

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON LEVERAGING
CULTURAL DIVERSITY



Hosted by

ROYAL THIMPHU COLLEGE and HELVETAS SWISS INTERCOOPERATION

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HELVETAS
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About this conference and the proceedings

The International Conference on Leveraging Cultural Diversity is the culmination of a three-year project conducted by Helvetas, with support from the European Union, in documenting and highlighting cultural diversity within Bhutan – in this case, the southern cultures of the Rai, Lhop, Sarchop, and Khengpas. Through this project, as well, the need to recognize and leverage cultural diversity was identified. Thus, this conference focused not just on these communities, but on ways in which all minority cultures can leverage their community assets to promote economic and social development. In many ways, this was a unique conference in that there was a diversity of presentations and activities. Outside of the more academic Technical Session presentation and question-answer format, there was a photo exhibit, dance performances, music, craft-making demonstrations, and an indigenous food demonstration and tasting. Because of this, these proceedings are not the publication of conference papers but, rather, a reflection of the conference activities through speeches, abstracts, summaries, and pictures.

Book Personnel:

Matthew Schuelka, *editor*

Sonam Thinley, Sonam Choki, Tashi Dhendup Dorji, Tashi Chephey, & Tshering Dema, *rapporteurs*

Khachab Dorji, Dr. Samir Patel, *photography*

Conference Personnel:

Dasho Tenzing Yonten, Dr. Shivaraj Bhattarai, Dr. Samir Patel, Dr. Dolma Roder, Bikash Chhetri, Nawang Yangden, *Royal Thimphu College*

Kunzang Dorji, Dr. Walter Roder,
Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation

Dr. Bruce Owens,
Wheaton College, MA, USA

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Closing Address

By: Lopen Dr. Karma Phuntsho

Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research, Loden Foundation

As an enthusiastic student and practitioner of Bhutan's culture, I have enormously enjoyed the cultural presentations and discussions during the conference and want to thank Helvetas and RTC for the wonderful experience. The conference is also a befitting celebration of what the Helvetas project, Leveraging Bhutan's Cultural Diversity, has achieved in terms of documenting endangered cultural practices, unravelling our assumptions about them, making culture expedient for socio-economic development and also in broadening the horizons of the target communities. Thus, the task of having the last word to wind up such an educational and cultural celebration on the right note is by no means an easy task and I stand here both humbled by the honour and daunted by the responsibility of passing some concluding remarks worthy of the wonderful experience we had so far.

The best thing, I can do in such a position, by following a traditional Buddhist pedagogic practice, is to look back at the proceedings of the past two days, to recapitulate the main threads of our discussions in order to reevaluate where we stand in terms of cultural integrity and transition and how we can take the wisdom of the project and this conference forward to leverage Bhutan's cultural diversity.

Dasho Karma Ura in his keynote address started the discussions with his incisive account of Bhutan's cultural scenario, which was then followed by substantive presentations on specific cultural practices and issues in the target communities. The presentations have not only broadened my exposure to and understanding of Bhutan's cultural diversity but also highlighted the precarious condition of some of our cultures and the many challenges we face in sustaining them meaningfully as we embrace the process of modernization and globalisation. In addition, our friends from the neighbouring countries have eloquently shared their wisdom and experience on using culture as expedient means of livelihood.

Throughout the conference, we have repeatedly touched on the definition and taxonomy of culture. Let me here recapitulate our basic understanding of culture and its classifications in order to shed light on the nature of our cultural heritage and the kinds of issues and challenges we are facing in sustaining or leveraging cultural diversity. If what we call culture is a set of transmitted patterns of our beliefs, values, world views, philosophies and their expressions in the form of behaviours or other representations, we can perhaps conveniently classify culture, using a Buddhist framework, into two categories of meaning and manifestation, (བརྗེད་པོ་ལྟོས་པ་ brda dang don). By meaning or don, I am referring to cultures pertaining to the inner conditions of the mind, our patterns of thinking, attitudes, outlooks, values, principles, philosophies, mores and personality traits and by manifestation or brda, the patterns of verbal, physical, artistic, material and other embodied expressions and symbols.

I make this classification of culture into meaning and manifestation partly because there is a tendency among some people to equate culture with tangible material forms and overlook the inner ideas and values, and thereby misconceive culture as a relic of the past which has become outdated and irrelevant to modern times. To those with such tendencies, I would like to emphatically state that culture is neither purely about tangible manifestations nor about archaic practices. Our cultural heritage consists largely of timeless values and patterns which are crucial to wellbeing and are as much relevant today as they were in the past.

I would like to demonstrate the relevance of our culture to our wellbeing in three progressive ways: from the individual, community to the world at large.

On an individual level, culture forms the bedrock of personal identity. Cultural traits and roles define a person and make up a person's epistemological and existential self beyond which, according to the Buddha, there is no ontological being. We have seen in the presentations on the history, genealogy and rituals of the communities how the identities of individuals such as a shaman, pujari or priest is determined by the cultural role they play. We are composites made up of the numerous socio-cultural factors which constitute our life and an evolving product of cultural conditioning. Thus, culture contributes substantially to the quality of our life and life experience and a wholesome culture is essential for a happy and meaningful life.

On the level of a community, cultural ideas and practices are the social cement which binds a society together. Culture is the blood which flows through our social-economic and political systems to keep them alive. Without the cultural values, principles, mores and practices to give order and structure to our shared environment and experience, a community cannot function. Culture informs our view and perception of the world we live in and our attitude and approach to nature, people, and the general purpose of our existence. A wholesome cultural ethos is essential for the smooth functioning of a society.

The benefits of culture, however, are not only local. In a highly globalized world, we are today living in an age of cultural exchange and fusion and some of the formerly isolated cultural practices have today become universal phenomena. A good example is yoga, a cultural practice which originated in India but is now practiced in most parts of the world. Similarly, chigung, taichi and acupuncture, which are originally Chinese cultural practices, have now spread across the globe. Meditation, a practice associated with our own Buddhist cultural heritage, is another great example of a culture which has gained global appeal and Buddhist mindfulness practice has even made its way into mainstream psychotherapy and medical practices in some countries.

Such universal relevance is even greater in the case of perceptible cultures such as music and artistic creations. Today, music and art are appreciated beyond national and cultural borders as universal phenomena. The same can be said about tangible cultures such as textiles, architectural designs or ethno-botanical products. The recent discovery of a herbal cure for Malaria and Alzheimer's by Phurpa Wangchuk through his knowledge of gso ba rig pa can be considered a true case of Bhutan's cultural contribution to solving a global problem.

In brief, our cultural heritage holds enormous value both for us and in what we can offer the rest of the world. It is in the light of such knowledge that I would like to now put forth a few proposals, drawn from the discussions at the conference, in order to take our collective wisdom forward in leveraging culture:

First and foremost, much of our cultural heritage remains at high risk of perpetual loss as the number of custodians of these cultures dwindles each year and the social and communication gap between these older custodians and the youth continues to widen. One of the most urgent tasks for us today is to take stock of our cultural heritage, create an exhaustive typology and inventory and carry out an extensive documentation programme. Several organizations and individuals are engaged in cultural preservation but there is a need for a united and collaborative effort.

I am personally pleased to report to you that in the last eight years, I have been engaged in digitizing the monastic archival heritage and with the help of my research team I have so far photographed the manuscripts in some 27 monastic libraries amounting to some four million pages. From this year, I am also excited to report, that with the help of a team of 12 field researchers and staff, I will be undertaking an extensive audio-visual documentation of Bhutan's oral cultures through Shejun Agency of Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research. We hope to consult all stakeholders, specialists and partners working on culture and work in collaboration with them with the aim of creating a shared central repository of our cultural heritage.

Secondly, in order to appreciate the value of culture, we need to rethink our method of evaluating the benefit of culture. The benefit of a tangible economic project such as a hydro-power plant been can easily measured using

well known accounting systems but the benefits of 'soft' cultural assets are not easily discernible because they remain diffused in non-quantifiable forms.

Let me illustrate this with an example of a cultural event from the recent past. Nearly a 100,000 people spent weeks in Punakha receiving teachings from HH the Je Khenpo. The event, *prima facie*, would appear to be economically unproductive and even wasteful. The actual outcome, however, is far from that given the intricate nexus of human life. The people, who attended the ceremony, did not come for wealth, power or vanity but for teachings on non-violence, non-self, compassion and enlightenment, which contribute in shaping their character and in fostering an ethos of non-violence, contentment, moral integrity, compassion and selflessness in them. Most of the participants returned home after several weeks, considerably affected by the teaching on these concepts and values. In a ripple effect, they would spread the values to their families, friends and communities, which would then lead to reduction in corruption, crimes and violence. This, in turn, would result in financial and socio-economic benefits such as savings on policing and court expenses and in social stability and higher economic productivity.

Thus, cultural practices have far-reaching benefits, which remain undetected by the radar of our mainstream accounting and auditing systems. It is therefore important that we look beyond known methods of evaluation and find a system of cultural accounting which can register non-quantifiable social and spiritual gains (such as social cohesion) as well as quantifiable economic gains (such as cultural tourism). In this respect, we hope the new GNH model of development with its numerous indicators will provide us with an efficacious way of assessing benefits of culture.

Thirdly, if we are truly serious about sustaining and leveraging cultural diversity, we must rethink our ways of engaging the custodians and practitioners of the culture in the process of cultural promotion and policy making, beyond having them as token representatives or using them as research informants. The communities and culture experts must not merely participate in issues regarding their culture practices but take the lead. The carvers of Kengkhar, for example, must be actively engaged in and leading the promotion of their craftsmanship if wood carving in Kengkhar is to continue as a vibrant culture. Our events also need to be focussed on the culture and cultural experts more than on our secondary analyses and discussions on them and conducted in the language they can speak. Although the linguistic diversity of the country, international participation and the dominance of English often compel us to conduct our discussions in English, it is an important that we study local cultures in a language, which is an appropriate medium for the culture and is intelligible to the cultural practitioners.

Fourthly, with the explosion of formal education which is mostly driven by regard for literacy and credentials, traditional and non-formal forms of learning and training are being generally ignored by the state. Our election rule requiring a university certificate to stand for the parliament is a very good example of our bias for the western system of education and an insult to our own traditional ways of learning through individualized instruction and apprenticeship. Isn't it shameful that we disqualify most of our community elders from leading us while at the same time opening the floodgate for fresh graduates from even substandard colleges to do so?

We need to revisit our education policies in order to give due credit to the merit gained through traditional training. Surely, a traditional architect, who has spent dozens of years as an apprentice under a master carpenter and build many houses, would know as much, if not more, about architecture and building as a graduate who studied architecture for five years within classroom walls but has not built even a hut in practice. Ironically, such a traditional architect, today, cannot even get a licence to practice in a place like Thimphu. Have we gone too far with our regard for modern western education and have unwittingly undermined our own cultural heritage? It is about time that we see these fundamental biases in our education system. In addition to having the two current schools of traditional arts and crafts and a single college for language and cultural studies, the state and the

education sectors must do more in revising our educational policies to allow more cultural components in our mainstream education system, both in the medium of instruction and content, if we want culture to have widespread influence on our youth.

Fifthly and finally, as culture experts and promoters, we must recognize and constantly be aware of the dynamic and fluid nature of culture, particularly the public culture. While it is important to document and preserve old cultural ideas, practices and artefacts before they are lost, our main challenge in sustaining our cultural heritage meaningfully lies in our ability to innovate and adapt our cultural thinking and practices to the changing times, without surrendering to it. We have to make culture appealing and affordable without losing its core values, which are timeless.

This challenge is particularly overwhelming as much of our population is increasingly bewitched by the popular global culture and its materialistic trappings and a large percent of them has moved to urban centres, beyond the familiar surroundings of rural Bhutan where our cultural systems and practices have so far thrived. While this move has left the rural cultural heartlands empty, we see undesirable practices and foreign influences filling the gap opened by this demographic transition. How can we reinstate in urban places the cultural practices which flourished in traditional villages? How can we engage the youth in cultural interests? How can we sustain the cultural diversity in the face of demographic fusion and homogenisation? How can we innovate to keep our cultural symbols and practices attractive and at the same instrumental? There are indeed many questions; questions which I hope you will take home with you for further thought. May we be able to find the right answers on time, answers which can help us maintain Bhutan's cultural heritage strong and vibrant.