

Bhutanese Refugee Families

This resource provides general cultural information, while recognizing that every family is unique and that cultural practices will vary by household and by generation. Several Bhutanese community leaders were interviewed for this background. While general information is provided here, it is best to get to know each family and learn their unique characteristics; whenever possible, ask members of the community about different cultural practices.



Background

Since 2007, over 60,000 Bhutanese refugees have been resettled to the United States from refugee camps in Eastern Nepal (U.S. Department of State, 2012). Originally, this minority group migrated from Nepal in the 19th century. In the 1990s they experienced repression in Bhutan and fled to neighboring Nepal. Sometimes referred to as Lhotsampas, almost all of the Bhutanese refugees speak Nepali and some may also speak English.

Practice Tip:

“Namaste” is a typical greeting, used when saying hello and goodbye. Literally it means, “I bow to you,” and may be accompanied by palms pressed together.

Culture and Religion

Most Bhutanese refugees are Hindu, though a fair number are Buddhist or Christian. They follow the Nepali calendar, which differs from the Gregorian calendar used in the U.S. Thus, holiday dates vary from year-to-year. There are many Nepali holidays, but some of the most significant include:

- **Dasain (called Dashara by some Bhutanese):** This major holiday, which celebrates the victory of good over evil, is observed for 15 days, with the 8th, 9th and 10th days being the most important. This holiday typically occurs in early October.
- **Tihar (called Diwali in India):** Falling three weeks after Dasain, usually in late October to early November, the festival of lights is celebrated for five days, with the 3rd and 5th days being the most important. The 5th day is brother/sister day, when sisters put a blessing on their brothers' heads.
- **Nepali New Year:** Celebrated in mid-April.
- **Buddha Jayanti:** A celebration of the birth of Buddha in early May.

Practice Tip:

Fasting is a common practice among Bhutanese refugees, especially during the holidays.

The cow is considered sacred to Hindus, thus Hindus typically will not eat beef while some also abstain from pork.

Some Bhutanese refugees are vegetarians, and a few are vegan. Rice, lentils, and curry are diet staples. Those who eat meat may prefer goat, mutton, chicken or fish. Modern cooking appliances may be new to some families.

Practice Tip:

Bhutanese refugees may shake their heads from side to side to mean “yes” or “maybe”. To an American, this gesture may be interpreted as shaking one’s head to say “no”.

Family and Community

Bhutanese culture incorporates both caste and clan. Older refugees may be more observant of caste than younger refugees. Caste structure is similar to that found in Nepal, and—while different—may be understood by Americans in terms of one’s social class within society. Clan is indicated by one’s last name and signifies familial connections. Those outside the culture are not expected to understand the complex dynamics of caste and clan.

Practice Tip:

While caste is not observed in the U.S., it remains an important social construct for refugees from Bhutan. Although programs cannot be expected to make special accommodations, caste structure may determine where families feel most comfortable sitting during social events and other activities.

Marriages are traditionally expected to occur outside of one’s clan but within one’s caste. Naming practices are similar to traditional U.S. practice: wives and children take the man’s last name. Newborns may receive their name during a naming ceremony shortly after birth. It is not uncommon for males to show platonic affection for one another, which may include hugging or holding hands.

Traditionally Bhutanese families have been patriarchal, with husbands acting as the decision-maker. Husbands typically work outside the home while wives care for children and take care of the household. However, in Bhutan, women often share responsibility for farming and other outside work (Maxym, 2010), and here in the U.S., women may work outside the home in order to ensure that the family has adequate income.

Extended family members are often part of the Bhutanese household, which may consist of grandparents, married sons, and their wives and children; families maintain close ties with aunts, uncles, and cousins (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007). Elders are held in high esteem. Typically, meals are eaten twice a day as a family. The kitchen is considered a sacred space, not to be entered by non-family members without permission (Maxym, 2010).

Practice Tip:

During a Head Start (EHS/HS) home visit, it is respectful to remove one’s shoes before entering a home.

Among the refugee population, there may be distinct generational differences, with the oldest generation feeling a connection to Bhutan as their homeland, the youngest generation feeling more of a connection to Nepal as their birthplace in exile, and the middle generation falling somewhere in between or feeling a strong connection to neither.

Practice Tip:

Among Bhutanese refugee families, out-of-home child care is rarely used. Rather, relatives or a Bhutanese neighbor are most likely to care for the children. As a result, home visits may be an ideal Early Head Start/Head Start model.

Child-Rearing and Child Development

Within Bhutanese families, children may be expected to undertake certain tasks on a different time frame than their American peers. In other realms Bhutanese child-rearing norms may also differ from American norms:

- Parents may feed children by hand until they are 3-4 years old; older children will ask parents’ permission to eat and wait for parents to serve them.
- Breast feeding is common and may be continued until the child is 3-4 years old.
- Children may be assisted with dressing themselves until they are school age.
- Some families may not bathe children as frequently as children in the U.S., in part because they may have been accustomed to life without hot and cold running water.

- Children are independently able to use the bathroom by 4-5 years old.
- Babies and children may be adorned with eye-liner, called kohl, and jewelry, such as bracelets.
- Having come from an environment in which parents knew all their neighbors, families may not supervise children as closely as U.S. parents are accustomed to.
- Parents are less likely to engage in games and play with their children than their American counterparts. Some community members describe a clear distinction drawn between adult's and children's activities.

Guidance and Discipline

Discipline practices vary, but community leaders note that in many families spanking may have been used in Bhutan or the refugee camp. This may be changing as families resettle to the U.S., due to warnings in refugee cultural orientation that corporal punishment in the U.S. could lead to children being removed from the home. Many families try to model good behavior for their children and also scold children for unwanted behavior. Some parents may have a more communal approach to child-rearing from many years spent in refugee camps.

School and Education

Education is considered to be of great importance in Bhutanese families. Children are expected to work hard, study, and do well in school. Unlike in the U.S., preschool education was not available in the refugee camps, and free education was only offered through 9th grade.

Practice Tip:

- Preschoolers and families may benefit from home visitor activities that prepare them for formal school expectations; such as, following a daily schedule, asking questions, following directions, turn taking, and problem solving.
- Bhutanese children are familiar with activities such as kite flying, mask making, and playing soccer, which can be incorporated into Head Start curricula and teaching practices.

Older adults are less likely to have a working knowledge of English; if they are the primary caregivers, this language barrier can prevent them from engaging in a child's education. The use of interpreters, possibly

through local refugee resettlement programs or Bhutanese community organizations, may help families to engage in Head Start activities.

Practice Tip:

Bhutanese families may be in the habit of eating two meals a day—lunch and dinner—which may mean that children do not eat breakfast before leaving home in the morning.

Health and Mental Health

The concept of preventive care, such as well-child visits, may be unfamiliar to Bhutanese families (Maxym, 2007).

- Some families may practice traditional medicine, such as using herbal remedies or consulting with healers.
- Mental health or adjustment issues may arise in relation to family separation or changes in gender roles.
- Due to gender roles, women may be reluctant to discuss their own medical needs but may willingly express concerns about their family's health (Maxym, 2007).
- Children may have suffered from malnutrition. Anemia is prevalent among Bhutanese refugee families.
- Many families have never received dental care.

Practice Tip:

Some traditional kohl contains high levels of lead. Information about lead poisoning should be shared in culturally respectful ways.

Community Leadership

EHS/HS programs may find it beneficial to work with leaders from the Bhutanese community. Some tips:

- Identify leaders, ask community members who they trust.
- Include knowledgeable community members as interpreters or liaisons in enrollment sessions and other meetings with Bhutanese families.
- Contact the state's Refugee Coordinator (see References) to provide contact information for ethnic-based community organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, and other helpful local resources.
- Educate community leaders about EHS/HS so they can share information with the community.

Resources and References

BRYCS

- Head Start Collaboration, <http://www.brycs.org/head-start-collaboration.cfm>
- Highlighted Resources—Bhutanese. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Bhutanese.cfm>

Other resources

- Bhutanese Refugees: The Story of a Forgotten People <http://www.photovoice.org/bhutan/index.php?id=1>
- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2007). Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. <http://www.culturalorientation.net/learning/populations/bhutanese>
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- Intergenerational Center at Temple University. (2011). Needs assessment of refugee communities from Bhutan and Burma. https://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/6067/images/2011%20NeedsAssessReport_FINAL.pdf
- International Organization for Migration. (2008). Cultural Profile: The Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal. http://www.peianc.com/sitefiles/File/resources/cultural_profiles/Bhutanese-Refugees-in-Nepal.pdf
- Maxym, Maya. (2010). "Nepali-speaking Bhutanese (Lhotsampa) cultural profile." <http://ethnomed.org/culture/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa/nepali-speaking-bhutanese-lhotsampa-cultural-profile>
- PBS Newshour. (December 31, 2008). "Nepal's Refugee Camps." http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/asia/nepal/slideshow/index.html?type=flash
- U.S. Department of State, Refugee Processing Center. <http://wrapsnet.org/>

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, links to State Refugee Coordinators and Mutual Assistance Associations. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/orr-funded-programs-key-contacts>
- UNHCR. (n.d.) "Nepal." <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e487856.html>
- Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/about/program.htm>

Video / DVD:

- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2010). A New Day, and Be Who You Are. <http://calstore.cal.org/store/p-194-refugee-families-youth-videos-a-new-day-be-who-you-are-dvd-in-english.aspx>
- Nashville Public Television. (2009). Next Door Neighbors—Bhutanese. <http://wnpt.org/productions/next-doorneighbors/bhutanese/index.html>