

5.2. CRAFT RELATED TO SECULAR FUNCTIONS

5.2.1. Thagzo: The Art of Weaving

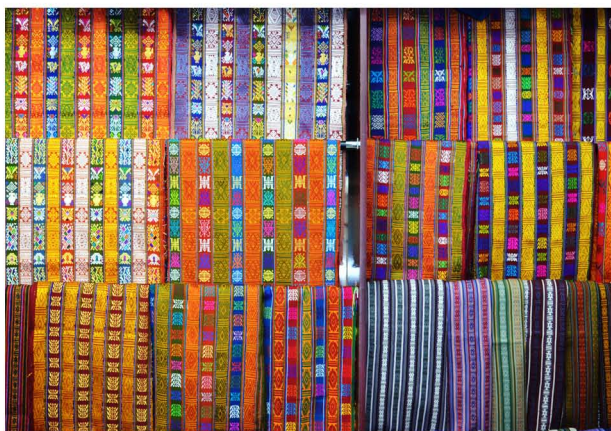
Thagzo or the art of weaving is one of the oldest and widely used skills that have been practised for ages.

The all-encompassing use of textiles represents prestige, artistic skills, discipline, determination, familial sentiments, tangible form of asset, and expressions of devotion towards the dharma. Bhutanese textiles are the product of knowledge and skills developed and nurtured over centuries of experiences and family traditions. Our textiles are valued and renowned for their richness of colour, sophistication and variation of patterns, including the intricate fibre preparation, dyeing, weaving, and embroidery techniques. This rich and complex art of weaving is an inseparable part of our culture and history.

Today, the wide availability of imported fibres and dyes are transforming the palette, textures, and surface qualities of the clothes produced. There are more than eleven types of yarns and dyes including the five main colours (white, yellow, red, green and blue) and six subsidiary colours (orange, dark green, light yellowish green, pink, light white, blue and black). These different colours are woven in accordance with different designs and patterns. Women from central and eastern regions of Bhutan are famous for their weaving skills and each region produces their own specialty.

5.2.1.1. Weaving with Designs and Patterns

Every textile product has a name that expresses its particular combination of colour, design, pattern and fibre. Weaving pattern is either stripes - vertical for men, and horizontal for women in cotton, silk or wool. Required extra designs are made by adding warp threads.



Patterns like the *vajra* (thunderbolt), the swastika, the tree or the wheel, each has symbolic meanings. Although the symbols used in Bhutanese textiles are primarily of geometric nature, they also have deep religious meanings. Some common geometric symbols include the *dorje*, the *drame*, the *phenphenma*, the *phub*, the *yudrung*, and the *shinglo*.

The *drame* or the eternal knot is a classic Buddhist symbol. The *phenphenma* is a symbol of butterfly and the eight-pointed star, while the *dorje* or the thunderbolt represents the indestructible powers of Buddhism. The *phub* or the rainbow is a triangle pattern in successive rainbow colours. When *dorje* symbol is incorporated within the *phub* symbol, the pattern becomes *dorje-phub*. The *shinglo* symbol is used mostly on the royal and noble family dresses since this symbol is the most difficult to weave. The *shinglo* symbol represents the “tree of life”.

The *therpochay* (Jana chagri) or the China Wall pattern is usually seen next to the *phub* design on *kiras*. The *therpochay* symbol is believed to have been derived from the designs on Chinese brocade. The *yudrung* portrays the crossroads where the four directions meet. A *yudrung* represents the balancing forces of the universe, when rotating. The *yudrung* is an ancient pattern and its epicentre is considered a spiritual place. *Yudrung* is depicted on the royal *thrikheb* as the centre most design.

Bhutanese weavers usually weave two types of textiles; the plain woven meaning *kar chang*, and the pattern woven textile called *metochem*. These are described below.

5.2.1.2. Karchang

The plain woven textiles include *pangtse*, *mathra*, *sethra*, *adang mathra*, *shardang thara*, and *pe sar*. Plain woven clothes are worn at home or work since they are cheaper than the pattern-woven clothes. *Mathra* (red pattern) is a varicoloured plaid woven on a maroon or red field, sometimes woven with stripes (*khaja*) at the edges. *Sethra* (gold pattern) is a plaid weave usually with yellow or orange field as the dominant colour. *Sethra* has two popular colour combinations; red with black or blue plaid on a white field; and yellow, white and black on an orange field. *Sethra dokhana* consists of black colour in it while *buechapggi sethra* does not contain black. *Thara* has horizontal stripes with white as a dominant field. *Shardang thara* has multicoloured stripes while

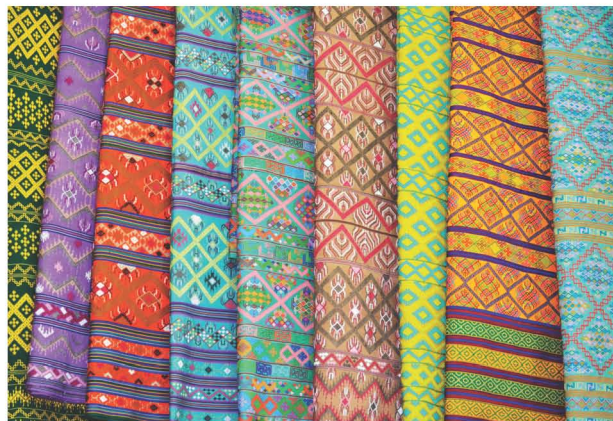
Samkhongma have narrow red-and-blue stripes, and *Mondre* which has a similar pattern to Samkhongma is worn mainly by older people in rural areas. *Kamtham Jadrima* is a striped textile with colours of the rainbow. *Kamtham thara* consists of simple warp stripes or plaids, which are gifted to a religious person. *Pesar* (new design) is a modern innovation with small patterns in striped plain cloth. *Yu tham* or the country cloth which is made of wild silk or cotton is very popular in the rural areas. *Kawley* is a completely black fabric of wool, which is believed to have healing properties.

5.2.1.3. Meto Chem

Aikapur and *Ku shu thara* are the two specific kinds of pattern-woven textiles. Pattern-woven clothes are considered special, and are valued and saved for special occasions like festivals, marriages and for New Year celebrations. Bhutanese weavers weave many different types of clothes with intricate designs such as leaves, birds, trees and other animal patterns. These are briefly explained below.

Aikapur

Aikapur is a textile woven of cotton or silk, and appears to be embroidered. Aikapur has double faced pattern bands called *hor* which alternate with rows of plain weave; with always an odd number of legs '*kangpa*' or cross hatches. A textile is referred to as a *b-sampa* (with three legs); *b-napa* (with five legs); *b-zumpa* (with seven legs); *b-gupa* (with nine legs); *b-songhthurpa* (with eleven legs); and *b-songsampa* (with thirteen legs). Aikapur is differentiated by the colour of the background thread, and the supplementary thread used. The common colours used in aikapur are: *dromchu chema*, literally meaning 'little boxes', with red, green, yellow, and white pattern bands. *Mentse mathra* is a material with a yellow base, and with red and green stripes. *Montha* has a blue or black background with red pattern bands between colourful stripes. *Lungserma* has green and red pattern



bands on a yellow background. *Shinglo* or 'tree of life' patterns made on the fabric are used to assess the quality of an aikapur. The delicate branches and leaves of these trees are inspected when judging the quality of a textile

Kushu Thara

Kushu thara used to be considered aristocratic and the most prestigious dress for women. Ku shu thara is woven from vegetable dyed cotton and raw silk (*bura*) or entirely from silk. Ku shu thara has spectacular brocade design which take up to a year to weave. Ku shu thara is always embellished on a white base, and a similar *kira* with a blue or black background is called *ngosham*. *Sapma*, the continuous weft patterns, and *tingma*, the alternative weft patterns are used as base pattern for *kushuthara*, *ngosham* or *shinglochem*. *Shinglochem* can be either a gho or a kira, woven with alternate rows of warp pattern bands.

5.2.1.4. Weaving Materials

Bhutanese produce fibres such as raw cotton, wool, nettle fibre, yak hair and bura (raw silk). The most expensive and the most valued fibre in Bhutan is raw silk. The Bhutanese do not kill the silk worms that remain inside after spinning its cocoon, but are left until they escape, which breaks the thread before it is unrolled. That is why, Bhutanese raw silk feels and looks relatively coarse compared to Indian and Chinese silk.

Several types of yarn like *sesbu* (cultivated from mulberry silk moth *Bombayx mori*), *bura* (produced by wild non-mulberry silk moth), *namdru kuep* (parachute silk), and varieties of silk imported from India are notable.





Nettle

Nettle or stinging nettle, though now rarely used, is said to have been the original and chief fibre used by weavers in ancient Bhutan. Nettle fibre is coarse but strong and durable. That is why people in villages used it to weave sacks, bags, kurel, pagi, pakhi, bundi and tabden. Owing to its strength it is also used as bow string.

Nettle is herbaceous flowering plant that grows in temperate and sub-tropical zone. The plant grows up to 2 meters in height with spiny stems and leaves and bears white to yellowish flowers. Nettle bark contains bast fibre which is strong, smooth and light. In Bhutan, nettle fibres are harvested in the months of October and November. After peeling the stems, the fibres are dried, and then cooked with ash for about 6 hours. The fibres are then washed with cold water, and beaten in order to remove the outer cover. After removing the outer cover, the fibres are dried and dyed with natural dyes. The nettle plants are shredded, and twisted into thin fibres using a drop spindle.

Nettle fibres are used to weave *bundi* or carry bag. Bundi is usually woven with brocaded *yudrung* motif at the centre of the middle panel, on a white colour base. The bundi or carry bag consists of three lengths of cloth sewn together to form a square panel. Ropes on the diagonal sides of this piece are tied together to carry possessions and bedding.

Wool

Yarns from yak, sheep and goat wool are spun using *phang* (drop spindle) and moved to a *chaphang* (spinning wheel). The herders of the high valleys of Merak and Sakteng weave shingka (tunic-style dresses), women's jackets and belts. They also make hats, ropes, tents, and bags out of yak hair, and floor mats and blankets from sheep wool. The *Layap* women's dress includes a black woollen jacket, a long woollen skirt, adorned with lot of jewels, which often include teaspoons. Women also



wear conical bamboo hats with a bamboo spike at the top, held by beaded bands.

Shingka, an ancient tunic-style textile that was woven with either a *ngoshingkha* (blue) or a *laushingkha* (red) wool base, was worn by a high lama during religious ceremonies.

Char khab, woven from wool (of yak or sheep) either on a pedal loom or back strap loom is used for protection from snow, cold, and rain. It is water-resistant and an essential item for the herders in cold the region. *Sephu charkhab* (rain cloaks from Sephu) is a colourful textile with bands of green, blue, white and orange.

Bumthang and Trongsa were known for a woollen fabric called *yathra*, which was used as a cover from rain and cold. In the late 1990s, farmers in Trongsa had stopped raising sheep which inevitably put an end to the practise of weaving *yathra*. *Yathra* is used as bed covers, blankets, rain cloaks, cushion covers, sofa set covers, and as jackets for both men and women.



Cotton

Kershing (cotton) is used to separate the cotton seeds, and then fluff out to make it ready for spinning into yarn with the help of a wooden spindle or spinning wheel.

Usually cotton woven with traditional designs on white background, *chagsi pangkheb* was put on laps to wipe hands before and after meals by persons of higher positions. In the early days, Bhutanese women used to put on an apron-like wear called *dongkheb* as a sign of respect while approaching the king or a high official. *Phechung* is a cotton woven carry bag woven but its



usage is now limited to ceremonial receptions along with *chagsi pangkheb*.

Thrikheb (throne cover) is a rare textile used as the King's throne cover. It is also used for the lamas during religious ceremonies. *Chephur gyaltshen* (banner with frills), *gyaltshen* (pair of cylindrical hangings with valance), *bumgho* (bumpa covers), *kheb and tenkheb* (altar covers), *phen* (pair of triangular topped hangings) and *chephur* (a pair of cylindrical hangings) are some of the other cloth products that are used in altars and monasteries.

Hingthub is a time-consuming but highly cherished textile woven for loved ones or for use by the weaver or their 'lord'. The finer product demonstrates the dedication of the weaver. It is also used by the weaver's family or to stitch outer attire for statues or as wall hangings.

Today most of the yarns for weaving like raw silk, cotton and acrylic are imported while some of the yarn is spun and processed locally. The availability of cheap machine spun yarns from India has overtaken the local cotton cultivation.

5.2.1.5. Types of Loom

There are three types of looms used by weavers in Bhutan. Traditionally pangthag was the most commonly used loom for weaving larger size garments. The smaller version of this loom called kethag is used for weaving narrow items like belts. In the 1970s, another type of loom called thri-thag (khri-thags) was adopted from India. This loom gained popularity in the growing urban centres. This later type is a horizontal loom with pedals.

Each region has a speciality in terms of designs and types. Kurtoe is known for Ku shu thara, while marthra and serthra are mostly produced in Bumthang. Trashigang district is well known for weaving aikapur, while *pangkheb* and *montha* come from Kheng.



5.2.1.6. Dyes

Bhutanese weavers consider the coordination of pleasing colours more important than the designs, patterns and techniques. Strong taboos are associated with the dyeing process and the weavers are very particular about colour shades. They believe that malevolent spirits, certain weather conditions, strangers or pregnant women can ruin the dye. Like the weaving techniques, the recipes for dyeing are closely guarded family secrets and the formula is usually passed down from mother to daughter.

There are a number of dye-yielding plants. Weavers obtain dyes using simple methods from barks, flowers, fruits, leaves, and roots of plants, and minerals. Today, chemical or synthetic dyes called *tsho-sar* are easily available while the natural dye is called *tsho nying*. They are easily recognisable by their hue. Some of the natural dyes obtained from plants are described below.

Indigo

Shades of green, purple, blue and black are obtained from leaves of trees locally called *yangshaba* (*Strobilanthus flaccidifolius*) in Tshangla dialect.

Indigo (*Indigofera spp.*) plants are cultivated in household gardens as a source of blue dye. Alum earths, sour fruits, and dug shing (*Symplocos*) leaves are used as a mordant in dyeing to fix the colouring matter. Indigo plant leaves are fermented for two weeks, and then passed through acidic ash water.

Lac

Jatsho (*Lacifer lacca*) is an organic dye that produces colours ranging from pink to deep red. Lac is boiled in water until it becomes sticky dough. The pulp is mixed with roasted wheat and allowed to ferment for 10 days. The selected yarn is then put into the boiling mixture until the colour gets absorbed. *Churoo* (*Phyllanthusemblica*) is used as a fixating element in dye.

Madder

Dried stems and leaves of madder called *tsoe* (*Rubia cordifolia*) are chopped into small pieces. This material is boiled together with the yarn to produce several colours ranging from pink to deep red. It is good for dyeing raw silk, cotton and wool. Madder can be preserved in dry place for years.

The ripe berries of berberis, locally called *kepatsang* (*Berberis aristata*) are used as a source of red colour, while the barks of nut of the walnut tree can be used to obtain orange colour in woollen yarns.

Pangtse

Leaves from *pangtse shing* (*Symplocos paniculata*) are gathered from the forest, which can be used fresh or dried, to make yellow colour. Pangtse leaves are boiled in water along with woollen yarns. The yarn is then allowed to drip. Sometimes, *yung ga* (*Curcuma longa*) or turmeric is also used to obtain a bright yellow colour.

Lemon, also called *churoo* (*Embllica officinalis*), variety of other berries, herbs, plants, and roots are used along with alum mordant to boost colours in the yarn. However, since dyed yarns from India are available at cheaper price, only a few Bhutanese weavers practise the tradition of natural dyeing processes these days.

5.2.2. Woodwork

For centuries, many great master carpenters of Bhutan have displayed their skills to produce distinctive architectural designs that had come to be our heritage in wood work or *shingzo*. Woodwork continues to be a dominant part of most construction works. For structures that require wood, master carpenters are called upon to employ their knowledge and skills and to engineer the entire works without any blue print.

The achievements of our master carpenters are evident in the dzongs, temples and monasteries, palaces, houses and bridges. The dzongs are widely appreciated by their architectural marvels. Trulpai Zowo Balep is respected and revered as a legendary artisan, for his contribution in the construction of Punakha Dzong in 1637.

A long thread called *thig* containing dissolved red soil; a pendulum (*chongdo*) and a wooden lupon are essential possessions of a carpenter as are other tools.

Bhutanese master carpenters rely on their knowledge and experience, and are expert in the joining wood without using metal nails. Each structural part like



pillars, doors, beams, window frames, and roof girders are fitted separately on the ground. These elements are then joined together using thick wooden pegs. Logs with ledges serve as staircases. Roofs are also made of wooden shingles, weight down in their places by boulders.

Items for daily use

Skills in wood work are also employed in making tools and essential items as listed below:

- Wooden printing blocks, altars and plates for making offerings in the household, drums (nga) and masks of different types;
- Cups, scabbards, handles for knives and swords and boxes of different types;
- Musical instruments like guitar and drums,
- Various decorative items like the dragons, eight lucky signs and other decorative items.
- Sports items lime darts (khuru) and targets (*bha*),
- Wooden phalluses of different sizes.

5.2.3. Stone Work

Like in many other countries, *dozo* (masonry or stonework) is an old craft that is still in practice throughout the country. The skills of Bhutanese masonry can be seen in fortresses, temples, monasteries, stupas and farmhouses.

It required special skills to cut and polish stones into right shapes and sizes and was carried out under the strict supervision of the head carpenter, who also had the role of an architect. Stone masons use an axe like tool called *dota*. Stones of crude shapes and sizes are chiselled into right shapes according to the style of the structure. There are mainly five different types of stone shapes that the masons prepare for construction. They are *jamdo*- used