

# Overview of Traditional Weaving (Thagzo) in Bhutan

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## Abstract

*Thagzo, literally meaning the art of textile or handloom weaving, is one of the Zo rig chu sum, thirteen traditional arts and crafts of Bhutan which have played a very important role in shaping Bhutan's unique cultural identity.*

*The practice of weaving had existed since the earliest recorded history of the country, and the knowledge and skills attributed to it have been passed down from one generation to the next. Weaving is an individual work of art and textiles produced are mainly for the Bhutanese. In recent times, however, Indian-made cloth featuring Bhutanese designs, which are machine-woven, is becoming increasingly popular in Bhutan. In addition, with the seeping in of westernisation, globalisation and modernisation in the country, there is a huge concern for the continuity of this beautiful and time-honoured tradition of weaving.*

*In light of the above mentioned facts, this paper examines the features of traditional weaving in Bhutan with particular attention to traditional ways of dyeing, traditional raw material and other aspects of Bhutanese textile production. Furthermore, this paper tries to find out whether there exists any relationship between the easy access to raw material and factory produced textiles from neighbouring countries, and the decline in traditional weaving that may cause it to disappear.*

## Introduction

Bhutan, 'the land of the thunder dragon' is a treasure house of beautiful and colourful arts and crafts. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008) defines arts and crafts as 'the skills of making objects such as decorations, furniture, and pottery (objects made from clay) by hand'. In Bhutan, the arts and crafts together are locally termed as *Zo Rig Chu Sum*. *Zo* means to make, *rig* means science, and *chusum* means thirteen thus translating to 'the thirteen arts and crafts'. The thirteen arts and crafts of Bhutan were first introduced to Bhutan in the seventeenth Century during Zhabdrung's (Father and unifier of Medieval Bhutan) time (1594-1651) and those are as follows:

1. Painting (*lhazo, lhadri or Debri*);
2. Wood, slate and stone carving (*Par zo*);
3. Sculpting or clay arts (*jimzo*);
4. Woodworking or Carpentry (*shingzo*);
5. Gold, silver and blacksmithing (*serzo, nguzo, Garzo*);
6. Cane and bamboo weaving or basketry (*Tsharzo*);
7. Weaving/textile work (*thagzo*);
8. Embroidery/needlework (*Tshemzo*);
9. Bronze/Metal Casting (*lugzo*);
10. Wood-turning (*Shagzo*);
11. Masonry (*Dozo or Tsigzo*);
12. Paper-making (*Shokzo, dezo*); and
13. Calligraphy (*yigzo*).

Arts and crafts of Bhutan are not only eye-catching and decorative but also subjective and symbolic. Buddhism being the principal religion of Bhutan, every aspect of arts and crafts is generally influenced by Buddhist beliefs, teachings and practices. Most, if not all Bhutanese arts and crafts are used to convey spiritual values and messages. Thus, one cannot find Bhutanese arts and crafts that are devoid of any religious significance and symbolism. As pointed out by Robin Smillie (2007), the three main characteristics of Bhutanese art are: its anonymity, spirituality and having no aesthetic function by itself (12). The artist does not work to create a work of art but a labour of faith that produces something as beautifully as one possibly can.

The incredible skills and knowledge of artisans and craftsmen have been passed down from generation to generation especially from father to sons/daughters, mother to daughters/ sons and master to the students. Until the recent past, this culture was kept alive even in the new environment of rising technical developments to which the Bhutanese adapted in a practical and open-minded way. Even to this day, these arts and crafts can be studied at the training institute of *Zorig Chusum*. Currently, there are two institutes of *Zorig Chusum* in the

country: Institute of *Zorig Chusum* in Thimphu (capital of Bhutan) and another in Tashiyangste in eastern Bhutan, set up in 1971 and 1997 respectively with the aim to provide training and to preserve traditional arts and crafts, and also to create job opportunities for the youth of the country.

All the arts and crafts, although being significantly rooted in Buddhism and history are mostly used in everyday life. All thirteen arts and crafts of Bhutan can be seen functioning in all the *Dzongs* (fortresses), temples and monasteries throughout the country regularly, if not on a daily basis. Murals and frescoes are seen inside the temples and monasteries that tell stories of religious figures, and symbolic items like statues of the great Buddhist saints are placed on altars in temples/ monasteries and in every *choesham* (altar room) of an ordinary household. Some of the products like masks are worn during religious festivals by mask dancers showcasing the expensive clothes with intricate designs. These are mostly performed during the auspicious days or festivals.

### ***Thagzo* – Textile/ Traditional Cloth Making**

Weaving in Bhutan today has come to represent its unique cultural and national identity in the eyes of the people of the world. The Bhutanese weavers have excelled in an old tradition of producing not only woven strips of cotton, but also of yaks' hair and sheep's wool, which is rain-and-wind proof. The textile works has been popular in the country for a very long time.

Weaving is very much part of the Bhutanese way of life. Nearly every house has a loom, often in a special room used mainly for weaving. Bartholomew (1985) states that in the past almost all the girls would begin playing with looms at an early age and start their apprenticeship at ten or eleven years of age (90). They were considered to be experts by the time they reached twenty two. Almost all the girls would be weaving by the time they reach their 20s. Although weaving task is part of their lives, it is carried out intermittently, in-between looking after children, cooking, washing and working in the fields.

Bhutanese textiles have been considered as one of the highest forms of artistic expression and the most important art in the country. Moreover, it has played a central role in maintaining the unique culture of Bhutan. Bhutanese weavers have been able to bring up a highly advanced and sophisticated weaving culture, developed and evolved over a significant period of time. Weaving is more

than a pastime for the weavers in Bhutan as it is one of the sources of income among rural women, especially in eastern Bhutan. Thus, weaving in Bhutan may be regarded as a cottage industry and the textile produced are used mainly for household purposes although some of the cloth may also be sold. In the past, before the monetised economy, a part of the fabrics people produced were used to pay government taxes. Some fabrics were redistributed as state payments to common people, and also offered to officials in return for favours. While weaving is closely associated with women, few men are also seen to be weaving.

The types of clothes the Bhutanese weavers wove depended on the availability of the raw material. People from eastern Bhutan are known to be the best weavers in Bhutan with every valley boasting its own designs and patterns. For example, the speciality of Bumthang, central Bhutan, is its famous production of beautifully-dyed woolen pieces such as *yattah*, *martah*, and *sertah* whereas the high altitude settlements, such as Merak and Sakteng on the eastern border are known for their woolen weavings and natural dyes. In many parts of eastern Bhutan, people cultivated cotton as an annual crop and thus made cotton clothes. Kurtoe in Luntse *Dzongkhag* (district) in eastern Bhutan boasts the most sophisticated *kira* – *Kishuthara* (women's dress), and Tashigang is famously known for the striped, multicoloured design of dress pieces known as *mensi mattah*, *aikapur* and *lungserma* as well as the *chaksi pankhep* (royal lap cover) and the *kara* (*belt piece*). Silk worms were raised to produce raw silk from which cloth called *bura* was made in Samdrup Jongkhar, South East Bhutan.

The entire process of weaving includes preparation of yarn, dyeing and final weaving to produce designs ranging from simple to beautiful and intricate designs.

### **Looms (*thagshing*) for Weaving**

In Bhutan, Fabrics are woven by hand using three types of looms:

- i. Back-strap loom (*pangthag*)
- ii. Treadle/pedal loom (*thrithag*)
- iii. Card loom

## Back-strap Loom

In the olden days, textiles were woven only on the back-strap loom (*pangthag*). It is operated by just one person who creates tension in the warp threads by leaning back against the wide leather strap which holds the thread taut (**Figs. 1a&1b**). As pointed out by Adams (1984), the weaver sits on the ground or floor, leans against a wide leather strap and deftly maneuvers a dizzying number of seemingly extraneous threads into the background cloth as it is being woven, thus producing the infinitely varied embroidery-like designs which can be seen on both ritual and utilitarian textiles all over Bhutan (5).



*Figures 1a&1b: Weaver on Back-strap Loom*

## Card loom

Card loom functions in a similar fashion to backstrap loom where the weaver leans against the wide leather strap holding the thread taut but the heddles are different. Instead of using the loops, cards are used to lift a part of the warp. The cards that used to be traditionally made of sheets of sturdy animal hides are often being made of x-ray film or cardboard today. Each card has four holes in each corner for the warp to pass through (**Fig. 2**). A set of warp units consists of four cards with eight warps. As the weaver weaves to make a belt, cards are rotated by quarter turns to open and close each shed, and the weft is beaten down with a wooden sword (*thagchung*). Card loom is used to produce narrow textile such as belts (*keras*), garters for securing boots, and ties for binding religious text.



*Figure 2: Cards used in the Card Loom to make Belts*

## Treadle/ Pedal Loom (*Thrithag*)

Treadle or pedal loom is a horizontal farm loom that functions with pedals (**Fig. 3**). The loom does not use a circular warp instead the warp is wound around the narrow rods laid parallel to the floor. As the winding proceeds at one end of the

warp, yarns are inserted through the heddles that control the ground weave. It usually has four shafts or heddles. Unlike the backstrap and card loom, supplementary pattern warps are not used in this type of loom. It is usually used to weave checkered textiles by using stripes in the warp and stripes in the weft.



*Figure 3: Treadle /Pedal Loom*

### **Fibers/ Yarn or Material used**

Most materials used in weaving were available locally. The yarn and dyes, which were used to make the cloth and the wood and bamboo for the looms, are also found within Bhutan. Traditionally, the Bhutanese weavers' material had been natural fibers like raw cotton, wool, and thread derived from nettle plants, raw silk and dyes that were produced locally. They used to cultivate cotton and silk worm and processed the yarn locally (**Fig. 4**). Gradually commercial fibers like commercial cotton, silk, synthetic dyes and rayon and dyes from India came into use as they were much cheaper and easier to use compared to indigenous materials. Today, Bhutanese weavers have access to fibers like silk-like acrylic yarn, machine spun woolen yarn, acrylic yarn, mercerised cotton, polyester from India, Hong Kong, Japan, and buy the best they can afford (**Fig. 5**). In addition, over the years rearing of silk worm and cotton cultivation have become labour



extensive and easy access to machine made yarn has lead to substitution of the local yarn with imported yarn. This has also led to the disappearance of traditional yarn processing tools. With this easy access to machine made yarn in the market, the tools that were used to make the traditional yarn are almost diminished in the country.



***Figure 4: Locally Processed Cotton Yarn***



***Figure 5: Machine Spun Woolen Yarn***



## Dyeing

Bhutanese weavers consider pleasing colour coordination to be more important than the designs of the fabrics. Bhutanese have a natural ability to excel in the dyeing process and manage to obtain every colour. Traditionally, fine yarn was dyed in many colours by the locally available dye (plant/ vegetable dyes). Since the country is generally rich in flora and fauna, Bhutanese cultivated indigo in household gardens along with wild madder, and other wild plants. However, it is very difficult to learn the specific formulae of dyeing as there is a strong taboo guiding the dyeing process. Bhutanese are very secretive about dyeing formulas, even amongst themselves. According to Bartholomew (1985), Bhutanese are very superstitious about dyes and they believe only the most qualified people will ever attempt the dyeing process (95). They believe that certain weather conditions, strangers and even a pregnant woman who come near the dyeing area or during the time of the dyeing process can ruin the impact of dyes. Therefore, in addition to good mood, dyeing of yarn is done in secret in the early mornings behind closed doors.

In the past, the traditional colours used for weaving were primarily red and blue, which are believed to be spiritually symbolic of the two complementary forces of the universe. For example, to make the white yarn into red colour, yarn is soaked in the boiled solution of wild madder (*lani ngang ru* in **Fig. 7**), and shades of green and blue colours are obtained from the indigo plants (*yang shaba* (**Fig. 6**)). The colour varies according to the dye-to-yarn ratio used and the steeping time.



**Figure 6: Indigo Plant**

Today, very little dyeing with natural dyes is done due to easy access to commercial dyes or aniline dyes which are cheaper to buy and easier to use. Weavers sometimes add synthetic dyes to a natural dye to enhance the colour and luster of the yarns.



*Figure 7: Wild Madder*

### **Textiles pattern**

Every valley has its own colourful pattern, where they have high levels of technical sophistication and unique designs. Each textile has its own spiritual relevance, importance and daily usage. It usually takes an artist from several days to years to finish a weaving depending on the complexity of the designs and patterns of the cloth. One would identify the district from where it came from by the very look of the fabric.

*Sharchops*, the people of eastern Bhutan where the maximum weaving is done, is famous for producing several distinct patterns and designs such as striped fabric, single faced or both side fabrics. Plain weave fabrics are relatively simple striped clothes with double-sided designs like *thara* and *serthra* woven for everyday wear, in contrast to those fabrics woven for special or ceremonial occasions. Supplementary-weft-patterned fabrics are usually obtained by adding coloured thread that is thicker than the base fabric, to the weft. These coloured threads can show on one side of the fabric or on both sides. If they show on one side, they are called single faced, and when they show on both sides, they are called two-faced or double faced. Kurtoe in Lhuntse *Dzongkhag* is famous for producing brocaded dresses (*kushuthara*). *Khushuthara* is characterised by its high silk content and also by the lavish use of *timah* and *sammah* brocade-work

finely executed on a white background. The *Timah* technique is believed to be very complex and requires great skills by the weavers to make sure that there are no supplementary brocade threads shown on the back while producing a fine pattern on the surface of the fabric.

Other patterns include the brocade motifs on both sides of the fabric like *lungserma*, *aikapur* and *mensi mattah*. These are made by adding coloured thread to the warp. These fabrics have extra warp threads manipulated to create double faced warp patterns. Those are called Supplementary-warp-patterned fabrics.

Apart from weaving the most intricate, creative and technically unique textiles, Bhutanese designs are primarily of geometric nature. The geometric symbols used in the textiles have a deep religious significance. The most common geometric symbols used by the Bhutanese are *yurung* (Swastikas), *phub* (triangular pattern), *dramee* (eternal knot) and *dorji* (thunderbolt). These symbols have their own significance. For example, the motif *phub* is believed to bring long life. Today, the work in modern pieces has become increasingly more dense and complicated, and the Buddhist influences seem to disappear in the overall pattern. Animal designs, once a common motif, are no longer being used.

## Products

Different styles of fabrics can be distinguished according to the combination of motifs and colours produced in different parts of the country. There are many subtly varying utilitarian and ceremonial weavings particularly in relation to custom and usage. Each fabric has a name like *kira*, *Gho*, *kera*, *rachu*, *Kabney*, *yattah*, *denkhep*, *charkhab*, *bhundi*, *khamar*, *chaksi pankhep*, *Tikhep* and *tego*. Utilitarian textiles like ropes and bags from yak hair and blankets and clothing from sheep wool are also produced in Merak and Sakteng on the eastern border.

### *Kira*

The *kira* is the national dress for women in Bhutan (**Fig. 8**). It is a rectangular piece, usually made from three lengths of cloth woven on the backstrap loom, or ten to fourteen narrow panels of fabrics made on the treadle loom. The *kira* is worn ankle-length, wrapped around the body, fastened at each shoulder with a *koma* (brooch - *Koma* is a distinctive piece of jewellery made of silver or gold, and often accented with turquoise to fasten the *kira*) and secured at the waist by

the *kera* (belt) (**Fig. 9**). However, the full *kira* is worn mostly by the older generation. The younger generation of Bhutanese women prefers to wear half *kira* made up of two lengths of cloth woven instead of three lengths of cloth. In recent times, factory made fabrics featuring Bhutanese designs that are actually from India have hit the Bhutanese markets and have become very popular. As it is cheap and easily available in the market, many women prefer to wear the factory made fabrics.



**Figure 8: Kira Hung up for Sale**



**Figure 9: A Woman in Kira**

### *Gho*

The *gho* is the national dress of men in Bhutan. This coat like garment is worn tightly belted with a narrow *kera* (belt) so that upper portion forms a sort of loose pouch or pocket. *Gho* is worn knee length over a white cotton shirt *tego* which has extra-long sleeves whose cuffs and collar are turned back to show touches of white at the wrist and neck (**Fig. 10**).



*Figure 10: Men in Gho*

### *Kera*

*Kera* is a belt, woven on card loom with traditional designs for women and plain for man's belt with stripes and is fringed at both ends (**Fig. 11**). It is used to secure the *kira* and *gho* at the waist. It is folded thrice, wrapped tightly around the waist and held in place with the fringed end which is tucked into the top of the belt.



*Figure 11: Traditional Designs of Kera for Women and Plain Stripes for Men: Fringed at both ends*

### ***Rhachu***

The *rachu* is a ceremonial sash worn by women during the festivals while entering temples, fortresses, monasteries, and flagged offices. It is fringed at both ends. It is worn folded and draped over the left shoulder when welcoming important officials (**Fig. 12**). When paying respect to a lama or prostrating in the temple and monasteries, it is worn loose over both the shoulders (**Fig. 13**).



***Figure 12: Rhachu folded and Draped over the Left Shoulder***



***Figure 13: Rhachu Worn Loose over Shoulder***

### ***Kabney***

*Kabney* is a ceremonial scarf worn by men, and is much broader than those worn by women. It is intricately draped and wrapped around the shoulders so that they can ceremonially unfurl for the traditional respectful bow to the king or other high officials. It is also worn while visiting temples, fortresses and monasteries.

Different colours of the *kabney* are used according to the rank of the man wearing it. For example, a commoner without official rank wears white scarf or



cotton or raw silk. Court judges wear green colour and ministers wear orange (Fig. 14).



*Figure 14: Kabney (Ceremonial Scarf)*

## Conclusion

Modernisation and globalisation have certainly brought major changes to the traditional weavers of Bhutan and Bhutanese textile, and these present great challenges, especially losing their significance in the modern world. The natural fibers are being replaced by commercial fibers, and the weaving tools and rich characters of the Bhutanese textile are rapidly impoverished with the flood of cultural influences and modernisation. Traditional Bhutanese designs are changing. In recent years synthetic fibers have steadily gained popularity, perhaps they are easy to wash and care for. Not many women are seen to be weaving compared to a century ago as young girls who should be learning to weave are now attending school. Machine woven clothes featuring Bhutanese designs made in India have gained popularity in recent times.

In spite of the stiff competition from cheaper factory-made cloth, and easily available commercial yarns and dyes, traditional hand-woven cloth still enjoys the pride of being unique and has maintained its great popularity throughout the country. The Bhutanese have been able to keep this culture alive even in a new



environment of rising technical developments by adapting themselves in a practical and unprejudiced way. Even today, traditional weaving forms the integral part of the rich cultural heritage of Bhutan and Bhutanese textiles are still considered to be one of the highest forms of Bhutanese artistic expressions.

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