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A Tale of Two Countries

BY SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

While the mountaineers, tourists and various developers are destroying Nepalese nature, Bhutan is determined to maintain its ecology and Buddhism. Sigmund Kvaløy told his story to Satish Kumar.

I have been going to Nepal, and now to Bhutan, for the last twenty-three years: sixteen times to Nepal, and four times to Bhutan.

My initial attraction was to experience that fantastic and sacred mountain of the Sherpas, Tseringma, which means the Mother of Long Life. A Mother Earth spirit is thought to have the mountain as her abode.

In 1969 I sat for three days on a little mountain, just looking at this great peak. Tseringma was then unclimbed. Local people thought it would be the gravest possible sacrilege if anyone were to climb her. In their

tradition, Tseringma would protect the community as long as it kept strictly to the norms of non-violence towards fellow human beings as well as towards nature. But to Western mountaineers such talk was incomprehensible. To them, she was “the last problem of the Himalayas,” spurring them to race each other to be her first conqueror, and Nepalese officials were more interested in Western money than the traditional culture. Discovering this, I tried to be mediator between the local community and the Government of Nepal, to stop the climbing expeditions. There were forty expeditions which had applied to climb her. Twice we went to Kathmandu with long lists of fingerprints and petitions on the local people’s behalf asking the government to stop the climbers.

I finally had to give in, because the Nepalese government was only interested in earning a lot of money;

they were not interested in the poor mountain peasants and their religious feelings. They earn a lot more money from climbing expeditions than from tourism. That's what their interest was. So finally an American expedition climbed it from the north, from Tibetan territory occupied by the Chinese. If Tibet had still had its independence, the American conquerors would have been stopped from that side. The next expedition was a British one, again from the north. Thereafter a platoon of seven Australian Commando soldiers, and finally a Japanese group. The latter two climbed from the Nepalese side.

Like Tseringma, the valley by the mountain is sacred and a haven of non-violence, what the Tibetans and Sherpas call *be-yül* (spas-yül). It is fascinating to know how settlements started in this sacred valley. Padmasambhava, a great Buddhist teacher, on his way to Tibet, 1,200 years ago, came around a cliff and saw this awesome mountain. With deep reverence he prostrated himself to the mountain goddess. Then he rose up and pleaded with her to give protection to the human beings who follow the teaching of the Buddha.

But Tseringma's response was "I don't want to see any human beings in my vicinity—they start conflicts and they ruin nature—I don't want to see them here." Padmasambhava said "Yes, but some of them are trying to get out of that, and follow the teachings of the Buddha. They need a place where they can stay and be devoted to non-violence, and where they can live in peace and harmony with nature, and you can protect them." This didn't help much, since the goddess was no Buddhist.

Then Padmasambhava stayed there for a month or more in deep meditation inside a cave, directing all

his spiritual power towards converting Tseringma to Buddhism. In the end, he won her over, and a strange thing happened. Suddenly Padmasambhava saw an enormous yak with a plough; Padmasambhava grew himself, grabbing hold of the handles, and ploughed through the mountainside, and the rocks cracked and scattered as he went, and behind him little trees, grass and flowers grew. This is how the valley was created, and why it was named The Plough Furrow. (I avoid the Tibetan name, to keep the tourist industry away.)

The Tseringma mountain form actually consists of five peaks. The central one is Tseringma herself and then you have two bigger sisters and two smaller ones. This group is called Tsering Chenga, which means The Five Sisters of Long Life. It's like a mandala, where the power center is Tseringma herself. The Five Sisters are female Buddhas.

One month after the Americans climbed the mountain, there was a gigantic landslide down into the Plough Furrow Valley, damming the river, and when the dam broke there was a flood wave that took away a watermill, killed one woman who was inside and then destroyed the potato fields lower down, causing the river to change its course. The people of the valley were convinced that this was a sign that the contract with Tseringma was broken and that the mountain goddess was expressing her anger.

MY MAIN INTEREST was the Tibetan culture and this valley was as close as I could get. More than half the people in the Plough Furrow Valley are Tibetans, and, of course, the Sherpas also have Tibetan origin. It was a completely traditional Tibetan society. I had

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been dreaming about it my whole life; since my mother used to tell me stories from Tibet. Tibet was the most exotic place she could think of.

The people of the valley thought that I was a doctor because I had brought a big medicine chest and, already, the day after my arrival, they came carrying a woman, who two months earlier had stumbled, put her foot into a fireplace, and burnt her foot very badly. You should have seen that foot! And the smell! Half-rotting and swollen and black with gangrene. I asked myself what I could do. I was leafing through my book. The first night I couldn't do anything; my stomach was shivering, it was so terrible. I had to do something; she had high fever; she was dying from this infection. So the next day I started doing something; I started to wash her. The smell was so bad even people standing outside the house were holding their noses! I began feeding her antibiotics every day, so I stopped

the fever. Then I started cutting dead flesh away and going on and on. Instead of climbing, I stayed in the village to continue treatment. One day she was crying, and I asked my interpreter why—whether I was hurting her—and he answered that it didn't hurt, but that she was crying because someone was again taking care of her. This was a very moving experience for me, and I think it changed my interest in people.

As I was about to leave, at the end of three months, a delegation from the village came and asked me to try to establish a health service in the area. Taking this seriously, I returned two years later with a physician, a medical nurse (my wife, Kirsten), a zoologist, a botanist, and my three children (experts on children's affairs). At the end of the four-month stay, I got an invitation from an elderly man who was a village head man and priest, and he asked me if I would become his *rTowu*. We have to use the Tibetan term because this is a name for an insti-



ILLUSTRATION: SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

tution we don't have in Europe. This happens through a very complex ritual. It lasts a whole night, and I became his rTowu, and he became my rTowu.

rTowu means that we are united, that we have common property and shared responsibilities. His children are mine and my children are his; we treat it very seriously, like blood relations. His wife is like my sister, so I call her rTomo, and so all my new children call me AprTowu. Ap means a father. And I call the boys Purzjung—son, and the daughters Pomo—and their children I call Nati—grandchild. The Natis call me Gaga—which is grandfather. Then my two daughters Kirsti and Frøydis, were invited by two other families belonging to two other clans to become sisters. Later on my son has become a clan member in the same way.

There are some symbolic things that you do to form this relationship; for instance, you have a tray with some objects and you give that to the other person and the other person gives it back to you; it symbolizes

that after that day we would have all our possessions in common. And they really mean this. For instance, if I come to the village of my rTowu, and if I should ask if there was a guesthouse there, the community would express great surprise and would remind me that I had my own house, because one of my relatives had a house; therefore I should just go to that house. And it works both ways. I noticed that when my Sherpa relatives came to my farm they treated it just as if it were their house, so it was very easy to have them as guests. This became a bridge into this community and into the Tibetan culture.

We wanted to study the needs of the people, and on that basis to establish a health-care center and a school for health workers at the old Buddhist monastery so that it would not be a Western thing. We wanted to integrate their old traditional medicine. I and my wife and some architects etc. worked with this for many years.

After countless meetings over the years with gov-

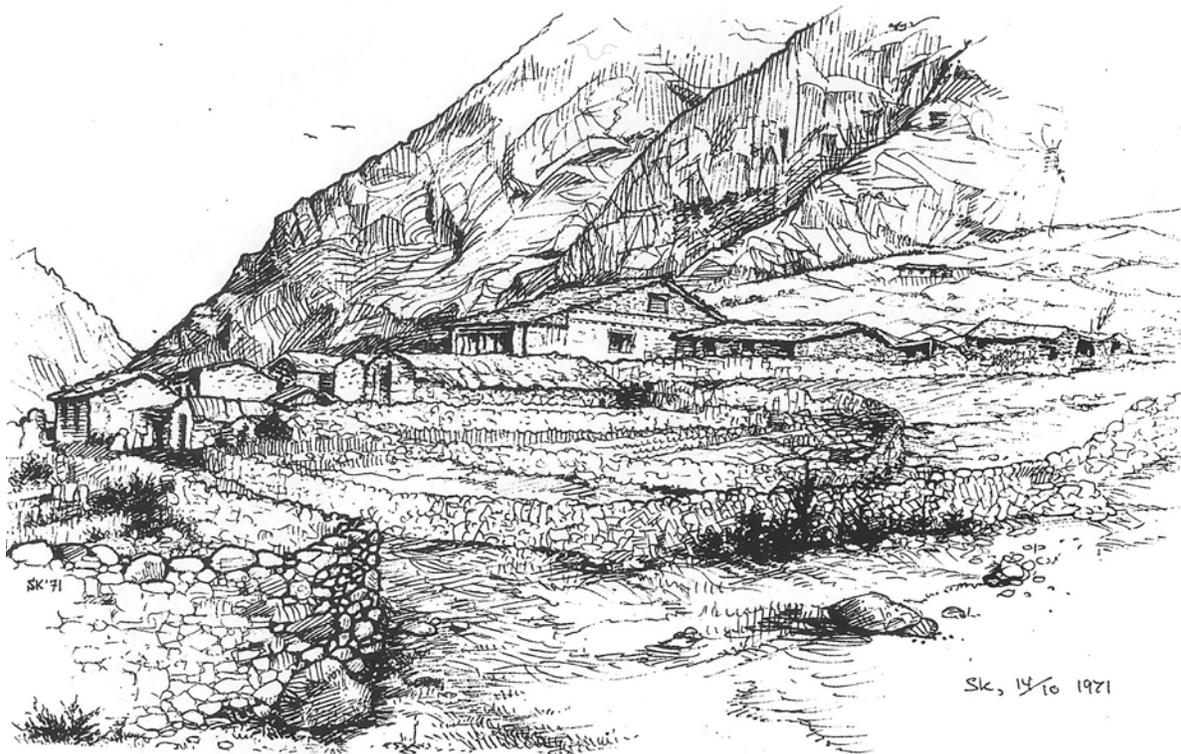


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ernment officials, I finally had to abandon my project. They would give me permission only if I could guarantee the inflow of a lot of money from Norway—money to be controlled by themselves. And Norwegian funding institutions would give no guarantee before getting permission from Nepal.

The first time my children came, my son was five-and-a-half and my twin daughters were ten. If you want to get to know another culture, bring your small children because they just go right into the families and start to communicate. They are easily accepted. They were welcome in any house, and my little son went with the Sherpa boys up into the hills to bring back the calves, shrubs for potato store, carry down things, and did everything they did. Gradually, a strong bond of belonging was established with the community.

IT'S A SOCIETY where handicrafts, riding, decorative and peasant art, song and dance, have a very high artistic standard. Its members are extremely community-minded. They use any and all occasions to get together and have celebrations throughout the year. They take plenty of time for this and they enjoy a lot. And this despite having such a meagre resource base and an economy requiring hard labor. They live by rules that protect nature. If a crisis happens, like a snow avalanche or monsoon, flood or fire, immediately, without the necessity of calling a meeting, people will gather under leadership different from that functioning at normal times. Those new leaders will be those having the best qualifications to handle the situation at hand. There is also little difference in importance between men and women. Many of the farms or individual fields are owned by women.

Unfortunately, there is a danger that the same thing will happen in the Plough Furrow as happened in Khumbu, which is the area south of Everest, where the local people have more or less been colonized by the tourist industry and by the mountaineers. So far, in the Plough Furrow, the intention is to resist this. We should not, by the way, say "Mount Everest." The

name of the mountain, given by local people hundreds of years ago, is Jomolungma, The Holy Wind Mother.

Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing together climbed Jomolungma. I met both of them. I quarreled with Hillary because at one point he was leading a group of climbers who wanted to climb Tseringma. He did not believe that the local people were against such expeditions. He's not as close to that culture as he is given credit for. After he had climbed and succeeded, he was so grateful to the Sherpas because without them he couldn't have done it. He wanted to do something and he thought very quickly and decided that what these people needed were schools. After the schools had been built, as elsewhere in Nepal, governmental authorities took over. They wanted to use the schools to homogenize the country's diverse ethnic communities. So they're using the Hillary schools to teach the Sherpa children Hindu ways and Nepali, and English and Mathematics as well, so that they can serve the tourists and bring tourist currency to the country.

In these schools they teach nothing about the Sherpa-Tibetan culture—and nothing about their own, 1,200-year-old written language, which is classical Tibetan, of course. Most of the Sherpa children growing up in Kathmandu, which has a large Sherpa community, do not learn a word of Sherpa. If you get off the airplane at Lukla, which is a tiny little airstrip in the mountainside at the lower end of Khumbu, you are met by a whole group of youngsters who speak "Hillary School English" to serve you. Over the years they have been completely incorporated into the tourist economy. Most of the younger inhabitants of this area don't know how to run their farm any more. During the sixties and seventies some Everest expeditions were extremely large (the Americans used 1,200 porters); during the worst ten years they managed to burn up 60% of the forests in the central Khumbu valley with their camp fires. Erosion has followed. Agricultural economics has been destroyed in the Khumbu valley and people there have become dependent on tourism. But tourism is a very unstable way of earning a living.

Every time there is an economic recession in the West, the first thing that happens is tourists don't go. They save money and stay at home; they go rowing on the Thames for a year or two instead. But it is a disastrous situation for these high-altitude-dwellers who depend on tourism.

Nothing like that has happened in the Plough Furrow Valley, but I know that the Plough Furrow youngsters are now more sought after by the climbers "because they are not spoiled yet," meaning that they don't ask for money for any little thing, or for helping someone in distress. The climbers go from one area to another spoiling the people, and then looking for fresh human material which is not spoiled, like the Plough Furrow Sherpas.

BUT BHUTAN IS a totally different story. They are managing to control tourism and to conserve their culture. They have very strict controls at the borders, and they mention Nepal as the big negative example. Every time I talk to them they remind themselves of the need to learn from Nepal and the danger of letting tourists, Western planners and Western technology have free access; they want to be very careful. But in the early sixties Bhutan became a member of the UN, to mark themselves internationally as an independent nation—and then it follows almost automatically that they are also members of different development and economic institutions that function in the UN system, like the World Health Organization and agricultural organizations. Thimpu, which is the capital of Bhutan, has grown in twelve years from 10,000 to 20,000; this is the only town, you might say, in the whole of Bhutan.

The very important thing is that they want to keep their identity as Bhutanese. That's why they are very restrictive with tourism. At the same time they want to earn some foreign currency, so their upper limit for numbers of tourists per year is 5,000. I never heard that they reached that, because they are so restrictive. Last year it was 3,000 only, and only a quarter of those were let into the center of the country, and not beyond

that, and they must come in groups. They have to pay \$250 per day no matter what they do. This way tourism is kept under control. They are developing with discretion; they are going neither too far, nor too fast. They are looking for a development model that is not Western, but Buddhist and Bhutanese.

Bhutan's planners are interested in the combination of ecology, Buddhism and Bhutanese tradition. They know that they cannot stay exactly the same—that's not possible; but they are trying to put as much of their own tradition as possible into the schools. They are building schools all over the country where they teach in an old Bhutanese language, Dzongka. And, of course, they spend a lot of money for the upkeep of the monasteries built in a very special and spectacular Bhutanese style of architecture. The most impressive ones are called Dzongs, fortress monasteries. In each of the main valleys leading down from the Himalayas into the country, you have at least one large Dzong. The largest ones have lengths of the complex of buildings up to 200-300 meters, built on spurs overlooking the valleys. Traditional Bhutanese builders shy away from mathematical symmetry—they were built without architects or drawings, by teams of people guided by a master builder, discussing the elements as they grew. Even the largest Dzongs are like organic outcrops in the landscape—a natural organic form; the various parts are set at different angles, and they are as if molded into each other. We might speak of the building that has impressed me the most—the Ta Dzong in Paro. It has a snail-house-like form—no windows are in a straight line. Arriving there once from the horrible cement slabs of "developing" Kathmandu, I walked over and touched the building and wept, because this is still a living, organic tradition; it has spent thousands of years in gradual, careful adjustments to reach this fulfilled identity. And the function is here beautiful, and its beauty is functional.

Almost all Bhutanese are farmers, cattle-herders and craftspeople. Farmers are also craftsmen; they are blacksmiths, they are wood-carvers, weavers and build-

ers; they are not what we think of in the modern world as just farmers. They are everything, and the farming is very varied too. In the lower parts of Bhutan they grow rice in terraces; higher up they grow wheat and maize, barley and potatoes and vegetables in great variety; and then they have cattle. In the higher areas they have yak. They have all that but most of them don't hunt; they are Buddhists, so they have an aversion to killing.

Bhutan is an "enlightened" monarchy. The king is quite a young person. He is very keen on ecological, cultural and traditional Bhutanese values, and is at the same time moving towards democracy. Unlike Nepal, he wants Bhutan to be free of commercialism, tourism and industrialization in any form that undermines the nation's identity, whilst striving to be an active member of the international community. Sixty-three per cent of the country is covered by forest, and a large part of that is untouched by human hands. It rises from 200 or 300 meters down on the Bramaputra plain, up into 7,000-metre mountains. You have everything there—from wild elephants, rhinoceros and tigers, and then, going up, bears and snow leopards. Bhutan is one of the last really green pockets of diverse, lush nature in the world; one of the few nationwide areas, maybe the only one, where there is a concerted effort to preserve an identity which is non-Western. So it's really very important to give them strong support, but not in the

form of tourism and mechanistic development. We should take care, and be critical of what kind of Western experts are sent there.

On my last journey I went to the far eastern part of the country. I went quite far north and south too, and I stayed for eleven days in one village—high up—and met a people that behave and think very much like the traditional Sherpas of Nepal of my first visits twenty years ago, before tourism started. To top it all, I discovered that even the goddess Tseringma is worshipped all over eastern Bhutan. She is either called Tseringma directly, or by another name, connected to a local mountain, like Sa'n Lhamo: "Earth's Sacred Mother"; and in several temples, the five Sisters of Long Life are represented as beautiful sculptures. In Bhutan, Tseringma lives!

I guess the first time I went to Nepal I also went as a tourist; but later not. A tourist goes for entertainment, for passing pleasures, makes demands for facilities, for hotels, whereas a true traveler goes to learn, to identify, to take part. Modern Western tourists tend to destroy traditional cultures. At present, the way things have happened and synthesized in my own life, a central concern of mine is support for Bhutan in its effort to stay unaffected by tourism and to keep its own identity. This might be why I am welcome there. I am thankful that the Bhutanese don't regard me as a tourist or "developer," and grateful that they let me come to learn.