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The Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement Experience: A Workshop Report

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The Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement Experience: A Workshop Report

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Hutt for inviting me to take part in this conference and Dr. Sienna Craig for her mentorship during the fieldwork that my conference presentation drew from.

Gandantegchinlen Monastery led by Professor Vesna Wallace (University of California, Santa Barbara), who has long fostered relations with Mongolian scholars, in cooperation with the monk-leaders of Gandantegchinlen Monastery's library, Munkhbaatar and Dashka. Tibetologists were not only awed by the architecture of the many temples on site, but also by the priceless texts and objects held in the two impressive libraries. When panels were not in session, scholars also feasted their eyes on the magnificent works by the great 17th century sculptor of Buddhist statues, Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar at two locations: at a museum devoted to this great artist and also at the Chojin Lama Museum.

Another important example of scholarly cooperation between Mongolia and the international community of Tibetologists was the recent rediscovery of an important Tibetan-language historical document entitled "The 1913 Tibeto-Mongol Treaty of Friendship and Alliance." Many had thought this document to be fictitious, lost, or destroyed, but it was recently found in the National Archives of Mongolia. This important document, signed on 2 February 1913, proclaimed the independence of Mongolian and Tibetan States a hundred years ago (cf. Elliot Sperling in *Lungta* Issue 17, Dharamsala, Amnye Machen Institute, Spring 2013).

On the eve of the final day of the conference, Tsering Shakya (Canadian Research Chair in Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia, Institute for Asian Research at the University of British Columbia) was named president of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. Professor Shakya, the author of *Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947* (Penguin Compass, 2000) and numerous articles, had convened the 12th seminar in Vancouver in 2010.

The presidential term lasts six to eight years, so he will preside over the 14th and 15th IATS Seminars. The General Secretary of IATS is Professor Hildegard Diemberger (University of Cambridge, UK). The other members of the Advisory Board can be found on the IATS website <<http://www.iats.info/people/>>.

In all, the 13th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies established new relationships with Mongolian scholars, helped Tibetologists across the world reconnect and forge deeper ties, and saw the establishment of new initiatives in Tibetan Studies. All of these endeavors reflect the continued growth of Tibetology as well as its sub-disciplines, and make for an exciting future full of possibilities.

Nicole Willock
Indiana University, Bloomington

The Bhutanese Refugee Re-settlement Experience

**SOAS, University of London
22-23 May 2013**

Bhutanese refugees represent an ethnically and linguistically Nepali minority group that fled southern Bhutan in the early 1990s (Michael Hutt. 2003. *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press). Refugees traveled initially to Nepal, where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established a series of camps for their protection. In 2007, after nearly two decades of refugee camp life, host countries in North America and Europe as well as Australia agreed to accept Bhutanese refugees for resettlement. Today, most Bhutanese refugees have been

resettled, with the majority residing in the United States; around one third of the population remains in camps (2014 UNHCR Regional Operations Profile: South Asia. *Bhutan*. <<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48766.html>>).

The Bhutanese Refugee Re-settlement Experience, a workshop hosted by SOAS in May 2013, sought to gather scholars and practitioners working in this context of radical migratory transition. The event took place over the course of two days and featured presentations from a range of disciplines and perspectives. Co-facilitators included Dr. Tania Kaiser, an anthropologist focused on migration studies, and Dr. Michael Hutt, a recognized expert in Nepali languages and cultures and one of the few researchers to do direct fieldwork in Bhutan during the mass exodus of refugees from the country in the early 1990s (Michael Hutt. 2013. Editorial. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 43). Thanks to the generous support of the organizing committee, conference participants represented resettlement communities in North America, Europe, and Australia as well as the region in which the refugee camps are located in Nepal.

Presentation topics were diverse and covered a range of issues related to the impact of resettlement. At the most general level, a number of researchers focused on shifts in collective identities in the context of Bhutanese refugee migration. Roz Evans, for example, considered the hopes of young Bhutanese refugees for post-resettlement life as well as the realities they met with. Sreeja Balarajan reflected on the transition to the composite identity of Nepali-Bhutanese-American. My own presentation drew on data from both the camps and a resettled community (in Burlington, VT) in exploring

the cultural meaning and common practices contributing to 'resilience' in context of Bhutanese refugee migration. And finally Heather Hindman focused on perceptions of 'Nepali-ness' among service providers working with Bhutanese refugees.

Another subset of presentations considered service provision by host societies through a critical lens. Nicole Hoellerer focused on the resettled community of Greater Manchester, UK. Her analysis of the UK's Front End Loading approach revealed the challenges many Bhutanese refugees face after early government support times out. Likewise, Eleanor Ott considered the notion of self-sufficiency and the role of employment services in the resettlement city of Pittsburgh, PA. Danielle Grigsby, on the other hand, outlined an approach that has shown promise in assisting the adaptation of Bhutanese refugees in the US: anti-oppressive resettlement services.

Yet other presenters considered the impact of resettlement on Bhutanese refugee society (or increasingly, societies). Ilse Griek reported on shifting practices of under-aged marriage in the refugee camps of Eastern Nepal. According to her findings, young Bhutanese refugees are marrying earlier in order to avoid the separation from their sweethearts that resettlement would otherwise entail. Suzanne Banki, writing from Australia, considered the impact of resettlement on refugee activism targeting the Bhutanese Kingdom. Joe Stadler discussed the civic engagement of Bhutanese refugees in the rust belt of the United States. Finally, Gopal Guragain described how resettlement has affected relationships between refugees and local communities in Nepal.

One of the most important aspects of the workshop, in my mind, was the inclusion of Bhutanese refugee perspectives. On the first day of the workshop, a group of resettled Bhutanese refugees reflected on their own migration trajectories in the UK. Their accounts covered expectations and triumphs as well as struggles and disappointments. These representatives were a strong presence throughout the conference, including formal sessions and informal gatherings. Their voices drew our attention to the priorities of Bhutanese refugees communities and offered interesting interpretations and reframings of our research projects. For example, after my presentation on ethnopsychology, one of the refugee attendees commented that research on Bhutanese refugee mental health has largely failed to recognize the political origins of psychiatric morbidity. From his vantage, efforts to foster 'resilience' could only go so far and direct advocacy, including lobbying of the Bhutanese government for repatriation, was the surest path to the alleviation of suffering.

On the whole, the workshop was fruitful, creating a venue for exchange among diverse stakeholders in an emerging field of research. Moreover, the subsequent publication of a themed volume of the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* compiling papers by the conference participants (Volume 43) helped to consolidate what was learned and broadcast it to others who were not able to attend. I have no doubt that scholarship on Bhutanese refugees will continue to be enriched by this platform for interdisciplinary dialogue in the years to come.

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This event has been archived online at <<http://www.soas.ac.uk/ssai/events/bhutanese-refugee-re-settlement-workshop/22may2013-the-bhutanese-refugee-re-settlement-experience.html>>.