
INTRODUCTION

Background

From earliest times, Bhutan's topographic and climatic features greatly impacted its social organization, as natural valleys separated communities from one another in this small, landlocked country nestled in the Eastern Himalayas. These isolated valleys were linked to one another only by high mountain passes, and accordingly, each sub-region developed its own customs, traditions and folklore according to the particular environments and circumstances in which they lived. Many of these customs have remained practically untouched over the centuries.

Buddhism arrived in the region sometime in the 7th century, bringing with it a number of new practices that over time were assimilated into Bhutanese life. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel further refined these strands of Buddhist principles and ethics in the 17th century when he began unifying the valleys into what is now modern Bhutan. Since then, the rich culture and traditions of Bhutan, replete with Buddhist values and principles, have flourished throughout the country, shaping the arts, drama, architecture, literature and social structure of the nation as a whole. In essence, Bhutan's entire way of living centres on Buddhism.

Throughout the centuries Bhutan has remained a sovereign independent country, a fact often attributed to the strong cultural and religious identities engendered through its forefathers. Though small in size, population, and economic power, in terms of culture Bhutan is considered one of the richest nations today. We see our unique culture as the symbol of our unity, and of our national identity. Therefore, the Royal Government of Bhutan adopted preservation and promotion of cultural heritage as the Third Pillar of Bhutan's development philosophy, broadly termed as Gross National Happiness (GNH), which was first propounded in the early 1970s by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan.

The philosophy of Gross National Happiness permeates every aspect of Bhutan's development policies. GNH provides a holistic approach to growth based on the concept that happiness requires spiritual development as well as material development, measures that are overlooked when focusing only on Gross National Product (GNP). It is believed that the people's well-being can best be achieved by promoting the development of spiritual and cultural values concurrently with initiatives oriented toward economic growth. GNH is consciously aimed at maintaining an ideal balance between material and spiritual development that benefits the body and spirit of Bhutanese society. GNH concepts and principles are thus applied to all national policies, acting as an umbrella that shelters all aspects of Bhutanese life.

Categories of Bhutanese Culture

It is difficult to define Bhutanese culture in a summary yet concrete manner. The Bhutanese term for culture is *lamsol* (*lam srol*), or 'following a path'; in this case, the customs and practices of our illustrious forefathers, religious and political leaders, and communities. For our purposes, 'culture' is used synonymously with 'civilization' as well as the idea that culture serves as a repository of human excellence, artistic achievement and as an individual pursuit of perfection that principally derives its inspiration from Buddhist doctrine and ethics.

As elsewhere, Bhutanese culture can be generally divided into tangible (*dnegos can lam srol*) and intangible (*dnegos med lam srol*) aspects. That which can be seen and touched, such as dzongs, houses, temples, art, and antiquities is termed tangible heritage, while those traditions and events that are conceptual or otherwise lack tangible form in themselves, like knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, song, music, drama, oral traditions,

festivals, and other such happenings that can be recorded but cannot be touched or interacted with, are categorized as intangible heritage.

Historically speaking, Bhutanese tangible and intangible cultures have sprung from two main sources: village communities and dzongs. Community-based cultures (*mi sde gnas stangs las brten byung ba'i lam srol*) are the diverse cultural elements that developed spontaneously depending on social needs and the specific environment in which the community members lived. The dzong- and monastery-based culture (*rdzong gzhi khag las brten byung ba'i lams srol*) is that which developed from government leaders, officials and monks who have resided primarily in the dzongs and monasteries. The dzong-based culture may be further divided into spiritual (*chos phyogs kyi lam srol*) and secular components (*srid phyogs kyi lam srol*). This is because since the 17th century, the dzongs have housed both the district monastic population and the secular administrators. Since both components ultimately have the same roots in Buddhist tradition, the dzongs have served as the centres of religious and civil administration, and by extension, of culture.

Bhutanese scholars divide the culture of Bhutan into the following four categories:

1. External objects (*phyi yul gyi lam srol*)
2. The culture of internal mind (*nang sems kyi lam srol*)
3. The culture of learning and education (*shes bya'i gnas kyi lam srol*)
4. The culture of conduct and character (*bya ba spyod lam gyi lam srol*)

External objects include those tangible items that can be seen and touched, such as dzongs, houses, statues, paintings, and so forth. The culture of the internal mind refers to that which cannot be perceived through the senses, for example, knowledge, attitude, beliefs, and skills. The culture of learning and education encompasses the cultivation of knowledge of the traditional sciences, such as arts and crafts, medical sciences, and astrology. The culture of conduct and character refers to conduct of the body, speech and mind: in other words, the reasons why we respect one other, the benefits of showing mutual respect and the negative effects of not doing so.

Of the four types, the cultures of external objects and of the internal mind are considered of prime importance, because they are comprised of tangible, physical objects and intangible aspects housed in one's mind. According to Bhutanese scholars, these two can encapsulate the entire culture and thus are the backbone — if not the source — of Bhutanese culture.

Evolution and Development of Bhutanese Intangible Culture

Though culture can be generally divided into tangible and intangible, at times these two are quite difficult to differentiate; they exist like the cause and effect of an entity. Take for example Bhutanese house construction. Till the house is fully completed, the site plan, design, workmanship, and the methods involved remain as an intangible in the mind of the carpenter. Similarly, sacred mask dances, or *cham*, often originate in the meditative visualizations of a saint. Until the dance is performed, the details of the movements and steps remain intangible in the mind of the saint. When the dance is being properly performed, the performer should be visualizing his body as that of a divine being, his speech to be the sound of sacred *mantras* and his mind in meditative state, all of which are equally intangible as qualities. Even those who view the performance are witnessing a manifestation of intangible culture. Cause and effect can also be seen during the creation phase of arts and crafts: until a bamboo basket is completed, the skills involved, such as where to source the bamboo, and how to cut it and weave it into the proper form, remain intangible, until the craftsman brings the basket into physical form.

The point here is that internal subjective values, when applied in the physical world through the creative process, are directly linked to our dynamic, external objective reality. Our internal knowledge, skills and experiences can determine what type of impact our lives can have on the external objective world. Thus, the intangible culture is the ultimate basis for and seed of all tangible culture objects.

The circumstances and environments that have pervaded Bhutanese life define the peculiarities of Bhutan's Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter ICH). In this context, it is necessary to analyse Bhutanese ICH while taking into account the dependences and mutual influence of territorial neighbours. For centuries, Bhutan has maintained relations with its territorial neighbours, India and Tibet, and has often exchanged cultural and artistic values with them. Further, Bhutanese ICH also draws on pre-Buddhist shamanistic practices. This peculiarity is expressed in various charms, spells, folklore, worship, festivals and rituals. During the long-ago spread of Vajrayana Buddhism in the region, Buddhist principles infused the indigenous Bhutanese mentality, customs, ceremonies and arts, which enriched and diversified Bhutanese intangible and tangible cultures, and gave them new value.

Bhutan has maintained independence throughout its history. There has never been a colonial presence in Bhutan, and accordingly there are comparatively few truly foreign elements that impacted the development of national ICH; there were no obstacles to its evolution, development, preservation or conservation. There have been a variety of forward steps regarding intangible culture throughout Bhutan's history. It could be argued that the heyday of ICH has come to fruition since the establishment of the monarchy in 1907. Under the benevolent rule of our great monarchs, Bhutanese folklore, art, oral traditions, rituals, customs, ceremonies, festivities, traditional technologies, and learning have flourished.

Bhutanese intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, constantly evolves and renews itself with the passage of time, thereby providing a community with a sense of identity and continuity. Accordingly, it promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. Of course, intangible culture has undergone changes and development from period to period, but its value to the people has remained intact and to them, valid. It remains a living tradition that is largely held in the minds and psychology of our people, and is conveyed through different vehicles. Intangible phenomena reflect and express the varied circumstances of our nation's history, and the differing perspectives of its ethnic groups and communities, and further provide accounts of their evolution and development. Thus, Bhutan's national cultural heritage, particularly its ICH, could be seen as evidence of "creative industry". In another words, ICH is an expression of a uniquely Bhutanese creative pattern of thought and could be seen as vital for progress and development.

Objectives of the ICH Documentation Project

Intangible cultural heritages are an important legacy shared by all of humankind, carried in the creative thoughts of peoples throughout the world. There have been active discussions in the global community that focus on the need to recognise and respect diverse cultures in this age of globalization. In particular, the importance of preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage that comprise the roots of cultural identities have been gaining attention around the world.

In today's world, elements of ICH are under constant threat. In particular, languages and oral traditions are the most endangered. ICH cannot be recovered once it has been lost. There is an old African saying, "When an old person dies, a library burns to the ground". Yet these days, due to aging practitioners and the lack of students to learn these languages, or the traditional arts and crafts, much of Bhutan's ICH is facing extinction. Thus, we must act urgently to preserve and promote our intangible heritage.

As Bhutan enters into the development mainstream, change is inevitable in the face of globalization and urbanization. The space formerly occupied by ICH is undergoing dramatic change. Modern global culture is gaining ground in Bhutan, with mixed results. There have been some positive impacts as a result of television programming and increased interactions with foreign cultures, especially where livelihood issues are concerned, but these forces are also having a negative impact on Bhutan's own culture and traditions. In response to these new challenges, ways of thinking are gradually changing. Cultural shifts that are adversely affecting society include urbanization, globalization, popular culture, modern education, and tourism.

As the younger generation is shaped by modern education, the festivals, folklore, and oral traditions are losing their historical importance, disrupting the chain of transmission and thus threatening to undermine the essence of practices. Every developing nation or community is faced with this problem, yet it is a matter of great concern. A common solution must be sought in order to avoid the pitfalls that would inevitably result from uncritically embracing "the new" at the expense of traditional practices that have evolved over a long period of time. At the same time, there is also a need to present the traditional practices in a way that is in keeping with the times, so that youth will value them and take pride in them as part of a long and rich cultural heritage.

The Royal Government of Bhutan has policies in place that seek to protect and promote our age-old culture and traditions. But however sound and healthy the government's policies are, it is difficult to maintain successful promotion and preservation of traditional spiritual values in the face of an ever-increasing population, and amidst the growing influence of globalization with its trend of assimilating other cultures and traditions. This is a mammoth and challenging task for the government.

In the hopes of stemming the tide, the erstwhile National Assembly had adopted a series of resolutions to preserve and promote spiritual and cultural values in successive five-year plans. Specifically, it had sought to provide a legal framework for the promotion of language and culture, art and architecture, documentation and inventorying of artefacts, performing arts, textiles, sports, and the traditional code of ethics.

In continuation of those efforts, Bhutan's constitution fully protects the country's cultural heritage. Parliamentary resolutions on cultural preservation and promotion have led to development of plans and programmes, and now both governmental and non-governmental agencies, private agencies, and individuals are carrying out ICH-related documentation and research through a variety of means. The mechanisms to accomplish this are equally varied, and include written documentation, photography, video and audio recording, workshops, seminars, contests, exhibitions and festivals. These efforts are indeed commendable, but much, much more remain to be done.

Survey Methodology

In 2005, the Royal Government of Bhutan ratified the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (the Convention). However, the Government is yet to establish a national inventory of ICH as per the obligations laid out in the Convention. As part of the continuing efforts to safeguard ICH in Bhutan and toward the full implementation of the Convention, the Department of Culture (which serves as national focal point for many fields that constitute ICH) proposed, in association with the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHCAP), a project for the development of a national information system of ICH in Bhutan. Although the project was originally scheduled for a duration of two years and four months (Sept 2011–Dec 2013), it was extended by a further year as the report compilation, translation, writing, and editing were delayed due to technical problems.

Before travelling to the research/documentation site, questionnaires were framed based on those provided by the ICHCAP office in order to obtain an appropriate and consistent data set. Next, after discussions with the District Cultural Officer (DCO), the particular gewogs (blocks) that were to be visited and surveyed were identified. At the district level, preliminary discussions were held with the DCO as well as other knowledgeable people in order to gain an overall picture of the community in question. After these initial discussions, the research teams travelled to the selected sites.

The Gup (head of a block) and the village Tshogpa (representative) appointed guides to the teams, and in some cases, the Tshogpa himself accompanied the research team throughout the visit, acting as an interpreter and introducing researchers to the community. We must acknowledge here the competence and dedication of the guides, from whose knowledge and assistance we greatly benefited. The guides were provided as a direct result of messages sent in advance from Dzongdas (District Administrators) to Gups and Gewog Administrative Officers (GAOs), for which we remain deeply thankful.

The field trips were undertaken by car as far as possible, but most travel was made on foot as the communities and villages to be surveyed were in far-flung areas. Many visits included overnight stays in the villages and several hours of walking in the daytime. Heartfelt thanks are offered to the Gups, Tshogpas, and GAOs for providing us with every possible support — lodging, guides, etc. — during the visits. Researchers met with community members of various ages though in general only the most experienced and knowledgeable village men and women were invited to contribute data. This was done through various informal talks but mainly through directed interviews with individuals who had practical experience of ICH matters in their own area.

The data collected from primary sources through interactions, interviews and field observations were noted in standard notebooks. Cameras and video/audio recording equipment were used to document local social and cultural activities, oral traditions, folklore and songs. Once back from the field, the authors/researchers consulted and referred to a number of secondary sources, mainly books and documents that deal with the cultural life of Bhutan, to crosscheck and analyse field data.

Plan of Presentation

UNESCO has categorised ICH into five domains, but because intangible cultural elements are diverse in each nation, each member country has the liberty to categorise their own domains of intangible culture as they see fit. The present report follows the same five domains as the UNESCO categorization, and also includes an introduction and a glossary. Each chapter has its own bibliography appended to it. The introduction includes a general overview of Bhutanese culture and ICH as relating to historical antecedents and of the contemporary situation of ICH in Bhutan.

Chapter I presents the oral tradition in Bhutan; specifically its languages and dialects, as well as the proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, narrations, poetry, epic narratives in prose and verse forms, charms, prayers, chants, songs, and dramatic performances that surveys indicate are under particular threat of extinction.

Chapter II gives an account of Bhutan's performing arts and traditional games. In particular, it presents types of ritual mask dances: *tsun cham* (performed exclusively by monks), *boecham* (performed solely by lay people), and regional mask dances. Further, the chapter enumerates types of folk dances: *zhungdra*, the classical dance; *boedra*, the court songs of medieval period; *rigsar*, the folk-based modern songs; and *zhbey*, the dance of heroes and also information on local musical instruments and ritual instruments. The second part of the chapter deals with traditional games and sports, and provides a comprehensive survey of these, including detailed accounts of the rules for each.

Chapter III describes the traditional customs, rituals, ceremonies and festive events that give meaning and essence to Bhutanese ways of life. An attempt has been made to provide an account of all types of ceremonies, tradition and customs, social practices, religious rites, festivals and celebrations as practiced by different ethnic groups and communities across the country.

Chapter IV presents — to the farthest extent possible — descriptions and lists of folk knowledge and technology that comprise formal traditional medicinal practices, local healing practices, folk meteorology, arithmetic, astrology and astronomical knowledge, traditional measurements, folk beliefs, and superstitions. It also describes traditional household and economic knowledge, and traditional foods and beverages.

Chapter V describes traditional craftsmanship, comprised primarily of the codified set of thirteen arts and crafts practiced in Bhutan that occupy and employ many Bhutanese craftspeople. Additionally, other forms of arts and crafts outside the thirteen are discussed in this chapter, such as bone working, leather working, traditional boot-making, pottery and calligraphy, all of which have played essential roles in Bhutanese society.

Bhutan's ICH project was time bound, and because of this the research teams could not be expected to survey entire districts; rather, the survey focused on those gewogs and communities that demonstrated unique intangible cultural practices and beliefs. Communities that shared similar practices were not included in this initial survey. Time and travel constraints did not allow the researchers to stay long-term in villages to make participatory observation. Each of these communities and others not yet surveyed would benefit greatly from additional time, which would enable the researchers to have a more immersive participation-observation experience to document all aspects of the community's way of life, their beliefs and practices, and the impacts of Bhutan's changing socio-economic situation. Conditions, therefore, were not ideal to provide a comprehensive evaluation of how individual villages were observing their traditional heritage practices, and the social interaction patterns that were driving their communities.

This project report therefore provides only a partial view of the myriad varieties of ICH to be found, documented and studied in Bhutan. With nineteen languages and local dialects — and a variety of different ethnic groups, there are hundreds of communities and villages across the country awaiting meaningful study. But we will not stop here. We have taken the initiative under the auspices of ICHCAP towards the development of a national inventory, and we will continue the survey and documentation processes in order to achieve the goal of a full national inventory of ICH, as per the obligations laid out in the Convention. Further, it is our foremost goal to safeguard and raise national awareness of ICH and to ensure that the flow of knowledge from our ancestors continues its transmission into the future.

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