

Bhutan's Hand-woven Textile Cultural Heritage: A New Perspective of Conservation through Cultural Industry Development

Joseph Lo

Introduction

History and Current Context of Social Change in Bhutan

The genesis of Bhutan's modernisation can be attributed to the Third Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (b.1929 – d.1972) who also initiated and institutionalised Bhutan's Five-Year Plan (FYP) in 1961.¹ The modernisation process was intensified by the Fourth Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck (b.1955). He expanded upon his father's legacy by modernising Bhutan's self-imposed rural, medieval, agricultural economy into a modern system.²

The Fifth Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (b.1980) is currently the Head of State. He expanded his grandfather and father's modernisation programmes, resulting in Bhutan having the fastest economic growth rate in South Asia.³

Because of the developments carried out in the last fifty years, modernisation has irrevocably changed the cultural fabric of Bhutan. Today, the younger generation is abandoning traditional dress in favour of jeans, T-shirts and tattoos. Quoting Tshering Tobgay, MP, then of the main opposition group, the People's Democratic Party: "It is us Bhutanese ourselves who are now putting our traditions and culture at risk."⁴

Cost of Conserving Cultural Heritage

Yet, to conserve cultural heritage, there are implicit costs involved. And the cost of conserving and practicing intangible heritage is just as high. Beyond these direct costs, there are also other inherent costs. These include the lost of opportunities for alternative developments, concomitant restrictions on new developments and the

¹Planning Commission, *1st Five Year Plan:1961 – 1966*. Royal Government of Bhutan.

²Goldsmith B., *Shangri-La is No Paradise*, in *The Canberra Times*, 13 June 2012.

³National Statistics Bureau, *National Accounts Report, 2011*. Royal Government of Bhutan, 2011.

⁴Goldsmith B., *Shangri-La is No Paradise*, in *The Canberra Times*, 13 June 2012.

imposition of an artificial framework in ever changing social, cultural and economic contexts, rendering the community and its culture inauthentic.⁵ Worse, as time goes on, the number of cultural heritage items increases as more and more entities (both tangible and intangible) are identified as cultural heritage and are added onto the existing list.

Therefore, because of the high cost involved in conserving cultural heritage, many in developing economies view conservation of cultural heritage as a surplus of economic development; a pursuit of luxurious, hedonistic, self-gratifying pleasures, to be attained only after essential needs are met.

A New Perspective on Conserving Bhutan's Intangible Cultural Heritage

This paper proposes that such a perspective on cultural heritage may not necessarily be valid, in the light of modernisation and social change, especially when categorised as an expenditure and burden to a developing economy. Rather, cultural heritage can be viewed as a necessary resource to fuel the development of cultural industries. Significantly, when seen through this paradigm, cultural heritage conservation is no longer attributed as a “cost” but a self-funding asset. Furthermore, by contemporising cultural heritage through innovation, the cultural resource pool will be enriched and expanded for the benefit of future generations.

Using the hand-woven textile industry sector as an example, this paper will examine Bhutan's cultural industry to argue this perspective. Due to the limits of this paper, the discussion will focus on specific elements of Bhutan's cultural heritage that have enabled the country to embark on a flourishing hand-woven textile industry. Within the discussion, explorations will also be made to examine why it is important to conserve contemporary new textile developments as a means of enlarging the existing pool of cultural resources/capital for the next generation.

Cultural Industry in Bhutan

What is Cultural Industry?

UNESCO defines “cultural industries” as:

...those industries which produce tangible or intangible artistic and creative outputs, and which have a potential for wealth creation and income generation through the exploitation of cultural assets and production of knowledge-based goods and services (both traditional and contemporary). What cultural

⁵Ashworth, G. J., ‘Heritage and Local Development: A Reluctant Relationship’, in Rizzo, I., and Mignosa, A., (ed) *Handbook on the Economics of Cultural Heritage*. Cheltenham. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2013.

industries have in common is that they all use creativity, cultural knowledge and intellectual property to produce products and services with social and cultural meaning.⁶

In most developing economies in Asia, such economic activities are already in practice but, because of their informal nature, no labels existed. At the UNESCO Jodhpur Symposium 2005, the term “cultural industry” was adopted to define and identify similar economic undertakings in Asia.⁷

Within the framework of this definition, cultural industries today cover a wide range of industries including publishing and graphic industries, film-making, recording music and other oral traditions, multi-media productions, crafts of many kinds, fashion, architecture, fine and the performing arts. These activities also include creative activities in the service sector such as advertising and publicity, television, radio, film, and entertainment.⁸ Within Bhutan’s context, hand-woven textile industry plays an important role in the crafts category. Other sectors relevant to Bhutan’s context include traditional medicine and wellness, and religious paraphernalia.

Why Cultural Industry in Bhutan?

The government document—*Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*—outlines the importance of culture in the context of Bhutan’s development agenda. It advocates the need to chart out a distinctive path of development in Bhutan



2005: When the legendary weavers of Khoma village spin yarn the traditional way it’s quite a social moment
Photo Credit: Joseph Lo

⁶UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific, *Statistics on Cultural Industries: Framework for the Elaboration of National Data Capacity Building Projects*. UNESCO Office Bangkok, 2007.

⁷UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific, *The Jodhpur Initiatives: A Strategy for the 21st Century*. UNESCO Office Bangkok, 2008.

⁸Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, *BIMSTEC: The First Ministerial Meeting on Culture. White Paper*. Royal Government of Bhutan, 2006.

where culture plays an important role in the country's development strategies.⁹

In Bhutan, the hand-woven textile sector is one of the strongest pillars of this industry. In 2011, weavers in Bhutan generated an estimated income of Nu. 149.88 million (approximately US\$2.2m) from selling traditional products, mostly traded from weavers' homes. The importance of weaving, in spite of it being an informal activity, is as a substantial form of income generation for rural communities, contributing to a reduction in unemployment and mitigating against rural-to-urban migration.^{10 11 12}

It is through the hand-woven textile industry sector that the preservation of hand-weaving skills and other cultural factors can be seen as an essential economic asset imperative for the country's economic growth. In order to appreciate this new perspective, it is necessary to understand the structure of the cultural industry and examine the reflection of the Bhutanese context within this structure.

Structure of Cultural Industry in Bhutan

The diagram below illustrates the structure of cultural industry.¹³ The following analysis uses this model to examine the lifecycle of the hand-weaving textile cultural industry.

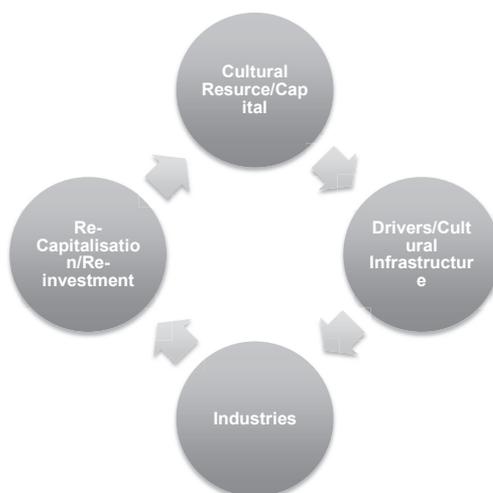


Figure 1: Structure of Culture-based Creative Industry

⁹Planning Commission, *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*. Royal Government of Bhutan, (1999)

¹⁰Choden, K., *New Horizon for Bhutanese Textiles*, in Kuensel, 11 June 2005.

¹¹Pelden, S., *The Lives Behind Your Ghos and Kiras*, in Kuensel, 1 August 2007.

¹²Lees, E., *Intangible Cultural Heritage in a Modernizing Bhutan: The Question of Remaining Viable and Dynamic*, in *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol. 18, pp 179 – 200, 2011.

¹³National Statistics Bureau and Department of Culture, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. *Cultural Industries Sector Development: A Baseline Report 2009*. Royal Government of Bhutan, 2009:

In the report, the diagram only shows three spheres – Culture Resource/Capital, Driver/Cultural Infrastructure and Industries. In this paper, the author proposes the inclusion of a fourth sphere – Re-Capitalisation/Re-Investment. This is because a structural entity needs to be established formally to channel gains and profits from the industry back to Culture Resource/Capital. Without such a structural formal entity, re-capitalisation/re-investment will remain as an informal and ad-hoc activity which may not serve to maximise the potential of the industry.

Cultural Resource/Capital

At the top of Figure 1 is the sphere representing cultural resource/ capital. It signifies “raw” resources, i.e., usually identified as “traditional”, “heritage-based”, “time-honoured practices” and typically, the cultural expressions of a community.

- *Hand-weaving Skills*

The profusion of hand-weaving skills and knowledge in Bhutan can be attributed to the country’s mountainous topography, where pockets of communities have been living in remote, ill-accessed valleys for prolonged periods. Because of their isolation, many of these communities are self-sufficient, producing most of their necessities locally—food, shelter and clothing. Therefore, weaving, a basic skill to produce clothing is widespread in many of these isolated communities. Many women, especially in eastern Bhutan are still engaged in weaving activities for a living.

During the initiation of the modernisation programme in the 1960s, the Bhutanese leadership had a choice: to abandon this cultural skill as it was no longer relevant in the contemporary world or to interweave it into the programme.

Wisely, the Bhutan rulers decided that weaving is an important aspect of Bhutan’s cultural expression and listed it officially as one of the 13 arts and crafts of Bhutan—*Zorig Chusum*. This led to the conservation of weaving skills.

- *Sophisticated Textile Culture*

Another cultural resource necessary for the flourishing of Bhutan’s hand-woven textile industry is the sophisticated textile culture that permeates all facets of Bhutanese life; Bhutan is often described as “the last surviving cloth-based culture in the world”,¹⁴ significant in both the sacred and secular realms.^{15 16 17}

This sophisticated textile culture has led to the imperative need to dress appropriately, according to the context, that is, the occasion of the event and one’s position in society. This is very important, as social propriety is highly valued in Bhutan, a condition deeply ingrained through *Driglam Namzha*. A person’s social status can be enhanced or diminished by choosing the correct or wrong *kira* to wear for the occasion. Underdressing or overdressing could embarrass oneself, the host and others at an event. It is also important to dress according to one’s age.¹⁸

¹⁴Adams, B., *Traditional Bhutanese Textiles*. White Orchid Press, Bangkok, 1984 (Pg. 2).

¹⁵Bartholomew, M., *Thunder Dragon Textiles from Bhutan*. Tokyo: Shikosha, 1985.

¹⁶Bolland, R., *A Loom from Bhutan*. Amsterdam. Royal Tropical Institute, 1995.

¹⁷Burchard, H., *Bhutan’s National Fabric*, in *The Washington Post*, 1995.

¹⁸Myers, K., Bean, S., *From the Land of The Thunder Dragon: Textile Arts of Bhutan*. Serinda Publication, London, 1994.

- *Textile Depositories*

Lastly, the discussion of cultural resource/capital must include the physical depository of textiles. The National Textile Museum, established in 2001, has gathered a substantial collection of antique textile artefacts exclusive to Bhutan.

The aim of the museum is to showcase Bhutan's success in the area of textile arts, and to promote and sustain the interest of weavers as they continue to strive for excellence in weaving traditional textiles.¹⁹

Besides the museum, and because of the high regard of Bhutanese for textiles, there are also numerous individuals and independent private collectors collecting textiles. As a matter of fact, collecting textiles is not limited to those textile specialists as individual households used to have a special chest (called *yanggam* or “box of prosperity”) to keep family heirlooms textiles. These collections act as a ‘textile bank’ where references can be made to study the different types of Bhutanese textiles, understand the technique, and reproduce textiles of excellent quality.

However, as “raw” resources, they need to be transformed into “refined” entities in order to be used by the industry; in its original state, its direct contribution to the industry is limited. Using crude oil and modern industries as an analogy, crude oil in its original state cannot be used by the industry. Rather, it needs to be processed and refined into petroleum so as to fuel industrial development.

Cultural Industry Drivers / Infrastructures

Institutions that “process”, “transform” and “translate” these “raw” cultural resources into “refined” resources can be described as “drivers” or “cultural infrastructure”; this can be seen in Figure 1, the sphere on the right. Referring to the analogy from the above, drivers/infrastructures are the oil refineries that transform crude oil into usable fuel for industrial consumption.

Within the framework of cultural industry, these drivers or cultural infrastructures are policies, marketing channels, promotional programmes, training centres, associations, etc. Together they transform “raw” cultural resources/capital into enabling environments for the successful development of the industry. Some examples of cultural industry drivers/infrastructures are:

- *Royal Decree on Mandatory Wearing of National Dress*

The Fourth King's decree on the mandatory wearing of national dress for all

¹⁹RAO, *Textile Museum in Thimphu – Preserving and Promoting a National Heritage*, accessed from <http://www.raonline.ch/pages/story/bt/bttextmus01.html>

public and formal occasions created an instant demand for traditional textiles. Furthermore, with a steady increase in population (about 1.8 percent in 2005 according to National Statistics Bureau) the sector's long-term growth seems to be secured.

- *Royal Patronage*

Royal patronage through Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck has made Bhutanese hand-woven textile visible on both the national and international scenes. Practically, her support for this sector has seen the establishment of the National Textile Museum in 2001 and the setting up of the Royal Textile Academy (RTA) in 2005. As a patron, she mobilised funds and resources to promote Bhutanese hand-woven textiles. Significantly, she has inspired weavers to ever-greater excellence in design and craftsmanship.

- *Support Programmes*

The Ministry of Economic Affairs has recognised the importance of cultural industry drivers/infrastructures to promote crafts and artisan products, vis-à-vis Bhutanese hand-woven textiles. As a result, the ministry has implemented various programmes such as the Bhutan SEAL of Excellence and the setting up of the Agency for the Promotion of Indigenous Arts (APIC) to execute the “Made-in-Bhutan” Seal to enhance the development of this sector.

- *Marketing Channels and Platforms*

Marketing channels and platforms such as the Craft Bazaar and the annual Craft and Textile Festival held in Thimphu contribute as drivers/infrastructure of the industry. These marketing avenues establish accessibility for producers to market their wares alongside a platform for consumers and producers to discuss and exchange their respective views.

Industry: Producers and Service Providers

Moving clockwise to the 3rd sphere at the bottom in Figure 1 are the industries themselves: private enterprises that are involved in the production of cultural goods and services. For the hand-woven textile industry, these are the weaving factories, workshops, companies, enterprises, and retailers involved in all levels and sectors of the textile business. Beyond the direct production and sale of textiles, the industry also includes the various industry-linked support clusters such as yarn importers, processors, dyers, suppliers, distributors, wholesalers and retailers; loom manufacturers and spare-parts suppliers; garment designers, tailors and fashion accessories producers, etc. Collectively, they form the hand-woven textile industry.

Re-Capitalisers / Re-Investors

The final component is an intermediary sphere, between the industry and the cultural resource/capital. The aim of the re-capitalisation/re-investment phase is to re-route a portion of the profits and gains from the industry back to the cultural resource/capital sphere. If the gains and profits from the industry are not “re-invested”, the cultural resource/capital will be depleted through constant withdrawal.

Again, using the analogy of the relationship between crude oil and industry, re-capitalisation/re-investment can be seen as research and development initiatives in the formulation of renewable energies to supply power for future industrial growth. The failure to develop new sources of energy will only spell doom for the industry as crude oil is a finite resource.

Similarly for Bhutan’s hand-woven textile industry sector, master weavers are the cultural resources of this sector. When they retire, if no new weavers are recruited and trained, the textile industry will have no skilled weavers to weave and produce hand-woven textiles for the industry of the future. Among some of the initiatives and institutions involved in re-capitalisation are:

- *Training Centres and Programmes*

Presently, there are a number of prominent weaving training centres involved in recruiting and training young weavers. These include *Zorig Chusum*, Royal Textile Academy, National Handloom Development Centre in Khaling and numerous other private training studios where master weavers impart their skills, knowledge and design sensibilities to train and nurture younger weavers.

Beyond weaving training, other specialised training has also been carried out. Notably, in recent years, natural dye training has been promoted through Handicraft Association of Bhutan (HAB). The usage of natural elements and the ability to dye colours have empowered Bhutanese weavers, as they are no longer totally dependent on Indian yarn suppliers dictating the colours. It has also expanded the repertoire of colours available to weavers; no longer are they subjected to uniformly chemically dyed colours in huge quantities. Albeit the quantities of these naturally dyed yarns are limited, it has enhanced the exclusiveness of these textiles with a unique character.

- *Technical and Design Innovation*

It is imperative that technical and design innovation be encouraged as a means

to restock and refresh the existing cultural resource/capital supply. Through the support from international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bhutan, training in innovative weaving skills has been conducted to introduce new methods of weaving. These include various configurations of basket, satin, leno, pile, twill and plain weave through the manipulations of warp and weft yarns. These new weaves have resulted in the expansion of new products such as scarves, shawls, stoles and other life-style items.

Over the years, design innovation of the *kira* has also taken root. For example, in the 1980s, the National Handloom Development Centre (NHDC) developed new *kira* patterns based on traditional supplementary weft motifs. In addition, they have also expanded traditional colour schemes to incorporate new colours including hot pink, yellow, peach and pale blue. These are often termed as “New Style Kiras”.²⁰

The dimension of the *kira* has also changed over the course of time. The width of old *kiras* from the 19th Century was narrower than those made today. This is because women then wore their *kiras* much shorter. Also, *kiras* then had longer fringes. *Kiras* from the 1940s had fringes as long as eight centimetres or more while today, fringes hardly exceed two to three centimetres.²¹

Another significant development of the *kiras* during the 1990s is the “half kira”. Instead of three panels, the half *kira* consists of only two panels. It is essentially a skirt, pleated like the traditional *kira* but instead of fastening at the shoulders, this new *kira* is fastened at the waist. A Bhutanese woman may wear a half *kira* with blouses, t-shirts or sweaters or with the traditional jacket over the blouse, closed in front with a brooch. This will give the illusion of wearing a full *kira*.²²

Such design innovations have gained the approval of stakeholders in the traditional cultural sector through establishing a special category—*Pesar*—at the national design competitions. Furthermore, the incorporation of *kira* textiles into contemporary fashion wear has also been accepted, as exemplified by the opening of an exhibition titled “Bhutanese Textiles in High Fashion” by The Textile Museum in 2014.²³

Beyond innovation in textile design and clothing, lifestyle and fashion accessories using hand-woven Bhutanese textile have also been explored successfully. Today, a wide range of such products is readily available to both locals and foreigners.

²⁰Myers, K., Bean, S., *From the Land of The Thunder Dragon: Textile Arts of Bhutan*. Serinda Publication, London, 1994.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan, accessed from: <http://www.royaltextileacademy.org/>

- *Conservation and Protection*

One means of adding new resources to the existing pool of cultural capital is to conserve and protect existing vintage textiles. Without conservation and protection, these fragile materials would literally disintegrate, and the loss will be irreversible. The preservation and conservation of heritage and vintage textile is important as it serves as a source for future research while serving as a resource for further developments.

According to the RTA²⁴ the institution is one of the first in the country to practise and impart internationally accepted methods and techniques of conservation and preservation. Beyond the Academy's own textiles, the conservation centre has also extended their services to restore many pieces from several *Dzongs* and monasteries in Bhutan.

- *Establishment of Trust Funds*

Another means of renewing cultural resource/capital is to establish trust funds as a means of investing in the future development of the industry. As reported by Kuensel,²⁵ Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, launched the Charitable Trust with the aim of ensuring the long-term sustainability of charitable organizations under her patronage. This includes the Textile Museum and the Royal Textile Academy.

Such trust funds could provide the financial resources to renew and revitalise the cultural resource/capital. For example, scholarships could be set up through such a trust fund for talented weavers to expand their horizon through enrolling into overseas academic institutions specialising in textiles and designs.

Beyond these current activities, others pursuits to re-capitalise Bhutanese textile resource could include:

- *Living Treasure Programme for Master Weaver /Artisan*

Currently, there is no official recognition for weavers who have produced exceptional works of art while contributing to the advancement of Bhutan textile culture. By acknowledging their contribution and recognising exceptional skills in an official way, these talented and expert weavers can become visible role models for the upcoming generation of weavers.

²⁴Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan, *Textile Conservation Centre*, accessed from <http://www.royaltextileacademy.org/programs/>

²⁵Kuensel, *Gyalum Charitable Trust Launched*, accessed from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/gyalum-charitable-trust-launched/>

- *Identification and Documentation of Endangered Textile Practices and Traditions*

In order to stamp the tide of generational de-skilling²⁶ which will erode and deplete Bhutanese textile resource and capital, it is important to conduct research to identify endangered textile practices and traditions. These will then be documented for possible future revival.

- *Contemporisation of Bhutanese Textiles*

Because of the advancement of information communication technologies, the flow of information is now instantaneous. The tide of information and global influences is also un-stoppable. Rather than resisting such flow, it is important for Bhutanese weavers to be informed of the latest developments in the world of textile, fashion and pop trends. By internalising such global trends, while being sensitive to their core culture, weavers can adapt products for their local markets, hence contemporising traditional Bhutanese textiles.

Seen from the perspective of cultural industry, such amalgamation of cultures and ideas will add onto the resource bank through forging new design developments to the existing range of *kira* and *gho* textiles.

Furthermore, the marriage of contemporary global fashion trends and Bhutanese hand-woven textiles will reflect a more “authentic” cultural expression of current times rather than attempting to stay within an artificially preserved, historically-grounded genre. Furthermore, such integration between the “outside” and the Bhutanese world will empower the industry by rendering it relevant and current.

Beyond tracking fashion and popular trends, it is also important for Bhutanese training establishments and stakeholders to keep abreast of the latest developments in textile and fibre. For instance, new yarns



Contemporary Bhutanese weaves styled in modern fashion at the Bhutanese Textile Exhibition, Singapore Fringe Festival 2006
Photo Credit: Joseph Lo

²⁶Lo, J., *Transformation of Saunders Weaving School into a Centre of Excellence*. UNDP Draft Project Document, UNDP Myanmar, Yangon, 2015.

have been developed which now incorporate technology (LED lights, solar-harvesting functions, enhanced thermal qualities, etc.). Also, new dyeing, printing and finishing techniques could initiate a new trajectory for Bhutanese textiles, clothing and life-style products.

It is at this junction of the cultural industry structure, where conservation of contemporary culture as it develops is important. This is because it will assist in the future growth of the industry. Therefore, not only is conservation of a “past” cultural heritage a vital necessity (for the point of departure in the cycle illustrated in Figure 1), but it is just as pressing an objective to conserve newly innovated, translated, and transformed cultural heritage or hybrids of new textile forms for the development of the next generation of cultural industry.

The challenge is to innovate Bhutanese textiles within the confines of its culture so that it is authentic and true. Therefore, it is essential and necessary for stakeholders such as designers, master weavers, trainers, academics, experts, collectors, etc. to understand the markers of authenticity of Bhutanese hand-woven textiles in order to incorporate new elements confidently and with credibility.

Second Generation

Once the cultural capital is renewed and refreshed, the next generation of capital will need to be refined through the “drivers” to feed into the industry for continuous and sustained growth. On the other hand, the disruption of flow from any one sector will adversely affect the entire development of the industry.

Conclusion

The argument advanced herein is for a new thinking about cultural conservation whereby the conservation is not merely for its own sake, but is treated as an essential resource for the economic development of the country. Importantly, from this perspective, conservation is not merely seen as a cost or a burden to a developing economy but an essential asset to the growth of a sustainable cultural industry.

Significantly, the conservation of culture should not be restricted to the preservation of ancient and heritage entities. It is equally important to explore, innovate and develop new cultural expressions and to conserve these contemporary cultures for future generations.

However, the important element is to ensure that innovation is not merely a random intervention but is carefully examined within the cultural context of Bhutan. Such thoughtful practice will result in the continuing heritage of Bhutan where authenticity is the bridge that connects both the past and the future.

Examining Bhutan from the macro-perspectives of social change and modernisation, the conservation of ancient heritage and the contemporisation of culture can be viewed as two-sides of the same coin, especially within the context of cultural industry. Hence, rather than perceiving Bhutan as a victim of cultural and social change with its culture being adulterated by non-Bhutanese elements, it is more worthwhile viewing such changes as hyper-cyclical in nature; an upward spiral movement in which items of today's contemporary culture become the cultural heritage of tomorrow.