

The Story of Bhutanese Culture

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The Premise

The premise of this article is that it is not the responsibility of the government but the responsibility of the Bhutanese state to coordinate all national institutions to ensure the functioning of Bhutanese society in a way that serves the populace. I interpret the functioning of society as governance, in its broadest sense, and not the narrower responsibility of the government which functions within the state.

It is in this context that I discuss the role of cultural institutions within the state. I look at different phenomena of culture: cultural heritage/artifacts that are preserved as it is; culture that must evolve with the times; and the values inherent in culture. In heritage I include the current institutions like monastic schools, national museums, libraries, and the Royal Academy of the Performing Arts (RAPA), for example. By products I mean arts and crafts and what are generally known as creative products. By trends I mean architectural traditions, language, evolution of the visual and performing arts, sport, and media. By values, I mean cultural consciousness and trends and the intangible aspects of culture such as practices, rituals, identity. This article emphasises the need for a clear policy and state support for cultural institutions of the state, those that exist and those that should but do not.

We often argue, with passion, that traditional Bhutan was a balanced society. The justification was the interdependence of rural communities where different sections of society helped each other and the human community, as a whole, accepted that we must live in harmony with nature. But we also acknowledge the feudal structure of society and the way that functioned. As a monarchy since 1907, governance emanated from the royal court and the cultural institutions—or rather practices—were dependent on royal patronage.

Then came the development process and, with development, an evolution of socio-economic and cultural systems. What does this mean? What did we lose, or gain, in the pursuit, albeit a cautious one, of progress and modernisation? This article discusses our understanding and interpretation of culture, the impact of the development

process on Bhutanese culture, the impact on traditional cultural institutions, the rural-urban migration impact on cultural evolution, and the emergence or non-emergence of modern cultural institutions. This is extremely important because the cultural arena is a critical component of the narrative of the state itself. What happened to our cultural institutions, artifacts, trends, and values as the royal court transformed into a modern state?

The Change

As an approach, let us take a look at the profile of Bhutanese society in 2015. In the aftermath of historic political transformation, and two general elections, we have five political parties and a growing cadre of politicians and political leaders. We also have a number of business companies that are vying for existing and emerging business opportunities, in a way monopolising the expanding economy. So we have our politicians and we have our businessmen. And we have the official and lay clergy. Who or what is missing in the context of a balanced society?

I would argue that we are missing the intellectual community—the scholars, thinkers, commentators, scientists, anthropologists, and artists. For the discourse on culture, I refer to the creative community or, more accurately, the creativity of the creative community. In this context I refer specifically to the evolving elements of culture like the visual and performing arts and literature. Rapid evolution of human communities over the past century forced societies to take stock of the new realities in the cultural environment. Has the sociocultural transition that Bhutan is going through dulled our cultural sensibility and our sense of aesthetics and creativity, and imagination? And has globalisation homogenised our cultural expression? Is this the price we are paying for modernisation?

A society, particularly one that claims to be a *GNH* society, requires the balance of politics and business with the sciences and humanities. Art, literature and all the humanistic sciences are the backbone and substance of culture. Inevitably this discourse must also look at the role of our spiritual institutions and community, the question of how our clergy are reaching out or not reaching out to broader society, especially the youth.

Consequence

One way of understanding this argument is to imagine a society comprising only politicians and businessmen and a conservative monk body. I argue that Bhutanese society is at risk of developing such an identity. And our cultural institutions are at risk of becoming mere shells without content. I believe that this was a resounding

message from His Majesty the King's special recognition of the masters in the traditional crafts on National Day this year.

There have been two consequences of the emphasis on the preservation of our cultural heritage. The evolving culture, particularly the creative arts, has been neglected. Therefore creativity has not been encouraged, perhaps even discouraged. The potential response from society, particularly the younger generation, is that Bhutanese 'culture', as it is widely understood, belongs to the older generation. Such a denunciation, even if it is just a perception, would dilute the Bhutanese identity as we know it.

The question now is how is Bhutanese culture evolving? If we argue that the discotheque is not Bhutanese culture are we saying that the thousands of Bhutanese youth who are in the discos several nights a week are not Bhutanese? Or, for that matter, what would we call the new Bhutanese music and songs on YouTube, written and performed by Bhutanese youth?

Given these trends we have no choice but to recognise and accommodate culture that include our youth. We are talking about the creation of a modernised contemporary Bhutanese culture.

If not it will lead to the exclusion of the younger section of the population from the process of nation-building. Rather than harmonise and balance society, this will widen the gap in terms of generations and values. The result, as we already see, would be that youth turns towards other powerful forces like Bollywood and Hollywood with their own culture and values. Should that be the future Bhutanese culture?

Present Situation

Take a look at Thimphu city. There are two libraries, 10 bookstores, no drama theatre, five small art galleries, and two music schools. Meanwhile there are 29 internet cafes, nine discotheques, 12 drayangs, and 639 registered bars while the number of illegal bars is unknown.

There are 28,080 students in 48 schools in Thimphu. Each school has an annual concert with a total of more than 100 items. You do not hear the voice of a single child in all these items because a school concert today means a group of students writhing to recorded *rigsar* music.

How many young Bhutanese will go to a concert by RAPA? But that is not the point. RAPA, as an 'Academy', drew up a sophisticated mandate: promoting classical,

modern, and indigenous traditions that include music, dance, poetry, drama. The idea is to train and promote these artistic traditions in all *dzongkhags*, maintaining their indigenous features, so that the rural communities preserve them.

But today, RAPA is largely an entertainment group that performs at festivals and events like official dinners. This is a commercialised environment with a growing number of private companies competing. The concept of entertainment itself is getting convoluted with sacred dances like the *Durda* being performed in hotel restaurants as dining entertainment for tourists. Meanwhile the visual arts and crafts are co-opted at hotels to portray “culture” for tourists.

High-profile organisations like the Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) also face the same challenges. The DDC was established to preserve, promote, and develop the national language. His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo personally elevated the status of the DDC by appointing the highest level commission.

As a result Dzongkha saw some progress and spread during the reign of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. Court proceedings, local *zomdues*, and parliamentary discussions were conducted in Dzongkha and translation of His Majesty’s own addresses in the east, centre and south stopped. But, as a senior Dzongkha expert laments today, ‘English is overshadowing Dzongkha. Soon our monks will be reading English newspapers’. A stark example of this is the written media where Dzongkha editions do not sell and advertisers want their messages in English language newspapers.

More than speech, or the fact that most subjects are taught in English, youth are ‘thinking’ in English. With Bhutanese students exposed to one period of Dzongkha a day and thousands of hours of television programming in Hindi and English, this is not likely to reverse. Looking at trends around the world the stark question facing us today is, ‘Can we maintain a national language?’

Then we have the traditional handicrafts, crafts with a distinctly Bhutanese feature. Traditional arts and crafts were started and maintained by royal patronage in the royal courts Bumthang and Trongsa and then Punakha and Thimphu, for several generations. This was modernised into the Zorig Institute—school of traditional crafts. Exquisite Bhutanese handicrafts have a niche demand, mostly for religious practice, but that is in very limited quantities.

The natural trend for crafts, including the creative industry, is commodification of products for the sustainability of the industry. But more than 90 percent of the

handicrafts on sale in Bhutanese bazaars and handicraft shops are mass produced items from India and Nepal. This is embarrassing.

An increasingly powerful ‘institution’ is the media industry that includes the oral medium, print, radio and television, film, music, animation, advertising and publishing. Currently overwhelmed by global trends and the powerful commercialised Indian media, the Bhutanese media have a powerful impact on the role of the state in governance and on society at large.

The risk is that we are losing our aesthetics and traditional finesse with the emerging foreign-influenced superficial and consumption-oriented culture. The greater question of Bhutan’s artistic appreciation, influenced by nature, is now influenced by commercial media. Even as we appreciate the claim by our film industry that Dzongkha films have replaced Bollywood, we have to ask ourselves if we have indeed replaced Bollywood or translated Bollywood into Dzongkha.

An important reason to create culture in the form of art, literature, and media is to create public space in which important issues are discussed. We do not just promote art for the sake of art, literature for the sake of literature, or culture for the sake of culture. The culturalist raises critical topics for discussion. The very function of culture must be to create this space for the broad discussion of social, political, and economic issues.

Literature

Celebrating the 60th birth anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, Bhutan declared it a year of reading. It was a brilliant idea, coming at a time when a strongly oral society is being seduced by the audio-visual media before Bhutanese society has been able to develop a culture of reading.

But where is Bhutanese literature? Bhutan is rich in epics, mythology, folk tales, and historical chronicles. The good news is that Bhutanese people are great storytellers and love stories. But we are changing from being great storytellers to being great television viewers, addicted to foreign serials and sitcoms. And there is much wanting in the quality of writing both in Dzongkha and English. The fact that the author of a book receives an eight percent commission and a tourist guide who takes a tourist to the shop to buy the book gets 15 percent commission speaks for itself.

Backdrop

All this is an irony. Bhutan has always emphasised the importance of preserving its rich cultural traditions. It is widely recognised for the pragmatic policy decision that,

in the absence of military might and economic power, Bhutan's resilience lies in its unique identity. As external threats metamorphose from military to demography, a small and vulnerable society can only survive by being different from the masses. This worked for Bhutan which has been much admired for preserving its cultural identity at a time when many societies lost theirs.

Bhutan proudly boasts that the kingdom is not a museum presenting itself as a photo opportunity for tourists, but a living culture. Seeing change as a potential threat, the government, and society as a whole, clearly interpreted Bhutanese culture as being synonymous with religion, in our case Buddhism. Thus the emphasis is on the cultural heritage to be preserved.

The main icons of cultural heritage were the *dzongs* and monasteries and temples, the National Museum, National Library, and Bhutanese architecture although this is a debatable issue. A common characteristic among the custodians of culture as well as the spiritual leadership, for example, was a sense of austerity like the emphasis on hierarchy and *driglam namzha*.

So the essence of my argument is that, while this emphasis on culture to be preserved was a brilliant policy, it is not enough. They are all the institutions and traditions to be preserved. The National Museum is a storehouse, and National Library a repository of books and archives, DDC is struggling to strengthen Dzongkha. If Bhutanese culture does not evolve with the times, Bhutan will become the museum that we claim not to be.

The Proposal

In *The Idea of Culture*, Terry Eagleton describes culture as 'one of the two or three most complex words in the English language'. Culture is that domain of human activity of the past, the present, and the future, both as individuals and as a community. Broadly, if we look at culture as 'a way of life' can we define a Bhutanese way of life? When objectified, that would include the artifacts, the creative arts that are distinctly Bhutanese, oral and published literature that is Bhutanese. Subjectively it is our mental images, our practices, and the conversation we hold about ourselves.

Through this complexity, let us look at two broad phenomena of culture that are important in our context: Bhutanese culture that needs to be preserved and culture that must evolve—two related but distinctly different approaches. For the preservation of culture, we have our religious institutions, national museums, libraries, the DDC. In these we see ourselves, our identity, our past.

But there have been no focused initiatives to nurture the evolution of the arts, particularly the visual and performing arts. Here I mean the arts, not crafts. This is a problem because the development of the creative arts is critical for the strengthening of social and community bonds, building a cohesive and resilient society, and deepening the sense of national identity.

There is no shortage of inspiration, talent, facilities, examples around the world. There is no shortage of talent, or for that matter, confidence in Bhutan. For Bhutan this should be a natural initiative because feedback from all sources where Bhutanese youth go out for training say that Bhutanese youth are naturally creative. We need to bring alive the Bhutanese maxim, ‘Learn what is good, even from your enemies, reject what is bad, even from your parents’. Is it that we do not understand the global creative industry or is it that we believe that we are better off just preserving our rich culture as it is?

Given these trends, exacerbated by globalisation, which includes the proliferation of mainstream and social media, the challenge is to develop a Bhutanese culture that can hold its own, with its strength being the uniqueness of Bhutan. Therefore we have the need for an innovative and aggressive construction of a viable Bhutanese culture for the 21st century with strong role models. The modern Bhutanese state requires this to function.

An amazing development in the past few decades, and a real opportunity for Bhutan, is the rapid evolution of Information Communication Technology that has revolutionised every aspect of human life and existence. The convergence of technology, media, and the arts has transformed the entertainment and artistic industry known by the United Nations as the Information Society. The only limit now, excuse the cliché, is imagination.

Policy and Institutions

The bottom line, and the thrust of my argument, is the need for a clear government policy to develop the creative arts. An innovative and aggressive policy, vigorously implemented, will build a strong creative section of society. The basis is already there in our Constitution, which emphasises the importance of the evolving culture.

The solution must begin with the ideas that can be translated into imaginative policies. While the emphasis on preservation of our cultural heritage has been consistent and strong, we need creative dynamic policies to enable Bhutanese culture to evolve. Today’s regulatory environment (or the lack of it)—policy, laws,

regulations—does not encourage the development of the visual and performing arts in a rapidly changing social environment. We need an urgent focus on the fine arts, along with the infrastructure and incentives that would include theatres and training in the arts and drama.

The policy will need to be backed by institutions guided by progressive approaches to cultural promotion. The function of cultural institutions is to actualise cultural policy. In other words, cultural institutions are the instruments through which ‘culture’ is strengthened and even created. At this stage Bhutan needs a range of state and non-state institutions that encourage an active involvement of civil society and the private sector in the arts.

Specialised agencies and institutions have to be imbedded in government ministries as departments and divisions or even as corporate bodies and statutory boards. The Department of Culture sees as its mandate the preservation of culture and therefore the focus on spiritual heritage and museums, the Zorig Institute and RAPA. The varying objectives of these institutes are visible in their lack of strategic focus.

Policy initiatives and support must begin in school curricula. We can have no modernising or modern 21st century Bhutanese culture if our education system does not inspire children to think and imagine creatively, be excited by the arts, and it does not give them the foundations in language and in skills necessary for creativity in the arts. At the tertiary level, education policies need to place greater emphasis on culture. While the goal of preserving and promoting culture is paramount, it is ironic that disciplines such as anthropology are not taught in Bhutanese colleges. Such disciplines not only enable critical thinking and analysis of culture, but also help to fill critical gaps in research and document important elements of diminishing culture through qualitative and ethnographic methods.

This may at times conflict with the tradition of rote learning but that is healthy tension. Without creativity, in the digital age, Bhutan will not survive. Children’s literature and youth writers must be a strong focus in the development of the arts with potential writers exposed to the creative arts at various levels.

Beyond the religious institutions, there are few non-state inspirational institutions like museums, art galleries, and libraries that often are major global icons in most countries. Art, drama, and music schools enrich the cultural identity of societies. These institutions can be national but differentiated from strongly spiritual institutions. We also need to differentiate between the documentation and recording of culture

and the promotion and preservation of culture.

All this requires substantial state recognition and support. While a number of institutions are fully funded government agencies the creative industry has received little or no support. Fortunately VAST has received royal encouragement. Other small galleries and artistic initiatives need to be brought into the purview of the government's plans. Cultural movements will enrich our national identity, in Bhutan's case a national identity that will have its resilience in its dynamism. In the age of globalisation and regionalisation, the issue of national culture is a vital feature of nation building.

So how do we stimulate the ideas and the inspiration for creative policy decisions? From discourse—including high-level political discourse. Decisions on culture and cultural institutions, like everything else, cannot be separated from real politics. We need to ask ourselves, what areas of culture are worth holding onto and preserving and which areas need to evolve?

As Thin, N., Verma, R., and Uchida, Y., argued in a chapter prepared for Bhutan's New Development Paradigm initiative¹, aspects of culture that are outdated, or even harmful, should be changed and aspects of culture that promote compassion, spirituality, and generosity should be preserved. In fact this will enrich political discourse because we talk politics today but we do not really have political discourse. It is important to instill pride in our culture especially at a time when our youth struggle with a rapidly changing cultural identity.

¹This chapter on 'Culture, Development and Happiness' appears in the unpublished 'Report on Wellbeing & Happiness', (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research, Thimphu, 2013), prepared for the Royal Government of Bhutan's New Development Paradigm initiative (2012-2014) as a contribution towards its final report entitled *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm* (Steering Committee and Secretariat for the NDP, Thimphu, 2013).