

Special Section Research Article

## Monk Picnic

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### Abstract

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On his first day in Bhutan, the author remembers witnessing a sunrise and meeting monk Tenzin. They embark on a journey to a monk picnic, welcomed warmly by Buddhist nuns into a van. The author's clumsy attempt to offer khadar causes laughter, but the accomplished master kindly corrects him. They enjoy a colorful feast, share laughter, and forget their ride home. Tenzin expresses gratitude, and the author reciprocates, walking back, shoes muddy but heart aglow. The author considers the sunset's promise of many more suns and moons to come in the Kingdom. A tale of friendship, laughter, humility and cultural exchange.

### Keywords

Bhutan; Buddhism; lived religion; ethnography; fieldwork

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The sun rises in the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon. This is the first of many suns and moons. *Nima Dawa. Nima Dawa.*

My eyes follow beams of light across the valley.

Later, my new leather shoes trace rice paddy trails. Matching my stride across the field is a man in a maroon robe. A yellow cloth bag hangs loosely from his shoulder. He is dwarfed by the looming palace behind him.

We meet at the road, each with beaming smiles. Tenzin is the teacher. David is the student.

“Would you like to go to a monk picnic?” he asks.

“Of course,” I answer.

‘*Lasoooo la.*’ New words, but also familiar.

We stand together while windblown willows line the street, waiting for... something. I follow Tenzin’s gaze up the road towards the hills. We hear a distant, gentle rumble blowing in from the North. The sound gets closer. Soon, a vehicle roars around the corner.

A smile of recognition emerges from behind Tenzin’s spectacles.

“Our ride is here.”

We step to the roadside as this steel and glass dragon slows, and one silver wing opens. Inside, five Buddhist nuns welcome us: ‘*Kuzuzangpo la.*’ Maroon austerity. Opulent smiles. I find a seat amongst the robes and the dragon roars forward. The world is a blur. We pass *dzong*; pass *throm kha*; pass *stupa* and billowing clouds of burning juniper. I breathe in these offerings.

Worlds swirl back into focus as we disembark and return to walking, turning onto packed stones. My eyes fly up, up, up. The Tiger’s Nest clings to the mountainside, nestled in clouds.

I step through the gate of the temple into a courtyard of red robes and conversation,

the monk picnic. At the center of the courtyard are three chairs, three teachers. Golden bowls of fruit and sweets, together with cups of steaming tea, rest atop a rainbow of silk brocade.

Tenzin hands me a white silk scarf, *khadar*. I hold it loosely, blankly, forgetting my own name as one hundred eyes land upon me. I approach the three teachers, the *khadar* in my palms. I step forward and begin to drape the *khadar* on the shoulders of the reincarnated master himself, Dzongkhar Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche. He looks up at me, eyes wide with surprise, sparkling with amusement, as a sea of red robes erupts in laughter.

I step back, embarrassed, my face scarlet.

“It’s okay”, laughs the accomplished master. “Like this.” He takes the *khadar* from my hands and places it over my bowed head. My smile finds me again. Laughter tumbles out of me, joins the chorus. I bow, step backwards, and turn again towards the willows. Tenzin is laughing, pointing at me – the fool.

We walk beneath the trees to tables lined with giant silver pots. Red rice. Green chilies. Yellow cheese. Tenzin hands me a plate with a warning this time. “It might be too spicy for you.”

Foolishness proving itself boundless, I spoon up every color. Sitting on a patch of grass, between the maroon robes, my face flushes with heat. I laugh again at myself. Tenzin smiles again. We watch as monks and nuns perform. Songs and stories spiral from speakers. Words of respect and welcome are offered to the great masters and to the lone, bumbling jester now seated on the grass, my face still scarlet, as red as robes, as red as chilies.

As the red rice dwindles and the chilies disappear, Tenzin and I talk. We laugh. We forget that our glass and steel dragon is waiting.

Eventually, we walk away from the picnic. The dragon’s silver wings slide open and we climb in. The world again becomes a blur. Willow branches part, clouds of burning juniper billow. We pass *stupa*; pass *throm*

*kha*; pass *dzong*. The road beside the paddy field is now covered in grey shadows. I step out and turn to face Tenzin.

“I am glad you came,” says the teacher. “Me too,” says the student.

The steel and glass dragon thunders back towards the hills. My face is now flushed with happiness. I continue my walk, leather shoes re-tracing the morning’s steps. It is wet and muddy on the rice paddy trails. My shoes are no longer new. My gaze settles on the far side of the field, under the moon. The first of many moons and suns. *Dawa Nima. Dawa Nima.*

David M. Hecht (PhD, Integrative Conservation & Anthropology, University of Georgia) is an environmental anthropologist and conservation social scientist. He is an international research partner with the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN), Bhutan’s oldest non-profit conservation organization. In his research, he prioritizes collaborative and participatory methods to center local knowledge and lived experiences of complex landscapes in conservation and development arenas. David is a National Geographic Explorer and Fellow with the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research.

This piece describes a vivid memory from my first day in Bhutan, now nearly a decade ago. It is a storied reflection on the encountered kindness of others and the patience shown to me in the depths of my ignorance. While I aspire towards deepening ways of understanding and relating to kindred others and the cultural worlds they inhabit, I know that I am in a perpetual state of unknowing; that working to overcoming pride, ego, and assumptions is a practice rooted in humility. This moment laid a foundation for this continuing lesson during my collaborative research and ethnographic fieldwork.