



Bhutanese in the US: An Overview for Torture Treatment Programs

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OBJECTIVES

- Describe the history and culture of Bhutanese refugees in the US
- Describe the refugee experience of Bhutanese before coming to the United States and where and how torture might have occurred
- Recognize the impact of trauma on the mental health of Bhutanese refugees and typical approaches to psychological distress
- Describe some tips on managing Bhutanese refugees' expectations now that they are in the US

Bhutan: Quick Facts

- Small country – 18k sq. miles; pop: 600k
- Multi-racial, multi-ethnic; multi-linguistic
- Subsistence agriculture
- Literacy – 60%, women – 49%
- Culture/Religion: Tibetan in the north; Nepali in the South
- Buddhists and Hindus; few Christians and animists
- Dzongkha in the north; Sarchhop in the east and Nepali in the south

The North



The South (refugees)



Three major socio-political groups

- Ngalongs – monarchy, Elites, north-west, rulers, nomads (have political and economic power)
- Sarchhop – East, diff language, diff religious sect, farmers (demographic majority)
- Nepalis (Lhotsampas)- south, farmers

Reources

- BBC country profile at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/country_profiles/1166513.stm
- UN data profile available at <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Bhutan>



The Bhutanese Refugees

- Lhotsampas - total of about 130,000 (1/6th of Bhutan's pop)
- More than 90% from the south – of Nepali origin; few Sarchhops from the east
- Mostly Hindus, Nepali-speaking people
- All of them owned land – subsistence farmers

Resources

- <http://www.photovoice.org/bhutan/>
- **CAL:**
<http://www.cal.org/co/overseas/bhutanese/Bhutanese-supplement.pdf>
- **IOM profile of Bhutanese refugees:**
http://www.peianc.com/sitefiles/File/resources/cultural_profiles/Bhutanese-Refugees-in-Nepal.pdf



Where did they come from?

- Migrated to Bhutan from Nepal between the 17th and 20th centuries
- Settled in the south, cleared land and worked the farms
- Recognized as citizens of Bhutan by a decree of the King in 1955
- Treated as second class citizens all along



Eviction

1988-1993

- Through civil officials, the army, police and local militias sponsored by the government
- Harassment, torture, intimidations, coercion, imprisonment, rape, Voluntary Migration Forms
- Justifications for Eviction: Citizenship Laws (illegal immigrants), voluntary emigrants
- Why?: Demographic fear, nearby movements for change, cultural cleansing

The atmosphere at eviction

- Arbitrary arrests, torture and detentions, gang rapes
- Schools turned into army barracks
- Health services closed, movement of goods and people banned
- Confiscation of citizenship cards and termination of employment
- Burning and demolition of houses;
- Fear and terror

Bhutanese Dances-Clash of Cultures?



TORTURE – inside Bhutan

- Torture was used to secure eviction:
 - humiliation-insults, degradation, forced labor
- Beating – blunt instruments, punches, slaps, rifle butts, boots, “rollers”
- Threats – of torture, eviction, rape
- Rape – for obedience, eviction, punishment
- Forced Positions – suspension, immobilization
- Imprisonment – jails, detention, temporary prisons
- Forced Confessions – Voluntary Migration Forms



What did they leave behind?

Land, Houses

Livestock

Family

Relatives

Friends

Peace

Certainty

Terraced paddies in Bhutan



Where did they go?

- Early phase— tea gardens in India
- Arrested by Indian forces in raids and taken to Nepal border
- Maidhar Camp in Nepal
 - No relief agencies
 - Self-care

Maidhar Camp (1990-91)



Then...?

- LWS, Red Cross, UNHCR arrive and establish camps
- Food rations and hut building materials arrive
- Schools, health centers start
- UNHCR screening camps set up at the border

Camps

- Administered by elected camp committees
- Nepalese Government, UNHCR
- About 40,000 resettled
- About 75000 in the camps
- Two Camps – Resettlement and Repatriation

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Continued persecution in the camps

- Rape (by camp inmates and Nepalese)
- Trafficking
- Intimidation and discrimination (by Nepalese police and authorities)
- Frequent torture and beatings by Nepalese police for small infractions
- Intimidation, threats and torture by Bhutanese militant groups
- Domestic Violence

Non-health issues in the camps

- Shame (due to dependency)
- Uncertainty (about the future)
- Monotony and Idleness (No right to work)
- Enduring the elements (inadequate shelter)
- Lack of adequate and quality food
- Inadequate education programs

Major Health Issues in Camp

- PTSD, Depression, chronic anxiety, psycho-somatic complaints, Dissociative Disorders
- Nutritional, dental and gastrointestinal problems
- TB, Malaria, Chronic Diarrhea, typhoid, Diabetes (not that common), high blood pressure, cancers (breast, tobacco), respiratory illnesses, beri-beri, vitamin deficiency

Resources

- Preventing Torture and Rehabilitating Survivors in Nepal by Center for the Victims of Torture (CVICT) in Kathmandu available at http://www.cvict.org.np/resources/articles/preventing_torture_and_rehabilitating_survivors_in_nepal.pdf. Accessed on 12/9/2010
- Impact of Torture on Refugees Displaced Within the Developing World - Symptomatology Among Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal, available at <http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/280/5/443.long>

How do you feel?

Expressions of psychological issues

- Dukha Lagyo- I feel sad.
- Wakka Lagyo – I feel irritated.
- Katkati khanchha – It hurts real sharp.
- Chwassai ghochchha – It hurts like being pierced.
- Uraath laagnu – I feel desolate/forlorn.
- Kasto kasto lagyo – I feel strange.

Why do you feel this way?

Usual explanations

- Karma ko phal – bad karma
- Graha Dasha – planetary alignment
- Pitri-kul deota – spirits of ancestors or family gods are unhappy
- Bhoot-pret – ghosts and spirits
- Saato janu – soul has been stolen
- Diet problems
- Imbalance of the three humors – wind, gall and mucus (Ayurvedic Traditions)
- Survivors of torture will generally attribute all health issues to torture

First Line of Defense

Traditional Healing Practices

- 7% of all refugees adults report being some kind of traditional healers
- Faith healing
 - Dhami/jhakri(Shaman); “Jumping Doctor”
 - Consulting an astrologer – leading to a ‘Puja’ –religious rites (worship) with the mediation of a priest – SCF initiative in camp
- Ayurvedic medicine
- The elderly find temple visits therapeutic

Jumping Doctors



Resources

- Healing Traditions in Nepal available at <http://www.aaimedicine.com/jaaim/sep06/Healing.pdf>. Accessed on 12/9/2010
- Abstract of “Mental Illness” Among Bhutanese Shamans in Nepal available at http://journals.lww.com/jonmd/Abstract/2004/04000/Mental_Illness_Among_Bhutanese_Shamans_in_Nepal.9.aspx. Accessed on 12/9/2010

Healthcare in the camps

- SCF has given way to AMDA (www.amda.org)
- Health centers in camps– weekly visits by docs
- 1 referral hospital + regional Nepali hospitals
- Problems: Queues, discrimination, disrespect, rationing, negligence
- No mental health care – except occasional psychiatric medication

Major Issues in the US

Health and Others

- All have been tested and treated for TB – Some may need additional medication after screening in the US
- Lack of Appetite – getting used to western food or store-bought vegetables
- Mental Health Disorders – sadness, somatic complaints, suicidal ideation, a profound sense of isolation (lack of closeness to friends, families in a strange land) and a feeling of permanent dislocation among elders
- ‘Standing on their own feet’ in more than two decades – takes a toll
- Change in gender roles – women in some families taking charge
- Change in generational roles – children are in-charge (language)
- Most health issues from the camps continue

Resources

- Mental Health of Karen and Bhutanese refugee Families in the Child Welfare System, available at <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/research/posterpdfs/Shanon-Wieling-MH-Poster.pdf>, Accessed on 12-11-2010
- Exploring the psychology of Bhutanese Refugees in New York City (video) on <http://refugeesyndrome.com/>. Accessed on 12-14-2010

Understanding the Bhutanese

- Patriarchal society
- Marriages -the bride goes to live at the groom's house with groom's family members
- Extended family – everyone is an aunt or an uncle or a brother or a sister
- Diet – Rice, lentil, vegetable, mutton and chicken. Spices used abundantly
- Milk tea served to guests
- Most do not eat beef and pork. Elderly from the “higher castes” do not drink alcohol

Working with them

- Privacy is not a big deal – they will want to know if you are married, have children etc. Play along.
- You can go visit them without advance notice – it is not considered rude, but it may be a good idea to impress on them to learn to call them before visiting both at work or home.
- Be gently firm and specific – particularly about timeliness and responsibility

Social Etiquette

- Refrain from shaking hands with the opposite sex – Namastey!
- Take off your shoes when visiting homes – don't ask if you should
- It is ok to decline an offer to eat or drink. When offered more than once, partake of the least cumbersome to prepare. “I will have some water, then.”

Social Norms

- Caste System
- Birth – the mother is considered ‘impure’ for three days after birth. It is ok to visit then, but the family may not offer any food to visitors until a ‘purification’ ceremony.
- Deaths and funerals are sacred events. Visit the family to pay respects and offer condolences, but understand where you are allowed to go in the house. Do not touch the dead body. Last rites sometimes last for 2 weeks.
- Marriages are sacred too, but they are events of celebration. Attend when invited. Invitations may not be extended primarily because of limited resources. It is ok to send gifts though.

Personal Issues

- Reinforce importance of punctuality. 8 AM usually means Eight-ish.
- Getting things done – be specific about what needs to be done. Completing a survey does not mean being half way through it.
- Excuses – you will hear lots of them.
- Beware – commitments may be taken lightly and not seen through. Reminders help.

Unrealistic Expectations

- Dependency in the refugee camps for 2 decades has conditioned them to have things done for them. Help them unlearn the helplessness.
- The orientation they receive is inadequate, rushed and inaccurate. Leads to unrealistic expectations, which then leads to depression.
- They do not trust their own leaders from experience. New community organizations being set up are facing backlash – lack of trust, pre-conceived ideas that Bhutanese organizations are set up to “milk” the government and the refugees.

Where do they get their information?

- www.bhutannewsservice.com
- www.bhutantimes.com
- Googlegroups
- www.nepalnews.com
- Facebook pages; Blogs

Reports and Projects

- Human Rights Watch Report – Last Hope
- Bhutanese Refugee Empowerment Project -SEWA International
- Bhutanese Community Program - ABA

Bhutanese Organizations in the US

- Association of Bhutanese in America
- **Bhutanese Community of Arizona**
- Bhutanese Community in Georgia
- Bhutanese Community of Nebraska
- Bhutanese Community in Pittsburgh
- Bhutanese Community Support Organization – CA



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