example cites a 2003 National Education Assessment conducted with class 4 students that found that “urban student out-performed semi-urban, rural and remote students in all cases” (2008: 31).

An illustration of the difference between urban and rural schools can be seen in staffing patterns. One of the biggest challenges for rural schools continues to be teacher shortages, while urban schools have extra teachers (for e.g. see Namgyal 2011). Since 2009, the Ministry of Education has tried to address this disparity, first by asking teachers to voluntarily transfer to rural posts and then (when too few volunteers were forthcoming) by sending transfer notification to teachers who had been working in the capital, Thimphu for more than twenty years (Bhutan Observer 2009 and Choden, 2009). These transfers were met with protests as well as claims that the transfers were unfairly enforced (Choden 2010b), however 2011 saw a second set of transfers (Gyelmo 2011). Echoing teachers’ urban over rural preference, the Secretary of Education, Aum Sangay

⁵⁴ Choden (1997) notes that while Bhutanese knew about and had on occasion even traveled to bustling cities in India, Nepal and Tibet, until planned development began in 1961; their major experience of the crowds and commerce associated with urban setting was limited to temporary settlement that spontaneously sprung up to for religious or trade purposes.

⁵⁵ Urban poverty is a growing concern but has received considerably less attention. Anecdotal evidence suggests that urban poverty does effect school enrollment. My sister helped to run and organize an art program with urban youth and was astonished to find how many of the participants did not attend school.

Zam is quoted as promising that “any teacher, willing to serve in remote schools for a period of three years ... will be transferred to *better places*” (Gyelmo 2011, emphasis added). This kind of a prejudice surely has some kind of an effect on the atmosphere at a rural school.

Interviews I conducted with students at Sherubtse indicated that wealth and school location have a long-term, ongoing impact on educational experience and outcomes. Sonam Wangchuck, for example told me during an interview that he had began to notice in about class eight that children from “better families” always got higher marks on class projects because their projects looked more tidy and presentable. Students from rich families could type up their projects on a computer and print them out on computer paper, while students like him had to use cheaper, thinner paper to handwrite their projects. He remembers going to a rich friend’s house to staple his projects so that the pages were not turned in tied together with a piece of string. He noted that he wasn’t surprised when that friend was able to secure a slot to study medicine. This wealth is likely to have also provided access to other kinds of educational resources, most significantly increased exposure to the English language.

Again and again at Sherubtse I noticed how students from more modest backgrounds and more rural schools were inclined to speak and understand English, the medium of instruction in almost all classes, poorly. This puts them at a huge academic disadvantage compared to their more urban classmates who are far more fluent and confident in their use of the language. This had important implications not only for performance at the college level but also beyond it with

ability to speak English well being a significant requirement for more prestigious kinds of work, in particular entry to the highly coveted civil services jobs.⁵⁶

Rural students also tend to feel at a disadvantage to their urban classmates in terms of knowledge and experience of the wider world, something that is referred to using the English word “exposure.” This term, which seems to resemble social capital, broadly covers a range of interrelated knowledge from fashion trends and pop culture to the ability to speak English (and to a less extent Hindi) well, to travel outside the country and connection to nationally important people. These perceived differences seem to reinforce disparities between rural and urban students as well as those based on family socio-economic backgrounds. Far from being superficial, these kinds of experiences and knowledge seem to provide students who have them with not only significant information about the world but also with a sense of confidence that allows them to do better both in school and beyond it.

Life at “The Peak of Higher Learning”

Sherubtse, which translates as “Peak of Higher Learning,” was founded in 1966 by Father William Mackey, a Canadian Jesuit priest. Until 1983 it was a higher secondary school. That was the year that an affiliation with Delhi University (or DU) in India allowed the college to begin to grant Bachelors’

⁵⁶ Even among faculty, there was a deep anxiety about English ability. Not only was it common for faculty from more urban backgrounds who were often educated outside the country to tease faculty with strong regional accents but some faculty were so concerned with what they perceived to be their weak command of the language (which they taught in) that they seemed to rarely speak the language in public.

degrees. Three years later, in 1986 the college awarded its first degrees in Arts, Science and Commerce to thirty male graduates.⁵⁷ This affiliation meant the curriculum, syllabus and exams were set in Delhi and then sent to Sherubtse. The completed exams were then returned to Delhi for grading. Degrees were technically granted by DU rather than the college. It was only in 2003 with the foundation of the Royal Bhutan University (RUB), a national university system that Sherubtse began to move away from DU and start to set its own curriculum and syllabus. This move also allowed the college to develop new, localized, Bhutan-specific courses and programs that were not previously possible under the DU system. These included the newly developed social sciences programs that I was involved in during my time at Sherubtse. This was a gradual move that was still being carried out and debated during the time of my field work in the 2009-2010 academic year. For many years, Sherubtse was the only liberal arts and sciences college in the country, drawing top students and seeing many of its former students going into careers in the government.

⁵⁷ According to the Sherubtse Website :



Figure 2: A group of students in national costume. They are wearing matching clothing because they were serving beverages at the bi-annual Sherubtse convocation.

There is no official uniform for Sherubtse students, but they are expected to always wear the national costume to class and all official college events. The rumor before I came to Sherubtse was that in anticipation of joining the college, every girl needed to have at least 30 *kiras*, the long, broad piece of usually hand-woven cloth that forms the straight ankle-length skirt of the women's version of the national costume. The *kira* is folded onto the body to fit the wearer exactly and then secured at the waist with a belt.⁵⁸ On top of the *kira* women wear a soft, often silky inner blouse *wonju*, which is mostly covered by a usually stiffer and thicker jacket called a *tego* which is secured shut using safety pins and often a brooch. The *wonju* is folded so that it is seen at the wrists and collar. Women

⁵⁸ Technically this is a half-*kira*. A traditional *kira* would cover the whole body. It would be attached at the shoulder with brooch-like *koma* and the tied at the waist. Half-*kira* became popularized during the 1990's and now most, younger women wear than in both formal and informal settings. Kinga (2005a) offers a fuller discussion of these changes

(both faculty and students) seemed to take great care in selected color combinations and in general favored vibrant bright colors. Based on the huge daily variations, it quickly became clear to me that 30 *kiras* might not have been such an exaggerated figure. In fact during an interview, Chencho Wangmo told me that once she knew that she has been admitted to Sherubtse she spent the summer weaving herself 17 new *kiras* in preparation. Men wear *ghos*, a single piece of cloth that is like a large coat. It too is fitted to the body and secured at the waist but the skirt is pulled up much shorter on them, ending near the knees. They also wear an inside shirt, *lagay* that is always white and is also folded so it can be seen at the collar and wrists (See Figure 2).

While students break all kinds of rules, the expectation that they will wear national costume to classes and official events was one that I never saw breached. Western clothing was repeatedly pitted against national costume as a way to emphasize the formality and appropriateness of the latter. For example, enforcing dress codes were often a way in which senior students “ragged” first year students. In the college setting there is also an entrenched age hierarchy with older students expecting to be able to “rag” first year students. “Ragging”(similar to hazing in a US setting) includes everything from public verbal abuse to insistence that for their first month at Sherubtse first year students only wear the national costume, even during non-school hours. Another example is the dress code for a popular student leadership program run by a small and dedicated group of young, progressive faculty members. One of them explained to me that while setting up the program, they discussed the dress code extensively and decided not to allow

students to wear “pant-shirt” (as western clothing is often referred to by Bhutanese) because that would be “taking things too far.” In both instances Western clothing becomes the less formal, less respectful, and trendier foil for Bhutanese clothing. This was emphasized to me during an assembly when the student speaker gave a long and passionate argument about why wearing a *gho* was superior to “wearing pant- shirt.” His argument deployed emotion and cultural pride more than it marshaled any facts or logic, again and again he told his captive audience – “We should wear the clothes we were born in.” Later however when I joked that he was the boy that was born in a *gho* , my colleagues and students laughed politely but told me that to a large extent they shared his views, and that they liked expressing their national identity and pride by wearing their national costume on campus.

In many ways life is self-contained on campus for faculty, staff and students, especially given the lack of reliable transportation in and out of the Kanglung. Sherubtse’s sprawling campus started out as an enclosed compound with gates that could shut the world out and the students in, but with a growing student population, with new courses being added as well as the ongoing pressure to admit more students, new hostels have been added both to an area above the original campus and more recently in an area to the south of campus. The main gated campus was built in the 1960’s with funding from the Indian government to be self-contained with student hostels, a student dining room, classrooms, offices, an official guest house, an auditorium and staff housing all within walking distance of each other. New buildings such as more science labs, computer rooms,

a library, a multiple purpose hall and so on were later additions but remain in walking distance of preexisting infrastructure. (Figure 3 offers a glimpse of the campus). Clusters of restaurants and small shops selling vegetables, stationary, toiletries and other daily necessities hug the two edges of campus.



Figure 3: Sherubtse Campus showing offices to the left, the auditorium to the right and the library to the far right.

For students, much of their social life and experiences is confined to the college campus. The Lecturers on Duty (LOD) system, which sees male Bhutanese lecturers patrolling the campus each night after 8 pm (later on the weekend) to enforce a curfew, also helps to keep students in their hostels. Student-run activities, including “cultural shows⁵⁹,” sporting events, student club activities and college dances, are largely confined to the campus. Students do

⁵⁹ Talent show-like events organized by various student clubs that usually include dance routines and singing.

make the trip to Trashigang for more exciting shopping and dining, they also picnic (and occasionally get drunk) at a helipad on the top of the hill and sporadically there is a class trip to an overnight destination,⁶⁰ but these are all special occasion trips, rather than daily journeys.

All the nearly 1,000 students lived in a college run hostel.⁶¹ Several hostels were considered “self- catering” meaning that students prepared all of their own meals, while the rest were designated “centrally catered” meaning that student could eat all their meals in the college mess. Student who were in self-catering hostels were given a small monthly stipend by the government to cover the cost of food but many students supplemented this by bringing bags of rice and other essentials from home. Kitchens provided by the college had no other fixtures except a sink, so students were also expected to bring all their own cooking supplies including stoves, gas cylinders and rice cookers. These are substantial investments and one faculty member who had been a student at Sherubtse when self-catering hostel were first established confirmed that initially only rich students could afford to move to them. Sharing a kitchen⁶² often does provide camaraderie as students usually prepare, cook and eat meals with their roommate, kitchen mates and other friends.

⁶⁰ These are impressive feats of organization as student organizer work to secure transportation, permission and food for the large group. The most organized classes manage one trip a semester.

⁶¹ The only exceptions were Continuing Education or CE students who were married and had families. They could petition to live off campus with their spouses and families off campus. I only knew of one CE student who took advantage of this provision.

⁶² About three or so rooms of two or more students each are assigned to share a kitchen.

Cooperation and campus politics

Many social arrangements on campus seem to lend themselves to promoting camaraderie or “cooperation” among students. For example, academic programs at Sherubtse are structured so that there are no elective courses, consequently a cohort (anywhere from 17 to 60 students make up a cohort) moves through the program together, year by year, always taking the same classes at the same time, often even moving across campus from class to class as a group. There were also a host of activities and tasks that students were expected to do in cohorts, from attending weekly evening prayer, to mandatory campus cleans up to participating in sports. Each cohort is headed by a single Class Representative or CR. The CR is often expected by teachers to “manage” their classmates, for example they might be called on to take attendance, oversee the distribution of required reading material, collect homework and organize the class for campus cleaning projects. The position was largely burdensome and thankless. There seemed to be no clear rules of how CRs were elected and in some cases it was clear that a faculty member had appointed the CR. Despite this lack of real “representation,” I would argue that both the design of academic programs and the way that the role of the CR was understood and used, helps to build camaraderie and strengthen cohort identification

In general there was a strong value placed around the notion of “cooperation,” which was a concept that I explored in focus group interviews. Students, faculty and staff often used the English word “cooperation” to talk

about work and participation in all kind of campus activities including: attendance, camping trips, school-sponsored religious events, academic group assignments and participation in faculty meetings. The term was used to describe a broad range of group activities from following the group, to doing things in a group, to helping people who are part of your group (even if it means doing their share of the work) to not attempting to derail or argue with the group. The local use of the term also allows it to be used to describe forms of “bad cooperation ” such as “ragging”, the pressure to drink or smoke in order to participate with the group, the pressure to cheat or at least pass on completed assignments to other classmates and of course the pressure to keep secret are all forms of “bad cooperation”. One student, however, pointed out that in some cases “cooperation” might not be as voluntary as it seems. She noted that sometimes some members of a class “don’t agree with that but they feel they have to. Since everyone is doing it if I don’t, I might look bad in front of the class. So you know they just force themselves to cooperate. Even in very cooperative classes there are some people that they don’t want to take part but you know out of compulsion they take part in such activities” (Tshering Lhadon, Focus group two).

On the other hand “not giving cooperation” was also used as a kind of threat and could be construed as a form of dissent. For example, faculty often passively protested unpopular administrative policies or personalities by attending as few faculty meetings as possible. The “fact” that male students would “refuse to cooperate” with a female leader was frequently cited by both students and faculty as the reason that female students were so poorly represented in student

government. In fact the two most striking and public examples I saw of non-cooperation where the reactions to female students taking charge of mixed gender groups. In one case, a class representative was eventually compelled to step down because so many of the male classmates “refused to cooperate” with her. And in the other the female head of the campus nature club told me how hurt she was that people did not show up for meetings and activities that she had organized or were rude and reluctant to participate when they did show up. Notions of cooperation and non-cooperation had significant consequence for social life at Sherubtse.

Hierarchy as a social organizer

Ever more than cooperation, the hierarchical nature of Bhutanese social life powerfully shaped experiences in the campus setting. This is most visible in the highly ritualized social interactions between people considered to be socially unequal, such as faculty and students, older faculty and younger faculty, faculty and upper level administrators, older and younger students and the college community and VIP visitors (including members of the royal family and important political and religious leaders).

In the college setting there is also an entrenched age hierarchy, with older students expecting to be able to “rag” first year students. “Ragging” can include a range of acts from public verbal abuse to demanding public display of “respect for senior”. Officially ragging is prohibited but in practice and as long as it is not distractingly disruptive, it is tolerated by faculty and staff with very little comment or intervention. *Driglam Namzha* or traditional Bhutanese etiquette,

which provides standard rules for interactions between socially different people, on the other hand is officially sanctioned and formally taught in all Bhutanese schools including Sherubtse. *Driglam Namzha* governs everything from the appropriate dress for particular social occasions to how people of lower status are to welcome and serve those of higher status.

The examples of the ways in which hierarchy are observable at Sherubtse are endless and often mundane. Students stand when a teachers enters or leaves a room; when faculty are served tea during faculty meetings, the director was always served first and always in a fancier cup; students often deferred to the older Continuing Education (or CE students) in their classes, often asking them for advice and sending them to faculty and administrators with requests and proposals on behalf of the class as a whole. Hierarchy is, in other words, an important form of social organization that is consistently reinforced in the college setting in both formal and informal ways. It was so naturalized that encountering it was only surprising to outsiders.⁶³

Talking in the Dark

At lunch time Dorji Dema and I ran into Raju in the canteen.

“Madams!” he half-yelled “why were you not at the meeting yesterday?” We shrugged sheepishly and mumbled vague excuses.

Of course as usual Raju was only play scolding us and he went on

⁶³ For example, one foreign faculty member had been known to complain about the director’s nicer cup. The fact that she was not there when I was but the story of her complaint was still there, speaks to how surprising people found her comments.

to dramatically recount the key highlights/lowlights of the very long meeting. He said that the meeting went on into the evening, daylight actually faded during the meeting. After about three hours of talking there was a power outage and the lights went out. He told us that he was so happy because he thought, At last! Now I can go home and eat dinner. “But oh no,” he said mournfully “The meeting continued. We went on! We were talking in the dark!” The entire account had Dorji and me in stitches, but later over lunch we talked about how “talking the dark” was the best metaphor for those meetings. How often it felt like no one had a clear idea about what they or anyone else was saying or trying to say during these meetings. Sometimes I get so confused I can barely keep up with my note-taking at these meetings (Fieldnotes March 2010).

“Talking in the dark” was also a metaphor for my experience as a member of the Sherubtse college faculty. Sherubtse was going through a period of rapid and unprecedented change during the 2009/2010 school year that I spent there and often it felt like the suddenness of the changes did not allow for a proper understanding of how these changes should or could happen or why they were desirable and/or necessary. Too often during meetings at various levels and even more casually which chatting among colleagues, when these coming changes were discussed it felt like we were “talking in the dark.” This sense of constant

upheaval, confusion and miscommunication (that was often as comical as it was frustrating) was an important part of the context of this study and of life at Sherubtse more generally.

Two of the most important changes were connected to the increasing autonomy of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) system. RUB was soon to move completely away from a formal affiliation with Delhi University (DU) and during the year of my fieldwork, RUB was to formally delink from the government, including the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC). Both changes are long anticipated and much discussed. The faculty at Sherubtse was generally uncertain about what these changes would mean both for them and for their institution.

Debates around the break from DU centered on questions about the quality of education and how quality and consistency could or should be monitored without the oversight of DU. Many of the senior faculty had taught for years under the DU system and for them in particular it was hard to imagine teaching without this familiar academic structure. In the past Sherubtse had a strong academic reputation but with the advent of so many new options for tertiary level education, both within the country and beyond it, there was particular apprehension around this transition. At the same time for RUB this was an important opportunity to design and offer courses that were more relevant to the Bhutanese context. There was also a sense among some faculty that the DU exams had encouraged rote learning and discouraged critical thinking. However the new courses and new program are untested and were often taught by young

Bhutanese faculty, many of them first time teachers, sometimes freshly graduated with their undergraduate degrees. The newness and the uncertainty were palpable. So many changes that came out of this break fell under the category of, “for the first time” or “for the last time.” For example, there were three brand new social science programs being offered on campus. The very first class of non-Delhi University students were getting ready to graduate and the very last of the DU students graduated. The last convocation that would be held at Sherubtse took place (the next one took place in the capital Thimphu where RUB was headquartered).

The delinking from RSCS that would be part of gaining autonomy from the government was something that particularly worried Bhutanese faculty. Up to this point they had been considered civil servants who were able to reap all the accompanying benefits. In particular civil servants were considered to have almost absolute job security. What would this change mean for them and for their careers? Once again RUB saw this as an opportunity to have increased independence in terms of budgeting, hiring and retaining the kind of faculty and staff that their institutions needed. They saw it as freedom from government bureaucracy. At the same time this autonomy means that college will have to start charging fees to students in order to raise revenue. Furthermore, despite RUB’s optimism, this autonomy was neither organic nor was it optional. It was in fact part of the “Accelerating Bhutan’s Socio-Economic Development “ (ABSED) program laid out by the consulting firm McKinsey to which the Bhutanese government paid USD 9.1 million to “improve the efficiency and effectiveness of

public service delivery in such a way that quality is improved at lower costs of delivery” (Lamsang, 2009). As part of the program the government is scheduled to gradually reduce support for students making the college and the students more responsible for education financing (Lamsang, 2011b). These looming changes will significantly transform education in Bhutan in ways that are not yet imaginable to most faculty or students at Sherubtse, so the confusion, concern and speculation I encountered was completely understandable.

The chaos of daily life at the college was more of a surprise. I have already spoken briefly in Chapter two (from a very personal perspective) about the way in which staffing practices regularly created gaps and uncertainties, however short staffing was a constant issue across the campus. Not only were there hires that never arrived or ones that quit and left before the semester was over but even more frequently faculty were just not in classes or even on campus. A few faculty members were notorious for calling off classes or just not showing up. Far more common were legitimate but often unpredictable faculty absences. Often faculty were sent away for trainings or scholarship interviews in the capital for undefined periods of time, and classes that they were responsible for had to be dealt with either by having someone cover them, by assigning students work to be done in their absence, by “taking extra classes” once faculty returned, or by just cancelling the classes all together. The lack of a consistent solution to a perennial problem created confusion and meant that some students were simply not being taught all the material that they should have for the semester. Not that students seemed to mind, as they frequently begged teachers to “call off classes,”

sometimes going so far as to cooperatively agree not to attend a class so that no one student could be punished. Classes were also frequently cancelled by administrators, with very little advanced notice so that students could prepare for VIP visitors or attend talks given by these guests. For newer foreign faculty these frequent and unpredictable interruptions were frustrating disruptions, but for many others the suddenness with which classes were cancelled was just a part of daily life.

Equally unpredictable were the rules and regulations that governed campus life. Rules were enforced, sometimes harshly but also almost always inconsistently. Everything from rules around curfew to dress code to attendance requirements were really up to the discretion of whichever faculty or administrators happened to be involved. It always saddened me to see what a huge difference a faculty advocate made. So, on the one hand Dorji Dema regularly managed to successfully protect her students who were caught breaking curfew from harsh punishments, but during the same period of time a group of male students who had brought a birthday cake to the dorm of a female friend at midnight were all summarily suspended.

What the official rules were, was also sometimes a matter of ambiguity. I was shocked while trying to help a student who failed an exam figure out his options that I could not find a single member of faculty who could walk us through what came next: Did he re-sit the exam at the end of the holiday or the next time the class was offered in the fall? Was it true that he could only score a

“pass” if he took it next semester?⁶⁴ What if he failed again? Could he re-take the failed exam a third time? No one was completely sure, apparently progression rules⁶⁵ had changed frequently since classes were gradually delinked from DU and now no one was sure which rules applied to which students. In fact I later learnt that different rules applied based on the year a student entered the college.

Information in general was not equally shared. For example, it took me weeks to find out that there would be no new textbook arriving that semester and I was told this only after several weeks of pestering the librarian about the textbook I had ordered. As I will discuss later, this made rumors an important and frequently credible source of information.

In the meantime all this confusion meant that if you were not willing to “talk in the dark,” waiting was really the only other option. Waiting to see. Waiting to hear. Very early in my stay, the college community had spent days preparing for an important visitor. Preparation that included cancelled classes. On the appointed day students and faculty were on the football ground that had been re-outfitted with tents and tables and decorations by 7am but the visitor was delayed and delayed and delayed. By noon we were still on the football ground, unsure when the visitor would arrive and waiting. I had become increasingly agitated but when I asked my students if they were annoyed by having to wait so long, one of them smiled and said “Madam, we are used to it.”

⁶⁴ A pass would mean that irrespective of his actual performance, the highest percentage that he could earn on the exam would be 50%.

⁶⁵ Progression rules have huge consequences, for example one of my former students wrote to tell me that he had been expelled after failing an exam for the second time.

Chapter 4

" ITS LIKE A ONE MAN SHOW, MADAM" : CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS

“Our education system is like a one man show, madam. The teacher is going on speaking and then there is no response. We do not know if we understand or not but whether we understand or not, we take notes on whatever is given. We do not question whether it is true or not, we just take whatever is given” (Karma Chuki, Focus group two).

In the last decade educational quality or the perceived decline of educational quality has become a huge concern in Bhutan, particularly at the levels of public debate, media discourse (see for example Pelden 2010c, 2011, Wangchuck 2009, and Wangmo 2010b) and policy intervention (see for example Education Sector Review Commission 2008 and iDiscoveri Education and the Royal Education Council, 2009). There have been complaints about teachers, complaints about particular national curriculum interventions, and complaints about graduates who allegedly lack the expected skills and abilities. Plenty of data is currently collected on Bhutanese schools and Bhutanese students, teachers and administrators to try to understand and remedy these perceived problems. For example The 2010 Annual Education Statistics covers everything from the enrollment figures at every level of education and drop-out rates for every level, to staffing patterns. Most of these figures are disaggregated by region and gender making it easier to track where the gaps are, who is dropping out and who is

moving along. However these figures on their own neither offer a complete picture of the Bhutanese school experience nor do they suggest solutions to the perceived woes of the education system. These numbers fail to convey what is actually happening on a daily basis in schools in general and in classrooms in particular. Mehan (1979) has similarly argued that the “role of schooling in society” can only be completely understood through “careful descriptions of what takes place *inside* schools” (1979: 8, emphasis added). What are students learning? How are they learning? What are they missing? Are all students learning? Which students are struggling? Which are excelling?

Classroom observation and classroom ethnographies have long been used in the field of educational anthropology as a way to get at how learning is happening and what can be done to improve learning opportunities for all students. As Emihovich (1989) put it, classroom ethnographies begin by asking the simple question “What is going on in the classroom?” and then by spending time in classrooms with students and with teachers, they usually suggest possibilities for how to create better learning opportunities within the classroom setting. Many ethnographies of classroom are not only asking how students are learning but also *which* students are learning. They are often explicitly concerned with how language shapes classroom interactions, particularly in the case of bilingual children or children who learn certain kinds of language practices in their homes and communities. For example both Heath (1983) and Philips (1993) look at how communicative cultures and socialization practices of minority children impacted learning and school achievement. Similarly anthropologists

working at the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) compared home and classroom environments to suggest adjustments in classroom practices that would allow native Hawaiian children to be more successful at school (Jordan 1981, and Vogt, Jordan & Tharpt 1993).⁶⁶

My intention in using classroom observations was to ask similar questions about gender in Bhutanese classrooms. Does gender have any impact on classroom interactions, learning opportunities and academic performance? I wanted to not only explore this concern in a range of Sherubtse classrooms but to better understand Bhutanese classroom in general. What kinds of interactions were typical? How did this impact knowledge transmission? I also wanted to add another interpretive layer to my understanding of classroom interactions, that of the students themselves. So drawing on the work of Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989), I used focus groups with students to get at their understanding and experience of their own learning and classroom interaction. To do this I took video recordings of some of the classes I observed and used clips from these classes in focus groups asking students to reflect on their own classroom experiences.

Classroom ethnography and classroom interactions

Classrooms are particular kinds of social settings. To a certain extent classrooms reflect the cultural contexts in which they are set⁶⁷ but at the same

⁶⁶ Other examples of classroom ethnography and observation include George and Louise Spindler's comparative work in American and German classrooms (Spindler 2000), Anderson-Levitt (2004), Cazden (1988) Emihovich (1989) and Lipka et al (1998).

⁶⁷ See for example Tobin et al's (1989) comparison of preschools in the US, Japan and China to see how classroom practices can reflect cultural and historical contexts.

time, acceptable classroom behavior and interactions must be learnt by all participants. Mehan (1981) suggests that classrooms are “a socially organized community, [in which] participants must be able to act appropriately within its normative constraints” (1981: 48). He notes that while “competent membership” of this particular community might require certain kinds of academic skills and abilities such as being able to read and write and having subject content knowledge, “classroom competence also involves matters of *form* as well as *content*, *interaction* skills as well as *academic* skills” (1981: 48, emphasis in original). Students must not only know things, they must know how to properly display this knowledge (Mehan, 1979, 1981). This is also true for teachers too as demonstrated by the difficulty that teachers, used to a differently organized classroom communities, have in Bhutanese classrooms. For example, we also had to learn how to transmit information and how to ask for responses in ways that demonstrate that we understand how to act and interact in the classroom setting.

Several classroom ethnographers point out that one of defining aspects of classroom structure is that the teacher controls both the focus of student attention and the flow of talk. Cazden, for example points out that in “typical classrooms, the most important asymmetry in the rights and obligations of teachers and students is over control of the right to speak. To describe the difference in the bluntest terms, teachers have the right to speak at any time and to any person; they can fill any silence or interrupt any speaker; they can speak to a student anywhere in the room and in any volume or tone of voice. And no one has any right to object” (1988: 54).

Given this noticeable power dynamic between teachers and students, Philips' (1993) work offers a useful contrast to most classroom ethnographies. Not only does she emphasize the importance of non-verbal communication (including body positioning and facial expression) within the classroom, she also points out that not all students are focused on interacting with the teacher or competing for their teacher's attention. In her work on Warm Spring Indian Reservation she found that teachers often assumed that Indian students were not paying attention because they did not have the same non-verbal behavior (such as eye contact, nodding) to indicate listening as non-Indian students. Furthermore compared to non-Indian students, Indian students tended to pay more attention to their peers and less to their teacher. Philips' work was useful to my own analysis because I quickly learnt that students did not have much verbal interaction with their teachers in Sherubtse classrooms. Much like Karma Chuki's observation that started this chapter, Sherubtse classrooms usually featured only one official speaker, the teacher.

The view from the front of the classroom

“I ask the students if they have any questions, comments, *anything*.

No ma'am, they say, no questions. I pick up a piece of chalk and

fill the blackboard: TALK. They laugh at this, but they do not talk”

(Zeppa,⁶⁸ 1999: 164).

⁶⁸ Jaime Zeppa was a Canadian English literature teacher who worked at Sherubtse College in late 1980's. Her memoir of her time in Kanglung is probably the closest thing to a study of life at the college. In it she provides detailed descriptions of college life including interactions between

My own experiences at the front of the classroom were very much like Zepp's description of classes she was teaching in Sherubtse in the late 1980's. My very first experience at the front of a Bhutanese classroom was in the fall of 1996. There was an acute nationwide teacher shortage and many short term, untrained teachers, were hired to fill staffing gaps. I had just graduated from high school and I was waiting to start college in Australia, where the academic year starts in January. An uncle who was an administrator in the Education Ministry convinced me that I should spend the six months before college started teaching science at the primary school near my parents' home in central Bhutan. I was assigned three sections of class five and two of class six, a very full schedule for a first-time teacher. I remember most clearly the tiny, crowded classrooms. I remember not having any resources; half the demonstrations and experiments we did that semester used materials and objects that I borrow from my parents' house. I remember never being sure how much students understood because despite my entreats, they never asked me any questions. I remember how both teachers and students struggled with textbooks and lessons in English which was a second, third or even fourth language for all of them. It was quickly established that I spoke and wrote English better than most of the other teachers. The headmaster constantly

students and faculty in the classroom and beyond. Her book has already been used by one previous ethnography, Michael Hutt's "Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan" (2003) to provide texture and context. I will be using it similarly.

sent circulars to me to proofread before sending them out to the rest of the staff. During the school talent show, even though most parents understood no English, I was made the “English MC”, announcing each act before it came out. I remember being embarrassed by being singled out this way but I didn’t protest.

Then I left for college and hardly thought about the experience again until about ten years later when I started putting together my PhD project and talking to educators and policy makers.⁶⁹ So much had changed but also so little; there was still a teacher shortage, classrooms still tended to be crowded, resources of all kinds continued to be in short supply and Bhutanese teachers and students still struggled with English.

At Sherubtse I was responsible for teaching classes to students in the new sociology program. The classrooms where I taught were simple and crammed with mismatched, worn furniture (see figure 4). One classroom had a table in the back with a leg that regularly fell off during class. Students were formal, rising when I entered or left a room. If they were late they waited at the door until I “allowed” them to enter. Unlike students in the US who compete for their teacher’s attention, these students seem to be working to go unnoticed. They kept their heads down during lessons; they rarely made eye contact with me.⁷⁰ And they were quiet, almost too quiet. From the beginning I worried, just as I had

⁶⁹ In the summer of 2008, the summer before I began writing my dissertation project proposal I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with long-term educators and policymakers, who helped me to formulate research questions that were relevant to key concerns about contemporary Bhutanese education

⁷⁰ Later I realized that this is proper Bhutanese etiquette in the presence of a higher ranking person such as a teacher.

more than 10 years ago with my primary schools students that these students were not following my lessons. Initially they never asked any questions, even when like Zeppa I asked, “Any questions? Anything you need me to explain again?” In fact only a handful of students could ever be convinced to speak in class. Their silence panicked me. Did they not like me? Were they just not listening? Was I making any sense? I discovered how lonely the front of the classroom can feel, where was that teacher-like authority and confidence that I should have been feeling?



Figure 4: A classroom in which I regularly taught

I often assigned group work because students were more comfortable talking to each other and to me in these smaller setting. I could move from group to group and students were more likely to ask questions and tell me what was unclear. Inevitably group work was done in a language other than English.

Sometimes every group was speaking a different language.⁷¹ Sometimes two languages were being spoken by single group. I marveled at their ability to move between languages but English, the official language of instruction, was another matter. Students constantly struggled to understand the content of the lessons and the readings I assigned them in their Canadian textbooks.⁷² I could tell from grading their assignments and tests that sometimes they had not understood the key concepts and most of them found it very difficult to apply any of the sociological concepts we were learning to the Bhutanese context.

Concerned that they were not telling me what they needed help with, I began to periodically asking them to anonymously give me written feedback. What could I do to help them? What did they feel worked? What didn't work? While many of them listed topics that were unclear or assignments that they particularly disliked,⁷³ predictably, they asked me to give them "notes" which I learnt were my lecture notes for the class. They wanted to be able to memorize them and then reproduce them for tests, assignments and exams, as they had learnt to do in high school, as they were expected to do in some of the other classes they were taking. I refused, partially because my lecture notes were often handwritten in notebooks and partially because I hoped I could help them understand the concepts rather than having them learn definitions and examples "by heart". Every assignment was another challenge to get them to write in their

⁷¹ Languages most frequently used were Dzongkha, Sharchop and Nepali.

⁷² These had been donated by a Canadian educator who helped develop the new sociology courses.

⁷³ I was always amused that any work they particularly disliked they described as boring. For example "Madam, reading is too boring" or "Madam, when we have too many assignments it's boring."

own words. They had learnt that there was always a right answer which had be committed to memory and reproduced word for word. It became clear that several of them simply lacked the grammatical confidence to fashion their own sentences. I read endless drafts of assignments and essays. I began to offer an optional English grammar class on Sunday. Some days I think I worried more about my students and what they weren't learning than I did about my own research agenda.

I was lucky to have good colleagues in the social science department, who were also teaching novices. We compared experiences, reassured each other, talked through classroom management problems, exchanged ideas for lessons and assignments, and bemoaned together the sparse library and the rampant plagiarism. It was also through conversations with them that I began to make sense of the interactions with students that troubled me the most. Why were some students so quiet? Particularly the ones that seemed to have the most difficulty with the work? We realized together that the more confident and noisy students tended to be the ones who had grown up in urban environments in Western Bhutan and spoke English the most fluently. Or they were the Continuing Education students, who were older and had already been in the work force. The quietest students were the ones who went to rural and sometimes remote schools, their English was often the most labored and they were often far more formal in their interactions with us both inside and outside the classroom. I also noticed that only one female student⁷⁴ regularly spoke up in my class. Still I wondered how it

⁷⁴ I should add that she was one of my research assistants. I often wondered how working on my project might have an impact on the way in which students would later see their own school experiences.

was that students could talk to each other and participate in long conversations with me outside of class but sit so quietly in class. This was particularly true of my female students who frequently came to chat with me in my office or to sit on stairs outside my office with me between classes. Some of them even called me on my cell phone ⁷⁵ on several occasions to discuss personal problems. Yet in class they were silent.

The view from the back of the classroom.

Teaching classes at Sherubtse initially felt like a huge and unwelcome burden. However I quickly realized the advantages of being able to interact with students as their class teacher and it definitely kept me from the tendency of anthropological accounts of schooling to turn teachers into what Forsey calls “disvoiced bodies” (2000:211). How could I ignore teachers or turn them into the “baddies” when many of them were colleagues, confidants and eventually friends? Being at the front of the room, dealing with similar anxieties and limitations as they did made me a far more sympathetic observer in their classes.

Between my own teaching schedule and the reluctance of some faculty members to allow me to observe their classes, I was only able to regularly observe six kinds of classes. They were: 1) a biology class; 2) a history class, 3) a computer science class; 4) a math class; 5) a chemistry lab class and 6) a *Diglam Namzha* or Bhutanese etiquettes class. In addition to these I also sat in on several

⁷⁵ I want to note that I did not initially give out my number to students but faculty and other students frequently gave out each other’s numbers. Privacy was not a concern that anyone seemed to worry about. At a certain point I gave up on enforcing that boundary because it was incomprehensible to everyone around me.

sociology classes taught by my colleagues as well as a smaller set of leadership classes for the Sherubtse Student Leadership Program. Of these classes I was only able to video tape an entire class period in the first four of these classes. Below (figure 5) is a table that sums up some of the key characteristics of the six classes I most regularly observed.

Class Observed	Class size	Gender	Language of instruction	Instructor gender	Instructor nationality	Instructor level	Recorded & included in focus group?
Biology (1 st year)	41	8 (f), 33 (m)	English	Male	Non-Bhutanese	Lecturer	Yes
Math (1 st year)	47	9 (f), 38(m)	English	Male	Non-Bhutanese	Senior Lecturer	Yes
Computer Science (3 rd Year)	29	5 (f), 24 (m)	English	Female	Bhutanese	Lecturer	Yes
History (1 st year)	36	14 (f), 22 (m)	English	Male	Bhutanese	Assistant Lecturer	Yes
Chemistry lab (1 st year)	47	9 (f), 38(m)	English	Both instructors were male	Both were Bhutanese	Both were Assistant lecturers	No
<i>Diglam Namzha</i> (3 rd Year)	32	5 (f), 27(m)	Dzongkha	Male	Bhutanese	Senior lecturer	No

Figure 5: Classroom Observations Summary

Being an observer in these classes was actually reassuring. Like my own classroom, most classes I observed had very little verbal interaction between teachers and students. The same kinds of students (male or older or from urban backgrounds) were more likely to speak in their classes too. Unlike me, however many of the other teachers didn't seem to expect their students to respond. They rarely asked question and when they did, they tended to either answer the question themselves, pick on particular students to answer or they made it clear

that they expected the whole class to answer in unison. For example the computer science teacher frequently started a key sentence, ending it with almost a question like inflection and this was the cue for students to fill in the missing words in unison. At other times the teacher had the students repeat together something he or she had just said. Occasionally the teachers would ask the class, “Do you understand?” “Do you follow?” and students would always respond in unison, “yes sir” or “yes mam.” Unless the teacher made it a habit to walk around the room, which the math and history teachers regularly did, the students in the middle of the class were usually the most ignored. In fact often the students in the back, the so called “back benchers” got the most attention from teachers who frequently verbally checked to see that they were following the lesson and paying attention.

Surprisingly, despite the variation displayed in figure 5, the two classes that were the most unlike the others were the history and the *Diglam Namzha* class. Both classes were far more lively and relaxed. The *Diglam Namzha* class was very different from all the classes in a number of ways. Not only was it the only class I observed taught in *Dzongkha*⁷⁶ but it was also not taught in a classroom or lab instead the class met in an open area between two buildings. Students stood during the lesson and few of them took notes. However since much of the lessons required students to practice aspects of Bhutanese traditional

⁷⁶ I suspect that the medium of instruction was not the reason that the class was more relaxed. *Dzongkha* teachers have a well earned reputation as disciplinarians. For example during one exam moderation meeting, a *Dzongkha* teacher had failed an entire cohort of students. Horrified, my colleague Dorji Dema inquired how this was even possible. She was told that he had done this to “teach them a lesson.”

etiquette (for example greetings and appropriate body posture in the presence of someone of higher rank, how to wrap and present gifts to various levels of higher ranking people and so on) it made sense for them to be standing and mobile.

While the teacher took attendance at the beginning of each session, the class itself felt slightly less formal. The students seemed more likely to interact with the teacher, asking for example if they were doing a movement correctly, and the teacher frequently used humor to demonstrate the incorrect way to interact with those of a higher rank.

The history class was another interesting exception. It was a far more animated class with many (though by no means all) students speaking up in class, several of them speaking “out of turn,” without first being invited to do so by the teacher. At other times students answered questions posed by the teacher. Sometimes they offered humorous, causal commentary on class material. Some of the male students interacted in a particularly familiar way with the teacher, making personal comments, for example about his recent haircut. But in other ways the interactions still followed a familiar pattern, it was mostly boys who spoke up and very rarely did they ask questions about the class material. Still the class was different enough for me to feel that it was something of an anomaly.

It was sitting in the math class, where I wasn't distracted by the lesson content because I could not follow the content, that I was finally able to see aspects of the classroom interactions that I missed when I stood at the front of the room. Foreign (non-Indian) teachers in Bhutan frequently complain that students would not talk in class or ask any questions, even when it became clear that they

did not follow the lesson. However students were not completely silent. One foreigner teaching at a college in Thimphu pointed out that while students were reluctant to address him, the moment he turned his back to them, to write on the board for example, he could hear the constant low murmur of students talking to each other. Of course, noticing that students whisper to each other while a lesson is being taught is hardly a new observation but usually talking among students is taken as a sign that there are being inattentive or even rude. However, eavesdropping on the conversation around me, it became clear that students were almost always talking about the class material. I watched as some students even passed around their notebook so other students could see how they had solved a problem or to copy their notes. It was clear that they were following the lesson but also that when they had questions or needed clarification they turned to their classmates instead of their teacher. Once I noticed this I could not help but see these interactions between students in all the classes that I observed, even in the history and *diglam namzha* class. So even in classes where students seemed more comfortable interacting with the teacher, they were still more likely to ask their classmates for help.

“Silly questions are too stupid”: student views of classroom interaction

“Sometimes questions turn out very funny, very silly to many of the people. Especially like for example, simple questions are too stupid, so we don’t like to ask. We don’t know the answer to the

question but still we feel like its sort of silly. So we have this kind of fear and low confidence.” (Leki Wangchuk, Focus group four)

I first reviewed the videos that I made of four classes (the math, history, biology and computer science) with my five research assistants. They watched each recording in its entirety and we talked about them together. These were casual conversations, I had no script, no set of questions for them to answer . As each recording was played my research assistants made comments and compared each one to their own classes and experiences. I also frequently asked them questions such as “Does that happen in your classes too? “ or “ Would you say that is normal?” I took notes during these conversations and they ultimately greatly shaped the clips that I choose and the kinds of questions I asked in focus groups. For example my research assistants talked keenly about attendance policies so I made sure to include clips that demonstrated different ways in which teachers handled attendance and late students. They agreed with me that in general they preferred to ask each other for help instead of talking to the teacher, “We prefer individual clarification” explained Pema Tsoki, so this became something I asked about in every focus group.

In focus groups students did confirm that they were more likely to ask their classmates for help and to work out answers together before going to the teacher. One of the reason is suggested by Karma Chuki’s quote that starts this chapter. She argues that this is just the way that the education system is structured. Question are just not asked. According to Karma, students take notes

on whatever the teacher says irrespective of their understanding of the material. They do not evaluate the content of what they are taught, they simply “ take notes on whatever is given ” (Karma Chuki, Focus group two). Several students explained this was something they learned starting in primary school when they were scolded for asking questions in class. Similarly in my individual interviews with students, I was told of some horrifically humiliating punishment that was meted out by teachers in order to enforce normative classroom and school behavior. This included never questioning or challenging the teacher in any way.

Leki Wangchuck’s comment about not wanting to ask silly questions offers a second reason for not asking questions in class. He and many other students in focus groups suggested that they avoided asking questions in class for fear of “criticism” and looking foolish. However unlike Karma Chuki’s concerns which are about the way a teacher might react to questions, Leki was worried about the judgment of his fellow peers. Students in focus groups talked about how their peers would mock or tease them for weeks, even years after they had said something foolish in class. One group talking in particular about how students who were from “remote” backgrounds could be teased for their accents and for not knowing things that their more urban and worldly colleague knew which meant they were particularly unlikely to speak up in class. Girls similarly bore a heavier burden of these kinds of judgements, something I will discuss in more detail shortly.



Figure 6: Screen shot of one of the classroom clips shown in focus groups

Both my research assistant and students in focus groups were really drawn to the interactions between students and their teacher in the history class and largely spoke about them in a positive light. They were amused at the teacher's comparatively lax attendance policy which often sparked a discussion about how so many other teachers were too strict about attendance and lateness. They liked that the class was "interactive" by which they meant students participated frequently. They consistently described the teacher's relaxed teaching style and the way he wove local and familiar examples into his lesson as "interesting." But how could they explain why his class was so different? Many of them put it down to subject matter. History was easy to teach this way they argued, math was hard to make "interactive." Others said that younger teachers like the history instructor were more "frank" with their students. One of the students in the focus group similarly pointed out that this history teacher "relates to his students on a

friendly basis.” Later as I got to know the teacher better I realized that he “hung out” with his male students more than the average teacher. For example he played football with them, let them use his office to study in and his computer to write papers. He frequently ate meals with them. I think for certain male students these social interactions dulled the strong divide between teachers and students and made it possible for them to relax some of the norms around student-teacher hierarchy in class. At the same time students, were still respectful, jumping up to help with physical labor and using the honorific and polite language even when they were joking with this teacher. And though they seemed more comfortable coming to the teacher for help outside of class, in class they still did not ask questions or make comments about things that were not clear. So they still largely avoided putting themselves out on the line to be negatively judged by their peers.

Unwelcoming classrooms

Female students seemed to be at the greatest risk of being evaluated negatively in classroom settings. A glance back at Figure 5 reminds us that in many classes they are outnumbered by their male colleagues and that the ratios are particularly skewed in the science classes. For example in the history class out of thirty-six students, fourteen were female while in the math class out of forty-seven students only nine were female. Several female science students told me both in focus groups and individual interviews that being in the minority made them feel less able to speak up in class. Susma Gurung, a physical sciences student described her own class like this, “The boys dominate, we might think

differently but they dominate. So our opinions are suppressed” (Focus group five).

However there were other reasons that female students felt uncomfortable and even unwelcome in the classroom. Teachers sometimes help to set this unfriendly atmosphere. For example Om Nath notes:

There are some teachers who talk useless things and the girls, they get embarrassed. Some of the teachers talk way out of the limits sometimes, so they[the girls] get really embarrassed and shy and when we go, after the class , they are cursing them like anything, like “why did he say that? He shouldn’t have said that, this he should know, he’s a lecturer” (Focus Group four).

The euphemism, “useless things” are for topics of an inappropriately sexual nature. What Om Nath is hinting at is that everyone in this story-- himself, all his classmates and probably the teacher-- understands that this kind of talk is a breach of conduct. From being in meetings and other on-campus, work situations with other teachers where similar kinds of talk and language seemed designed to embarrass the women in the room, I suspect that this breach is not accidental.

There is a strong prohibition against public talk of a sexual nature particularly in mixed-aged, mixed-sex groups, so this kind of talk is designed to shock. In fact several girls mentioned how this kind of “indecent” talk, from both faculty and their peers, made them feel ashamed and unwelcome. While teachers who engage in this kind of talk are not the norm, at the same time they are also not uncommon.

Even more commonly female students complained that when they started dating or were even suspected of being in a romantic relationship some of their teachers repeatedly brought up their romantic status in class. For example they would make comments like, “Oh, you must have done less well on this test because you were concentrating on your boyfriend instead of your school work.” The students pointed out that boys were never accused of being distracted by romance. And of course it goes without saying that for many female students this kind of scrutiny of their personal lives is both uninvited and humiliating. In fact female students in focus groups, who brought up this issue, often had to be coaxed by my research assistant Pema Tshoki to be candid with me, since at least initially they seemed worried about how I might judge them.

Female students often seemed to feel that their male peers were judging them as well. They complained that any time they spoke in class, no matter what they said; they were teased. Pema Lhamo pointed out, “whatever response we give, they tend to speak from behind. They make fun of us” (Focus group five). Female students noted that even if they knew the right answer they were afraid to speak up. In fact in the history class there was one girl who spoke up quite frequently and she was almost always mocked by her male peers, they would imitate her for example or ridicule her comment or just generally scoff at her. Male students also frequently claimed, in variety of contexts including official written class evaluations, that male teachers favored female students, awarding them high marks simply for being female. What is particularly insidious about these claims is that male students are implying that most of the academic success

of female students can be attributed to their good looks or feminine charms rather than hard work or ability.

In a variety of ways, then, female students are made to feel uncomfortable in class and even less comfortable saying anything in class. Gender not only seems to affect interactions in the class, it seems to discourage them. Furthermore both their male peers and their teachers see female students as the potential object of sexual desire and assume that this makes them less able to be good students.

A case for rote learning?

I would argue that the peer dynamic and the teacher- student hierarchy are producing particular kinds of classroom interactions and practices that might actually make it difficult for students to pursue a more complete understanding of course material. I think their understanding of what they are being taught becomes even more problematic when one considers the substantial language difficulties that some students (and even some teachers) face. Students consistently struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary, concepts and contexts. Their peers were not always able to help them with these problems. This meant that to a large extent students continued to memorize course material without completely comprehending it.

I collected exam papers at the end of the spring 2010 semester (see appendix c for a sample of the kinds of questions asked) to see what teachers expected student to know at the end of a course and how they expected them to present what they knew. Many of the questions made it clear that students were

expected to reproduce information verbatim from lectures, class notes or the textbook. For example, one of the question in the Waste and Waste Management final asks students to “ Explain the process of activated sludge system with the help of the a proper diagram,” while a question on the Geography of Bhutan final asks that student “provide adequate data” to show that the Bhutanese population is unevenly distributed. In both cases it is clear that there is a “right” answer and students are told exactly how to reproduce that right answer. While serving as an official faculty monitor for one exam I watched as a student produced from memory a table comparing regional pasture production levels across Bhutan for the last five year.

This continued reliance on rote learning has been identified by several studies as an on-going problem in the Bhutanese education system. For example, the iDiscoveri Education and the Royal Education Council report on the quality of primary school education in Bhutan argues that the “ mechanical teaching-learning process deployed in classrooms most directly limits students involvement and promoting learning by rote” (2009: 51). They point to the use of recitation of textbook content, drilling formulae, the lack of relevant real life examples and the emphasis on memorized definitions as examples of mechanical teaching. Similarly Pelden (2011) writing about the 2010 Annual Status of School Learning report put out by the Royal Education Council notes that the prevalence of rote learning and students memorizing concepts without understanding them were major concerns.

Initially, educated in a system which values critical thinking and sees rote learning as mechanical and limited, it was very easy for me to write off these practices as examples of “bad” teaching and “bad” learning. Teachers both Bhutanese and Indian, however, have been educated in systems that saw memorization as an important and useful skill.⁷⁷ Many of the teachers I observed put serious thought into their lesson planning and made sincere attempts to try out new pedagogical practices and create more “student- centered” classrooms. They did not always see rote learning as an obstacle to this. More significantly I would argue that students and teachers continue to rely on rote learning and memorizing for two primary reasons 1) as a strategy to manage their problems with understanding and using English and 2) because as way to transmit, display and evaluate knowledge, they know that it works. Sherubtse students are among the best students in the Bhutanese education system. While they might not be in their first choice tertiary educational setting, they have still preformed comparatively well on the class twelve exams. Throughout their educational careers, many of them relied on memorizing and rote learning to succeed academically. They know this is a technique that can produce excellent results in their exams and many of them are good at it. Particularly for students who came from rural schools and have less practice with English, memorization meant that language skills mattered less. In a way it levels some of the disadvantages that they faced when compared to students in urban schools.

⁷⁷ Several Bhutanese have remarked to me, for example, that the American school system seems to not be doing enough for its students because so many Americans that they meet are unable to recount from memory their time tables, simple math formulas for creating percentages or basic world geographical facts.

Interruptions to the classroom

For me the most surprising aspects of classroom practices at Sherubtse was how often scheduled classes didn't happen and how often they were cancelled or, as they say at Sherubtse how often classes were "called off." Sometimes students just did not show up or they begged to have the class "called off". This was especially true if you taught the final periods before an afternoon football match. I almost always firmly refused to "call off" my classes but many of my male colleagues, who were just as crazy about football as their students, could not always resist.

Even more commonly, college administrators called off classes, often with almost no notice, when there were VIP visitors or to prepare for upcoming large scale school events. So for example, during convocation when a member of the royal family was the chief guest, classes were continually being "called off" so that students could help with preparations which mainly consisted of rigorous "campus beautification" including grass cutting, weeding, picking up litter, tent construction and drain cleaning. Several days before convocation, a high ranking administrator who was involved in academic affairs came personally to my office and told me without any malice or sense of irony that it was far more important for my students to stripe pine needles from branches than it was for them to learn sociology (see figure 7).



Figure 7: Sociology students helping to prepare for the convocation

As a teacher this was hugely frustrating, particularly because of how unpredictable these interruptions were. My students more or less missed one or two weeks of classes for convocation preparation alone. I really worried about how we would make up for those lost classes.⁷⁸ But as an anthropologist this was all fascinating. Student time and labor was both consistently counted on and devalued. The ways in which tasks and responsibilities were allocated consistently highlighted gender norms and expectation. For example, anything that involved serving from bringing tea for VIPs to handing out pens to alumni was a job for female students. Carrying and arranging anything heavy, leading teams, security and anything requiring knowledge of Bhutanese cultural protocol were male jobs. I was consistently surprised that even faculty who after talking to

⁷⁸ Some teachers responded by asking the students to come for “extra classes” in the evening and weekends to make up for the time that was lost, I rearranged my syllabus and lesson plans to drop some classes and activities.

me about my dissertation project told me that they thought gender inequity in the country needed to be addressed, explicitly and repeatedly endorsed the view that some jobs were for female students. They sometimes even made it clear they were looking for “pretty” girls to help with particularly public aspects of these events.

But I had to also ask myself: what does it tell me about classroom interaction when time in the classroom is so consistently interrupted this way? I felt like these interruptions were a commentary on how little importance the college administration gave to what goes on in the classroom. I felt like it was connected to this emphasis I was constantly noticing on form over content. For example textbooks were a constant problem, and teachers often had no control over what was available so usually assigned whatever could be found. Some classes in fact had no textbook at all. Even in literature classes based around particular texts sometimes there was no book available for the students to read and so they had to rely on instructor’s lecture to get a sense of the text. So even though the actual literature was absent this was a “real” literature class because they were studying a canonical text. In the same way this was a “real” educational enterprise because students were available to serve guests and listen respectfully to their speeches and the school was clean and tidy for visitors even if it meant canceling classes to make sure that this was true.

Chapter 5

"COPPED UP": GOSSIP, GENDER AND SPACE

They look like matchsticks, tall, straight-ish, rounded pieces of wood with slightly protruding, square red-orange caps. They are the height of a small child and frame the short cement stairway up to the house of a well known local government official in Kanglung, the eastern Bhutanese town in which Sherubtse College is situated. For weeks, I walked past them every day on my way to the college before I finally realized what they were. Phalluses. Wooden phalluses planted at the entryway of this woman's compound as a way to counter-act a particularly harsh bout of malicious gossip about the way she (mis)handled a significant community event. Once I started to ask about the phalluses, my colleagues in the social sciences departments were almost gleeful in recounting the stories.⁷⁹ Once upon a time, maybe about this time last year, the event that this official was in charge of planning dramatically fell through at the last possible minute after weeks of preparation because of her inability to secure an important chief guest. Her frustrated employees (who had spent weeks putting the event together) were as social inferiors unable to criticize her in public so they took to posting anonymous criticism of her on-line on well-known Bhutanese cyber forums.⁸⁰ Effectively this made the gossip national, even international. She was apparently called weak and a poor leader and those were some of the kinder

⁷⁹ Equally gleefully they told me or even took me to see other examples of other planted wooden phalluses, all hidden in plain sight and in walking distance from the campus.

⁸⁰ Online forums have increasingly become significant places for educated Bhutanese to share gossip, start a rumor, or incite a little scandal. The anonymity allows for the suspension of the usual Bhutanese norms that demand a respect for hierarchy, making gossiping openly about social superiors possible. Interestingly, this same anonymity makes many readers of on-line forums assume that much of what was reported on-line was true.

comments. Her response was a ritual to ward off malicious gossip which included erecting the two phalluses outside her home. Her husband is old-fashioned my colleagues explained, and it was probably his idea, an old fashion solution to an old fashion problem, even if new technology was essential to this particular story. What this incident speaks to in particular is the fear of gossip's circulation and the way in which this fear can be marked in space, in this case through the use of phalluses to keep gossip out, to ward it off. In this chapter I will show how gossip and fear of gossip shapes the ways in which differently-situated people at the college came to understand and experience space in divergent ways. In particular I want to show how gossip within the college is gendered and evaluates male and female behavior differently so that what space means and how it is used also becomes gendered. Gossip and space are particularly effective analytical instruments to examine the daily experience of female students on the Sherubtse campus. This chapter will demonstrate how their ability to move and be within the space of campus is particularly restricted by the threat negative evaluation in general and gossip in particular.

It took me a while to identify the wooden phalluses (see figure 8 for an example) because in Western and Central Bhutan, where I grew up, phalluses are typically painted onto the outer wall of houses, usually near the main entryway. Planting carved wooden phalluses in the ground is far more common in the east of the country where the college is located. According to Kinga (2005a) these wooden structures are known as *Kharamshing*, *shing* means tree or wood while *kharam* means to "ruin by speech". All over the country shorter but not

necessarily smaller wooden phalluses are hung from the corner of roofs. Wherever they are placed, however, both the painted and wooden phalluses function in the same way—they are intended to ward off malicious gossip, to protect what is inside from what is outside.⁸¹



Figure 8: Wooden phalluses warding off malicious gossip and slander

The phalluses, particularly the far more colorful and often quite playful ones painted onto houses, they might, for example, be positioned around a fountain, be decorated with flowers or be given comically huge eyes (see figure 9 for an example), are a favorite topic for travel writers of every stripe but they have

⁸¹ Richardson (1972) claims that these were noted by travelers on homes in the greater Himalayan region as far back as the 1820's.

received little academic attention. I suspect this gap shows the on-going tendency for scholarship on Bhutan to focus on textual religious philosophy and ritual while overlooking the spiritual practices and beliefs of ordinary lay Bhutanese.⁸²

However *Dasho* Karma Ura, a well-known Bhutanese historian recently wrote a two-part series in a leading Bhutanese newspaper bemoaning “the decline of the phallus.”⁸³ In it he cites several Buddhist ritual texts that refer to the dangers of slander and the need for protection from it. One speaks of a king who was subjected to such severe slander that it led to his exile, another noted that slander was powerful enough to “dismember a human being, crash a cliff, drain a lake and bring death to animals” (Ura 2009a). The phallus, according to Ura, worked to offset the danger of slander because slanderous people who saw them were said to become so “overcome by shame and embarrassment” that they are unable to gossip (Ura 2009a).

I think it is significant that the phalluses mark a distinction between the safe space inside the family home and those outside the home and beyond the family who might be a source of malicious gossip and slander. By the logic of the phalluses which seems to suggest that outsiders and their talk can be dangerous, an institution like the college which draws together such a range of unrelated

⁸² Pommaret (2009) similar notes that local community rituals which often had pre-Buddhist origins and centered on appeasing deities located in the natural environments, were largely ignored until the mid-1990’s when they became reconceptualized as evidence of concern with nature.

⁸³ This decline is most likely overstated. The wooden phalluses continue to be common in the east and I noticed many newly erected ones during my time in Kanglung. In response to *Dasho* Karma Ura’s articles my father pointed out that in his more than thirty years in Bhutan, he has noticed that more people can afford to paint their houses than in the past and so in fact there are probably more houses with phallus paintings than there were in the past. Either way it is not possible to say definitively that there is a decrease or increase in the use of the phalluses since there is no baseline to compare to current patterns.

people from all over the nation and even beyond it, has the potential to be a particularly unsafe place. Perhaps this is why gossip seemed to pervade daily life in the small college town.



Figure 9: Phalluses painted on the outside of a roadside restaurant between Bumthang and Thimphu

Everyone gossips about everything

In Bhutan news seems to be all word-of-mouth, what someone heard from someone else two days ago or two weeks ago, rumor and gossip and travelers' tales. News of road conditions, for example, fluctuates wildly. We are told that the passes are blocked with snow; we will not be going to our postings for a while. But someone heard the passes are clear. No, two passes are cleared, we can get to Bumthang. The passes are partially cleared, the road is open to light vehicles, and someone came through last night from

the east. The passes are cleared but there is no petrol. There is petrol but no diesel. No there is petrol and diesel but all the passes are blocked, all the roads are closed. We will leave tomorrow, we will leave next month (Zeppa, 1999).

In Kanglung it felt like everyone gossiped about everything and everyone. It felt like there were no private places, no secret relationships or conversations that went unreported. Everyone seemed to know far too much about everyone else. Rumors spread quickly and ranged from amusingly inventive to disturbingly accurate.⁸⁴ No one was immune. Initially gossip seemed like some kind of a near universal extracurricular activity, something almost everyone did when they were bored, in the afternoon over tea or while waiting in the bread line, waiting by the side of the road for the milk van or at the bank.⁸⁵ But I quickly learned, as the quote from Zeppa's memoir which begins this section suggests, gossip can also be a source of vital information. In the quote Zeppa is describing attempts to pin down road conditions in order to decide how soon she and her fellow Canadian teachers can travel from the capital Thimphu to their rural school posting.⁸⁶

Despite its sometimes frustratingly shifting nature, which Zeppa so eloquently highlights, most of the information with which people operated on a day to day

⁸⁴ For example, once when the college branch of the bank had not opened for over a month, I had to travel to the main bank branch in Trashigang, the district capital, to withdraw cash. I was astonished and unsettled when the man who processed my withdrawal request, a stranger to me, asked why a single woman like me who lived alone and paid this much in rent (he knew the exact sum!) would need to withdraw so much cash.

⁸⁵ All three are supposedly scheduled services but in fact access to each of these typically demands patience and prolonged wait times from customers. The drawn-out and usually unpredictable waits often provided the perfect conditions for leisurely gossiping.

⁸⁶ As I discovered traveling west for the summer break during a particularly severe monsoon storm that created huge road blocks and avalanches, news of road conditions still "fluctuate wildly", even if now most gossip about road conditions travels rather quickly by text message

basis (Will the college bank really open today? Are there any cooking gas cylinders for sale right now in Trashigang?⁸⁷ Are all classes being cancelled for the visit of the prime minister?) came from what we heard from others as casual gossip because much “official” information was purposely restricted. (For example most students and faculty first heard of the H1N1 outbreak on campus from national media instead of college administrators who argued they had chosen to withhold information in order to prevent panic.) Since most faculty and students were aware that information was often strategically withheld, gossip and rumors were seen as both critical and believable sources of news.

While gossip, if it were loosely defined as information that is circulated informally and might not be verifiable,⁸⁸ was pervasive in Kanglung not all of it was the kind that caused concern. Not all gossip is malicious or even slanderous. This chapter, however, is about the kind of gossip that does concern people, makes them nervous and worried and fearful, the kind of gossip people want to ward off. Besnier notes that the most common definition of gossip is “as the negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties, involving bounded group of persons in a private setting” (2009:13).⁸⁹ If you are the subject or the target of this kind of gossip, you might

⁸⁷ Trashigang is the district capital and the nearest “big” town. Though the 2005 census shows its population to be less than 2,500, Kanglung’s population by contrast was found to be just over 1,500.

⁸⁸ As Steward and Strathern similarly point out that “[b]ecause rumor and gossip work covertly, outside formal mechanism for social control, they cannot be easily checked on or verified by explicit means. They can nonetheless produce results in themselves regardless of verification” (2004:29).

⁸⁹ He does problematize this definition by asking: Is there any form of talk that is not morally evaluative at some level? How do the actors themselves define what they are doing? Are public and private distinctions useful particularly given their cultural baggage? But his solution of “more

know or suspect that you have been judged but since you were not present while you were gossiped about, you can never be completely sure what was said or who said it. I suspect that a significant part of the fear and anxiety about being gossiped comes from this uncertainty. While those of us who have been gossiped about (or worry that we have been gossiped about) like to think of gossip as fanciful and untrue, the most effective gossip is the kind that is believable. It could be false but it sounds like it might be true. It sounds like it could be true. What matters for this analysis however is not whether gossip is true or even if it is believed but how the behavior of its subject is interpreted and then evaluated, as well as the consequences of this interpretation and evaluation. I am interested in how one becomes the object of gossip and what it means to become the object of gossip. How do certain kinds of people, those who are hierarchically lower, for example younger people (like students and assistant lecturers) and women, more frequently become the focus of gossip and how does this kind of evaluative attention influence their experiences and opportunities at Sherubtse? In particular how does it affect their relationships to space?

Gossip and Space

Most anthropological examinations of gossip lean in one of two directions. They either look at the way in which gossip enhances and/or disrupts social ties (Barkow 1974, Dreby 2009, Gluckman 1963, Perice 1997, Steward and Strathern 2004, Szwed 1966) or they focus on the linguistic aspects of gossip (Brenneis 1984, Fisher 1976, Goodwin 1980, Pietilä 2007). Occasionally these

context” is somewhat disingenuous since any use of a definition of a term should work to contextualize findings and arguments.

two concerns are combined to show the connections between language and social ties (Das 2001, Besnier 1996, 2001). What is often overlooked is the way in which gossip intersects with space, an intersection that I noticed again and again in Kanglung. Gossip and fear of gossip or the kind of moral evaluation that underpins gossip shaped the way in which people experienced and understood space and the way they could or could not occupy and move in that space. At the same time how certain people used space and moved in it was also being constantly morally evaluated so that it fed back into the gossip mill, often adding even more weight to the way in which gossip and space are connected.

Geographers have long argued that social relations are constituted, constrained and mediated by space (Dear and Flusy 2002). Feminist geographers have pointed out that men and women understand, experience and use space differently. McDowell and Sharp for example note that spaces are “constructed and given meaning through the social practices that define men and women as different and unequal. Physical and social boundaries reinforce each other and spatial relations act to socialize people into the acceptance of gendered power relations—they reinforce power, privileges and oppression and literally keep women in their place” (1997: 3). The suggestion here is that space both shapes and reflects social practices, boundaries and relations. McDowell (2002) notes that everything, from restrictive clothing like high heels, to jokes about women drivers to beliefs about female physical frailty can work to restrict women’s mobility. I would argue that at least in the case of Sherubtse, gossip and fear of

gossip is an important social practice that works to restrict women's mobility and "keep them in their place."

Equally important is how space can be inhabited or how one can be in space. How much space can you take up? How are you expected to look and act in this space? Who can you be with in these spaces? What are the consequences of breaching these kinds of expectations? Examples of this in the context of Sherubtse could include how students dress in various space (for instance on campus during the school day national costume is expected) to how noisy they can be in particular spaces (like silent during morning assemblies, but shouting and whistling in the same hall later that night during a school concert) and where they can be at what time (for example after the 8:30 pm curfew). I will argue that how space can be inhabited also depends on differences such as age, gender and relative social status.

Low and Lawrence-Zungia in their introduction to "The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture" point out that anthropologists are increasingly not only writing about space but have also started to "shift their perspective to foreground spatial dimension of culture rather than treating them as background" (2003:1). Space according to them has become more than just another aspect of the ethnographic setting, and culture is not just located in space but instead the two are seen to be entangled and mutually constitutive. Space as a concept has moved from being part of the description to being part of the analysis. While there have been anthropologists who have written about gendered space,⁹⁰ Low

⁹⁰ Examples include Anderson 1993, Bourdieu 2003 and Moore 1996.

and Zungia note that “anthropological interest in gendered spaces has not been focused and is fragmented” (2003:8). I would add that it seems that much of the anthropology of space is concentrated on two particular kinds of locations, urban environments and archaeological accounts of prehistoric settlement patterns. By focusing on a non-urban, contemporary account of gendered space this chapter contributes to this emerging anthropology of space.

Low and Lawrence- Zungia define gendered spaces as including “particular locales that culture invest with gendered meaning, sites in which sex-differentiated practices occur, or setting that are used strategically to inform identity and produce and reproduce asymmetrical gender relations of power and authority “ (2003:7). I would argue that Sherubtse is a gendered space in which gender norms and hierarchies are produced and reproduced and that gossip is an important component in this process. Becoming the object of gossip and anticipation of becoming the object of gossip, particularly the gendered evaluation of behavior, creates and sustains a gendered understanding and experience of space.

Objects of gossip

While everyone is a potential object of gossip it is clear that certain kinds of people are more frequently the object of gossip. Furthermore being the object of gossip does not have the same consequences for everyone. In fact the same kind of behavior that could make someone the object of gossip can be evaluated

differently based on who (allegedly) does it.⁹¹ I will argue that one of the most significant consequences of this kind of difference is that it influences the way certain groups of people can be in space. Gossip or even the threat of gossip, in this sense, both creates and maintains particular kinds of spatial practices and relationships.

The purchasing and consumption of alcohol is an activity that foregrounds some of these differences. On-line rumors about the “bad behavior” of young assistant lecturers (mainly their allegedly drunken antics)⁹² for example provoked very strong reactions from the university administration.⁹³ The position of assistant lecturer is a fairly new one to the university system and reflects the general lack of qualified university level teachers in the country, particularly in newly established subjects such as the social sciences. Typically an assistant lecturer is a recent graduate with a BA or a BSc who did well enough on the Royal Civil Service Exam (RCSC) and was assigned by the government to become an assistant lecturer at Sherubtse, teaching undergraduate courses that they might have just taken as students the year before. This means they tend to be young (most while I were there were in their early to mid-twenties), inexperienced (most of them have little or no teaching experience or training, for many of them this is their first paid job) and have typically not yet married or

⁹¹ Others writing about gossip have noted this too. For example Dreby (2009) and Brennan (2004) found that communities related to transnational migrants gossip about men’s and women’s financial strategies differently, focusing on different aspects that often serve to reinforce gender norms and expectations. While others such as White (2002) note that women’s (alleged) sexual behavior is often judged more harshly than that of men.

⁹² However some of the on-line gossip was also about their (lack of) abilities as teachers.

⁹³ The college is one of eleven member colleges of the national university system. All the university administration is done in the capital city Thimphu though the member colleges are located all over the country.

“settled down”. Twice since the assistant lecturer program started, university administrators visiting from the capital, Thimphu collected all the assistant lecturers at Sherubtse for a private chastisement where the university administrator directly referred to what was said on these online forums. I was able to sit in on the second of these “meetings”⁹⁴ (as they were euphemistically called) in which when assistant lecturers attempted to defend their behavior and their reputation, the administrator sternly reminded them that in her experience there was very rarely “smoke without a fire.” The implications being that she believed there must be at least some truth to the allegations. She also reminded them they had to be more careful because they had “many spectators” in which she was including both the Kanglung community and those like her in the faraway capital who were watching for misbehavior.

Many assistant lecturers did drink,⁹⁵ occasionally to excess but so did senior lecturers. In fact during my time at Sherubtse I saw several senior⁹⁶ lecturers and long time staff members come to work visibly and aromatically intoxicated.⁹⁷ Their behavior was not above gossip, for example I heard several disconcerting stories of alcohol fueled domestic violence (usually featuring an

⁹⁴ I decided to attend this meeting after hearing several assistant lecturers complain that the first one, which happened the year before I arrived was upsetting and unfair.

⁹⁵ It is important to note that not all assistant lecturer drank, in fact this form of mass scolding was particular stinging for those assistant lecturers who by their own account “did not even eat *doma*” (the mild bit addictive betel nut, a stimulant).

⁹⁶ By senior I am referring to age, experience and qualifications. Most senior lecturer had at least an MA and had been teaching for while. They were older and most often married with families.

⁹⁷ As far as I know, none of the assistant lecturers had ever done this. In fact in one of my interviews a student told me that the thing that took the most getting used to in the high school to college transition was being taught by someone who was clearly drunk.

infuriated and frustrated wife severely beating her drunk husband)⁹⁸ that I can only hope were mostly invented. However there were several key differences in the way their drinking was dealt with. Firstly because their behavior was recognized to belong to individuals there were never any attempts to see these kinds of acts as categorical (“all senior lecturers get drunk and are then beaten by their wives”) in the same way as the assistant lecturers who were seen as a group to be unruly drinkers. The gossip about drinking among senior lecturers singled out individuals. They were also much less likely to be publicly rebuked. In gossip about excessive drinking among older faculty, the general emotion was one of resignation and tolerance. Even Indian faculty (who were far less likely to drink at all), despite being shocked and even slightly disgusted by Bhutanese (alleged) alcohol consumption patterns,⁹⁹ seemed unwilling to speak openly of the drinking habits of older faculty. Assistant lecturers and students however were fair game and while assistant lectures felt victimized, sometimes unfairly, it was students for whom the consequences were most severe. Students who are caught intoxicated could be suspended for months and in severe cases, for example that involved drunken violence,¹⁰⁰ they could be expelled (or “terminated” in official Sherubtse language). However in practice the application of punishments was uneven and usually depended on who caught them and their relationship to upper level

⁹⁸ For example, in one particularly violent story the man in question was said to have been beaten to a pulp with a hockey stick, a strange story given that as far as I know no one in Kanglung plays hockey. I can only hope it was a fabricated story based on something seen in a Hindi movie.

⁹⁹ Two things that Indian faculty told me that they found particularly shocking about Bhutanese drinking practices were 1) women drinking and 2) parents and children drinking in front of each other and on occasion with each other.

¹⁰⁰ The violence was not necessarily directed at a person, while I was at Sherubtse one student was terminated for breaking a door in a drunken rage.

administrators. So the same kinds of behavior were talked about and dealt with differently based on age and standing (as mentioned earlier there is a strong sense of hierarchy that makes it more difficult to criticize people who are senior in age or professional rank).

Spatial relationships and practices clearly affected the difference in evaluation and consequences. In particular they made assistant lecturer and students not only more common targets but also easier targets. Kanglung is in fact a “dry town” meaning that in an effort to prevent students from drinking alcohol, it cannot be legally purchased in any of the shops near campus. However several shops still sold the occasional bottle of alcohol out of a back room to select trusted customers, including students. Students and young assistant lecturers could also walk to nearby towns (the nearest bar is about a 30 to 45 minute walk away) to purchase alcohol either to take home or to consume on the spot. Additionally, several farmers who lived near the college were known to sell home distilled liquor (*Ara*) to both students and faculty.¹⁰¹ Senior faculty and longtime staff members however tend to buy alcohol in bulk. They usually either own a car or have regular access to one and can therefore buy entire boxes of beer or several bottles of whisky or rum on grocery shopping trips to Trashigang or at the government subsidized Food Cooperation of Bhutan (FCB) in a nearby town which has good prices on beer. Being able to use a car to purchase and transport alcohol makes the consumption practices of this second group less conspicuous.

¹⁰¹ In fact one of my students wrote a paper on the economic impact of the college on the local community and claimed that selling alcohol to students was a key subsistence strategy for widowed and elderly women.

They also bring the alcohol home to consume, often with friends and family. The assistant lecturers and students however are far less likely to own or have regular access to a car.¹⁰² If they decide to carry the alcohol home, this already makes their purchase more visible. Sometimes they will consume the alcohol at the point of purchase and then walk home or to their hostels. Even more commonly among the students, they will purchase the alcohol and then take it with them to consume in the open in one of several known drinking spots around the town.

Students often seem to favor drinking spots where they know they can be seen. For example the helipad near the military training site which sits above Kanglung is a favorite picnic spot for all the nearby communities. This is a place that students often go to drink in groups, in full knowledge that they may run into faculty, staff and community members during their outing. These kinds of outings frequently entail a drunken walk home. It is in fact these drunken walks home that tend to get both assistant lecturers and students in trouble. Visibility is enhanced because this kind of drinking often happens in a group and so there is a group of noticeably drunk people rather than just an individual. Many faculty members¹⁰³ told me that as long as students drank only in their rooms, they would leave them alone. It was clear that being drunk in public was the bigger problem; I suspect that this is because it was tied to the reputation of Sherubtse in the community and beyond it.

¹⁰² There is no real public transport except a daily bus going from Trashigang to the border with India. There is one taxi locally but rides must often be arranged in advanced. Hitchhiking is common but not always reliable.

¹⁰³ By no means do all faculty agree, in fact there were several cases in which students were caught drinking in their room and suspended but in many cases provost did not go into student rooms to check on this kind of activity.

Again what is significant here is not just the behavior (drinking) but also the way in which the behavior is carried out in space, and how the use of space can create visibility, or protection (drinking at home for example) which in turn makes certain groups of people more vulnerable to harsh evaluations of their behavior and to more severe consequences. At the same time, public drunkenness is largely tolerated in Bhutan. Archery games for example, which are public events and are often part of bigger celebrations (like New Years), often involved large amounts of drinking and drunken antics.¹⁰⁴ Personal celebrations including weddings and baby showers also tend to involve heavy drinking. What is key is who can be drunk in public. I already mentioned that older faculty and staff sometimes show up to work drunk during a regular work week. Students on the other hand have an 8:30 curfew which is enforced by Lecturers on Duty or LODs (male, Bhutanese lecturers and assistant lecturers who patrol the campus looking for drunk and “dating”¹⁰⁵ students.)

Female students who drank were judged perhaps most harshly of all. An illuminating example comes from the experience of a small group of students that I taught who were caught drunkenly walking back to their hostels by an LOD. I only found out about the incident because I ran into the LOD who caught them on

¹⁰⁴ The drinking has been blamed for several fatalities during the archery matches.

¹⁰⁵ “Dating” is the term used to refer to any kind of suspected heterosexual romantic activity. So it could even refer to a boy and girl sitting next together in an isolated location. One of the most amusing conversations I was witness to was between someone who had been on LOD duty the night before and a North American lecturer. The LOD was telling us how he had caught some students “dating” the night before and when the North American tried to quiz him on what he meant—were they on a date? He wasn’t sure. Kissing? No. Holding hands? It was dark, so maybe. Sitting real close to each other? Not particularly. The LOD could not quiet explain what he meant except to argue that a boy and girl should not have been alone together after the curfew, therefore they were dating. As I mentioned in the previous chapter however, a substantial number of faculty see romantic relationships as problematic distractions.

my way home from campus and he began to talk about the students who were drinking, completely unaware that I taught these same students.¹⁰⁶ He was particularly appalled that there had been a girl in the group, “What kind of a girl does something like this?” he repeatedly asked me. What was shocking to me was that despite the fact that everyone in the group had been out after curfew and everyone had been drinking, it was the female student that he was singling out as being particularly badly behaved. The LOD was particularly concerned that in her inebriated state she was vulnerable to sexual assault (“What if she passed out on the road?” he wondered aloud “Who knows what could have happened to her then!”) which he seemed to imply would have been her own fault. It was clear that this vulnerability then became tied to the harsher evaluation that the LOD had of her behavior. Being a student and being a female changed that way in which the student and her public drunkenness was perceived, the “who” mattered as much as the “what” and “where.” Kencho Wangdi, using “doing bad things” as a euphemism for drinking, similarly noted that:

“When boys are doing the bad, they are not feeling ashamed, no madam? But when girls are doing bad thing, boys are always teasing and so girls become ashamed in front of the boys” (Focus group three).

¹⁰⁶ Those of us in the social science department were able to prevent these students for being suspended through swift intervention with upper level administrators; however this incident made it clear to me that students without advocates were more likely to be given harsh punishments. Including one particularly depressing case in which an entire class failed a final exam given to them by a notoriously vindictive teacher but their head of department refused to intervene.

Much like the classroom experience described in the previous chapter, female students are once again the target of both faculty and peer judgment.

“Cooped up:” Gender, Gossip and Space

At the college, verbal harassment- particularly by groups of male students remarking on the behavior, appearance or even presence of female students- already made female students feel unwelcome in particular spaces and situations. I first noticed this form of harassment at college talent shows and introductory sessions¹⁰⁷ where male students would yell out comments about female students on stage often related to their perceived physical attractiveness, a practice that was mostly tolerated by faculty, as being in good fun and part of college “tradition.” Zeppa (1999) similarly noted that during her time at the college, girls who came on stage to make speeches were hissed at. It was clear that the stage, the center of attention, was a space in which female students could expect particularly loud and unapologetic evaluations. Female students who challenged norms of feminine behavior or appearance for example by being heavier, wearing their hair short or walking around the campus and town on their own were frequently both harassed and gossiped about. For example Karma Yangzom, who still often appeared to be rather shy and soft spoken to me, was already considered to something of a rebel for being slightly more adventurous and wearing her hair

¹⁰⁷ Introductory sessions require new students to “introduce themselves” on stage to older senior students and faculty in their departments. So each department holds their own “session.” Loud and often unkind heckling is expected. First year students dread them.

shorter than any other girl on campus¹⁰⁸, told me how in her first year she often walked around campus and in the nearby town on her own. She was horrified and hurt to learn in her second year that this unusual activity had earned her plenty of gossip as well as the unkind nickname “psycho.” Several other students told me that even during daylight they did not feel safe walking around alone because if they walked past a boys’ hostel they might be shouted at or harassed. In focus group interviews female students listed the places in which they felt particularly unwelcome such as sports facilities and male hostels. Tshering Dolkar for example told the following story to demonstrate the entitlement that some male students seemed to feel:

“From my own experience when we go to the basketball court, whether we came first or not, when boys come and play we have to leave from there. (Another student asks: Do they force you to leave?) No they just say, you’ll can go there and play. (Everyone laughs) And then sometimes they use that basketball court to play football (laughter).”

Students noted that in general if they were not in class, most girls preferred to stay in their hostels. One senior student described the confinement to their hostels as being “cooped up” like caged birds.

I also found that in general female students were far more conscious of how they appeared once they left their hostels, even if they were on campus

¹⁰⁸ Long hair is very much the norm for all Bhutanese girls. The only women who wore their hair short were older more traditional women. In fact Karma Yangzom told me that groups (of usually male students) would often mockingly yelled “Kiran Bedi!” after her alluding to a famously tough and aggressive Indian policewoman who also wore her hair short and boyish.

during school hours. For example, Kinley Choden told me how awkward the moving around campus between classes could be:

“ One thing I am not comfortable with is walking through these corridors when boy are packed in with us....Because they always tend to stare at us , passing unwanted comments.... some of the boys are like this madam, they are really concerned with how we are dressing . It’s not matching, she got a big (she laughs)... I mean, you know”

Even on the weekend many female students wore the national dress on campus while most male students switched to more casual western clothing as soon as the school day was done. This sense of what was appropriate attire suggests that female students in general felt they needed the protection of either formal clothing or a group of friends to be able to move comfortably on campus. Sonam Peldon complained about how difficult friendship with boys become in this kind of social environment. She had on several occasions been questioned for spending time with male friends:

“Sometimes they are so narrow-minded. You go out for a walk with a guy they’ll ask you, okay you were going out with that guy, what were you doing? And I’ll say it’s just a walk, it doesn’t mean anything.”

It was clear that through gossip, the threat of gossip and harassment female students developed a sense of which kind of spaces they could occupy, how and with whom.

As an unmarried woman, living alone I was vulnerable to many of the same threats of gossip as the female students and other unmarried female faculty. I found myself imagining my relationship to the space around me differently and restricting my own behavior accordingly including refusing alcohol in public, worrying about the appropriateness of my clothing in formal setting, avoiding being seen wandering around after dark, and getting nervous about having male visitors (even the telephone repair man) come to my house. I was able to understand the way that students and some younger faculty felt about space and gossip not just in an abstract way but at a very visceral level. This often left me like the female students I was speaking to, feeling cooped up or confined to certain spaces and certain kinds of appearance and behavior in these spaces.

Spoilt girls: visibility and becoming the object of gossip

I ran into Dechen Choden on campus today and we chatted for a while about classes and her internship. Since I don't teach her class anymore now when I see her it's usually in the evening before curfew when she is out walking on the main road with her boyfriend. Even though they always greet me when they see me, they are always also very shy to see me. I tell her that lately I have been heading off the main tar road and down past the BHU¹⁰⁹ to the villages below, the narrow forest path is beautiful and very private. I asked her why she and her boyfriend don't walk down

¹⁰⁹ The Basic Health Unit which sits below the main road.

there instead of on the main road where everyone can see them.

Dechen looked shocked and laughed. “Madam,” she protested,

“You are going to spoil me!” (Field notes, March 2010)

Repeatedly being told stories about “spoil” girls was what first helped me to see the connections between how ideas about gender inflected and connected gossip, space and moral evaluations about behavior. The term “spoil” in this context is used differently than it is typically used in American English. Students and faculty repeatedly talked for example about “spoiling” exam papers, which meant that they could have done better, that they expected to have done better but they couldn’t. The exam was “spoil” because it had the potential to have been done well. It was also something an individual did to the paper—it wasn’t bad luck, they had spoilt the paper, and it was their fault. Similar when girls are described as “spoil,” it has less to do with them getting everything they want (as it might imply in an American context) and everything to do with not fulfilling the potential to conform to what is expected of girls.

Boys are also sometimes in extreme situations described as spoilt. For example, I heard the term used to describe the expelled male student who was involved in the drunken stabbing of several other students. However in general this term was far more commonly used for girls and often for behavior and attitudes that were seen as excusable for boys. Spoilt girls drink and have boyfriends and smoke. Spoilt girls are loud and argumentative. Spoilt girls have flashy haircuts. Spoilt girl are visible, they move through space differently, as if

they do not care about the kinds of moral evaluations that people might have of them, as if they do not fear gossip.

Tashi Tshomo was a female student who had been suspended for being caught in a boy's room after the 8:30 curfew¹¹⁰ and missed two months of the spring semester. Once she was back she told me that she had the distinct and unsettling sense that everyone, both students and faculty were constantly gossiping about her. Sadly this was not just Tashi imagining things. Many people were gossiping about her. For example a female faculty member, who did not teach her, told a group of us with some authority that she had always known that Tashi was trouble because of her outrageously short and trendy haircut. Tashi worked hard to catch up on the months of school she missed and went on to be a "topper" or one of the students who got the highest marks on the end of year exams but she refused to change her hairstyle, the way she dressed or her outspoken nature.¹¹¹ She told me that her way of dealing with the stress and pressure of having been identified as a spoilt girl was to "not give a damn." Variation of this phrase (don't give a damn, damn-less, bother-less, least bothered) was repeated to me again and again by students, both male and female who felt that they had been unfairly gossiped about, as well as by people criticizing those who seemed dangerously unconcerned about their reputation.

¹¹⁰ It should be noted that technically boys and girls are never allowed into each other hostels or rooms. One provost told me how one top level administrator sometimes called her in the middle of the work day asking her to go back to the hostel she oversaw to ensure there were no boys there. The administrator would insist that she go and check even if she was scheduled to teach at the time of his request.

¹¹¹ A junior unmarried female faculty member what was also the object of much gossip told Tashi that she had two choices; she could conform to expectations or grow a thicker skin.

The encounter with Dechen Choden reported above, forced me to rethink the connections between visibility, space and gossip. Walking along the main road, with a boyfriend made her almost as visible as Tashi Tshomo with her sassy attitude or even Karma Yangzom with her short hair and tendency to walk around campus alone but in Dechen's case being seen was what she claimed prevented her from being "spoilt". What became clear is that female students, no matter how they dress or behave or where they locate their bodies, are always visible when they are outside the safe spaces of their hostel or when they drop the armor of conventional appearance . And they are always vulnerable to gossip. Rose (2002) argues that in fact it is women's self-consciousness of their bodies in space, their awareness of being watched and judged that creates their sense of confinement and even oppression. In other words, Dechen Choden, Tashi Tshomo and even Karma Yangzom, were aware that they were visible and being gossiped about (or in constant danger of being gossiped about) and like the government official at the beginning of this chapter they are looking for ways to manage malicious gossip because they like her understand that its already swirling around them. For all three of them malicious gossip felt as personally destructive as that gossip *Dasho Karma Ura* described dismembering people and killing livestock. Dechen, by choosing to be visible in a particular way, on the main road, before and never after curfew, came closest to the strategy of warding off any potential gossip. It remains to be seen if her approach is as successful as the girls who choose stay "cooped up " in the safe spaces of their hostels, moving around only off-stage with groups of other quiet, long-haired, kira- wearing girls

while always maintaining curfew. This tactic in some ways might actually have be almost as effective as a wooden phallus at warding off the gossip. As for Tashi Tshomo and Karma Yangzom's decision (and to a lesser extent the decision of those students who defiantly head to the helipad with a backpack full of beer) to "not give a damn" about way gossip tries to contain their movements and actions, their efforts to battle gossip head on by ignoring the conventions of space and how they "meant" to occupy and move through it, will not prevent them from suffering the on-going consequences that come from being the objects of gossip.

Chapter 6

"TOO GOOD TO TEACH": LEARNING TO ASPIRE, LEARNING TO WAIT

There was a guest speaker at assembly this morning, someone who is involved in the whole “GNHing of Education”¹¹² initiative and he told an interesting story about changing aspirations. Apparently *Lyonchen*¹¹³ has been visiting schools and asking primary school kids what they wanted to do when they grew up. All of them said things like “I want to become an engineer”, “I want to be a doctor” and this was something he found very sad because a generation ago all of them would have said something along the lines of – “When I grow up I want to pay back my debt to my parents.” This was in his eyes, evidence of the erosion of a core GNH value (Field notes, March 2010).

In the last decade the modern Bhutanese education system has started to struggle with preparing its students for an increasingly competitive and unpredictable job market. Highly desirable government jobs are no longer guaranteed for college graduates as they were a generation ago; however, current aspirations have not yet begun to reflect these new realities. During my time at Sherubtse I found that the aspirations of most students at this college were limited

¹¹² Since about 2009 there has been a concerted effort to “infuse” Gross National Happiness (or GNH) values into the Bhutanese education system. The notion of GNH is intended to encapsulate the Bhutanese development ethos with its emphasis on happiness over economic development or more accurately development but not at the expense of happiness. *Lyonchen*, the prime minister, has since the late 1980’s been one of the key articulators of GNH.

¹¹³ Prime Minister.

to careers in government service and that they saw very few other “appropriate” options for themselves. For example most of the students already saw themselves as “too good to teach.” This chapter will examine the ways in which the Bhutanese educational experience in general and at Sherubtse in particular teaches students which kinds of aspirations demonstrate a real desire for success. It will also briefly look at the way in which, what is being described as “the crisis” of youth unemployment is being understood and dealt with at the level of media discourse. I will argue that current understandings of appropriate aspirations are not only gendered but also linked to assumptions about class and education, and that “waiting” is a career strategy that brings these potential differences into sharp relief.

Craig Jeffery (2010) looked at educated but unemployed lower class youth in North India and identified two kinds of waiting—firstly the waiting of young men for opportunities that match their aspirations and secondly the waiting of their parents investing in a child’s education and waiting for the results. Jeffery argues that waiting is part of the experience of modernity; think of lines, traffic jams and call waiting. However, he also points out that in the developing nations and increasingly in developed ones “ people have been incited by powerful institutions to believe in particular versions of the future yet lack the means to realize their aspirations” (2010: 3). Both kinds of waiting are visible in Bhutan. Families increasingly invest in their children’s education and young graduates and job seekers frequently use waiting for something better as a not always successful strategy for meeting their aspirations. Educational experiences appear to be

teaching young people both to narrow their aspirations and that waiting can be part of the strategy for meeting those aspirations.

Levinson and Holland have called schools “contradictory resources” because while schools do in many instances offer “freedoms and opportunities, at the same time [they also] further draw students into dominant projects of nationalism and capitalist labor formation, or bind them even more tightly to systems of class, gender and race inequalities” (1996:1). They are known to “encourage a sense of failure” (1996: 1) in those students who are unable or unwilling to succeed in the ways that schools claim is possible for “everyone” to be successful. The way in which Bhutanese students learn to aspire within formal school contexts shows how students can become bound to “particular versions of the futures”. Like modern schools in other locations (see for example Pigg 1992 and Lesorogol 2008), schools in Bhutan seem to deepen the divide between “uneducated” and “ educated,” and “ successful” and “unsuccessful” thereby making some aspirations particularly unthinkable for Sherubtse graduates.

An investment or a gamble?

As seen in chapter three, Bhutan’s modern education system is comparatively new and until fairly recently most Bhutanese parents were reluctant to send their children to modern state-sponsored schools. There are many stories of parents, in the 1950s and 1960s, when modern education was introduced in Bhutan, begging government officials to let their children stay at home, even hiding the children and lying about their whereabouts (Center for Education

Research and Development, 2002). Now families of almost all socio-economic backgrounds are willing to make substantial investments and sacrifices when it comes to children's schooling. This willingness is especially visible in the growing and very profitable Bhutanese private school industry. Between 2000 and 2006 the number of private schools doubled from 8 to 16 and the number of children enrolled in a private school increased from 1,460 to 5,421 (RGOB, 2008: 39). But a place at a private school does not come cheap. At the beginning of 2010 many private higher secondary schools substantially increased their fees by about Nu¹¹⁴. 6,000 so that most schools now cost at least Nu. 30,000 a year (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2010a). According to the International Monetary Fund, Bhutanese per capita income in 2010 was 1,980 dollars or roughly Nu. 87,790, which would mean that in 2010 to send just one child to private school could cost up to a third of an average Bhutanese annual income.

There are currently 547 schools in the country; including twenty- seven private schools, thirteen of which are private high schools (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2010).¹¹⁵ Bhutan has many more government-run primary and middle schools than it does high schools, so as students move up the educational scale, they are forced to compete for fewer spots in free government schools. Private schools are able to take advantage of these gaps, as well as of the on-going bottle-necks at key points within the Bhutanese education

¹¹⁴ *Ngultrums* are the local currency and are pegged to the Indian rupee.

¹¹⁵ In 2009 the first private liberal arts college, Royal Thimphu College (or RTC) began admitting students. RTC offers many of the same courses that are available at Sherubtse

system.¹¹⁶ The first occurs after the class ten exam, which is a national level assessment, meaning that all class ten students across the nation take the same exam and that their answer scripts are assessed centrally.¹¹⁷ Class ten students are not only competing with students in the same class or even in the same school but with all the class ten students in the entire nation. Students who are unable to score over a certain threshold (passing the exam is not always enough) are no longer eligible for free government education. This threshold score is subject to change and shifts based on the number of students taking the exam, how well they all do and the availability of seats at government schools . In 2011 even though the cut off was set at 61%, a percent lower than in the previous year, only four in every ten class ten students who sat the common exam qualified to continue to study at government schools (Wangmo, 2011a). Many years there are devastated students who point out that if they had sat the exam the previous year, their score would have been enough for them to continue in government schools.

There is a similar sorting process after the class twelve exams but there are even fewer places at free government tertiary institutions. Students must not only pass their final exams but score high enough to gain admission to not just particular government institutions but also to particular courses within these institutions. At both junctures parents and extended families of students who are

¹¹⁶ It should be noted, however, that middle class parents in Thimphu, the capital which has a very high concentration of private schools are increasingly choosing to send their children to private schools for their primary years in the belief that private primary schools provide students with “better basics” than public schools. In fact a government assessment of “the top ten performing schools” lists three private primary schools among top ten in 2009 and four in the top ten in 2010 (Pem, May 27 2011).

¹¹⁷ These exams are not comparable to the SATs since they are generally not multiple choice type tests and are far more content focused. A closer comparison would be the British GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams.

not successful often make huge efforts to find ways and funds to keep children in school. This willingness is a sign of a significant shift in the way Bhutanese think of modern education, a shift that happened roughly within two generations.

I would argue this shift happened because schooling was in recent past the most effective way for families and individuals to get ahead financially and socially. As Kinga points out, “in the early years of modernization, education was understood as the instrument of joining the civil service” (2005b: 51). Initially even a little education would promise a government job¹¹⁸ and with it job security as well as the financial and social benefits. Most Bhutanese continue to honor economic obligations to family, including extended family, for example paying for school expenses for younger siblings and sometimes also for other younger relatives such as cousins, contributing financial support for annual family rituals and even assisting parents in acquiring and improving property and other investments. So in many ways despite shifts in aspirations, children do still honor the debts to their parents.

Ueda (2004) offers four key reasons that civil service jobs are so prized: 1) securing the job demonstrates success in the Royal Civil Service Commission exams; 2) job security is assured;¹¹⁹ 3) these jobs are considered prestigious; and, 4) most government jobs provide opportunities to travel abroad for study and work. Travel abroad is highly desirable and often lucrative especially if it is

¹¹⁸ For example, during the 1960s and 1970s government officials only needed a class six or seven education because there were so few other qualified and available candidates.

¹¹⁹ A recent article in *Business Bhutan* found that young graduates who sought civil service employment claimed to prioritize job security over the higher salaries that might be possible in the private sector (Saraswait 2011).

linked to training or further studies. It is significant that civil servants continue to earn a monthly salary while they are away from their jobs for further studies. Between their salary, the scholarship stipend and sometimes taking on an additional job if they are sent to another country to receive the degree or training, scholarship recipients are able to come out of the experience with substantial savings. Many are able to afford land, cars and large household appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators upon their return home, purchases that would otherwise be difficult for the average Bhutanese. Already in the early 1980's *Lyonpo Zanglay Dukpa*, the current minister for health, complained that on his return from studying overseas "almost all people asked me how much money I brought. Hardly anyone asked me about the academic and professional benefit of the course and how it enriched my knowledge" (2002:41). Ueda also points to other perks of working as a civil servant such as use of a government vehicle and in some postings, free or subsidized housing.

Stils (2009), who wrote a dissertation that provides a broad overview of the Bhutanese education system and its recent changes, notes that the expectation that all students could and would get civil service jobs was already recognized as a problem, "an unrealistic expectation", by Bhutanese policy makers in 1997 as they worked on Bhutan's eighth Five Year Plan (2009: 72).¹²⁰ The strategy at the time had been to try and redirect students who were unable to secure college placements or even office jobs towards vocational training; however, these attempts have been and continue to be largely unsuccessful. Ezechieli similarly

¹²⁰ The first five year plan was created for the period 1961- 1966 and was focused on infrastructure development.

notes that there was a change in both the way students and their families perceived education and its benefits: “the parents do not want their children to experience the same harshness that characterized their life. The children, who generally are the first schooled generation in the family, feel entitled to a white-collar job; the government is perceived as the “natural” employer” (2003: 59). This sense of entitlement is important because on the one hand it means that students and their families are quick to reject vocational training and blue collar employment as beneath an educated person but at the same time they are unprepared for their potential failure to secure government jobs. Often there is no contingency plan besides waiting, and in many cases educated youth turn down alternatives, in order to wait and see if government employment becomes available.

However these investments and expectations do not always play out in the ways that students and their families anticipate. Every year the pool of recent college graduates eligible to sit the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) Exam increases while the government is able to employ fewer and fewer of them. In 2009, 943 graduates, a 17percent increase from the year before sat the exam but only 336 of them were able to secure a place in civil service (Choden 2009c). In 2010 the Royal Civil Service Commission instituted a preliminary screening exam which graduates had to pass in order to take the newly re-name d Bhutan Civil Service Commission Exam (BCSCE). That year 1,216 graduates appeared for the preliminary exam, 658 graduates qualified to sit the actual exam and only 318 graduates were absorbed into the civil service (Saraswait, 2011).

Sherubtse is still seen as an important civil service feeder school but the success of its students is increasingly being challenged by students from newer Bhutanese institutions as well as by students who have continued their studies privately or on government scholarships outside of Bhutan, particularly in India and Thailand.¹²¹ Despite these trends, students' aspirations have not yet shifted to match these new realities. At the same time, the private sector has been slower to grow and is still considered a less desirable place to work because these jobs are seen as less stable, remuneration is generally lower and private sector employees are less likely to receive perks like regular promotions and opportunities to travel abroad.

“Sherubtse was not my first choice:” learning aspirations

The story that started this paper, about the Prime Minister's school visit hints at other, perhaps more subtle, shifts in aspiration. The Prime Minister (or at least the one in the story) is probably right in pointing out that aiming to become doctors or engineers are most likely not the kind of aspirations that would be cultivated or nurtured in the past by a rural Bhutanese family with limited education. However, these are exactly the kind of aspirations that are being actively fostered within the setting of contemporary Bhutanese schools.

¹²¹ This shift is a recognized one because most people are able to have access to information about the results. Once results are known they have traditionally been reported in newspapers and other news venues, some years each exam takers name and undergraduate institution is even listed next to their results. The “toppers” are usually considered an important news story and are usually interviewed and photographed by a range of news outlets.

Bhutanese schools are teaching students specific kinds of aspirations. In particular students are learning that good students should want to be doctors and engineers,¹²² for these are the appropriate aspirations for good students. This kind of academic hierarchy with medicine somewhere near the top is of course by no means unique to Bhutan but it is most definitely new to Bhutan. In fact, many of the interviews I conducted with educators and policy makers¹²³ who are from my mother's generation indicated that the idea of having particular career aspirations of any kinds is new to Bhutan. Many interviewees told me that their academic course and eventual career trajectory were not active choices.¹²⁴ For example many of the early teachers were selected by the government to become teachers. There was no application process, merely a national need that they were expected to fill.¹²⁵

Given that students are expected to perform fairly well in order to secure a place at Sherubtse, I was surprised by the overwhelming feeling from many of the students that I taught and interviewed that they had already failed by not securing a slot to take up a professional degree like medicine or architecture outside the country or at the newly established Business and Engineering colleges inside the

¹²² In general doctors and engineers are still government employees. At present while some engineers have set up shop on their, there are no private medical practices of any kind.

¹²³ These were conducted in the summer of 2008, the summer before I began writing my dissertation project proposal.

¹²⁴ I should add that most of them told me this without any resentment or regret, more as an observation. However several were upset by the attitude of many young people towards teaching as a profession.

¹²⁵ Many of the stories told by early Bhutanese teachers in "The Call: Stories of Yesteryears" compiled by the Center for Education Research and Development (2002), highlight that rather than actively choosing the field, many of them were selected and then expected to becoming teachers and educators.

country.¹²⁶ As Tshering Lhadon, noted sarcastically during a focus group discussion in which almost every student participant (including my research assistant) admitted that in high school they had aspired to study medicine, “Everyone wanted to be a doctor once, once upon a time” (Focus group two). For many of these students a place at Sherubtse was clearly a consolation prize.

While there were students who actively choose to pursue humanities and excelled in these subjects, it was clear that early in their high school careers many of the most promising students were tracked, sometimes quite forcefully, into the science or commerce streams, preparing them for competitive professional degrees in fields like accounting, engineering or medicine. For example, during an interview one recent graduate, who was now teaching social sciences at Sherubtse, told me that because of his consistently good marks his high school principal had been quite aggressive in his attempts to push him into the “sciences stream” and that it took stubbornness and persistence on his part to resist this pressure.¹²⁷ Several students noted that their families were also sometimes involved in encouraging them to pursue sciences in general and medicine and engineering in particular. Wangmo (2010d) notes that the number of students in the arts stream has actually declined in recent years. She points out that in 2009 of the 6,789 students who sat for the Bhutan Higher Secondary Education certificate only 24 percent were arts students. She bemoans the fact that the arts stream has

¹²⁶ The College of Science and Technology is one of the oldest technical institutions in the country. It was started in the 1970 or 1980s by the Don Bosco priests. It was up-graded to a college in 2001. It is located nearly the bustling boarder town Phuentsholing. Geddu College of Business was started in 2008 and the Commerce/Business course that was offered at Sherubtse transferred there along with most of the Sherubtse Commerce/ Business faculty.

¹²⁷ In fact he told me that rather than arguing with his principal he just “silently” signed up for the art stream.

earned a reputation for being both dull and easy; many students with whom she spoke admitted that they chose the arts stream because they thought it would be less work. Students are learning that there is more prestige in pursuing sciences and that true academic success means getting into one of these coveted and hugely competitive professional degree programs.

This privileging of the sciences is probably something that was imported into the country along with many other aspects of the new modern education system. Most likely it came with the scores of Indian teachers¹²⁸ who had been similarly socialized and they passed on this academic value system to a new crop of Bhutanese educators. While admittedly I did not spend any time in Bhutanese high schools, this huge sense of disappointment and regret expressed by so many Sherubtse students who failed to qualify for these professional courses could not be ignored. Many of them recounted how they came to be at Sherubtse by first noting that, “Sherubtse was not my first choice.” Again and again students told me how they had done so well in school but “spoilt” their class twelve exams by not scoring marks high enough to continue their pursuit of a career in medicine, engineering or accounting. For many students who had worked their entire time at school toward jobs in these fields, this meant that they had to let go of previous aspirations and rethink what academic and personal success might look like. Sherubtse seems to offer only one suggestion: government service.

¹²⁸ Getting into medical or engineering college in India is notoriously difficult and competitive but these continue to be highly sought out professions there.

Narrowing possibilities: “the best and only option”

Student life at Sherubtse is saturated with the idea that the government service is the expected and appropriate future for most of its students. Karen Ho (2009), in her ethnography of Wall Street, shows how students at Ivy League colleges are directed both by financial institutions and campus culture into investment banking careers. She convincingly shows how future investment bankers are “made” through particular kinds of discourses and experiences. Ho points in particular to the way in which an elite education works to narrow the range of what students see as career success so that investment banking seems like one of the few legitimate aspirations. I saw something similar happening at Sherubtse, as here too educational experiences and campus level discourse worked to narrowly reshape aspirations. Of course these students are even easier targets than the average Ivy League attendee. Many students come to Sherubtse, no longer having aspirations of any kind. They were dedicated, goal-driven students in high school but now that their former goals have proved impossible, they have lost their sense of purpose; they need new aspirations to fill that gap. Given its well known perks and perceived advantages, it’s not difficult for students to quickly come to see a career in civil service as the “best and only option.”

What is striking, however, is that unlike Ho’s account, with prominent Wall Street investments banks making huge and expensive efforts to woo promising Ivy Leagues students, the Bhutanese government does not actively seek

to recruit Sherubtse graduates. In fact, it is clear that the government branches tasked with employment at a national level (the Ministry of Labor and Human Resources) and new hires within the government (the Royal Civil Service Commission) would prefer not to have such an overwhelming proportion of the nation's youth continue to so hopefully strive for government employment.

It's striking that so few students are able to imagine or name other possibilities both in terms of jobs and employers. However, those that do are often actively discouraged from pursuing alternatives to civil service. Looking at female science students in India, Mukhopadhyay found that: "Educational decisions are treated as family, rather than individual student decisions, involving the investment of collective family resources and guided by collective family concerns and long term goals" (2004: 467). Given that many young Bhutanese expect to bear some degree of financial responsibility for their extended families, I would argue something similar is true for many Sherubtse students. Numerous students I spoke to chose or rejected particular career paths or educational programs in consultations with family, often including extended family.¹²⁹ For example, Kesang Wangmo, a final-year student had dreamt of becoming a police officer since class eight¹³⁰ but at various junctures (after class eight, ten and twelve), when it would have been possible for her to leave school in favor of training as a police officer, an uncle encouraged her to stay on in school in hopes

¹²⁹ As a counter argument, journalist Thapa (2011) suggests that students rely on family to help make career decisions because of the general lack of career counseling available to Bhutanese high school students.

¹³⁰ Her deceased but much beloved father was a police officer and this fueled her long standing desire to follow in his footsteps.

of securing a civil service job. Similarly Tshering Lhadon had her heart set on becoming a journalist, even successfully completing a summer internship at one of the national newspapers, but she was repeatedly reminded by her parents that she “*had to*” sit the Royal Civil Service Commission exam. Additionally several students told me that they decided not to pursue teaching because their families vehemently discouraged them from this career path. In all these cases families encouraged their children to sit for the Royal Civil Service Commission exam, which could help ensure a place within the civil service. Teachers and police officers are government employees, in the sense of who manages and pays them, however they are considered less prestigious occupations and have fewer associated perks, such as opportunities to travel abroad for training and further study. Potential police officers and teachers are also not required to sit the Royal Civil Service Commission Exam¹³¹ or RCSC which would give successful candidate access to these more esteemed opportunities. Teaching in general is frequently referred to as a “last resort” or “last option” by both Sherubtse students and the national media, something that will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Students, particularly those in their final year, talked endlessly about the best ways to prepare to do well in the civil service exam. As Kesang Jamstho sarcastically observed during the first focus group, “I guess no one is here to learn, just to get their degree certificate so they can sit the RCSC.” It was

¹³¹ Though as of 2010 teachers are expected to sit a qualifying exam after their B.Ed is complete. However this is not the same exam as other civil servants sit. It is instead specifically designed for B.Ed graduates and is intended to deal with concerns about the quality of teachers (Pelden, 2010a).

extraordinary to me that after years of working hard¹³² to get the highest marks possible many students told me that they no longer felt the need to study too hard because after all the degree marks they earned at college only accounted for 10 percent of the overall criteria for the civil service exam.¹³³ The three written exams, one in Dzongkha and two in English (one was general knowledge focused and the other was focused on recent Bhutanese history) accounted for 70 percent. The final 20 percent came from a panel interview. I was also repeatedly told by faculty that students were only interested in taking part in extracurricular activities that are rewarded by a certificate because these could be shown during the interview portion of the civil service exam as a way to demonstrate that they were active and well-rounded students. I began to pay attention to the binders full of certificates that particularly ambitious students carried around. In general, however, students felt their time was best spent preparing for the written exams. This meant that most only began to worry about mastering this content during the final year, the year before they expected to take the exams. It was almost as if the first two year of their degree was really just spent biding their time until they could take the civil services exams.

Tashi Dukpa pointed out to me that “it is only the final-year students who could be found in the library reading all the (national) newspapers” which were said to be a major source for questions on the written and oral portion of the

¹³² Students told incredible stories about how hard they studied for exams in high school—including waking up at the crack of dawn to study, taking cold showers to stay awake and eating very small meals so that they were not sleepy after a big meal.

¹³³ The Education Sector Commission Review similar found on a visit to Sherubtse that “[i]n general student do not seem fully engaged in learning, working only hard enough to score the 40 percent needed to pass” (2008: 9)

exams. In the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester, more than a year before they would sit the exam, I came across a group of final-year students in the single photocopying room on campus that was available for their use, making copies of a list of documents they needed to be familiar with for the exams.¹³⁴ It was clear that for them this, rather than anything on a class syllabus, was their reading list for the year. So perhaps it was not surprising that my colleagues in the political science department frequently grumbled that both they and their students had to compete with these final year students for the scare library resources on Bhutanese political history.

To a larger extent my colleagues at the college seemed to see themselves as civil servants first and teachers second. This is no doubt part of the reason that there was so much distress about RUB's delinking from the government and the Royal Civil Service Commission. Some of the younger faculty members were placed at Sherubtse after sitting the RCSC exam so it makes sense that they saw themselves as civil servants who happened to be placed at the college. In big and small ways, the college operated just like any other government office, especially when it came to bureaucratic practices. Despite the relatively small size of the campus and the faculty, there was extensive amounts of paper work associated with any action, for example though it was always the understanding that I would leave after my year of fieldwork, there were three different kinds of documents

¹³⁴ The students while amused by my interest were happy to make an extra copy of the list for me. Interestingly several of the documents on the list had been superseded by newer documents (for example the 9th year plan which was for the period 2002-2007 was listed) implying that this list is likely to have been floating from one set of seniors to the next for several years.

that I was required to fill in so that I could get a “relieving order” that would “allow” me to leave.

Nothing seemed to happen without an “office order” commanding it, any “incident” (particularly those requiring negative or disciplinary action) required that formal statements were written by everyone involved, and many titled figures from the Deans to Class Representatives, to Administrative Officers and the Sports Director were mostly known by their title rather than their names. All of this helped to create a sense that we were all civil servants; that this was not completely an academic enterprise and this did not go unnoticed among the students. I was astonished at how quickly they began to learn how to create their own practices which mirrored campus bureaucracy. For example one group involved in a project I assigned had an argument because one student in the group had ripped up the “office order” that the group leader had written as official notification of a group meeting.¹³⁵ I was initially confused by the fight. There were only five students in the group, they took almost all their classes together; why was an office order even needed? However in talking with the group it was clear that the office order was not the problem but the fact that it had been ripped up. Already in the first year at Sherubtse they “knew” that official action had to be authorized by a document like an “office order”. Gift giving and speech making practices at class farewell picnics closely emulated what happened at formal faculty farewells. Even more striking was the pageantry around the much anticipated final of an annual soccer tournament between the boys’ hostels. The

¹³⁵ It was not clear exactly why but possibly it was in protest of the time at which the meeting was set.

two teams in the final arranged an elaborate procession before the game which included non-players dressed up as VIPs; the boys donned the red and orange scarves that denote particularly high ranking government officials (see figure 10). This was both dress-up and a sort of dress rehearsal for the boys involved. In a sense the college bureaucracy served as a training ground to help students imagine themselves as civil servants.

Despite the certainty with which many students imagined their future as civil servants what struck me the most was how much students worked to not aspire too precisely. Often when I asked about their post-college hopes and plans they told me they planned to take the civil service exam and then they would see. As Kesang Jamstsho explained:

“We all take the same exam, same questions are given to everyone, Madam. They don’t set different papers for different people. So I guess sometimes they get the wrong people in the wrong job...like if one person wants to go for finance sector but he is placed in a different section.”

The Royal Civil Service Commission mostly seeks to recruit bright generalists who can be placed in any government department and transferred easily between different departments and jobs. To fit into the imagined future of a civil servant, students could not anticipate which department they would be assigned to or what they would be doing there since this was decided by the Royal Civil Service Commission. This kept their aspirations unspecific and lacking in detail. They

had to wait and see. As Tshering Dolker put it “Only after we appear for the RSCS, we will know what we want to do to do.”



Figure 10: Students dressed up to participate in the procession before the annual monsoon football match

“Too good to teach”

Given the high level of respect that Bhutanese teachers are still afforded by their students,¹³⁶ I was surprised at how actively and often forcefully Sherubtse students rejected teaching at any level as a desirable or even possible aspiration.

Part of this is no doubt the fact that the marks required to get into either of the two teaching colleges in Bhutan are among the lowest of all the educational

¹³⁶ I was constantly experiencing the respect the students reserved for teachers. Examples include: students giving me right of way when I walked through a crowded hallways; always being served first during class picnics , tea sessions and meals where students were present; student insisting on carrying anything I had in my hands anytime I encountered them, students rising whenever I entered or exited a classroom and the list could go on.

institutions in the country. Chencho Wangmo told me that she had always wanted to be a teacher but when her family saw how well she had performed in her class twelve exams they convinced her that she was “too good to teach.” Several other students told me that they had considered becoming teachers but they were talked out of pursuing the profession by friends, family and even their teachers. Karma Yangzom’s sister who is already a teachers warned her for teachers “ it was hard to give time to the family.” Another student recounted how her teachers told her that teaching involved far too much work and far too few rewards. They encouraged her to aspire to something less strenuous and something better paid.¹³⁷



Figure 11: Decorations for the full day event scheduled to celebrate Teacher’s Day, May 2010 at Sherubtse College

¹³⁷ One of Stiles’ (2009) informants similarly told her that teaching was an unpopular career because you were paid the same wages as other government workers at the same level but you had to work far more than an office worker. For example teachers are often expected to perform extra weekend and evening duties particular in schools that also board students.

These students were not alone in their sense that teaching was not a desirable profession. The Bhutanese media frequently writes about the declining prestige of teaching and how it is increasingly the “profession of last resort” (see for example Pelden 2010a, Raj 2011, Wangchuk 2009 and Wangmo 2010a). In fact, there is a persistent teacher’s shortage that is partially filled by using contract teachers from India and yet despite this demand, young Bhutanese actively reject teaching as a possible career. Highly publicized attempts by the Ministry of Education to convince civil servants to temporarily work as teachers in rural areas and to recruit graduates as temporary contract teachers largely failed to address either the teacher shortage or the seeming disdain for the profession (see Bhutan Broadcasting Service 2010b, Raj 2011 and Wangmo 2010a). Many young Bhutanese graduates who were offered contract teaching jobs choose to “wait for something better” than teaching.

This growing sense that teaching is not an appropriate aspiration is not helped by increasing evidence that those already within the profession are demoralized both by this disdain and by other aspects of the profession. Dorji (2009) notes that teachers are often blamed for the current belief that the Bhutanese education system has declined in quality. He argues that teachers are frequently held responsible for the very limitations that they must work under including “ the lack of adequate textbooks, learning materials, limited professional and after training support, increased duty hours especially those that work in boarding schools (24 hr duty), large classes and problematic children” (2009: 12). Teachers have reportedly begun to leave the profession in record

numbers (Choden 2009a, Lamsang 2011c, Rapten 2009). According to Lamsang (2011c) a 2011 Royal Audit Authority investigation into why teachers were leaving the profession found that 68 percent of teachers left because the work load was too heavy. Also 60 percent felt unrecognized for their efforts and blamed for the perceived decline in the quality of education. While some sources claimed that inadequate remuneration was a source of low morale among teachers (see for example Raj 2011), the audit only found 38 percent unhappy enough about the salary to consider leaving the profession.¹³⁸

The seemingly low regard for teaching as a career has clearly shaped both perceptions of those already in the profession and those who might be on the verge of becoming teachers. These views are particularly significant when thought about in relation to the way in which students think about other possible aspirations such as those in the science fields or within the civil service. Perhaps it is partially because Bhutanese students continue to respect their teachers that seeing them disheartened and publically disparaged makes teaching seem like such an unattractive aspiration.

Who can wait for something better?

Waiting, which initially looked to me like apathy, has become a noticeable strategy among young Bhutanese graduates. To start, the civil service intake happens only once a year, in the fall. This means that many recent graduates

¹³⁸ However, 63 percent did admit they were demoralized because they had fewer training opportunities which as I have already shown can be lucrative. In fact Lamsang (2011b) points out that while teachers make up 97 percent of those employed by the Education ministry, they only receive about 45 percent of the opportunities to travel outside the country for training.

spend anywhere from a half year to over a year studying for and waiting to sit the Royal Civil Service Commission exams. Graduates are also able to retake the exams if they are unsuccessful the first time, so some young graduates are off the job market for up to two years. Additionally on several trips to the Labor Ministry and to Royal University of Bhutan's head office which is located just below the Ministry, there were almost always groups of formally dressed young people, waiting outside the gate of the ministry, waiting for jobs, waiting for news of jobs. I also frequently met young people in the capital, whose upper middle class parents could not only afford to provide them with excellent educations (often outside the country) but who could also afford to support them while they waited until the right job came along. While the unemployment rate in Bhutan stands at just over 3 percent, the youth¹³⁹ unemployment rate has been over 9 percent for the last two years (Chhetri 2011). These rates are even higher in urban areas, 18.6 percent, where somewhat educated and uneducated young people from all over the country, assemble in hope of finding jobs. Groups of these youths congregating in public spaces increasingly make many urban residents suspicious and uncomfortable.¹⁴⁰

The Labor Ministry has repeatedly argued that there are jobs available. A 2011 survey done by the Ministry shows job vacancies slightly outnumbering job seekers (Chherti, 2011). They cite an “attitude problem” among young people who consistently prefer office work over any other kind of labor, as well as the

¹³⁹ Defined in this context as a job seeker between the ages of 15 and 29.

¹⁴⁰ For example it is frequently assumed in the media that all of these young people are drug addicts or members of urban gangs (Dorji 2010, Rinzin 2011, Wangchuk 2010 and Wangmo 2010b).

“mismatch” between the labor demands of the market and the expectations and abilities of young job seekers as the reasons for high youth unemployment. This notion of a “mismatch” between supply and demand, skills and needs, expectations and available jobs is used again and again by both the media (see for example Kuensel editorial 2011) and academics and policy makers (see for example Kinga 2005b) to explain the extent of youth unemployment.¹⁴¹ What is often missing from these kinds of analysis is an understanding of how educational experiences have actively shaped these aspirations and expectations that make it so difficult for young people and their families to accept that civil service and office jobs are unavailable.

Such disconnects are hardly new or unique to Bhutan. Foley in his 1977 review of anthropological studies of schools in developing countries found that many of these early studies already saw schools as creating similar new contradictions. Schools raised “the expectations of villagers and their children for a modern life, but educational production outstrips economic and occupational developments. Schooling expansion leaves in its wake, therefore masses of educated, unemployable youth” (1977:316). The question then becomes what do young, (somewhat) educated job seekers do in the face of these contradictions. Waiting for something better, is one strategy.

This strategy is, however, unevenly deployed. In particular, not every young person can afford to wait. Young women and poorer, less educated youth are much more likely to take up jobs in the private sector rather than wait. For

¹⁴¹ While my work is looking mostly at the aspirations of college graduates, Kinga (2005b) points out that the most significant employment gaps are for class ten and twelve drops outs.

example it was repeatedly pointed out to me that girls who had to drop out after class ten tend to quickly find jobs as babysitters, maids or waitresses, but a boy with the same qualifications is likely to wait to see if something better opens up. Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery (2008) in their account of the pervasive under-employment of educated young men in rural North India, found that women were not held to the same career expectation as their brothers, in fact the paid labor of their sisters often helped to support educated but unemployed men. It is possible that something similar is at work in the Bhutanese context. This seems to speak to the way in which aspirations can reflect gender expectations and economic constraints. For example Dorji (2005b) in his survey of live-in baby-sitters in the capital, Thimphu, found that they were overwhelmingly young (most were between the ages of 16 and 20, but over 30 percent were between the ages of 11 and 15) females, with little or no education from poor rural households. At least half of the baby-sitters surveyed were sending money home, while in some cases the employers sent the baby-sitters' entire monthly earnings directly to their families. Interestingly, Dorji reports that many of the girls are expected (both by themselves and their employers) to move out of baby-sitting after their adolescence because caring for children is considered a low skill job that is no longer appropriate once these girls are over a certain age. At the same time, what opportunities were available for these young women apart from "settling down" in a marriage was less clear.

Another example of the way in which gender and socioeconomic background is linked to career aspirations can be seen in the recent debates

around *Drayang* dancers. *Drayang*s are similar to cabarets, they are bars with a stage on which young women dance and lip-sync to songs requested by mostly male clients. Figure 12, a photograph of *drayang* dancers outside a *drayang*, demonstrates both the youth of many of these dancers and their characteristic traditional and demure dress. A survey done by students at Gaeddu College of Business Studies of 20 *drayang*s around the country found that 83 percent of *drayang* workers were females between the ages of 18 to 26, 33 percent were uneducated and an overwhelming 81 percent came from poor, rural dwelling households (Pem, 2011). Public and media scrutiny of this group of young women has been intense, as noted by reporter Sonam Pelden, 2010 saw a “surge of moral policing, especially on online forums” where *drayang*s were accused of being “anti-women and a blot on the tradition and culture of Bhutan” (2010b). Some of this moral outrage fueled recent discussions in the National Assembly where it was suggested that *drayang*s should be banned because they were immoral and socially destructive (Pem 2010). Chenchu Dorji, the Member of Parliament (MP) from Paro famously claimed that legalizing *drayang*s was akin to legalizing prostitution. The Labor Minister even went so far as to guarantee *drayang* dancers job and training opportunities, a guarantee he has not extended to the many unemployed youth actively waiting for jobs, sometimes even outside his office (Dema 2011). *Drayang* dancers surprisingly responded openly and quite forcefully to these debates. A group of them threatened to sue the MP for defamation. He quickly backed down (Pelden 2010d). *Drayang* dancers have also repeatedly rejected offers of alternative employment and training (Tshering 2011).

A news survey found that 80% of *drayang* dancers had actively chosen to work in this field because they enjoyed dancing and performing (Pelden 2010b).

The moralistic tone of these debates and the way in which fears of cultural destruction are used just as often, if not more often, than concern for the well being of the actual *drayang* workers, is particularly noteworthy. *Drayang*s are in fact highly regulated since they were legalized in 2009. The Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) frequently visits establishments to oversee activities there, including ensuring that the dancers are always properly dressed in national costume. Baby-sitting and household work (which many of those involved in the debate felt were more appropriate kinds of work for poor, uneducated women), however, is completely unregulated.¹⁴² At the same time waiting for better paying, higher prestige jobs was never suggested as an option for this group of young women.

All over the world and particularly in countries like Bhutan which are facing rapid social change, women, in particular young school-aged women, seem to become the focal point for anxiety around modernity and cultural change (see, e.g., Adely 2004, Aheran 2001, Gordizons-Gold 2002, Jeffery & Basu 1996, Kirk 2004, Mirembre & Davis 2001, Seymour 2002, Stambach 1998 and Vavrus 2002). Women are so often cast as the carriers of tradition so that any form of cultural change or expression of modernity such as the pursuit of new educational

¹⁴² While there is a real dearth of information on the actually conditions under which babysitters and *drayang* dancers work, it is clear that because of their relative youth, inexperience, the huge power imbalance between themselves and their employers and their disconnection from family support systems both groups are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. However interestingly there is great reluctance to recognize these issues for baby-sitters, even Dorji's study (2005b) refuses to engage with this possibility.

and career opportunities, increased mobility or even the adoption of less modest clothing is viewed negatively as a loss of tradition. These debates then are actually about what constitutes appropriate gender aspirations, particularly appropriate gender aspirations for poor, young, less educated women.

“I want to be a sunflower”

This chapter began with an illustrative story of a school visit and I would like to close it with the story of another school visit. In late 2006 as I was just beginning to imagine my dissertation project, my mother was one of a diverse team of people appointed to the Education Sector Review Commission that was asked to produce a very broad review of education in Bhutan.¹⁴³ Part of the process involved innumerable school visits. During one of these school visits somewhere in eastern Bhutan, the team met with a group of young primary school students who were asked to close their eyes and imagine what they wanted to be when they grew up. They were encouraged to remember that they could be anything they wanted to be. When they were asked to share to their aspirations, the first child to speak told the group excitedly, “I want to be a sunflower!”

This story usually draws a laugh when my mother tells it or when my sister or I retell it. But it’s only funny because unlike that child we and our listeners are pretty certain that no one can become a sunflower, no matter how much they want to. Despite being told that he could be anything at all, we know his answer is the “wrong” answer. One of the things that this child will learn in

¹⁴³ The final product of this study was the document “Education without compromise” which is referenced in this paper.

school is that doctor or engineer or government servant are the right kinds of aspirations, teacher and *drayang* dancer are the wrong kinds of aspirations and becoming a sunflower is an impossible aspiration. And yet there is something so wonderfully whimsical and sweet about this student's answer, suggesting that it is not students who lack imagination when it comes to aspirations but schools that works to limit the range of what's possible and desirable so successfully that an aspiration like this becomes laughable.

Chapter 7

CULTURAL PRODUCTION, CHANGE AND CONTINUITY: CONCLUDING REMARKS

I started this dissertation by claiming that I wanted to understand why female students in Bhutan were “choosing” not to “come up.” Influenced by feminist methods and theories, I made it clear that I was interested in the potential for reforms that could create greater equity. However one of the first stories I told about Sherubtse, the successful amendment of student leadership policy to make it more inclusive and the backlash that followed, served to highlight the difficulty of this kind of change. The story also makes the limits of these approaches clear. While feminist analyses is able to identify and eloquently describe the kinds of structural forces and individual actions that make change difficult, it is by definition deeply unsettled when agency is deployed to maintain or defend existing states of gender relations and roles.

Mahmood has similar critiqued “ the normative liberal assumptions about human naturesuch as the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them” (2005:5). In other words, even when they are able to recognize the diversity of ways in which individuals and their motivations and actions can be imagined and explained, these approaches are still deeply enmeshed in particular normative liberal understanding of “individuals,” “ action” and “freedom” that come out of a particular historical tradition. This kind of

historical and ethical baggage cannot help but limit the analytical power of these approaches. This is particularly true for the case of Sherubtse, where as I have shown, changes associated with gender expectations and experiences are caught up in local moral understandings that are both prevailing and resilient.

However this tension, particularly when it is recognized and discussed as I have tried to do throughout this dissertation, can be productive and illuminating. In particular it makes it clear that any attempt to fit a particular on-the-ground reality, in all its complex, muddled, contradictory detail to a theoretical approach is in part an act of force, perhaps even an act of some violence. The correspondence between the two can only ever be partial and some significant details have to be forgotten, ignored and underplayed in order for these attempts to work.

By privileging ethnographic detail and deploying a mix of theoretical tools throughout this dissertation, I have tried to draw attention to how this fit is always at some level an estimation that could be re-imagined in a host of different ways. This dissertation is then largely an ethnographic account of Sherubtse College at a moment when both it and the nation are dealing with ongoing sweeping social change. The frequent sense of confusion and ambiguity depicted in the dissertation can partially be linked to anxiety and uncertainty of process such as rapid democratization of the nation and approaching autonomy for Sherubtse. The dissertation sought to show what daily life and experience is like in this kind of social, political and historical context. In particular it draws attention to the following three trends:

- 1) The growing differences in wealth and opportunity in the nation at large are beginning to be reflected and reproduced in both the experience of schooling and the job market.
- 2) Schools, like Sherubtse, continue to recognize, maintain and reproduce conventional traditional values around hierarchy, cooperation (or group identity), learning and gender norms.
- 3) The claim that female students could choose to be more visible, vocal and mobile in classroom and on campus without being challenged or discouraged is largely a myth.

These findings are shaped in part by work done in the anthropology of education using what Levinson and Holland (1996) have identified as the “cultural production” approach, which sees schools as deeply embedded in local, nation and/or global structures of inequality that make transformation difficult if not impossible. The cultural production approach is defined by its emphasis on culture as an on-going process of meaning making, “which could occur independently of, but enter into complex relations with, processes of the social and cultural reproduction of class structure” (Levinson and Holland, 1996: 9). To Levinson and Holland, the value of this approach is that it allows researchers to:

- a) “better understand the resources for, and the constraints upon, social action- the interplay of agency and structure- in a variety of educational institutions” (1996: 3) and b) “to portray and interpret the way people actively confront the ideological and material conditions presented by schooling” (1996:14). The cultural production model with its emphasis on social interaction, on the

continuous process of meaning making and on the importance of context is particularly effective at showing the connection between individual belief, actions and experiences and larger social structures such as schools, gender norms and nation-making projects.

As Levinson and Holland point out, the approach also highlights the dialectical nature of the process of cultural production, so that “while the educated person is culturally *produced* in definite sites, the educated person also culturally *produces* cultural forms” (emphasis in the original 1996:14). This does not however imply that people within a particular schooling system are able to change their circumstances at will if they deem them unfair, uncomfortable or ineffective. In fact in some cases the inability to see systemic discrimination as anything beyond a personal predicament, helps to maintain certain kinds of inequalities. These processes are visible at Sherubtse as students are both product and producers of cultural practices and beliefs around hierarchy, cooperation, learning, aspirations and appropriate gender behavior and roles. Looking at examples of some other accounts using the cultural production approach will highlight the implications of this dissertation’s findings.

In Holland and Eisenhart’s (1990) book about “the culture of romance” on American college campuses, they found a high-pressure, largely inescapable peer-based system that forced female college students into a gendered hierarchy that ranked them according to their sexual attractiveness to men. Despite their depiction of the “culture of romance” as largely inescapable, the authors are careful to point out that, “the cultural model of romance is first and foremost an

interpretative structure, a meaning system, *not a set of prescriptive rules*. Actual relationships are not dictated or determined by the model, but rather experience is anticipated, interpreted and evaluated in light of it” (emphasis added, 1990: 95). This is one of the ironies of the processes uncovered by the cultural production model. The lack of a mechanically, uniformly applied set of rules naturalizes individual actions and beliefs so that these acts and belief look like choices made by individuals rather than a product (and producer) of the “culture of romance.”

I would argue that this is the process by which students and faculty at Sherubtse come to see the unwillingness of female student to “come up” as an individual choice rather than the result of a structure of social practices and interactions that make “coming up” so difficult. This misrecognition serves to disguise their systemic nature and makes real system-wide changes difficult.

Douglas Foley (1990), in his study of schooling in a small south Texas town, found change is possible, particularly because of transformations in the social and cultural climate, but that in many ways schools continue to be extremely effective at reproducing class, ethnic and gender differences. Foley’s account pays particular attention to the place of sports (specifically football), classroom interactions, teenage social life (especially dating and the way social status was assigned) and communication styles to get at how “schools are sites for popular cultures practices that stage or reproduce social inequality. [He argues that]... school is a cultural institution where youth perform their future class roles in sport, youth groups and classroom rituals” (1990: xv). One of Foley’s most significant underlying points is that students, particularly the

socially/economically privileged ones, are “taught” their social positions and the deception and image management that protect these positions, within the context of school. However despite the effectiveness of the system Foley found that the 1960s Chicano civil rights movement had begun to challenge the “segregated racial order,” creating both racial tensions and a gradual but by no means complete erosion of racial privilege. Foley points out that despite this erosion, class and gender factors continue to slow the breakdown of racial barriers. So ultimately his argument is that gradual change is possible and on-going but that race, class and gender hierarchies are both persistent and slow to change.

To briefly reiterate then, the cultural production approach¹⁴⁴ offers an excellent analytical vantage point on schools and their influence on power relations, identity formation and ultimately individual action and experience. They show that schools are not neutral institutions but are in fact important sites that both produce and are produced through particular kinds of power relations that are often uneven and socially unjust.

There power relations and their implications are rarely clear cut or unambiguous. While female students at Sherubtse may “choose” to be quiet in their classes and to spend more of their time non-school hours in their hostels, while they may never offer to run for a student leadership post or to pursue a romance, all these choices have to be seen in the context of a social environment that could punish them for attempting anything differently. Female students are aware of the variety of consequences that they could face including gossip,

¹⁴⁴ For other examples of this kind of work see also Levinson 1996, Skinner and Holland 1996, Weis 1990, and Willis 1977.

teasing, withheld cooperation or being humiliated in public. However, each of these consequences relies on their peers and teachers to enact them, meaning that while these consequences are expected they are also haphazard, unpredictable and largely informal, concealing their systematic character.

Philips, looking at the way American college students talk about their sexual and romantic relationship, points to “ the variability and murkiness of the boundaries, or “edges” and “fine lines”- between seduction and domination, pleasure and danger, responsibility and exploitation, agency and objectification , consent and coercion” (2000: 3). She points to the dizzying array of often contradictory discourses and expectations that these women are constantly faced with so that ideas about pleasing a partner and being a “sexually empowered” woman sit beside the notion of who is a “true victim” of sexual violence or coercion. These competing ideas in the end shape complex, ambiguous and shifting understanding about power and sexuality within their relationships. Philips’ point is to lay bare the messiness that comes with these young women accounts of their choices and experiences without moralizing.

I would argue that the choices that female students at Sherubtse make must be set in a similarly muddy mix of competing ideas. It is the academic college environment which exposes students to some normative liberal values which challenges several conventional norms. For example the amendments to student leadership selection process came out of what students were learning in political science about different forms of democratic government. The new spirit of democracy that is most obviously being expressed in the emboldened media is

also another source of these potentially liberal values. Yet at the same time the constant reinforcement of conservative values like hierarchy and cooperation continue to convey important traditional ideals that many students continue to value.

Despite my initial interest in looking at schools as sites for potential social change, this dissertation is most effective at showing the ways in which schooling is a conservative force, one in which traditional cultural values might be somewhat reconfigured but are still largely recognizable. Hierarchy and a sense of group over individual identity (summed up in the word “cooperation”) are still used to shape the social experience of schooling in big and small ways. Classroom interactions, continue to be structured around traditional assumptions about knowledge transmission and appropriate teacher- student relationships. Aspiration might shift in content and direction but the family connections and obligations that propel financial decisions still hold fast. And there might be many more female students at tertiary level institutes like Sherubtse, but they are still often made to feel unwelcome.

In last generation, schools may have created an educated class of civil servants who seem like they are largely able to pass on the benefits of their new position to their children. However, rural youth who are able to complete even some school have hopes beyond their rural homes; their expectations have been raised by their education. Many of them looking for the kinds of jobs that match these expectations drift to urban centers where they join the growing urban underclass. These growing class differences already have a huge effect on

educational experiences and are likely to continue to fuel real social change.

Looking at the growing private school industry which prolongs educational hopes a little longer, the growing population of educated youth seeking jobs and the shrinking market for civil services jobs, the biggest changes seem to be ahead.

Who will get the jobs? How long can anyone really wait for a job?

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APPENDIX A
FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

Intros:

Start by introducing ourselves (name, degree program, year)

Participants introduce themselves: Name, course, semester, where you finished class twelve, where you consider yourself from. Ideally what you would like to do in the future, what you think you will be doing.

Part one: Video elicitation.

Instructions for video elicitation:

Don't focus on subject content of video. As you watch ask yourself:

1. How similar is this to your experience as a student?
2. Was there anything unusual that you saw here? Anything surprising?
3. Is this typical of college? High school?

Not an instruction but prompts to get them started. What about : teacher/ student interactions, reprimands, attitude to attendance, student interaction, lecture style, kind of example they are using , use of teaching materials?

Part two: definitions

I have a couple of terms that I hear you use often and I what you to help me understand what you mean by them? Which gender are they associated with?

1. Decent
2. Sincere
3. No scoop
4. Cooperation.

Part three: question about gender

Do you think girls and boys have different experience and opportunities at Sherubtse?

Are there things that girls can do that boys can't? Are there things that girls are better at? Boys? That they prefer to do? (Again prompts if they seem to be having trouble answering: subjects, sports , leadership, deviance- cheating on exams, dancing, romance, cooking , religion)

Was it the same in high school?

Are they any other kinds of differences? For example the way they are treated?

The way they perform? The kinds of things they are interested in/ concerned with?

What about outside of school: In the family? In society? In the workplace/job market

APPENDIX B

SUMMARY OF ALL INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Focus Group participants

Focus group	Name	Gender	Program
1	Anju Rai	Female	1 st year arts
1	Sangay Choden	Female	1 st year physical sciences
1	Bhim Giri	Female	1 st year arts
1	Tshering Dolkar	Female	1 st year arts
1	Kesang Jamtsho	Male	2 nd year arts
1	Tenzin Dhendup	Male	1 st year arts
1	Tashi Dukpa	Male	1 st year arts
1	Dechen Choden	Female	2 nd year arts
2	Tshering Lhadon	Female	3 rd year arts
2	Chencho Wangmo	Female	1 st year arts
2	Tshering Choden	Female	2 nd year arts
2	Karma Chuki	Female	1 st year arts
3	Chimi Rinzen	Male	3 rd year physical science
3	Damcho Wangchuk	Male	2 nd year physical science
3	Tenzin Dawa	Male	1 st year arts
3	Kencho Wangdi	Male	1 st year arts
4	Om Nath	Male	2 nd year arts
4	Tshewang Dendup	Male	3 rd year physical sciences
4	Dechen Pelmo	Female	3 rd year arts
4	Deki Om	Female	1 st year physical sciences
5	Susma Gurung	Female	2 nd year life sciences
5	Pema Lhamo	Female	2 nd year life sciences
5	Tashi Tshomo	Female	1 st year arts
5	Gaki Wangmo	Female	1 st year arts
6	Sonam Wagdi	Male	3 rd year arts
6	Jamyang Tshetrim	Male	1 st year arts
6	Karma Tenzin	Male	2 nd year physical sciences
6	Kelzang Dorji	Male	2 nd year physical sciences

Interviews with students:

Name	Gender	Program
Tshering Lhadon	Female	3 rd year arts
Karma Chuki	Female	1 st year arts
Kesang Wangmo	Female	3 rd year physical sciences
Karma Yangzom	Female	3 rd year arts
Sonam Wangchuck	Male	1 st year arts
Kamal Rizal	Male	1 st year arts
Kinga Loday	Male	1 st year arts
Kinley Choden	Female	2 nd year arts
Kunzang Dolma	Female	3 rd year physical sciences
Lham Dorji	Male	1 st year arts
Lhobzang Choden	Female	1 st year arts
Namgay Bhida	Female	1 st year arts
Yonten Samdup	Male	1 st year life science
Pankaj Sharma	Male	3 rd year life science
Phub Dorji	Male	1 st year arts
Rinzin Lhamo	Female	3 rd year arts
Sonam Peldon	Female	1 st year life sciences
Dorji Dendup	Male	3 rd year arts
Sonam Lhaki	Female	1 st year arts
Deepti Dewan	Female	2 nd year arts
Tashi Tenzin	Male	2nd year arts
Phuntsho Wangmo	Female	1st year arts
Tandin Om	Female	3rd year arts

Interviews with faculty/ staff

Position	Nationality	Gender
Assistant Lecturer	Bhutanese	Male
Assistant Lecturer	Bhutanese	Male
Senior lecturer	Non- Bhutanese	Male
Senior lecture	Non-Bhutanese	Male
Senior Administrator	Bhutanese	Female
Provost/ Lecture	Bhutanese	Female
Provost/ Lecture	Bhutanese	Female
Provost/ Assistant Lecturer	Bhutanese	Female
Provost/ Senior Lecturer	Non- Bhutanese	Male
Provost/ Lecturer	Non- Bhutanese	Male
Provost / Lecturer	Bhutanese	Male
Sports Director	Bhutanese	Male

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE END OF SEMESTER EXAM QUESTIONS

Public Health and Environment

1.
 - a) Discuss the concepts of family planning with special reference to history, significance, features, considerations and geography.
 - b) Which are the two most common male methods of family planning? Explain them with their advantages and disadvantages.
2.
 - a) Define alcoholism
 - b) What are the long term effects of alcohol misuse and who you treat them?

Bhutan Economy

1. What are the rate, pattern and structure of economic growth and national income since 1980? What brought about structural changes and changes in sectoral contribution in the national income?
2. Analyze the change in size and structure of Bhutan's population since 1961? What are the causes of the population growth in Bhutan? What steps government has taken to deal with the present growth of the population?

Statistical Technique in Social Science

1. Write short notes on any two of the following:
 - a. Use of statistic in our daily life
 - b. Spatial and non-spatial data
 - c. Types of tables
2. What is primary data? Discuss different methods of primary data collection.

Natural Resource Management

1. What are the four main components of soil and what is the relative proportion of each component? Explain how soil is formed through chemical processes.
2. Briefly explain the following:
 - a. Biodiversity is richer in tropical areas
 - b. Introduced species are more successful than native species
 - c. Prescribed burning of forests is sometimes necessary
 - d. Certain plants and animal activities can help in soil formation
 - e. Protecting ecosystems is better than protecting genetic diversity or species diversity.

Waste and Waste Management

1. What is activated sludge? Explain the process of activated sludge system with the help of a proper diagram
2. Explain the waste degradation process occurring in the landfill ecosystem, clearly listing the microbes involved and the products formed.

Geography of Bhutan

1. “Regional distribution of population in Bhutan is highly uneven” Provide adequate data to support this statement.
2. The wide variation in topography and climatic factors is distinctly reflected in the character of natural vegetation in Bhutan. Discuss in detail.

Post Colonial Literature

Critically comment on any five of the following in about 500 words

1. Stereotyping Orient against Occident
2. The atmosphere in two novels are based and built around the house
3. The closing lines of a poem of Walcott's:
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?
4. Very often Naipaul is his own main character. Relate this statement to a character in *A House from Mrs Biswas*
5. Igbo men managed to acquire prestigious titles, enabling them to be acknowledge as great men or chiefs.
6. Desai's use of symbols in *Clear Light of Day*
7. Hope's Australia is his expressions on the philosophical views of the world
8. Significance of the title *The Lion and the Jewel*

APPENDIX D

LIST OF MATERIAL FOR RSCS EXAMINATION (MODIFIED TO INCLUDE
EXPLANATORY FOOTNOTES)

Paper 1 – Dzongkha

Structure: Composition, Letter writing, Comprehension, précis writing, translation

1. Dzongkha Yikur Namzha- letter writing book
2. Dzongkha- English Dictionary
3. Newspaper in Dzongkha
4. Constitution (Dzongkha)
5. Essay book on Dzongkha (available in the market)

Paper 2 – English and GK¹⁴⁵

- a. Newspapers
- b. SAARC¹⁴⁶ (background and latest happenings, who is who)
- c. Competition success yearbook (Manorama) ¹⁴⁷
- d. BBC CNN News channels
- e. International forums
- f. BBS¹⁴⁸

Paper 3 -Bhutan and its political institutions and socio-economic development since 1961

a. Bhutan and its political institutions

1. Constitution
2. CBS¹⁴⁹ articles
3. Monarch and Monarchy system¹⁵⁰
4. Five Year Plans(9th FYP¹⁵¹, mid-term review, proposal for 10th FYP, background)
5. History of Bhutan (class 9 and 10 textbooks)
6. Raven Crown by Michael Aris
7. Bhutan History – Françoise Pommaret
8. Foreign polices
9. GNH articles
10. Newspaper
11. Spider and the Piglet (a CBS publication)

¹⁴⁵ General Knowledge, a very commonly used abbreviation in this part of the world.

¹⁴⁶ South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation which is made of eight nations including Bhutan.

¹⁴⁷¹⁴⁷ The Manorama yearbook is an annual Indian publication that compiles newsworthy events of the year including major award winners, demographic information and news about major political event that year. Its focus is primarily on India.

¹⁴⁸ Bhutan Broadcasting Service which started as a radio station and has since also been expanded to include television reporting. Interestingly the radio and television arms continue to be combined, sharing reporters and producers and often even stories.

¹⁴⁹ Center for Bhutan Studies a research institution which is focused on producing research and publications related to Bhutan. It also puts out a journal with academic articles on Bhutan, this maybe the articles referred to here.

¹⁵⁰ There are several categories like this one that I think refer not to publications but to bodies of information that the exam taker should know about.

¹⁵¹ The 9th Five year plan covered 2002- 2007, the 10th Five year plan covers 2008- 2013. Perhaps this is evidence that this list of reading material for the RCSC has been circulating since the time of the 9th year plan.

b. Socio-economic development since 1961

Sustainable development and Globalization¹⁵²
Private sector development
Gewog¹⁵³ based planning
Hydro Electric projects
Forest Reserves
Economic Indicators- Annual Reports of RMA¹⁵⁴ (like GDP, growth rate etc)

Other important material

Prime Ministers Annual Report
Round Table Meeting¹⁵⁵ (7th, 8th, 9th)
Bhutan 2020¹⁵⁶
The Middle Path¹⁵⁷
BCSR, 2006 and PCS Manual¹⁵⁸
Populations Housing Census Reports
MDG¹⁵⁹
Browse net for more Information

Best Wishes, Tshering Penjor
PGDPA¹⁶⁰ SIMTOKHA

¹⁵² This entire section seems to be a list of bodies of information rather than publications.

¹⁵³ A geographical administrative unit that is smaller than a dzongkhag or district.

¹⁵⁴ Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan a government entity which regulates banking and other financial institutions.

¹⁵⁵ Round table meetings are held each year between the Government of Bhutan and its development partners (sometimes referred to as donors) The 11th Round Table meetings will be held in 2011 so again it seems that this list may have been circulating for a while.

¹⁵⁶ Most likely a reference to “ Bhutan 2020: A Vision of Peace Prosperity and Happiness” which was a document put out by the Planning Commission in 1999 and was intended to imagine Bhutan in the year 2020

¹⁵⁷ This could refer to several documents or articles—it’s not clear which one exactly.

¹⁵⁸ Bhutan Civil Services Rules and Regulations and Position Classification System. The latter PCS was intended to rank civil servant on merit rather than seniority.

¹⁵⁹ Referring to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals

¹⁶⁰ Post Graduate Diploma in Public Administration, a course offered at the Royal Institute of Management for graduates who scored particularly well in the RCSC exams. In other words the writer of this list is someone who was highly successful in the exam.

APPENDIX E
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL DOCUMENT



Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

To: James Eder
ANTH

From: Mark Roosa, Chair
Soc Beh IRB

Date: 04/16/2009

Committee Action: Exemption Granted

IRB Action Date: 04/16/2009

IRB Protocol #: 0904003906

Study Title: School Girls and Modern Women: Gender and Education in Contemporary Bhutan

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) .

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

