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Review of *The History of Bhutan* by Karma Phuntsho

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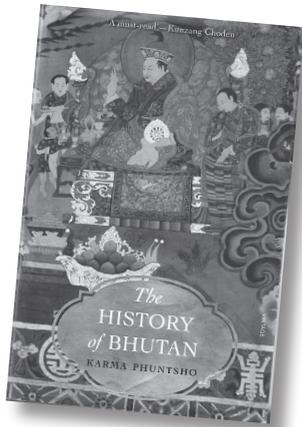
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The History of Bhutan.

Karma Phuntsho. Noida, India: Random House India, 2013. (Reprinted by University of Chicago Press, 2014). 661 pages. ISBN 9788184003116.

Reviewed by Michael Givel

In recent years, there have been a number of Bhutanese and other scholars and analysts who are associated with literary and scholarly analyses concerning Bhutan that is analogous to the realism movement in art and literature. Realism attempts to portray everyday life as accurately as possible by avoiding sentimentalized, synthetic, improbable, and supernatural themes. This is in contrast to portraying life in an idealized form such as often occurs in mythology or folklore. The idealized narrative in current years, particularly in some foreign media news stories and by tourist agencies, has described Bhutan as remote, breathtaking, environmentally

friendly, “shrouded in mystery and magic,” and representing a manifestation of the last Shangri-La (Lonely Planet. Introducing Bhutan. Accessed February 15, 2017, <<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/bhutan/introduction>>).

In Karma Phuntsho’s 2013 well-researched, definitive, and highly detailed book, *The History of Bhutan*, this idealized view of Bhutan is replaced with an in-depth historical analysis based in the realist perspective of how Bhutan has progressed before, during, and after its inception as a nation in 1651. In particular, the book provides an overview of how and why Bhutan advanced as a society over the centuries, analyzing periods of progress and advancement and/or deep-seated intrigue, conflict, and armed battles. The book begins by providing a detailed historical overview of Bhutanese geography and the history of various ethnic groups that live in modern Bhutan. These include the western and northern Ngalop, the eastern Shar chop, the southern Lhotshampa and various other ethnic peoples spread throughout Bhutan.

The book then provides an overview of the first major cultural period in pre-Bhutan prior to the seventh century, which was dominated by the Bon religion and worldview. Bon was and is an animistic worldview that posits that the natural world is vibrantly alive with good and evil deities. So from the Bon perspective, individual mountains, for instance,

are not only distinct geographic places but are alive.

Also covered in the book is the arrival from the seventh century to the present of the next major cultural period of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan or Mahayana Buddhism focuses on achieving enlightenment for all in the here and now. In the Mahayana tradition, the Buddha is viewed as a benevolent supernatural entity. The very gradual transition over the centuries to Mahayana Buddhism was never an easy linear path. As Phuntsho illustrates in great detail, there were periods of tension and cooperation between Bon and Mahayana worshipers. Eventually, Mahayana Buddhism became dominant. However, it never totally supplanted Bon traditions in Bhutan, some of which exist to this day.

The third cultural period in Bhutan commenced in the middle of the twentieth century with the rise of modernization and global capitalism in Bhutanese society. As the book describes, this third cultural period is now increasingly in conflict with the prior two traditional cultural periods of Bon and Buddhism. One of the key issues in modern Bhutan today is how traditional values can be maintained or balanced with the increasingly dominant, powerful, and secular forces of materialism, modernization, and private enterprise.

The second major theme covered in the book is the transition in governmental form from a Buddhist theocracy from 1651 to 1907, to a

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Michael Givel on *The History of Bhutan*

hereditary monarchy from 1907 to 2008, to a democratic constitutional monarchy from 2008 to the present. The book, in realist fashion, provides a robust description from 1651 to 1907 of past accomplishments and ongoing intrigue such as civil wars and assassinations of civilian heads of state. Eventually, in 1907 the governmental form became a hereditary monarchy. Since 1907 to the present, there have been five hereditary kings from the Wangchuck royal family. In 2001, the Fourth King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck commenced the process and transition to a democratic constitutional monarchy, which culminated with the adoption of the new Bhutanese Constitution in 2008. Currently, democratization in Bhutan progresses in tandem with the rise of modernization and market capitalism. This modern trend represents a considerable departure from the past when Bhutan was a Buddhist theocracy and later a hereditary monarchy and primarily agriculture society steeped in Buddhist culture and tradition. With this transition comes a myriad of modern problems and issues, such as the provision of quality health care, educational attainment, and poverty that are far removed from the idealized last Shangri-La description of modern Bhutan. As Phuntsho writes, "Today, even while young Bhutanese eye an opportunity to travel to the US and engage in manual jobs to earn quick bucks, the rest of the world is looking up to Bhutan as a happy country—a postmodern Shangri-La. It is indeed a very lofty position to

reach and perhaps even loftier to maintain in the changing fortunes of time" (p. 599).

Phuntsho's book is an excellent overview and account from a realist perspective of the long-term history and transition of Bhutan. It is required reading for scholars of Bhutanese history and culture, international area studies, Asian studies, Asian history, political science, international relations, religious studies, and comparative public policy to comprehend the complex factors shaping modern Bhutan. By not painting an idealized picture with well researched and numerous dense historical facts, this book reveals that a careful analysis of modern Bhutan shows that Bhutan, while being a beautiful place, also has faced significant issues over time.

Michael Givel is professor of political science at The University of Oklahoma. He was the first US Fulbright in Bhutan in 2009, and is the Director in Bhutan and curator for the University of Oklahoma of the Bhutanese digital rare and historical document collection. His research and teaching specialization includes comparative public policy, Himalayan area studies, policy theory, complexity theory, social movements, and health policy.