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A History of Bhutan

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Introduction

Nestled in the eastern Himalayas and often enveloped in clouds, Bhutan—known to its people as Drukylul, "the Land of the Thunder Dragon"—holds a unique place on the world's historical and cultural map. With its formidable mountains and centuries of self-imposed isolation, Bhutan has nurtured a civilization deeply connected to nature and profoundly shaped by the teachings of Buddhism. Over the course of millennia, this resilient kingdom has forged a path that stands apart from the larger, more tumultuous histories of its Himalayan neighbors.

Bhutan's origins are shrouded in myth and legend, with archaeological evidence hinting at human settlement as far back as 2000 BC. Early inhabitants, such as the Monpa and Sharchop peoples, built societies that revered nature and practiced local animistic religions. Their stories form the groundwork of Bhutanese folklore, providing a sense of continuity and rootedness that survives to this day. The arrival of Buddhism in the 7th and 8th centuries represented a turning point, planting spiritual seeds that would ultimately transform Bhutan's identity and cultural landscape.

The spread of Buddhism, aided by figures such as King Songtsän Gampo and the revered Guru Rimpoche (Padmasambhava), not only reshaped religious and philosophical perspectives but also served as a unifying force for the disparate communities of the region. Over centuries, these traditions intertwined with local customs, producing the distinctive Bhutanese expression of Buddhist practice that persists today, particularly in the revered Drukpa Kagyu school.

Political unity eluded Bhutan until the 17th century, when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal emerged as a charismatic leader capable of consolidating the country's warring provinces. His establishment of the dual system of governance, the building of monumental dzongs, and efforts to define a separate Bhutanese identity set the stage for modern nationhood. Yet, for the next two centuries, Bhutan would face internal rivalries, civil strife, and pressure from bordering empires—a turbulent era that tested the young nation's endurance.

The encounter with British India in the 18th and 19th centuries signaled new challenges as global geopolitics began to encroach on Bhutan's relative isolation. The rise of the hereditary monarchy in 1907, however, marked a new chapter, one focused on careful engagement with the outside world and balancing tradition with the demands of modern statehood. Under the Wangchuck dynasty, Bhutan underwent significant reforms, opening its doors incrementally to development and global relations while striving to preserve its unique identity.

Today, Bhutan stands as a rare example of measured modernization. With the transition to democracy in the early 21st century, Bhutan reasserted its independence and set forth on a journey characterized by its philosophy of Gross National Happiness—a reflection of its enduring values. This book traces the historical currents that have shaped Bhutan, exploring not only the events themselves but the underlying spirit of a nation seeking harmony between old and new, between the world outside and the world within.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land of the Thunder Dragon: Geography and Early Settlement

Bhutan, the kingdom known as Drukyul, the Land of the Thunder Dragon, is a place defined as much by its terrain as by its history. Tucked away in the easternmost reaches of the Himalayas, it is a land of dramatic contrasts, where towering, snow-capped peaks scrape the sky and deep, verdant valleys lie hidden below, carved by powerful rivers. This formidable geography has been both a protector and a isolator, shaping the course of human settlement and interaction from the earliest times.

Imagine a land folded and creased like an ancient, weathered map. Bhutan is precisely that, a vertical country where elevation changes drastically over short distances. The southern borderlands, hugging the plains of India, sit at altitudes as low as 200 meters (about 650 feet), supporting subtropical forests and lush vegetation. Move north just a few dozen kilometers, and you rapidly ascend into temperate zones with oak and pine forests, eventually reaching alpine meadows and, finally, the realm of perpetual snow and ice, with peaks soaring over 7,000 meters (nearly 23,000 feet).

This dramatic verticality creates distinct climatic zones, supporting a remarkable biodiversity but also making travel and communication historically challenging. The major rivers, including the Amo Chhu (Torsa), Wang Chhu (Raidak), Punatsang Chhu (Sankosh), and Manas Chhu, originate in the northern glaciers and flow south through deep gorges and narrow valleys before emptying into the Brahmaputra River in India. These river systems form the primary arteries of the landscape, their valleys often the most habitable and fertile areas.

The rivers, while vital for life and agriculture, are also powerful forces, carving steep V-shaped valleys and making east-west travel particularly arduous. Historically, movement within Bhutan was often easier along the north-south axis, following river valleys or mountain passes. This geographical reality contributed to the fragmentation of early settlements and made centralized control difficult before the advent of strategically located fortresses.

The sheer ruggedness of the Himalayas has historically served as a formidable natural barrier. To the north lies the vast Tibetan plateau, separated by the highest ranges. To the south, the plains of India stretch out. This natural fortification, combined with later deliberate policies, meant that Bhutan remained largely shielded from the major political and military upheavals that swept through other parts of Asia. It wasn't that people couldn't get in or out, but rather that it wasn't easy, and large-scale movements were severely restricted.

While the majestic peaks like Gangkhar Puensum, the highest unclimbed mountain in the world, dominate the northern skyline, the inhabited heartland of Bhutan lies in the fertile valleys of the inner Himalayas. Places like Paro, Punakha, Wangdue Phodrang, Trongsa, and Bumthang are situated in these relatively broader valley floors, offering space for agriculture and concentrated settlements, often watered by the glacial rivers. These valleys became the cradles of early Bhutanese civilization.

Given this challenging environment, it's no surprise that deciphering Bhutan's earliest human history is akin to piecing together fragments from a mountain landslide. The steep slopes, dense forests, and harsh weather conditions have not been conducive to extensive archaeological work compared to more accessible regions of the world. Much of the very distant past remains speculative, built upon a mix of limited physical evidence and the rich tapestry of oral traditions that have been passed down through generations.

Despite these challenges, tantalizing clues exist, suggesting human presence in Bhutan long before the recorded history tied to the arrival of Buddhism or the formation of a unified state. Archaeological finds, including stone tools, provide some of the most concrete evidence of early hunter-gatherers or early agriculturalists inhabiting the valleys and lower mountain slopes. These tools, often found in river terraces or caves, speak of peoples adapting to the specific conditions of the Himalayan environment.

Estimates based on these findings suggest that humans were present in the region that is now Bhutan as early as 2000 BC, or perhaps even between 2000 and 1500 BC. This places the initial human footprint in the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age, a period when scattered populations across South and East Asia were beginning to transition from purely nomadic lifestyles to more settled agricultural practices. Whether these early inhabitants were permanent residents or transient groups moving through the valleys remains a subject of ongoing research.

Further archaeological evidence comes in the form of megaliths and other ancient structures found in various parts of the country, particularly in central Bhutan around the Bumthang valley. These structures, which can include standing stones or stone circles, are difficult to date precisely but are often associated with prehistoric or early historic populations. Their purpose – whether funerary, ritualistic, or territorial markers – is not entirely clear, adding to the mystery of these early peoples.

Some of these structures suggest a degree of social organization and perhaps even early forms of religious or spiritual practice centered around the landscape. The sheer effort required to move and erect large stones indicates a communal undertaking, hinting at settled communities rather than purely transient groups. These megaliths are silent witnesses to a time before written records, before the great religious and

political shifts that would later define Bhutan.

The identity of these very early settlers is largely unknown. Theories abound, often drawing on linguistic clues and comparisons with neighboring populations. Some scholars propose that the earliest inhabitants were likely related to indigenous groups who predated the migration of Tibeto-Burman or Indo-Aryan peoples into the broader Himalayan region. They might have been part of older migration waves, adapting to the specific ecological niches offered by the Bhutanese valleys.

It is important to distinguish these earliest theoretical inhabitants from the later, more clearly identifiable groups who would play a significant role in Bhutan's cultural and political formation. The people who left behind the stone tools and built the megaliths likely had distinct cultures and languages that are now lost to us, leaving only these material traces as a legacy. Their connection, if any, to the groups who were present when Buddhism arrived centuries later is a subject of ongoing debate among historians and anthropologists.

The challenges posed by the geography meant that early settlements were likely isolated from one another, developing distinct local customs and, potentially, dialects. Communication over mountain passes or through deep gorges would have been slow and dangerous. This geographical fragmentation would contribute to the lack of a unified political entity for a long period, with power often concentrated at the local or valley level rather than across the entire territory.

Despite the difficulties, the valleys offered sustenance. The rivers provided water for irrigation in the lower areas, and the diverse climate zones allowed for the cultivation of various crops depending on the altitude. The forests provided timber, fuel, and food. The mountains, while barriers, were also sources of valuable resources and offered protection. Early human survival in this landscape required ingenuity, resilience, and a deep understanding of the natural world.

The reverence for nature and the spirits associated with the mountains, rivers, and forests, which is a thread running through later Bhutanese culture, likely has its roots in these early interactions with the environment. For people whose daily lives were so intimately tied to the forces of nature, animistic beliefs and the appeasement of local deities would have been central to their worldview and survival strategies.

Understanding these early inhabitants and their relationship with the land is crucial for appreciating the layers of history that followed. They laid the groundwork, adapting to and surviving in a challenging terrain. While their specific names and stories may be lost to time, their presence shaped the initial human landscape of Bhutan, preparing the valleys, perhaps inadvertently, for the cultural and political transformations that were still centuries in the future. Their legacy is etched not in written records, but in the enduring human connection to the land itself.

The difficult terrain also meant that while neighboring civilizations and empires rose and fell, Bhutan remained somewhat off the beaten path. It was not a major trade route between India and Tibet in the same way that passes further west were. This relative obscurity, stemming directly from its geography, meant that its history would develop along a unique trajectory, less influenced by the large-scale movements of armies and populations that characterized the history of more accessible regions.

The scattered nature of early settlements also meant that various forms of social organization likely developed independently in different valleys. There was no single center of power or culture. Instead, loosely connected communities, perhaps organized around kin groups or local leaders, navigated the challenges of their specific valley environments. This decentralized structure would persist for centuries, contributing to the later fragmentation that characterized Bhutanese politics before unification.

The transition from purely nomadic lifestyles to more settled communities would have been a gradual process, likely occurring at different times in different valleys depending on the availability of resources and suitable land for cultivation. The archaeological evidence of structures and potential agricultural tools supports the idea of at least semi-permanent settlements existing well before the more prominent historical periods.

While direct evidence is scarce, it is plausible that these early peoples engaged in subsistence agriculture, supplemented by hunting and gathering. The specific crops they cultivated and the animals they hunted are largely unknown, but they would have been those adapted to the Himalayan climate and ecosystem. Their technologies would have been relatively simple, based on stone, bone, and possibly early metalworking techniques, though evidence for the latter from such an early period is limited.

The megaliths and other potential ritualistic sites suggest a complex inner life and a worldview that extended beyond mere survival. They speak of beliefs about death, the afterlife, or the power of nature, indicating that these early Bhutanese were not just physically adapting to their environment but also creating systems of meaning and connection to the world around them. These ancient practices might have left subtle traces on the later religious landscape, even after the arrival of Buddhism.

In essence, Chapter One begins the story by setting the stage – a dramatic, mountainous landscape that dictated terms to its earliest human inhabitants. It highlights the limited but significant archaeological evidence suggesting a presence dating back thousands of years, hinting at the resilience required to survive in such a place. While the specific identities and detailed histories of these pioneering peoples remain largely unknown, their initial adaptation to the valleys and slopes of the future

Land of the Thunder Dragon provides the foundation upon which all subsequent history would be built. They were the first to carve a living from these formidable mountains, their faint traces awaiting further discovery.

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