Cultural Quick Guide: BHUTAN

This guide is intended to help Boise State University (BSU) students and community volunteers prepare for their service experience with refugee resettlement agencies. Learning about a refugee’s nation of origin, languages, and cultures is fundamental to understanding who they are and thus more effectively helping them integrate into American culture. Additionally, tips for teaching English and interacting socially will improve communication and the chances of a successful experience for both the volunteer and the refugee. It takes many human-service professionals as well as volunteers from the community to participate in refugee resettlement program. Thank you for helping to welcome refugees to our community.

Where is Bhutan?

Bhutan is an ancient country nestled in Asia’s Himalayan Mountains (see figure 1). Bhutan shares borders with India to the south and Chinese Tibet to the north. Nepal is nearby to the west and Bangladesh is nearby to the south (see figure 2). About the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined, Bhutan is home to an estimated 690,000 people [3]. With a population of 43,000 [4], the capital Thimphu is the largest city and about the size of Moscow, Idaho.

Climate

Boise’s refugees are from the lowlands of southern Bhutan. This area is graced by a humid subtropical climate with year-around temperatures ranging from 60 to 85°F. While most of Boise’s precipitation arrives in the cold winter months, most of southern Bhutan’s arrives on the warm monsoon winds of summer. These bring heavy rainfall and high humidity from late June through late September. Precipitation can total over 12 feet each year, in contrast to Boise’s 12 inches per year.

Moving north from the lowlands, temperatures fall with increasing elevation to the permanently snow-covered Himalayas. These include the highest unclimbed peak in the world, 22,623-foot Gangkhar Puensum [5]. This is the region of the cold winter monsoon winds that gave Bhutan its traditional name, Drukyul, or the Land of the Thunder Dragon in the Dzongkha language. A
dragon also appears on the country’s flag (see Figure 3).

Hydroelectric dams along Bhutan’s many rivers provide the country’s power needs plus a large surplus for export [3]. Agriculture and forestry are the basis of the economy, employing about 60% of the population [3] and providing oranges, apples, timber and cardamom for export. (For more facts about Bhutan see box 1).

In contrast to the widespread deforestation in many parts of the world, nearly 75% of Bhutan is still forested and over a third of the country is protected in parks. Tourists are attracted to Bhutan’s abundant wildlife (elephants, tigers, rhinos, snow leopards, red pandas…and perhaps yeti, the Abominable Snowman of Asia); Bhutan’s unique flora (including many beautiful species of Rhododendrons and Orchids); and to the country’s distinctive cultural events.

**History and politics of Refugee Problem**

The great majority of Bhutanese refugees are descendants of people who in the late 1800s began immigrating to southern Bhutan—lowland, malarial-infested regions shunned by the Druk Buddhist majority—in search of farmland. There they became known as Lhotsampas (“People of the South”). Contact between the Druk in the north and the Lhotsampas in the south was limited, and over the years, the Lhotsampas retained their highly distinctive Nepali language, culture, and religion. Relations between the groups were for the most part conflict free. Under Bhutan’s Nationality Law of 1958, the Lhotsampas enjoyed Bhutanese citizenship and were allowed to hold government jobs. In the 1980s, however, Bhutan’s king and the ruling Druk majority became increasingly worried about the rapidly growing Lhotsampa population. Concerned that the demographic shift could threaten the majority position and traditional Buddhist culture of the Druk, Bhutanese authorities adopted a series of policies known as Bhutanization, aimed at unifying the country under the Druk culture, religion, and language. The policies imposed the Druk dress code and customs on the Lhotsampas and prohibited the use of the Nepali language in schools. Nepali teachers were dismissed, and Nepali books were reportedly burned. The government also established new eligibility requirements for Bhutanese citizenship that disenfranchised many ethnic Nepalis, depriving them of their citizenship and civil rights. When the Lhotsampas began to organize politically to protest the policies, the authorities declared the activities subversive and unlawful. Some Lhotsampas became activists in the Bhutanese People’s Party, which called for Bhutan’s democratization. Smaller ethnic communities also began to advocate for a more democratic political system. In 1990, large-scale protests led to violent clashes with the police and army and to mass arrests. Ethnic Nepalis were targeted by the Bhutanese authorities, who destroyed the Nepalis’ property and arrested and tortured activists.
Individuals were forced to sign so-called “voluntary migration certificates” before being expelled from the country. In December 1990, the authorities announced that Lhotsampas who could not prove they had been residents of Bhutan in 1958 had to leave. Tens of thousands fled to Nepal and the Indian state of West Bengal [8].

**What was life like in Bhutan?**

The Drukpa culture dominates the politics and culture of Bhutan. Boise’s refugees, in contrast, are ethnic Nepalese from Bhutan’s southern region. Citizens of eastern Nepal were encouraged to immigrate to Bhutan and settle in its southern region beginning in the late 19th century. They established farms in the area, retaining their Nepalese language and customs and forming a Hindu minority in a largely Buddhist country. The Bhutanese government works to maintain a high level of “Gross National Happiness”, to remind its citizens that economic growth is not the most important metric for development and that people need a balance between spiritual and material wealth.

**Family and food**

Most ethnic Nepalese residents of southern Bhutan were farmers, growing primarily rice, with some working as teachers or weavers. The mild climate of the area made homes constructed of local bamboo practical and economical. Before the conflict that led to them leaving the country, Nepalese-speaking Bhutanese may have made up as much as 40% of the country’s population [7].

An average-sized family of Bhutanese refugees is about eight people and typically includes three generations of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Polygamy, while not common, is practiced: Of the more than 15,000 households in the camps, there are more than 500 with a polygamous marriage or relationship within the household. Often the two wives are sisters or other blood relatives, and in some cases, one of the women is disabled or otherwise in need of special help. Gender roles are distinct and clearly defined. Girls experience heavier household workloads than boys, a distinction that continues into adulthood. Women generally do not have equal access to information and resources and do not enjoy equal decision-making authority in the family and the community. In certain social groups, divorced and widowed women have a low position within the extended family and often must raise children without the support of family members. A female victim of sexual abuse or rape and her family typically face ostracism and harassment by the community. [8].

Girls and women commonly cook rice, lentil dishes (*dal bhat*), and curries. As Hindus, most abstain from pork and beef, but do eat fish, goat, and chicken. Most do not drink alcohol or smoke tobacco.

**Dress and festivals**

Hindu women from Bhutan traditionally wear a *sari*, the elegant wrap dress also worn in India. However, many young women wear a *kurtha-suruwal*, consisting of a tunic and pants, as they find it more practical and comfortable than a *sari*. Hindu men from Bhutan
typically wear a *daura-suruwal*, which is a pants and tunic, with a traditional hat known as a *dhaka topi*.

Bhutanese refugees celebrate many Hindu festivals throughout the year. *Tihar*, the Festival of Lights, lasts for several days in fall and is remembered with great fondness by Boise’s refugees. A different animal important in the Hindu religion is fed and blessed each day of the festival. Crows are honored on the first day, followed by dogs, cows and oxen. On the last day girls honor their brothers by giving them *tika* (the mixture of red powder, rice and yogurt that is applied to the forehead) and flower garlands and praying for their long life.

**What was the refugees’ journey?**

Boise’s Bhutanese refugees did not choose to leave their country. They were forced to flee, leaving behind their land, homes, and communities and becoming separated from members of their families. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many Bhutanese refugees say they want to return to their homes in Bhutan. Despite this desire—and despite numerous high-level meetings between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to resolve the refugee crisis over the past 16 years—Bhutan has not permitted a single refugee to return home. Local integration has not been possible for political reasons. Moreover, Nepali government policy denies the refugees two basic rights that are prerequisites for local integration: freedom of movement and the right to work and earn a living. Only a small number of refugees have been able to acquire legal citizenship in Nepal. This occurs through marriage or descent. With neither repatriation nor local integration a realistic possibility for the great majority of refugees, resettlement to a third country, such as the United States, has emerged as the only durable solution to the 16-year-old problem. The plan to resettle the refugees has been a divisive issue in the camps. While many welcome the chance to begin new lives in other countries, a group of politically active refugees opposes the resettlement plan, saying that repatriation to Bhutan is the only acceptable solution.

**Conflict and flight**

Increasing emphasis on the majority Drukpa culture and their Dzongkha language in the late 1980’s began to set the ethnic Nepalese minority apart. The Citizenship Act of 1985 strictly limited citizenship to those who could prove their families had been living in Bhutan in 1958 or whose parents were both Bhutanese citizens. Although the government stated that the measure was to control illegal immigration, it stripped tens of thousands of ethnic Nepalese of their Bhutanese citizenship.

Demands for full citizenship and equal rights by ethnic Nepalese were met by increasing repression by the Drukpa government. Friction between ethnic Nepalese and ethnic Drukpa erupted into violence in September 1990. This was followed by increased pressure on ethnic Nepalese to give up their land and to “voluntarily” emigrate to refugee camps in Nepal.
The flood of emigrants peaked in early 1992, with 80,000 people arriving in the camps by the end of that year [9] (see figure 4). Since then numbers have increased to over 106,000 in 2005 [9] mostly due to children that have been born in the camps.

Most Bhutanese refugees left their homes hoping to return to their land and their lives once citizenship issues were resolved. However, the process of reviewing citizenship has been difficult and slow. After repeated meetings over many years and under mounting international pressure, the Bhutanese and Nepalese governments agreed in late 2000 to jointly evaluate the citizenship of each Bhutanese family in the camps.

Citizenship reviews began in the camps in March 2001 but moved slowly, taking more than two years. This process was made more difficult by the Bhutanese government’s program of settling other families onto lands left behind by the refugees. The restrictive conditions for return to Bhutan announced in late 2003 led to frustration and continued violence in the refugee camps.

**Life in refugee camps**

Bhutanese refugees represent 1/6 of the country’s population, the highest rate of refugees in the world. Approximately 107,000 refugees reside in seven camps in eastern Nepal. This includes equal numbers of males and females, of which 97% are ethnic Nepalese [8]. Of these, 60% are Hindu, 27% are Buddhist, and the remainder are Kirat, a form of animism. The percentage of Christians in each camp varies from 1% to 7% [8]. Nearly all refugees speak Nepali as a first or second language. UNHCR estimates that about 35% of the population has a functional knowledge of English.

According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, 40% of the refugee population is younger than 17 and has spent most of their lives in the camps. The Bhutanese run schools for the children, where they are taught in English. Due to the difficulty attracting teachers, some fear that the quality of education in the camps has started to decline.

Education in camp schools is conducted in Nepali and English and follows a modified version of the Bhutanese curriculum through Grade 10. Beyond Grade 10, students attend local Nepali schools outside of the camp. Some students have attended secondary schools and universities in India.

Conditions in the camps are difficult and many people are forced to seek work outside the camps in order to earn money to supplement the supplies provided. Social problems, such
as depression and anxiety are common and friction between refugees favoring return to Bhutan and those favoring resettlement in a third country adds to the tension.

Some of Boise’s Bhutanese refugees lost most of their belongings and savings when the Goldhap refugee camp burned on March 1, 2008 [11]. With nearly the entire camp destroyed, refugees lived in the forest in makeshift tents of plastic sheeting before leaving for settlement in other countries.

Today, tens of thousands of refugees still in the camps face uncertain futures as they await return to Bhutan or resettlement in a third country. The United States agreed to resettle up to 60,000 Bhutanese refugees, who began arriving in March, 2008.

**Life in Boise**

Bhutanese refugees began arriving in Boise in 2008. Approximately 300 have arrived as of early 2009. Older refugees face tremendous challenges finding suitable jobs while learning a new language and adapting to a new culture and a new climate. Younger refugees learned English in the camps and typically have an easier time finding work.

**What Activities Might I do with Refugees?**

According to past volunteers, every activity is a learning opportunity for refugees. A good first step may be sharing a meal in the refugee’s home to get acquainted with the family and help them practice speaking English. Once refugees feel comfortable, outings in town provide first-hand experiences with American culture.

In addition to the activities suggested below, refugees might have specific errands in mind. Volunteers are encouraged to plan activities within walking distance or take public transportation instead of using their own vehicles.

- Share a meal with Bhutanese refugees at the Dream Café (http://boisedreamcafe.com or 208-338-6632) at 3110 S. Brown Way, serves foods created by refugee chefs, including one from Bhutan, on Wednesday evenings.
- Attend Refugee Day in Boise, usually the third weekend in June.
- Shop at the India Market, 602 N Orchard St., which carries foods such as lentils, rice and spices.
- Meet refugees at The English Language Center (located at 1607 W. Jefferson Street) for tutoring resources. This is a familiar meeting spot for refugees.
- Show refugees the resources available close to their homes such as the bus stop, parks, houses of worship, post office, stores and health care clinics.
- Role play daily-life scenarios such as, boarding a bus, going to a health clinic and purchasing something.
- Show them where to shop for food and introduce them to English names for common foods.
- Take them to the bakery on campus at the Culinary Arts Institute.
- Show refugees specialty shops like thrift, consignment and outlet.
- Take them to see some of Boise City’s intramural sports games and show them how to sign up (www.cityofboise.org).
- Take refugees to ride a Valley Ride bus, teach them how to learn the routes and practice making change (www.valleyride.org).
- Take them to the movies (nonviolent ones).
- Meet children after school and walk to a park to practice English or play games.
- Go to the public library together and show them how to get a card, check out books and read the paper. The Hillcrest Branch, at 5246 Overland, welcomes refugees with a variety of classes and programs.
- Help them fill out forms such as job applications.
- Invite refugees to cultural events at BSU and around Boise such as the International festival and concerts (www.boiseweekly.com; www.bsuevents.com).

Is it something I said?

Remember that as Hindus, most Bhutanese refugees are largely vegetarians, although they do occasionally eat fish, goat or chicken. They typically neither drink alcohol or smoke.

When visiting a Bhutanese home it is polite to remove your shoes and leave them by the front door. It is best to wear modest clothing, which means long pants rather than shorts, no short skirts, and no bare chests or midriffs. Even younger refugees are shocked by public displays of affection between men and women.

When arriving, it is appropriate to greet people by saying “Namaste” while holding your hands folded, palms flat together, in front of your chin. It is then appropriate to introduce yourself, giving your first name, ("Mero naam [name] ho") and to ask others what their names are (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Common phrases in Nepalese</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Namaste.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hajur.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tapai lai kasto cha?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thik cha.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khana khannu bhaiyo?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dhanaybhad</td>
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<td>Tapai ko naam ke ho?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mero naam Mary ho.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mero kaam [student] ho.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maaph garnuhois</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maile bhujhe.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maile bhujhina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pheri bhetaunla.</td>
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</table>

Table 1 Continued

|                               | Good-bye. |
|                               | Yes.      |
### Where can I learn more?

The websites listed below provide more information on refugees and links to helpful resources.

- **Idaho Office for Refugees** - http://www.idahorefugees.org
  The Idaho Office for Refugees (IOR) works to promote mutual understanding between refugees and the larger community by sharing information, encouraging social interaction and developing opportunities for refugees to participate in all aspects of community life.

- **Agency for New Americans** - www.anaidaho.org
  The Agency for New Americans (ANA) provides case management, employment services, immigration assistance and services to older refugees under agreement with the Idaho Office for Refugees.

- **Kwintessential** - http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/
  This site contains a wealth of cross cultural training information, including interaction tips and cultural quizzes.

- **Refugee Resources for Service Learning** - http://guides.boisestate.edu/refugees
  This is a collection of refugee resources for service learning students at the Albertsons Library.

- **Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)** - http://www.cal.org/co/
  CAL is focused on improving communication through better understanding of language and culture.
The websites listed below provide information specific to Bhutanese refugees:

  A joint project of the European group PhotoVoice and the Bhutanese Refugee Support Group, based in the UK, this website documents life in the camps through the refugees own photographs and words.
- Bhutanese Refugee Crisis in Nepal - http://the-voyagers.tripod.com/refugees.htm
  This is part of the website Nepal Focus.
  Information on Bhutan and links to news stories.
- The Bhutanese Refugees - http://www.chhahari.com/bhutan
  Describes working as a Red Cross volunteer in a refugee camp in 1994.
- From Bhutan to the Bronx - http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7372916.stm
  Refugees describe the transition from refugee camp to New York City.
- Durable Solution To Bhutanese Refugee Problem - http://durable solution.blogspot.com/
  A collection of news stories about Bhutanese refugees from around the world, with online comments. Includes stories describing difficulties adjusting to life in the US.

The YouTube videos below provide additional insight into the lives of Bhutanese refugees.

- Bhutan's deprived refugees - 23 Mar 08
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFEZMFnL0tE &feature=channel
  Describes life as a Hindu minority in Bhutan,
- Ethnic Cleansing of a Nation - Bhutan
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1yWZ6j4W5A&NR=1
  A journalist describes the Bhutanese refugee situation, visiting both the camps and Bhutan.
- Walking in their Shoes
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJ uf3FrNJa
  Australian teachers describe visiting schools in Bhutanese refugee camps in December 2007. Also includes general information about the camps and the lives of children there.
- From Bhutan to Syracuse: Hari Adhikari - A Man of the People
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DryNAyeFD08
  A Bhutanese human rights activist describes his journey to the US, including time spent in prison in Bhutan and refugee camps in Nepal.
- Bhutan Refugees Welcomed to Cincinnati
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjGLEtNHF1I&feature=related
  The first Bhutanese refugee family arrives in Cincinnati and talks about their escape from Bhutan and life in a refugee camp.
- Bhutanese Nepali cultural programme in Colorado
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kjy9Z54jKsY
Illustrates the refugee’s music, dancing (note that women dance with women and men dance with men) and dress.

References