

MARI MIYAMOTO
Keio University

JAN MAGNUSSON
Lund University

FRANK J. KOROM
Boston University



Animal Slaughter and Religious Nationalism in Bhutan

This article explores the shifting role of slaughter and meat consumption in Bhutan as a result of the recent religionization of Bhutanese politics and as a case of religious nationalism. It argues that there is a tension between customary meat consumption and traditional blood sacrifice and the Buddhist nonviolent ritual practice of *tsethar* that is propagated as a central part of modern Bhutanese nationalism and good citizenship. This tension has created a situation where animal welfare and vegetarianism are dominant in the public discourse while slaughter and meat consumption still continue—but as concealed and obscure practices. The article presents data from ethnographic fieldwork and other sources to demonstrate how this process has played out in practice.

Keywords: nonviolence—*tsethar*—Buddhism—Bhutan—religious nationalism—slaughter

Although regional variations are found abundantly in the religious life of modern South Asia, Buddhism is widely regarded as a religion of minorities. While the conversion of some Dalit Hindus to Buddhism is known in India, the revival of Buddhism can also be seen in more conventional Buddhist nations and regions such as Bhutan and Sri Lanka. For instance, in post-civil war Sri Lanka many small shrines containing Buddha statues have been built on roadsides, both by communities and individuals (Suzuki 2014; 2017). The growth of such roadside shrines is very conspicuous, with some taking on gargantuan proportions.¹

Beside just the India-exiled, world famous Dalai Lama, and as a result of the global Tibetan diaspora in general, many eminent lamas within Vajrayana Buddhism have acquired a significant number of followers beyond Tibet and the South Asian realm (Korom 1997; 2018). In places held sacred by all Buddhists, such as Bodh Gaya in India and Lumbini in Nepal, devotees from places as far afield as Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Myanmar have built pagodas and temples in their own national styles, one after another, in an attempt to revivify a global form of Buddhism.² Such places are once again attracting the attention of world Buddhists as sacred destinations for the performance of pilgrimages and tourism within the Buddhist global ecumene (Geary 2014; Kinnard 1998).

The revival also takes a political turn with Buddhist institutions and leaders taking an active role in the state's political affairs. In some postcolonial nation states Buddhist doctrine has also come to serve as a source of political ideology and nation-making narratives (Weiberg-Salzman 2014).

The revival of Buddhism seems to have become especially prominent in Bhutan. As a global reinvigoration (Dreyfus 2011), or what Anthony Wallace (1956) long ago identified as “revitalization,” of Buddhism is taking place, Bhutan has recently entered into a process of “religionizing” politics, in which distinct Buddhist practices have been introduced and popularized as a core framework for nation-making and good citizenship. The particular practice at the heart of our investigation is *tsethar* (*tshé thar*), a Buddhist ritual practice that is popular in East Asia but associated with the older concept of *ahimsā* (Korom 2000) that can be traced all the way back to the Ashokan edicts in the third century BCE, which emphasize nonviolence and even animal welfare (Nikam and McKaon 1959) as central features of Buddhism.³

Anti-slaughter regulation and the expansion of *tsethar* practice

In the year 2000, Kunzang Dorjee, a thirty-two-year-old Buddhist lama, performed a so-called *tsethar* at his monastery named Jangsa Gompa in Kalimpong, an Indian town in West Bengal. *Tsethar* is the Buddhist practice of saving the lives of animals destined for slaughter. This particular *tsethar* took place after five bulls on their way to be slaughtered managed to escape, forcing their way into the compound of his monastery, where they caught Kunzang Dorjee's attention (Rai 2002). Feeling compassion for the bulls, he bought them for the price of INR 45,000 (USD 720), built a shed, and hired a caretaker to look after them (Anonymous 2013). The story of this particular *tsethar* now circulates freely in oral tradition and on the internet to provide a morally edifying example of compassion (*karuṇā/snying rje*) for all sentient beings, which is a central tenet of Mahayana Buddhism, the broader category to which Bhutanese Buddhism belongs.⁴ Many observers perceive it to be the beginning of a movement that would radically change the Bhutanese slaughtering business, and it has even spilled over into neighboring Tibet as part of the "development" discourse there (Kabzung 2016).

Just a year later Kunzang Dorjee partnered with Bhutan's highest religious official, His Holiness the Je Khenpo Tulku Jigme Chodrak, to buy cattle headed to a slaughterhouse and released them to roam freely in the surrounding open fields. Around the same time, Je Khenpo began to tour the rural areas of Bhutan, teaching *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence) and the sinfulness of animal slaughter. He even declared an edict (*kasho*) intended to stop the practice of animal blood sacrifice in nature worship, Bön-related rituals, and other shamanic practices.⁵

Because of their meat consumption and ritual practices, Je Khenpo's mission created a dilemma for the rural peasantry, and they feared that they would be punished by local deities and spirits who might become wrathful when denied their blood sacrifices. To alleviate their fear, Je Khenpo actually addressed the deities and spirits directly, ordering them not to harm people or livestock when the practice ceased. At the time, many people believed that Je Khenpo had the power to subdue the wrathful elements of nature, which consequently led to a gradual decline in animal sacrifice throughout most of Bhutan, and food habits gradually started to become more vegetarian. As the *tsethar* activities of monks became widely known throughout the country, the release of cattle in order to avert the sin of taking life became popular even among the livestock farmers and pastoralists themselves, who would normally eat meat to survive. Some of them even donated pastures to Je Khenpo, where the released livestock could roam freely (Anonymous 2002a).

In response to the events associated with rescuing, purchasing, and releasing cattle, Lama Kunzang Dorjee proceeded to establish the Jangsa Animal Saving Trust (JAST) to collect donations for his *tsethar* practice (Anonymous 2013; Gyeltshen 2002). JAST constructed a large Buddha statue on a site previously used for butchering located in Shimtokha, which was consecrated by Je Khenpo in 2002 (see figures 1 and 2).

It was a symbolic gesture of good overcoming evil, dispelling the negative karma of many generations of slaughterers. JAST now performs regular ritual offerings at the site to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings in general and of the animals released in particular. It was estimated that by the end of 2002 Kunzang Dorjee and



Figure 1. The Buddha statue built at the site of a former slaughtering ground. All photos by and courtesy of Mari Miyamoto.

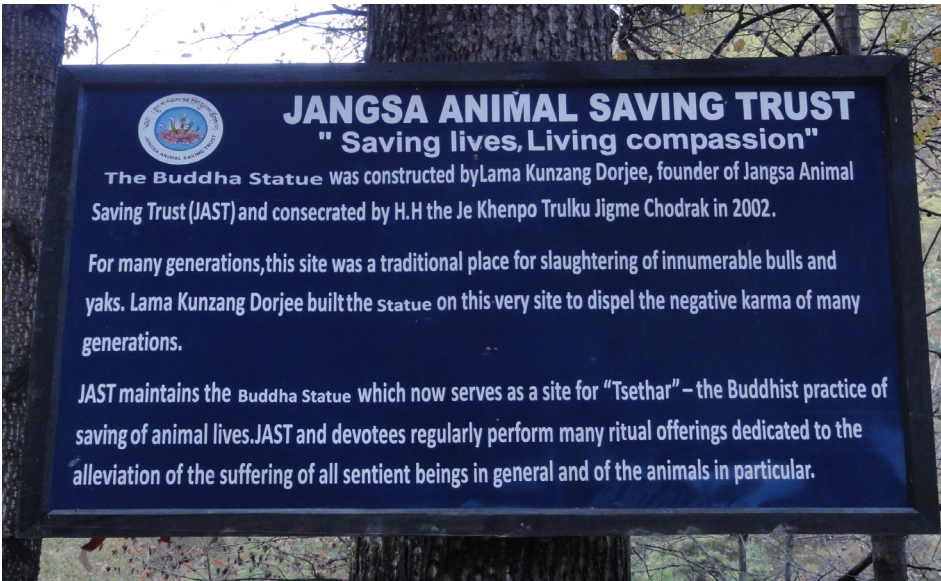


Figure 2. Signboard at the site.⁶

JAST had saved more than a hundred cattle, all of which were released to donated pasture lands in various areas throughout the region.

Tsethars are frequently covered by Bhutan's state-owned, national newspaper *Kuensel*.⁷ The story of Kunzang Dorjee's five-bull release is often reproduced online, and journalists carefully keep track of the aggregated number of saved animals.⁸ The *tsethar* stories do not always have a happy ending, however, as saved animals are sometimes abandoned and left on their own for survival (Josserand-Mercier 2019).

Today, any form of slaughter is officially considered to be a repulsive act, but meat consumption nevertheless continues in urban areas. The slaughtering of Bhutanese livestock has recently been outsourced to Indian slaughterhouses, and the dressed carcasses are then imported back into the country where they are sold in shops managed by Nepali shopkeepers. The cattle that are saved from the Indian slaughterhouses are often bulls and cows that no longer produce any milk, thereby having less monetary value (Tsering 2002; Yeshe 2012). By implication, healthy cattle are still likely to be hauled off to the Indian slaughterhouses. Offering healthy animals for *tsethar*, however, is becoming a viable alternative source of income for their owners, since, for instance, a released yak can bring as much as Nu 40,000 (Anonymous 2018; Norbu 2013a, 2013b).⁹

The practice of *tsethar* challenges livestock breeding and the consumption of meat, which has traditionally been central to Bhutanese food habits. This is also true for Buddhist monks and nuns, as they are free to eat meat from an animal killed by someone else. Why was the longstanding practice of animal slaughter for consumption thus suddenly challenged? Is there a context beyond the act of compassion to view



Figure 3: Statue of a cow placed at the feet of the Buddha statue installed at the site of a former slaughtering ground.

this radical shift in practice? In our article, we explore this issue as a political turn in nation-making, where Buddhist doctrine is promoted as the unifying principle of modern Bhutanese national identity, following suit in the reinvigoration of religious nationalism taking place in all of the South Asian states today (compare with Dreyfus 2011). We look specifically at how this kind of “top-down nationalism” project plays out pragmatically in contemporary Bhutan.

The Buddhist practice of animal release

Animal release is associated with the old Buddhist and Jain tradition of *ahimsā* (nonviolence). *Ahimsā* is the teaching that views killing as one of the greatest sins a human can commit on earth (Korom 2000, 188). The practice is known as *tsethar* in Bhutan, where it is part of an East Asian Buddhist tradition that goes back to the sixth century.¹⁰ It is considered a wholesome action that leads to the accrual of *punya* (merit). The practice was popularized in China by Zhiyi (538–597 CE), the founder of the eclectic Tiantai school of Mahayana Buddhism, after a ceremony he performed in 575 CE. Zhiyi had a pond dug for the release of fish caught by local fishermen, after which he preached the *dharma* to them (Buswell and Lopez 2013, 293–94).

Stories like saving fish by releasing them in a pond and about monks filtering insects out of their drinking water belong to the generic lore concerning the animal-saving discourse, as suggested by the statue of a cow at the Buddha’s feet in figure 3. Saving animals is a way for a practitioner to cultivate compassion and to accumulate merit. When it comes to animal release one should, perhaps, make a distinction between protecting and saving animals as opposed to doing it by staging a ceremonial ritual. In a guide written by Buddhist masters, the performance of the ritual varies. In the Tibetan tradition, *tshé thar* “usually follows the standard structure of a tantric Generation Stage (*bskyed rim*) [ritual] where the practitioner visualizes oneself as a deity and blesses the animals being released” (Shiu and Stokes 2008, 186).

In a modern Tibetan version of the ritual performed in Sydney, Australia, as described by Noel de Bien (2005), the practitioners bought AUD 450 worth of mud crabs at the local fish market and took them to the Vajrayana Institute in Newtown. During the ritual they carried the crabs forty times around an altar while reciting prayers. This was done to “create the causes and possibly the conditions for the crabs to be reborn in a higher realm” (*ibid.*). After that the crabs were transported to Western Harbour, where they were released back into the sea with the permission of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Obviously, we are talking about the release of smaller animals here, some of them as small as ants. There are practical reasons for this, since animal release is often practiced as a private, individual activity. In countries like Taiwan animal release has even given rise to a business, as practitioners can order animals solely for the purpose of releasing them (Shiu and Stokes 2008, 189). As already indicated in the case of Bhutan, selling big animals like bulls, cows, and yaks to practitioners of animal release has also become an alternative market for livestock breeders.

Modern animal release practice is not without problems, and it sometimes creates situations that are contradictory to its intention. For instance, the capture and

transport of ordered animals for release can cause death and stress to the animals. There are also environmental and ecological issues that, in effect, can produce not-so-compassionate results (Tsering 2002). An example brought up by Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes (2008, 190–92) is that purchased-for-order animals, when released in a new place, may become an invasive species and cause death to the native animals in that particular ecosystem. One could justifiably ask where the compassion lies, if the invasive animals then have to be killed to save the ecosystem. Issues like the ones just mentioned have led to recommendations against the practice of animal release in places like Hong Kong and Singapore, for example.¹¹

In Bhutan, saving small animals such as goats and fish has been practiced as an extraordinary symbolic and very personal ceremony. Many pious Buddhists have practiced *tsethar* for these animals on the basis of compassion and *ahimsā*. Goats have been especially indispensable for religious ceremonies in Hinduism and so, because their fate as sacrificial victims is obvious, Buddhist practitioners have often conducted *tsethars* to save them from the chopping block.

Religious nationalism

In contemporary Bhutan the practice of *tsethar* is a conspicuous example of how religious doctrine serves as a framework for the political ideology of the nation state and for the construction of national identity. Together with the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), *tsethar* forms a dynamic duo that not only gives Bhutan and its citizens a distinct national identity but also influences its government and legislative system.

“Happiness” in Buddhist doctrine refers to an enduring kind of happiness. In the conventional use of the word, happiness is an impermanent state of being that is based on selfish craving and grasping for material things, such as the taste for meat and the slaughter of animals for profit. A practitioner who wants to achieve a state of enduring happiness must follow the Buddha’s *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* (eightfold path). When employing the Buddhist concept of happiness implied in GNH, it is the idea of an enduring happiness that is intended, not an ephemeral kind that results in only temporary pleasure or satiation. Two aspects of the path immediately come to mind when translating it into good citizenship. The first is right action (using ethical conduct to manifest compassion). The second is right livelihood (making a living through ethical and non-harmful means).¹² Both of these concepts are integral to the practice of animal release.

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a Bhutanese alternative development index that is rooted in national traditions and heritage. It guides the state’s governance and development planning.¹³ The idea behind it is accredited to Bhutan’s fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in the 1970s. After sifting through major government documents, however, Lauchlan T. Munro (2016) found that GNH first appeared in print in 1997 when it was mentioned in passing in Bhutan’s eighth five-year plan (RGOB 1997, 13):

Most importantly, none of the Royal Government’s programmatic or policy documents from the 1960s to the mid-1990s referred to GNH. The first seven of Bhutan’s

five-year national development plans, covering 1961 to 1997 did not mention GNH. The RGOB's National Budgets, the major annual statement of fiscal policy, did not mention GNH until 1996–97; GNH did not assume a central place in the National Budget's narrative until after the Millennium. Nor did GNH appear in any other RGOB publication that this author has been able to find dating from the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s or early 1990s. (Munro 2016, 75)

The concept started to be used more frequently after 1996 in official Bhutanese documents and in government speeches. It was promoted by various government-linked organizations such as the Centre for Bhutan Studies, a “steady purveyor of articles on GNH” (ibid., 81). Munro (ibid., 80) counted 260 citations in the eleventh five-year plan and 576 citations in academic articles between 2002 and 2015. GNH has also become more explicitly related to the concept of happiness as laid out in Mahayana Buddhist doctrine (see, for instance, Phuntsok 2004; Schroeder and Schroeder 2014; Givel 2015).¹⁴ The promotion of GNH is thus similar to *tsethar* in the way Bhutanese nationalism borrows its ideology from Buddhist doctrine.¹⁵

The amalgamation of Buddhist doctrine, legislation, and government in Bhutan today can be understood as a case of religious nationalism. Mark Juergensmeyer (1996) has made a distinction between ethnic religious nationalism and ideological religious nationalism that can be useful here. The case of nationalism in Bhutan is a combination of both of these two types of religious nationalism. The difference between them is “the degree to which religion is an aspect of ethnic identity,” and “the degree to which it is a part of an ideological critique that contains an alternative vision of political order” (ibid., 4). In the first case, nationalism is linked to people and land, “a community bound together by race, history or culture” (ibid.). In the case of modern Bhutan it is a kind of nationalism that fuses Bhutanese ethnicity with Buddhist doctrine to achieve political authority. In the second case, nationalism is based on ideas and beliefs. With regard to Bhutan, then, we argue that Buddhist doctrine provides a moral framework that supports a new social order, and that Buddhist doctrine is combined with the notion of the modern nation state (ibid., 5).

If the ethnic approach to religious nationalism *politicizes* religion by employing religious identities for political ends, an ideological approach to religious nationalism does the opposite: It *religionizes* politics. . . . Compatibility with religious goals becomes the criterion for an acceptable political platform . . . , and religious law replaces secular law as the pillar of government authority. (ibid., 5–6)

From this perspective, it could be argued on the one hand that slaughter and the consumption of meat in Bhutan today are called on by the regime as symbols of a secular, unwanted social order. *Tsethar*, on the other hand, is part of the moral framework of the new social order.¹⁶ Looking closer at nationalism in Bhutan, it becomes clear that it combines Juergensmeyer's two types of religious nationalism in a form of ethno-ideological religious nationalism. First, it supports the idea of a distinct Bhutanese ethnicity. This is conspicuously evidenced in the deprivation of citizenship and eviction of the Lhotshampa, a people of Nepali ethnic origin, from Bhutan in the early 1990s (Hutt 2005; Ferraro 2012).¹⁷ Second, it has an ideological component borrowed from Buddhist doctrine.

This is so because religion, the repository of traditions of symbols and beliefs, always stands ready to be tapped by those who wish to develop a new framework of ideas about social order. (Juergensmeyer 1996, 8)

A paradoxical feature of religious nation states is that despite their high degree of centralization and authoritarian leadership, they also claim to be democratic in the sense that they represent, in this case, all Bhutanese Buddhists, assuming that they are all in favor of such a state, even though there is no explicit mentioning of religion in Bhutanese citizenship laws.¹⁸ Ultimately, as Juergensmeyer proposes,

it is not the will of the people that matters in a religious frame of reference, but the will of God. In a religious context, democracy can operate only within limits. . . . Hence the freedom of a religious nation-state will always be limited by religious law, and the liberties of individuals will always be tempered by what is deemed necessary for the community's good. (1996, 18–19)¹⁹

The implication, of course, is that the citizens of Bhutan are free to make their own choices, as long as they do not conflict with the moral framework promoted by the state. Thus, slaughtering and consumption of meat are preferences that bring about some specific dilemmas for meat eaters, since they become “enemies” and targets for national mobilization.²⁰ As we shall return to in the following paragraphs, these preferences can also be acts of resistance to the regime's definition of modern Bhutanese national identity, for they represent an aspect of life in which people—whether pious Buddhists or not—do not wish to be governed.

Anti-meat and slaughter laws: The legal codification of Buddhist doctrine

It is imperative to point out that the *tsethars* we described in the preceding paragraphs were carried out by representatives of monastic institutions. They are, of course, normal aspects of Buddhist practice, yet they function as highly symbolic and influential acts when lamas like Kunzang Dorjee and Je Khenpo perform them, especially because they do so with the sanction and moral, if not monetary, support of the government.²¹ What makes them of special interest to us here is how practices and values prescribed in Buddhist doctrine find their way into Bhutan's legal system and are then used to foster a homogeneous sense of national identity that is simultaneously both ethnic and religious.

The Bhutanese polity is perhaps best described as a constitutional theocracy, a modern kind of state formation that formally separates political leadership from religious authority (Hirschl 2010). What qualifies it as theocratic is that the constitution supports a state religion, that the laws are informed by religious doctrine, and that religious bodies carry a significant symbolic weight in society (ibid., 3).²² In the case of Bhutanese constitutional theocracy one might add the Buddhist conception of the relationship between the temporal (the monarch) and the spiritual (the lama). They are the interdependent two wheels of the *dharma*, where it is the responsibility of the ruler (that is, the state) to uphold Buddhist values (Lee 2014, 3).

As is argued by Matthew Ferraro (2012) and Darius Lee (2014), Bhutan's latest constitution (promulgated in 2008) lays out the basics of a liberal democracy where there is no explicit mention of a link between citizenship and Buddhism in any of its articles. At the same time, the constitution establishes Buddhism as Bhutan's state religion and spiritual heritage (RGOB 2008, 9) in Article 3.²³ By implication, the phrasing of Article 8, Clause 2, stating that it is the responsibility of every citizen to "preserve, protect and respect the environment, culture *and heritage* of the nation" (our emphasis), makes it the duty of every citizen to adhere to Buddhist values (RGOB 2008, 16). Exactly what these values incur is in the hands of the Bhutanese Druk Kagyu school of Buddhism, as the constitution also establishes a state-controlled monastic body through the Dratshang Lhentshog, which is the joint state and Druk Kagyu commission for monastic affairs. It is, for instance, this commission that vigorously—some say even aggressively—promote values regarding animal welfare and restrictions on meat use (Lee 2014).

When the *tsethar* practice by Kunzang Dorjee became widely known in Bhutanese society, the Department of Livestock announced a revision of the Livestock Act. The law, named the "Livestock Act of Bhutan 2001" (RGOB 2001), established regulations concerning the distribution of domestic cattle and meat based on the recognition of the existence of slaughterhouses in the country. The act proposed to prohibit not only slaughter but also the import and sale of meat at markets during the auspicious months and days indicated by the Bhutanese calendar. Auspicious periods basically consisted of two whole months (the 1st and the 4th) and three days of each month (8th, 15th, and 30th). Additionally, they included the 10th day of the 5th month, the 4th day of the 6th month, as well as any other day that happens to coincide with any religiously auspicious day, such as the 22nd of the 9th month.

The implementation of the meat-ban policy, however, encountered some unexpected outcomes contrary to its intentions. As put forward by Tashi Wangmo, chairperson of the Social and Cultural Affairs Committee at that time, in her petition to amend the Livestock Act during the 3rd Session of the National Council in 2009, both restaurants and private persons made sure to stock up on meat well before the auspicious days, thereby actually shortening the lives of animals (Anonymous 2001; Dorji 2001). Not being able to procure fresh meat, the shops were selling rotten meat leading to cases of food poisoning. On top of this, the vendors had to take a financial loss during the prohibited months, as they still had to pay rent. Some assembly members objected that there was no ban on cooked meat and that the shops could always buy refrigerators to keep the meat in, so the amendment was not accepted.²⁴

Moreover, the dates of the meat-ban overlap with some of the traditional festivals in rural communities and monasteries. In particular, the 1st month, which is after the harvest, is the time of the *tsechu* festival held at great monasteries and in village temples. It is also the time of the annual domestic *pūjā* for deities (*choku*) held within domestic compounds, where it is customary to offer the "best meal" accompanied with meat dishes served with home-brewed wine to guests and monks, relatives and neighbors. During one of her fieldtrips to rural areas Mari Miyamoto witnessed an incident in which the best meal could not be prepared, due to the suspension of the meat supply at this time, a situation that caused a huge calamity in the village. In

urban areas, where there is less storage of dried meat, the chaos was greater. Some people even started to import meat privately from India (Anonymous 2002b) for the auspicious occasion. Such chaotic circumstances have continued until the present, but in 2012 Je Kenpo suggested that people should prepare meat-free meals during the *choku* festival (Anonymous 2012), in his attempt to steer people toward vegetarianism to make them better Buddhists.

Even though the legal meat-ban is limited to certain auspicious months and days, the monastic establishment and various NGOs engaged in animal welfare agitate strongly for vegetarianism and a total ban, in this way exercising their symbolic weight on public opinion and behavior.²⁵

Dealing with the meat stigma in practice

Despite the increasing popularity of *tsethar*, it is clear that neither meat eating nor the slaughtering of animals has disappeared in Bhutanese society, and it continues to be a hotly debated topic in Buddhist circles (Pelden 2007).²⁶ A study made by Dendup Chopel, Sangay Thinley, and Dorji Gyaltshen published in 2012 actually came to the conclusion that slaughter and meat consumption is growing. Another study by K. Nidup and colleagues (2011) calculated that Bhutanese meat consumption tripled between the years 2000 and 2005. Given the Buddhist institution's intensive anti-slaughter and meat-eating propaganda and legislation, how are such findings of increased consumption possible?

As already mentioned, *tsethar* has become a new source of income for livestock farmers. But that is only a small part of the explanation. On closer inspection, one finds that, in practice, people have found various new, alternative ways to deal with the meat-ban in order to continue eating meat. In James C. Scott's (1990) terms, the alternative measures carried out by butchers and the consumers of meat can perhaps be perceived as a "hidden meat transcript," in the sense that they are transgressing the master meat-ban and *tsethar* narrative, which are the public meat-ban transcripts of the nation-making project choreographed by the ruling élite. In order to be able to continue both with livestock production and meat eating, one might even say that people are "jellyfishing" their meat practices, to use another of Scott's (2009) terms.²⁷ Jellyfishing here refers to the various strategies deployed to downplay the stigma of animal killers and meat eaters. A couple of examples to which we shall return below include *makhep*, the hiding of the butcher's identity and pretending to have nothing to do with the killing of one's animal, and the three kinds of pure meat (*trikoṭisuddha*) in the monastic code that allows monks and nuns to eat meat, as long as the animal to be eaten has not been seen, heard, or killed by the consumer of the flesh (compare with Ham 2019, 135).

Since it involves taking the life of a living being, the act of slaughtering is stigmatized. As such, it has become a subject of avoidance and obscurity in Bhutanese society. One of the consequences is that the name of the person who kills the animal is concealed. They are often represented as being Tibetan, Indian, or Muslim. In other words, those who butcher animals for consumption or sale are people who theoretically do not belong to the nation. Instead, they live virtually anonymous and unknown

existences on the margins of Bhutanese society, often in the manner of an outcast, a phenomenon better known from Hindu society next door in India (Dumont 1981).

The secretive acts related to slaughtering and butchering make life difficult for Bhutanese livestock farmers and pastoralists who have relied on meat sales as a source of income. Now they are constantly struggling with this aspect of being a good Bhutanese citizen. Indeed, the tension between local customs and new government policies weighs heavily on the rural peasantry. For instance, more recently the people living in the valleys of Merak and Sakten in Trashigang Prefecture in the eastern areas of the country became concerned about the bad reputation they were gaining, not only by their practice of slaughtering their livestock but even more so because their traditional method of slaughtering, which is suffocation by hanging from a tree after the animal's legs are bound, was reported in Bhutanese media as unmerciful. It caused the supreme decision-making body in the district (*dzongkhag tshogdu*) and the supreme decision-making body in the block (*gewog tshogde*) to make the radical decision to ban all customary slaughtering in the whole district, regardless of the incessant demand for meat (Wangdi 2013; Yeshi 2013).

The explicit purpose of the ban was to remove the social stigma from the highland people and show that they were genuine citizens who follow Buddhist doctrine. The move was met by mixed success. In the report, a deputy head of a block protested against the image of his community as a bunch of slaughterers. He pointed out that even though the meat sold in the area was produced in different regions, they were still considered to be the slaughterers (*ibid.*). During fieldwork conducted in 2014, the deputy head of the block (*mangmi*) was still upholding the slaughter ban.

Similar bans have been made in several districts around the country. Although governmental politics used to be centralized, modern reforms and decentralization policies have enabled local governments to exercise a certain amount of autonomy. As a result, there are an increasing number of cases where the heads (*dzongdas*) of the districts, the representatives (*gup*) from each block (*mangmi*), and every supreme local decision-making body collectively propose bylaws at their own discretion in addition to their conventional role that relates more to rural development plans. Particularly, the autonomous decisions concern everyday customs and religious practices, as they are regarded as an area that, in theory, cannot directly conflict with central government policy. However, as discussed, there is an increasing central governance of animal protection and welfare, and slaughtering and meat consumption have often been addressed in campaigns and propaganda material issued by government ministries or in teachings by prominent Buddhist leaders.

How do these policies and campaigns play out in practice on a village level? In a study of a pastoral village located within a designated national park in eastern Bhutan, Miyamoto (2008; 2015) looked at the implementation of a government policy that involved a reduction of so-called “unnecessary cattle” for the sake of environmental conservation.²⁸ Since reducing the number of cattle implied that some of the villagers' livestock had to be slaughtered, the case provides some insights into the practical side of Bhutanese nation-making. What is perhaps most striking is that the killing of the unnecessary cattle remained unmentioned by the governmental actors, such as the Department of Livestock, and was understood to take place in secret by the

villagers. We would argue that this was so because the consequence of the policy does not sit well with concepts such as *ahimsā* and rituals such as *tsethar*, both of which we have already seen to be central in the discourse on Bhutanese nationalism.

Even though the officials did not mention the actual killing part of the policy explicitly, it was clear to the villagers that “natural environmental protection” meant the disposal of “unnecessary cattle” through killing, although not necessarily by their own hands. This would be in direct contradiction to what the monks had previously taught them. One could also inquire about the meat itself. Selling it for profit surely would not be proper for any good citizen. Miyamoto’s case study concluded that the pastoralists were bewildered by the idea of slaughtering cattle, due to the influence of Buddhism.

Similar but slightly different cases have occurred in western regions of Bhutan for the last few decades. In those areas, religious teachers had often targeted pig farming and the killing of pigs and sheep for sacrificial purposes in their teachings. Sacrificing such animals was an integral part of a traditional village ritual intended to please the local deities and to secure the community’s future prosperity. The monks sent by regional monasteries had told the villagers that if they wanted to be good Bhutanese citizens, they should give up animal killing altogether, as Buddhism considers it to be a grave sin. The religious figures in particular had considered the animal sacrifices to be “backward” and too voracious, against Buddhist doctrine and Bhutanese values. Consequently, the sacrificial rituals as such have gradually vanished. Pig farming has also decreased in most villages.

While the balance of the meat economy in pastoral communities was shaken, the government attempted to implement a few policies to counter increasing religious sentiments. One was to establish a “calf-rearing center.” To facilitate the reduction of cattle, the Department of Livestock under the Ministry of Agriculture established a pilot project by setting up the calf-rearing center to collect unnecessary cattle from villages. The center was intended to be a kind of intermediate stop on the way to the slaughterhouse. The pilot project was later abolished for unknown reasons. The department’s attempt to eliminate unnecessary cattle, however, led to a new plan to establish a modern slaughterhouse in 2015, as we shall see in the following paragraphs.

Besides the governmental departments, pastoral communities located in the eastern regions of Bhutan where people had earned cash from the meat of cattle made certain demands for reducing unnecessary cattle. After the slaughter ban was enforced in Tashigang district, desperate to find a solution to the dilemma, some cattle owners decided to transport their cattle to the Indian border. Pastoralists from the higher mountains, such as those from Merak and Sakten, herded their *zo* and *zomo* across the mountainous border to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, while those from lower-altitude regions took their oxen and cows to Indian districts in the plains.

Obviously, the enforcement of the natural-environment protection policy ran into similar problems in other pastoralist villages in the country. Somehow, the government had to deal with the hidden aspects of the policy’s consequences.

Another obscure aspect of the policy was to try and remove the country’s meat production from nature to make it more contained, intensive, and efficient through industrial slaughterhouses. In terms of nation-building, the policy also served to

reinvent Bhutan's nature as untouched, thereby portraying Bhutanese culture and life as eco-friendly.

What all of this suggests is that the pastoralist villagers, trying to be good Bhutanese citizens, were trapped in a choice between being better Buddhists by practicing *ahimsā* or being better environmentalists by slaughtering some of their cattle, with the added confusion created by the link between green Buddhist ethics (Huber 1997) and the killing of animals.

The *makhep*: A *boep*, *darley warrar*, or *hla-gap*

Eating meat implies the killing of animals, but identifying the slaughterers as people of non-Bhutanese origin (the symbolic Other), by calling them *boep*, *darley warrar*, or *hla-gap* is clearly a practice intended to keep the sinful act of killing far away from one's family and outside of an ethnically defined Bhutanese community.

In villages, slaughter skills usually include dressing animal carcasses. Professional butchers do not necessarily monopolize this task. Slaughtering animals is a survival skill learned and used by most ordinary villagers, and when an animal dies due to natural death or accidents, the owner often disassembles the carcass himself, making use of every part of the animal, from internal organs to skin. Not only in pastoral villages but also in rural areas in general, where only a few livestock are maintained, one often encounters scenes where villagers are dressing an animal carcass on a woven bamboo mat, even though the village economy mainly relies on agriculture as the basis of subsistence. The conceptual boundary that distinguishes the professional butcher from the villager with his bamboo sheet is that the former's work is referred to as *makhep*. The term refers to someone who takes the lives of animals, not just butchering dead ones.

The *makhep* is usually an outsider to the local community. But there are cases where the *makhep* is a resident in the village. For instance, the northern part of the Thimphu Division is an area where many pastoralists breed yaks. The yak owner Thinley (a pseudonym), a forty-three-year-old male, explained that when he needs a large amount of cash at once yak meat is his only resource. Since he is not willing to kill the yak himself, he needs the services of a *makhep*, in his case someone from his own village.

The stereotypical figure of this kind of *makhep* is a young man without any adequate farmland of his own and with no specific job in the village. His life is insecure, and his existence fluid. He is adventurous and reckless and does work just to make some cash for the day. The actual killing is concealed and takes place before daylight. Thinley strikes a deal with the *makhep* and pays him Nu 2,000 but claims that he is unknown to him and that he does not even know his name. In the evening he ties up his yak at the outskirts of the village and returns to his house. In the dark of the night the *makhep* slaughters the yak, butchers it roughly, and leaves before dawn. No one in the village is supposed to have witnessed the act of killing. In the morning, Thinley fetches the dead yak and does the remainder of the butchering himself. It is a kind of performance in which each actor has a script to which he or she adheres, so whether or not the actual identity of the slaughterer is known is somewhat irrelevant. What is

important is the pretense that nobody knows the mysterious identity of the person who actually carries out the murderous deed.

In a study conducted in a pastoral village in Laya district, located in the northwest section of Bhutan, Yasuyuki Kurita (1986) picked up a story from his informants, who identified slaughterers as “Tibetans.” Miyamoto heard a similar story in Haa district during fieldwork conducted in 2013. The pastoralists in the village where the research was conducted kept yaks. A fifty-year-old male informant in Haa named Karma (a pseudonym) had always hired Dorji (a pseudonym), a man living in another village, to conduct the slaughter of his yaks whenever he needed cash. Karma explained that Tibetan immigrants inhabited Dorji’s village. He refers to them as *boeps*, the term for Tibetans. According to Karma, the Tibetans in the village had migrated across the border into Bhutan. They have now been forced to undertake unfavorable work out of necessity in order to survive.

When Dorji suddenly died it was difficult for Karma to find a replacement from the same village, since none of Dorji’s family members were willing to take on his butchering tasks. Instead, he sought out a person among the Indian migrant workers residing in the area. It was understood that there was no religious problem with Buddhism involved in the killing and slaughter of his cattle and yaks, as the man he hired was a so-called *darley warrar*, a “bearded man” (*dādhī vālā* in Hindi/Urdu), suggesting that he was a Muslim. Karma’s *darley warrar* had come to Haa as a worker on the national road construction project. In general, Indian Muslims on the border have been regarded conveniently as slaughterers of cattle. While the slaughter of cattle has been severely restricted in Nepal, the rumor that was circulating during the fieldwork period was that Nepalese cattle were hauled off secretly to the Indian border, where Muslim workers handled the slaughter.²⁹ In Bhutan’s case, several pastoralists had exported so-called “unnecessary cattle” to places in India where Muslim butchers were known to reside. This activity, however, seems to be decreasing as a result of the upsurge in religious nationalism. During the 2013 field period, for example, some cattle herders mentioned that their herding to the border was stopped by a local citizen group that conducts *tsethar* ceremonies. However, clever entrepreneurial exporters have continued the enterprise out of public view, as a hidden compromise to continue to satiate the demand for meat.

At the same time, there are cases where the slaughter is superimposed on the image of Bhutanese highlanders. In the northern region of Wandue-Phodrang a family used to slaughter a pig during their annual *pūjā*. For that purpose, they called a highlander to the house. He was called a *hla-gap*, which literally means “mountain man.” The man was given about five to six kilos of the prime cuts of the animal as a reward for his work. He also received local meals and alcohol. Letting a *hla-gap* take care of the slaughter is a custom that has more or less fallen out of use after the start of the *ahimsā* and *tsethar* campaigns. Calling a *hla-gap* is simply no longer necessary, because pig breeding has ceased. However, the actual meat eating has not been abandoned. In rural areas, meat still remains essential at the time of ceremonial occasions and rituals, but villagers have been transformed into consumers who now purchase pork at the market instead of raising and slaughtering pigs at home. This is



Figure 4: A meat shop in Thimphu.

a radical change in subsistence for them, since cash is often scarce in an agricultural economy more accustomed to barter and reciprocal exchange of goods.

More meat, less killing

At first glance, and given that some of the most important cornerstones of Bhutanese nationalism and national identity are anchored in Buddhist concepts like *ahimsā* and *tsethar*, it seems like a contradiction that the consumption of meat is actually increasing in Bhutan. As mentioned, it tripled between 2000 and 2005. Despite the meat bans in the prefectures and the discontinuation of keeping livestock and pigs for meat, beef, pork, and chicken continues to be eaten in homes and restaurants all through the country (Dawa 2013). Dried meat is readily available in villages that are still not connected to the electrical grid. For instance, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, the self-sufficiency rate of meat between 2012 and 2014 was 13.3 percent for beef and 16.3 percent for pork. So where did the additional 86.7 percent of beef and 83.7 percent of pork come from? The answer, of course, is that it was imported.³⁰ For instance, nearly all the meat vendors in Thimphu import and sell meat from animals slaughtered in the Indian town Jaigaon, located just across the border southwest of Bhutan. According to the vendors Miyamoto spoke to during her fieldwork the slaughtered livestock mostly originates from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal in India and as well as from Nepal (see figure 4). In the town Gelephu on the

south-central border, Bhutanese people regularly buy meat from the Indian vendors, regardless of whether it happens to be an auspicious month or day.

In a way, the expulsion of killing and slaughter to the margins or outside the national border altogether has reduced animal killing in Bhutan. At the same time, however, it has paradoxically increased people's consumption of meat. One explanation that has been proposed is that the psychological barrier to eating meat decreases as the anonymity of the slaughterer increases. In fact, this development actually sits well with the three-kinds-of-pure-meat code previously mentioned, under which one is free to eat meat, since the killing of the animal has not been done for the specific individual who eats it (compare with Derville and Bonnemaire 2010). In that sense, the transfer of livestock breeding and slaughtering from the village to the modern meat industry and its mechanized slaughterhouses, as well as the sale of meat in shops, is actually compatible with an aspect of the Buddhist doctrine, although perhaps not so compassionate.

In 2015, the Department of Agriculture planned to construct a large-scale modern slaughterhouse equipped with the latest facilities near Thimphu, in a place called Serbithang. The construction was kept secret from the public until the final stage when it was announced in the newspaper *Kuensel*. The slaughterhouse aroused a lot of controversy and led to a heated debate between proponents and opponents. A petition against it was even submitted by Lopens of the Central Monastic Body (Anonymous 2015). Even though the plan and purchase of land and the construction site were facts, the prime minister, Tshering Tobgay, was forced to deny it, declaring that the government never planned to build a slaughterhouse, nor would it devise such a plan in the future (Dema 2015). He held this line until the evidence for the construction of the modern slaughterhouse became irrefutable, after which the discourse changed to the facility being a packing plant only, in which no slaughtering would occur.

Conclusion

The public transcript of Bhutanese nationalism is religious in the sense that it is set in the framework of Buddhist doctrine, drawing on various religious practices and concepts, such as *tsethar*, *ahimsā*, and happiness to define properties of good Bhutanese citizenship. In Juergensmeyer's (1996) terms, slaughterers and meat eaters are made targets for a national mobilization in the establishment of a new, "modern" social order, and to support it some practices derived from Buddhist doctrine are tapped into in an attempt to temper the customary meat practices for the general good of the community and country.

Nationalism further reinvents Bhutan as a society driven by "soft" values and offers a more ethical alternative to Western materialism and development as economic growth. It reflects a kind of "reverse orientalism" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 144), where Bhutan's heritage is cleaned up to correspond more to the stereotypical Shangri La image of the country, its people, and culture. It is very similar to the reinvention of Tibetan culture and its traditional values as "soft" by the 14th Dalai

Lama and the Tibetan Government in Exile to be able to influence the arena of global politics (compare with Magnusson 2002).

New social policies are dressed in the gross national happiness framework and conceptually linked to the Buddhist moral and ethical code. The changes in the constitution described in this article make it the duty of all citizens to preserve, protect, and respect Bhutanese heritage, which is implicitly defined by its association with the constitution's establishment of Buddhism both as Bhutan's state religion and spiritual heritage.

Personalities like Kunzang Dorjee and his five-bull rescue, along with Je Khenpo's overpowering of the wrathful deities and spirits with his edict, are promoted as symbols for the new order. The lamas become role models of good citizenship, and their stories morally edify national myths with strong religious connotations. Slaughterers and meat eaters are stigmatized as ideologically different. They become marginalized Others driven by values opposed to Bhutan's ideologically perceived "authentic" heritage. Political ideology is thereby "religionized" to protect the nation from inauspicious things, while the monastic establishment becomes the main platform from which the nationalist framework is propounded.

At the same time, the "new" Bhutan has a hidden transcript of concealment and obscurity when it comes to the realities of continuous and increasing consumption of meat, such as the unmentioned fate of the "unnecessary cattle" in Miyamoto's (2008; 2015) study of environmental conservation policy related in this article. The people of Bhutan have responded partly by officially adhering to the public transcript of "good citizenship," such as protesting against the government's plans for a slaughterhouse, and partly by devising various covert ways to circumscribe them, such as transporting the livestock to Indian slaughterhouses and then importing the processed meat back into Bhutan for sale and consumption. The compromise between "old" and "new" is then morally laid to rest in the correct framework, in this case a tweaked version of Buddhism's three-kinds-of-pure-meat code.

AUTHORS

Mari Miyamoto is an associate professor of South Asian studies and political anthropology at the Faculty of Business and Commerce within Keio University, Japan. She is also a former Newton International Fellow of the British Academy, where she worked at the SOAS South Asia Institute, London. She is interested in diverse processes of cultural interpretations of global political issues, such as "democracy" and "environmental conservation" in people's everyday lives. She obtained her PhD from Kyoto University in the field of political anthropology, working on the cultural politics of environmentalism in contemporary Bhutan, for which she conducted intensive ethnographic fieldwork. She has published widely on issues related to the environment, religion, and democracy.

Jan Magnusson is an associate professor in the School of Social Work at Lund University, Sweden, where he teaches social science theory and method. His research interests include social change, social policy and welfare, social movements, South

Asia, and the Himalayas. He has published a number of papers on social change in Baltistan, the Western Himalayas, and the Tibetan refugee community in India.

Frank J. Korom is a professor of religion and anthropology at Boston University, where he teaches courses on South Asian religions and cultures. He is the author and/or editor of ten books. In addition, he is co-editor of *Asian Ethnology*.

NOTES

1. It could be argued that these roadside shrines are an emerging expression of Buddhist nationalism, which has risen greatly since the end of the protracted civil war, as discussed by Susan Reed in this special issue; see also Samuels (2007). A similar trend can be seen in India, where huge statues of Hindu deities are popping up virtually everywhere as an expression of Hindu nationalism; see Jain (2015).
2. While Lumbini has become a UNESCO cultural heritage site (Schrom 2019), Bodh Gaya has become a religiously contested site, despite the growth in Buddhist patronage at the latter; see Kinnard (1998) and Maejima (2013).
3. Although the Bhutanese language (Dzongkha) is distantly related to Standard Tibetan and somewhat intelligible to Sikkimese, it has its own distinct vernacular flair, especially when it comes to religious, philosophical, and cultural terms; see Dorji (2006).
4. In the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, the government recognizes the Drukpa lineage, sometimes referred to as the Red Hat sect of the Kagyu school of Vajrayana Buddhism, as the national religion. Kagyu is one of the six recognized schools (*chos lugs*) of Tibetan Buddhism (Vajrayana). It is also known as the “oral lineage” or “whispered transmission” school that uses *mahāmudrā* (great seal) as its central teaching, which argues that wisdom and emptiness are really the same thing. Vajrayana is historically derived from Mahayana Buddhism, the tradition practiced most widely in East Asia.
5. Along with Buddhism, many of the people to whom he preached practiced animism and Bön as well. On the integral relationship between Bön, Shamanism, and Vajrayana Buddhism elsewhere in the Himalayas, see the excellent study by Geoffrey Samuel (1995).
6. Taken during fieldwork conducted in November 2013.
7. *Kuensel* means “clarity.” It was the only newspaper available in Bhutan until 2006, when two more newspapers began printing. The government holds more than 50 percent of shares in *Kuensel*.
8. Sanjeev Mehta and Tshering Dorji (2006) found out that the newspaper was rated quite poorly by respondents in a survey of *Kuensel*’s impact on public life.
9. The term *ngultram* (Nu) refers to the Bhutanese currency, one of which is equivalent to the Indian rupee (INR).
10. In Dzongkha, the official language of Bhutan (Driem 1998), the term is *tsethar*, which is the local rendering of Tibetan *tshé thar*. It is known as *fangsheng* in Chinese and *hōjō* in Japanese. It is considered meritorious action in all of these places. For a history of animal release practice in Buddhism, see Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez (2013) and Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes (2008). Some key terms in this article are given first in Sanskrit, then in Tibetan for the reader’s benefit. Otherwise, terms are spelled as used in Bhutan.

11. The prominent Bhutanese lama Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche recently launched his “Less Meat More Love” program in March of 2021 (see Rinpoche 2021). He also acknowledged the potential negative effects of *tsethar* and explained that his program explores alternative practices—in this case, using art as an “alternative method of saving lives” by promoting the idea of “less meat, more love” (for this discussion, see his Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/djkhyentse>). We thank Harmony DenRonden for bringing this reference to our attention.
12. *Samyakkarmānta/ yang dag pa'i las kyī mtha'* (right action) and *samyagājīva/ yang dag pa'i 'tsho ba* (right livelihood), respectively.
13. Karma Ura, the president of the Centre for Bhutan Studies and a leading Bhutanese intellectual, explained the concept of GNH at length in his 2009 manifesto entitled *An Introduction to GMH: Gross National Happiness*.
14. The ongoing international discussions and development of GNH can be followed in the proceedings of the conferences on the topic organized by the Centre for Bhutan Studies (www.bhutanstudies.org.bt).
15. Another similar case is how the Tibetan exile government reinvented Tibetan culture as “green” in the 1990s; see Huber (1997) and Esler (2016).
16. Just like the Bhutan National Product (BNP) and, to a certain extent, the HDI indexes are criticized for looking at development from a purely economic and not human wellness perspective. See, for example, Budathoki (2019).
17. Michael Hutt (2005) calls the eviction of the Lhotshampas a “demolition of the Nepali in Bhutan,” the “purification by expulsion” strategy as mentioned by Peter van der Veer in this volume. See also Budathoki (2019).
18. There are, however, many oblique references to Buddhist doctrine (Ferraro 2012, 421).
19. For his more recent discussion on the topic of religious nationalism, see Juergensmeyer (2010).
20. As argued in this volume by van der Veer about Hindu nationalism in India.
21. *Tsethars* are not just performed by monastic institutions, for there are *tshokpas* (groups of representatives) that conduct them as well. These are conducted with donations collected from ordinary citizens. As a result, many social issues are caused by such organizations concerning saved animals released in rural areas.
22. Among the constitutional theocracies listed by Ran Hirschl (2010) are “Islamic states” like Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Tunisia. “Buddhist states” that can be added to the list are, for instance, Sri Lanka and Thailand.
23. “Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance” (RGOP 2008, 9). Article 3§3 then states that all religious institutions must preserve the spiritual heritage of the country but not get involved in politics: “Religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics” (ibid.).
24. Resolutions (translation) of the 3rd session of the National Council of Bhutan, 9th day of the 5th month of the Female Earth Ox Year corresponding to July 1, 2009, 30.
25. Apart from JAST and Samchen Tsochap Tshogpa there are a number of organizations and animal shelters, some of them foreign sponsored, engaged in animal welfare, such as BARC For Animal Welfare, Royal Society for the Protection and Care for Animals, and the Maya Foundation.

26. Our study is based on information obtained during ethnographic research conducted by Mari Miyamoto in various parts of Bhutan from 2002 to the present. The work done by Miyamoto is supplemented with material collected from the Bhutanese national English newspaper *Kuensel* and other sources. Her data have then been jointly analyzed with the co-authors, Jan Magnusson and Frank Korom.

27. See Magnusson's contribution to this special issue for an elaboration on Scott's (2009) concept of what he calls "jellyfishing."

28. The term "unnecessary cattle" first appeared in Bhutan in a policy tract and was a bewildering concept to the villagers. The policy also coincided with the somewhat contradictory project to cross breed Bhutanese and Swiss cattle.

29. For a discussion of cow slaughter in Nepal, see Mara Malagodi's article in this issue.

30. In 2014, Bhutan imported 10,336 metric tons of meat products worth Nu 1.37 billion from India and Thailand, making Bhutan the highest per capita meat consumer in South Asia, with roughly 13.5 kilos of meat per capita annually; see Dema (2015). This increasing demand has thus led to the recent development of private slaughterhouses throughout Bhutan, so long as the owners adhere to the Livestock Rules and Regulations of Bhutan 2017; see Yangdon (2019). Meat consumption also varies depending on rural versus urban populations; see Asian Development Bank (2013, 38).

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