



# Intangible Cultural Heritage NGOs' Strategy in Achieving Sustainable Development :

The Relationship between  
Safeguarding ICH and Education

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# Old Solutions for New Problems: Loden Foundation's Efforts to Leverage Intangible Cultures for Sustainable Development in Bhutan

Karma Phuntsho

## Loden Foundation-Shejun Cultural Programme

Established in 2000, The Loden Foundation is a registered civil society organization in Bhutan with the objectives of promoting education, cultural preservation, and entrepreneurship among the Bhutanese children and young adults; promoting education and learning at the preschool, school, and post-school stages, and thereby fostering an enlightened and educated society in Bhutan; promoting awareness of the education and the needs of local communities in relation to entrepreneurship, health education, practical skills and crafts, and literacy among remote villages and communities within Bhutan; preserving and promoting the cultures and traditions of Bhutan; and undertaking, if need be, other charitable work that contributes toward the welfare of the public.

One of the main programs currently is intangible cultural documentation including oral traditions, religious practices, arts and crafts, folk knowledge and customs, cultural events, games and sports, and languages and dialects. The foundation's cultural program has undertaken an extensive audio-visual documentation of Bhutan's oral and intangible cultures. This

documentation process makes digital recordings and images of cultural objects and practices for the sake of preserving them for posterity in digital archival format and also for giving easy access to the cultural knowledge and practices for researchers, students, policy makers, and the general public. By the middle of 2017, the project had produced and collected over 3,200 hours of high-quality audio-visual recordings and over two million photos of Bhutanese manuscripts and cultures covering vast areas and a large number of subjects and genres. The pictures are supplemented with metadata, captions, summaries, descriptions, transcriptions, and translations for online publication. Some samples of the work in progress can be viewed at [www.bhutanlibrary.org](http://www.bhutanlibrary.org). An encyclopedic book on Bhutan's cultural topics is also in progress.







▲ Jangsakha village in Paro

“

**The benefit of the cultural documentation was not merely to record and sustain the knowledge of old traditions and practices. The project was also directly relevant to the enhancement of people’s living standards and livelihoods.**

”



▲ The village of Tshangkha on the east-west highway amid fields and forests



▲ Researcher Yeshi interviewing an old woman

The twenty-first century is proving to be a very exciting as well as challenging time for the world. In barely a decade and a half, we have seen digital technology take over life, with over a thousand mobile apps added to our list every hour. Global mobile subscription is estimated to be 108 percent, and 37 percent of humanity is said to be logged onto social media. More than 50 percent of the global population is reported to live in urban cities and use the internet.<sup>1</sup> Such technological and social development has also heightened changes in other fields. In politics, we saw the Arab Spring, the Umbrella Movement, Brexit, and the fall of Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Robert Mugabe. Economically, China is emerging to be a leading world power. Tencent rose to become Asia's first company to exceed USD \$500 billion, while Apple is still leading the race and gearing up

to become the world's first trillion-dollar company. Every day, our lives are filled with powerful and gripping news.

In spite of such rapid developments, and to a large extent due to such impetuous pursuit of growth and exploitation of resources, humanity is confronted with challenges in sustaining its welfare as never before. The global agenda of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the members of the United Nations adopted indicates the many challenges we are facing both as the world as a whole and as individual communities. The first issue of utmost concern for everyone is the economic one concerning the two activities of production and consumption, which virtually include all human engagements and pursuits of happiness. The natures of our production and consumption have gone through enormous transformation in recent times due to unprecedented economic growth and advancements in communication and information technology. The world population has seen the production

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Kemp, "2017 Digital Yearbook," We Are Social, 2017, accessed December 5, 2017, <https://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/2017-digital-yearbook>.



and consumption systems cross over traditional boundaries and go from immediate localities to distant international and global markets.

Today, most of our goods are being created in faraway lands, with no palpable link between production and consumption. This disconnect has often led to disregard for the process of production and the situation of the raw materials. Moreover, most of the world's population now lives in urban cities with no direct connection to the sources of basic commodities. This leads to a lack of awareness and appreciation of production and to reckless consumption, often amounting to a lot of waste. When neoliberal capitalism, which is based on a free market, and consumerism, which thrives on insatiable human greed fueled by alluring commercials, are wreaking havoc on the earth and posing a threat to the sustainability of human well-being, it is critical that we reconsider our current mode of development driven by GDP and find alternative models. In addressing the serious issue of economic sustainability, it is worthwhile to look back at the principles and practices of sustainability provided by the traditional economies based on organic and localized industries.

In Bhutan, efforts are being made to formulate and implement a new model of development that pursues Gross National Happiness in addition to Gross Domestic Product. A conscious move is being made to balance external material comfort with internal spiritual well-being and to balance tradition with modernity. A good example can be seen in the area of food production. Instead of promoting food produced in mass quantity with fertilizers and mechanization by large corporations,

efforts are being made on the part of both the state and individuals to enhance organic farming, an agricultural tradition which was robust in Bhutan until half a century ago. From the knowledge of traditional soil management, manure production, seed distribution, cultivation, harvest, and food processing to culinary recipes and ethno-botanical knowledge, there is a lot that Bhutanese today can learn from the intangible cultural practices of the past. The Loden Foundation is at the forefront of promoting a socially responsible culture of business and production through their Buddhist entrepreneurship program, which seeks to leverage spiritual and cultural traditions for sustainable socio-economic development.

The same is true with respect to our consumption practices. A deeper appreciation of the traditional respect for food and resources, the culture of contentment, sharing and simple living, and the awareness of the deep connection between producers and end users can help us become much more responsible consumers and minimize mindless waste of resources. Bhutan, like the rest of the world, has seen with modernization a fundamental shift of worldviews from a traditional “eat to live” spiritual ethos to a “live to eat” materialistic outlook, which is harmful both to individual health and the natural environment. This new hedonistic and materialistic mindset has led to unhealthy consumption habits leading to alarming waste and undesirable health conditions as well as excessive exploitation of the environment for resources. We need to unlearn some of the negative habits we acquired in the rush for material development and return to the spiritual and cultural heritage of

the past in order to promote such timeless values and practices as contentment, right livelihood, and mindfulness, which are fundamental to our existence.

Bhutan's world-acclaimed environment, with over 81 percent of the country under forest and shrub cover, is another example of how ancient indigenous knowledge and practices have contributed to sustainable use of the environment. The pristine ecology of Bhutan is largely a result of people's belief in the sanctity of the natural environment as a living organism. It is the Bhutanese view of sacred mountains, hidden valleys, holy rocks and lakes, forests, and rivers as abodes of territorial deities and spirits, the Buddhist regard and compassion for all forms of life, and the understanding of interdependence of all things that have helped Bhutan conserve its flora and fauna much more than those following modern scientific environmentalism. The intangible cultural beliefs and practices today continue to influence people's interaction with nature and are very effective tools for nature conservation. It is with this effect in mind that the Loden-Shejun Cultural Programme is documenting and disseminating the local knowledge of spiritual and heritage sites and their significance.

Another major social challenge we face across the globe is urbanization. Bhutan had no urban settlements some 50 years ago, but today nearly half of the population lives in new urban settlements. This transition from rural community to urban settlement causes problems, as the new towns lack the social support systems that were well established (albeit in unwritten forms) in the

closely-knit village communities. Due to space and other constraints, people in towns today have nuclear families and live independent lives with an enhanced sense of privacy. This has resulted in a rising sense of individualism and an isolated lifestyle, which in turn leads to social problems such as delinquency, substance abuse, alcoholism, etc.

One social problem that is a tragic indicator of the breakdown of social systems and cultural values is the alarming suicide rate. Suicide was almost never heard of in traditional Bhutan, but today about 100 young people take their lives annually. The traditional Bhutanese, who were born and brought up with the spirit of Buddhism, were taught as the first spiritual lesson how special and rare the human body is as a medium for the pursuit of enlightenment. Given our rational and emotional capacity to feel and think, human life is considered an exceptionally privileged position which one should not misuse or waste. Today, young Bhutanese do not receive adequate education in the traditional culture, but learn basic modern science and perceive the human body as an anatomical phenomenon and a problem to be discarded when their unrealistic expectations go unfulfilled. They are more vulnerable but less resilient to hardships in life. The Loden Foundation documents and promotes the traditional Bhutanese view of life, culture of resilience and tolerance, appreciation of human life and its blessings, proclivity for contentment and compassion, and sense of higher purpose in a better way than what secular education and economic development provide.

While humanity has seen significant achieve-



ments in scientific discoveries and economic standards of living, it has not seen much progress in the inner evolution of the human mind. Moreover, unlike material development, scientific discoveries, and technical advances, all of which are mostly transferable to the subsequent generations, mental and emotional development and achievements generally cannot be transferred to the following generation. Each generation has to go through its share of mental and emotional development. Thus, an important area for developmental work today is the human mind, which is fundamental to the human experience of happiness. This is because happiness is considered to be essentially a state of mind. Deriving inspiration from Buddhist thought, which is indeed a science of the mind and an art of mind training, the Loden Foundation endeavors to re-appropriate and reformulate Buddhist theories and practices for developing the power of the mind and to make them relevant and applicable to the contemporary secular society. This is particularly urgent today, as technological developments such as internet and social media have made the human mind more restless and stressful than it ever was.

## The Loden Foundation

The Loden Foundation is a registered civil society organization (CSOA/PBO-02) in Bhutan dedicated to fostering an enlightened and happy society through the promotion of education,

entrepreneurship, and culture. Composed of individuals with shared vision, concerns, and aspirations, the foundation is located in Thimphu, the capital city, but it carries out activities in all twenty districts of Bhutan. The objectives for which the foundation was established are as follows:

- to promote education and learning at the pre-school, school and post-school stages, and thereby foster an enlightened and educated society in Bhutan;
- to promote awareness of the education and the needs of local communities in relation to entrepreneurship, health education, practical skills and crafts, and literacy among remote villages and communities within Bhutan;
- to preserve and promote the cultures and traditions of Bhutan; and
- to undertake, if need be, other charitable works that contribute toward the welfare of the public.

## Programs and Activities

Loden runs three major programs:

### *1. Loden Education Initiative*

Loden spotlights the power of education to enhance human capacity and quality of life. Thus, it provides educational support and facilities at the preschool, school, and post-school phases.

#### *Loden Early Learning Centre*

Considering the need for holistic early child-care and preschool services, particularly in the rural areas, Loden runs five community-based Early Learning Centres within the framework

of Bhutan's educational policy and guidelines. They are designed to provide equal access to early education to the children from rural communities and also to combine modern childcare and development techniques and traditional Bhutanese upbringing methods.

### *Loden Scholarship*

As its primer program, Loden provides financial support to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Loden matches deserving beneficiaries and benefactors and liaises between the two by administering the fund. The foundation also offers educational guidance and counseling for those seeking higher and alternative education. Loden also provides scholarships for higher education to meritorious candidates, particularly in fields that will fill a social gap in Bhutan. Today, there are 88 beneficiaries in schools across Bhutan,

and 42 students have received scholarships for graduate and post-graduate education in Bhutan, India, UK, and Germany.

### *Loden Knowledge Base*

As an educational organization, Loden regularly organizes talks, seminars, workshops, film screenings, and other educational events for public education, academic advancement, and policy development. The “Bhutan Dialogues” series, organized in collaboration with the UN in Bhutan, is one such event.

### **2. Loden Entrepreneurship Programme**

This program was launched in 2007 with the aim of curbing the rising unemployment and rural-urban migration, promoting an ethical entrepreneurial culture in the country, and contributing toward building a self-reliant sustainable economy.

▼ Researcher Rinzin Dema in the crowd filming at Paro Tshechu



Today, it has become a dominant program of Loden, which is seen as the leading organization in promoting social entrepreneurship in Bhutan.

#### *Loden SEED (Student Empowerment through Entrepreneurship Development)*

Loden fosters entrepreneurship among tertiary and higher education institutions through lectures, talks, trainings, and funding for on-campus student businesses. Currently, it has funded student businesses in 15 colleges and institutes.

#### *Loden Social Start-up*

Loden's main entrepreneurial activity focuses on nurturing the social entrepreneurial culture in Bhutan. The foundation gives trainings, workshops, and seminars to young men and women and also provides interest-free and collateral-free capital between US \$2,300 and \$23,000 for social start-ups. The educational empowerment and funding are followed by monitoring and mentoring services.

#### *Loden Impact Fund*

In order to scale up ventures with high potential and enhance social impact, Loden is raising investments to help selected enterprises grow with further investments and technical support. As a new initiative, Loden is yet to see it fully burgeon.

### **3. Loden-Shejun Cultural Programme**

Bhutan is going through a profound change in the social, cultural, economic, and political spheres, leading to unprecedented confusion and stress in the society. Loden, through its efforts for cultural

preservation and promotion, strives to help bridge Bhutan's past and future and facilitate a smooth transition. Loden has published many dozens of essays and books on culture in an effort to make Bhutan's rich cultural heritage relevant to our times and leverage them to solve current problems and enhance the quality and meaning of life.

#### *Written Heritage*

In order to preserve information in digital copies and make them easily accessible, Loden has digitized over four million pages of Bhutan's endangered archives.

#### *Oral Tradition*

Loden has recorded over 3,100 hours of vanishing oral traditions, including folk stories, songs, poems, narratives, jokes, languages, culinary recipes, farming practices, social contracts, customs, and other forms of intangible cultures.

#### *Art and Architecture*

Loden has documented several thousands of Bhutan's artistic and architectural heritage properties, including wall paintings, statues, cultural objects, and antiques.

## **The Oral Traditions of Bhutan Project**

The Loden-Shejun Cultural Programme has been undertaking a series of projects for documenting and disseminating Bhutan's oral, written, and



▲ Digitizing manuscripts in Gangteng



▲ Researcher Yeshe filming the Zhengshi Pema cham dance in Bumthang

artistic heritage in order to help people enhance the quality of their lives and leverage cultures for socio-economic and spiritual development. The group's initiatives have the dual aim of preserving Bhutan's vanishing cultures for posterity as resources for historical research and references for cultural identity and of promoting the country's cultural values, practices, and objects, which can contribute to the spiritual, social, economic, and environmental enrichment of the global community in general and the Bhutanese society in particular.

The most significant cultural project undertaken by the Loden-Shejun Cultural Programme by far is the Oral Traditions of Bhutan project, which was funded by Arcadia, administered by the University of Virginia, and executed by the Shejun Agency, which has now merged with the Loden Foundation. With over US \$1.4 million in budget, the project aimed to undertake an extensive survey and audio-video documentation of Bhutan's oral heritage, including various

languages, oral histories, genealogies, folk stories, songs, chants, vernacular idioms, and other oral genres such as *lozey* (ballads), *tsangmo* (poems), *khartam* (riddles), *shedpa* (orations), and more. The project also gathered cultural knowledge on local practices such as food and architecture, ecological beliefs and practices, and a great variety of traditional skills and know-how. Using innovative and cutting-edge digital technologies, audio-video recordings were made of these oral traditions and embodied knowledge. These are in the process of being published on the web in a dedicated open-access portal that includes searchable transcripts, creative subject mapping, and powerful visualizations.

The project also developed collaboration between Bhutanese, British, and American institutions and served as a platform for consolidating and coordinating previous work as well as encouraging further academic study on the subject. In the process, the project also promoted the value of these oral forms of knowledge and the



importance of cultural documentation among Bhutanese citizens, thereby ensuring a continuing interest beyond the funded life of the project. The project thus contributed toward the preservation of culture in Bhutan and strengthened one of the four pillars of Bhutan's national goal of Gross National Happiness, a holistic index that measures quality of life or social progress, as well as considerably enriching humanity's knowledge of ancient cultures and knowledge.

## Project Background

Since the decline of Buddhism and various political disruptions in Tibet and other parts of the Buddhist Himalayas, the Kingdom of Bhutan has come to be seen as the last bastion of Himalayan Buddhist culture and has often been romantically labelled "the last Shangri-La." This Orientalist perception no doubt came about largely due to Bhutan's long history of isolation, independence, and cultural integrity. Today, the culture of this last Shangri-La in general and the intangible oral heritage in particular is under serious threat as the

▼ The picturesque Ura village



country undergoes massive transition. The older generations, who are the custodians of the cultural heritage and ways of life they reflect and support, are passing away, and most of the younger generations lack interest in the traditional culture and way of life.

Until the mid-twentieth century, Bhutan had little exposure to the outside world other than from the Tibetan monastic culture to the north. Its traditional culture was largely based on subsistence agriculture and a deep religious piety and had remained intact over the centuries. Oral traditions form an inherent part of Bhutanese culture and have been used over the centuries as a means to transmit values, knowledge, skills, and practices over generations. The past sixty years, however, have seen this country get catapulted from a medieval society into a globalized meld. Bhutan is today undergoing rapid and chaotic social and cultural transformation.

Economically, Bhutan has moved from subsistence farming to a consumerist market economy and has changed socially from an entirely rural community to a largely urban settlement. It has moved communicatively from a strong oral tradition to a post-modern audio-visual world and politically from a medieval monarchy to a constitutional democracy. People's cultural ethos is shifting from a spiritual Buddhist worldview with strong connection to nature to a secular and scientific outlook. Bhutan is going through an enormous transition, which has been brought about by the two processes of modernization, which Bhutan actively sought, and globalization, to which Bhutan is inescapably subjected.

The most far-reaching cultural transformation must, however, be attributed to Bhutan's program of universal education. From eleven schools established in 1959, Bhutan now has over 1,000 educational institutions, excluding monastic centers of learning. The education system follows a Western model and is responsible for a change in the people's medium of communication as well as their cultural ethos, worldview, and mindset. Seven out of eight sessions in a typical daily school routine are instructed in English, and only one class, on Bhutanese language and culture, is in Dzongkha, the national language. All of Bhutan's languages, with the exception of Dzongkha, are spoken vernaculars with no written version, and half of these languages are spoken by fewer than 5,000 people, most of whom are aged above fifty. Three of these languages are spoken by less than 300 and only with fluency by a handful of older members of the community. The situation is even direr for the dialects of these languages, with many facing extinction. At the current rate, most dialects will have disappeared within a couple of decades, and one quarter of local languages may be dead by 2050. With the demise of a language, an entire culture is lost.

The rapid spread of school education has a profound impact on culture well beyond the linguistic landscape. Most children grow up reading English novels, singing Western pop songs, or imitating foreign movie stars, and only a few learn traditional literature and music or emulate their elders. Their worldview, outlook, values, interests, sensibilities, and sense of humor are quite different from the older generation. Moreover,



▲ Researcher Sonam Tobgye films a dance in Kurtoe



▲ Loden-Shejun core team with two directors at Dodeydra

educated youth mostly live in a new urban environment based on a secondary economy of white-collar jobs and with a very different range of values and expectations. The high rate of migration to the towns and cities has seriously depopulated the rural villages, which are the cultural heartlands. Thus, many village festivals and community practices are dying out.

As a result of the linguistic and cultural differences, there is a serious generation gap between the older and younger citizens, and Bhutan is for the first time in its history facing a serious challenge to the cultural continuity and transmission of old traditions. As the older generation ebbs away, much of Bhutan's traditional culture and know-how is disappearing. For instance, the culture of storytelling in a family house almost completely stopped after the arrival of television. The use of mineral paints and vegetable color for fine art and dyeing declined due to the availability of cheap chemical alternatives. Instead of traditional bamboo bows, most archers now use

expensive American compound bows and fiber arrows. These high poundage bows, lethal arrows, and the strictures of modern sportsmanship have deprived archery of its usual joviality and the wit and repartee of its songs. Instances of such decline are numerous, and the death of any village elder results in the loss of an irreplaceable heritage.

Despite the risky situation the culture is in, attempts to save and study the intangible cultural heritage of Bhutan were few and far between. Due to its isolationist policy, Bhutan has remained largely inaccessible to foreign researchers, and the local capacity for research has only started to grow in the past decade. With much of its rich oral history, culture, and practices yet to be properly charted and studied, Bhutan was a vital strategic area for ethnographic research and cultural preservation efforts.

A few initiatives of cultural study existed when this project began. The Centre for Bhutan Studies had conducted a couple workshops on folk stories, the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies

had made ethnographic recordings of a number of festivals, and the Dzongkha Development Commission had hosted a few linguistic projects. The Agency for Promotion of Indigenous Crafts carried out projects on arts and crafts and the Music of Bhutan Research Centre was doing some work on traditional music. The National Library and Archives of Bhutan was compiling an inventory and a book on some intangible cultures, and the Firebird Foundation had launched a project to document the language of Northeastern Bhutan and traditional ecological knowledge.

However, these projects were not adequate for the richness and extent of the cultural traditions ensconced in Bhutan, and they resulted in only patchy and paltry outcomes, having been seriously encumbered by poor resources, access, and research skills. The foundation initiated the extensive project to document and study Bhutan's textual, oral, and artistic traditions and cultures by involving an extraordinary team of Bhutanese and international experts with many years of experience and diverse expertise to undertake a systematic approach to document the endangered cultures across the country and to publish them locally and globally.

### **Preparation and Project Work**

While cultural preservation and promotion are the two main objectives of the activities of the Loden-Shejun Cultural Programme, local capacity building always features as an important subsidiary outcome of its activities. Thus, the project started with a rigorous training for the research officers

in Bhutan. For over one month, the researchers were given training by the three project directors and many other local and international experts in ethnographic research, audio-visual technology, documentary making, music recording, photography, interviews, data and metadata collection, and digital archiving and processing.

Professor David Germano and Dr. Karma Phuntsho, Director of the Foundation, worked as the two main directors for the project. While Dr. Phuntsho conceptualized and led the project in Bhutan, he ran the project and data processing in the US. In addition, he has developed expertise and experience in cultural documentation through a series of previous projects, the largest effort at that point being the digitization of Bhutan's textual culture, which has produced a wealth of scholarly resources that have the potential to revolutionize the study of Himalayan manuscript traditions.

As a primary investigator of the project at the University of Virginia and the director of the Tibet Center, Professor David Germano as well as his staff was committed to providing the systems, servers, and expertise necessary for this project. They were to provide supervision of all data processing, oversee the importation of data into the archive repositories, and implement the final publication.

Professor Mark Turin of the University of British Columbia, a leading linguist and anthropologist who has been working in the Himalayan region for two dozen years, joined the project as a director in the first two years. An internationally recognized expert on digital archives and collaborative field research projects, he is the founder and director of





▲ Filming the project director on the site of digitization

both Digital Himalaya ([www.digitalhimalaya.org](http://www.digitalhimalaya.org)) and the World Oral Literature Project ([www.oral-literature.org](http://www.oral-literature.org)), whose protocols and approaches the program implemented and extended for this project.

While both Germano and Turin provided guidance in designing the entire project in terms of fieldwork and data processing, Germano supervised the ultimate coordination of all technical work including design of the portal's architecture and user interface and supervision of

a UV technical staff with content work in Bhutan. Phuntsho played the pivotal role as the supervisor of all field operations in Bhutan, the key liaison coordinating US and Bhutan operations, and the main scholar in the program with expertise on Bhutanese culture. At the University of Virginia, the project also involved Bradley Aaron, Associate Director of the Tibet Center, until he was replaced by Ariana Maki as Associate Director in 2016. While Aaron shared his extensive knowledge and experience in photographic documentation, Maki brought with her a vast knowledge of Bhutan as a leading art historian on Bhutanese art.

Audio-video technology provides a uniquely powerful tool for documenting and exploring oral traditions; thus, the project work is heavily based upon a sophisticated use of new digital technologies to draw upon their advantage to achieve new heights of efficiency and flexibility in creating systems that extend from the field to the web and back again to local and global communities. Using the digital tools, the traditions can also be recorded in all of their constitutive elements such as facial expressions, tones of voice, and surroundings. Extended and dynamic metadata can directly link such recordings to detailed information and visualizations about the places within which they take place and subjects about which they are concerned. Rich, multilingual, and time-coded transcripts allow for analytical searching of the actual content of these oral traditions.

In September 2013, the field researchers were assigned to two districts each according to their social and linguistic strengths and understanding. The project directors designed a procedure for



▲ Old lady in Chukkha trying the headset

workflow including a list of things to do before going to shoot; specific things to follow during and after shooting; the procedures for downloading, editing, saving, and archiving data at the work station at the end of the day; and mechanisms for transferring data to the central office in Thimphu.

The project directors also developed the procedures for collecting metadata and other important information related to the audio-visual and photographic data from the field. Three forms were created for mandatory use by the researchers. A documentation form was created for capturing metadata and contextual information on the documentary recording. A biodata form was to be used to gather information on the cultural participant, and the consent release form was to be used to obtain expressed permission allowing the project to generally use the data for educational and cultural purposes. The consent form also recorded the terms of restriction, such as a ritual being only viewable by those who had the initiation or

membership or a sensitive story that the author only wished to have published posthumously.

Having completed the introductory training sessions in all aspects of audio-visual documentation and metadata collection and having also done many trials in Thimphu, the researchers were then sent out to the field to practice their field recording techniques in the first half of October 2013. Prior to their departure, the groups discussed in detail the practical needs and challenges they may face traveling and working in the rural parts of Bhutan, the people they would need to build connections with, and the relevant state policies and regulations they would have to follow. Thus, the main objective was to have researchers experiment with the skills they had learned, try working independently, build useful contacts, explore their areas, gauge the extent of cultural knowledge and diversity, and experience living and working in rural communities.

Researchers were expected to return with

practical experience and a lot of questions that would then help the program to address unforeseen problems and issues before making serious and large-scale documentation efforts. When they returned from the field in the third week of October 2014, many of them had returned with wonderful footage and recordings. Two of these were used in BBC World Service coverage of the project. Others returned with no recordings yet had good lessons to share. Some were hampered by lack of transportation facilities, while others met official hurdles. The researchers met in Thimphu for over a week to play their recordings and discuss their findings with technical experts.

As the researchers got ready to return to the field, Shejun organized a symposium on cultural mapping and typology in October 2013 by inviting all the stakeholders and leading experts on Bhutanese cultures. The outcome of the three-day symposium was the first draft of the typology of Bhutan's intangible cultures, which listed close to 1,000 items of cultural traditions. The project director compiled the draft in both Dzongkha and English and made it available to cultural experts for further feedback. Today, the draft has evolved to become by far the most extensive enumeration of intangible cultures in Bhutan and is being used by both governmental and non-governmental organizations as the most authoritative inventory. While akin to UNESCO's typology of culture, this typology more closely reflects the local Bhutanese way of mapping and conceptualizing their cultural world and organizing their knowledge. The typology classified Bhutan's cultural heritage into seven cultural types:

- oral traditions,
- religious practices,
- arts and crafts,
- folk knowledge and customs,
- cultural events,
- games and sports, and
- languages and dialects.

As it stands today, the seven types are further divided into 94 genres, 420 subgenres, and over 1,200 cultural subjects. Director Phuntsho is in the process of writing a short caption and a brief summary for each of these cultural types, genres, sub-genres, and subjects and will prepare an essay on some of them.

Before the researchers started their serious work of documentation, the team officially launched the oral documentation program with a cultural gala in the center of Thimphu city on a public holiday celebrating the day of the Buddha's descent from heaven. The event was graced by the Speaker of the Parliament and attended by many government dignitaries, public figures, and cultural experts. A large crowd of people witnessed the cultural show performed by the research team and a few selected cultural experts. The show included cultural items such as songs, dances, storytelling, poetry reading, orations, riddles, and jokes to reflect the objective of the project.

After visiting Tashichodzhong, the abode of Bhutan's national protector deities and the headquarters of the government, and saying prayers to and receiving blessings from Bhutan's highest spiritual powers, the researchers set off to their respective districts in the beginning of November 2017 to begin three years of intensive cultural





▲ Loden-Shejun team with a cultural expert

documentation in the field. They were armed with written support from the Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs and the Central Monastic Body exhorting all local officials and leaders to give them assistance. When the field-based researchers needed extra support, especially during festivals when multiple cultural performances take place simultaneously in various locations, the core staff member from the central office provided additional backup support or arranged field researchers to assist one another. The IT officer collected the data regularly from the researchers and undertook the initial evaluation before consolidating and

archiving the data and sending it forward to the directors for further evaluation.

The field researchers plunged into their work of cultural documentation that would go on for more than three years, reaching every *gewog* (county) and almost every *chiwog* (sub-county) in Bhutan. The team in the central office also made recordings of cultural events and interviews with some senior citizens in Thimphu. To enhance the output, the team also employed the help of dozens of graduates who came to intern with the project while they waited to find jobs. As most researchers found it difficult to work on their own



and handle the different tools simultaneously during recording sessions, the program sent the interns to assist the field researchers after giving them brief trainings. Engaging the interns helped the program to further develop the local capacity, and a few interns who had acquired the skills and experience became field researchers when some of the original field researchers rendered their resignations.

## Sustainability and Cultural Documentation

If the primary objective of the project was to sustain knowledge from the past for use in the future, the project was hugely successful in capturing a wide range of cultural knowledge, particularly in the places where no such ethnographic effort had ever been made before. One of the best achievements of this project was the extensive coverage of the country, especially reaching some of the most remote communities. Documentation of cultural life was carried out in isolated communities such as Laya in Gasa, Merak and Sakteng in Trashigang, Shingkar Lauri in Samdrupjongkhar, Dorokha in Samtse, Reti in Sarpang, Ngangla Trong in Zhemgang, and Balung in Dagana. Many of these places were several days' walk from the motor roads but were on the cusp of change, as the government was in the process of building motor roads and bringing electricity to these places.

Once connected by roads and given access to



▲ Sonam, a Loden entrepreneur, demonstrates local dishes

electricity, these places will witness drastic changes to their local practices and modes of living. We have seen the transformation that the process of modernization brings to the villages and valleys. A good example is how Bhutanese cook rice, which is now the staple food of most people in Bhutan. Before electrification, people prepared rice on open fire stoves, but as soon as electricity reached them, people began to buy electric rice cookers. The culture of hospitality shown to unexpected guests and of greeting strangers diminished after

the motor road reached a place, bringing more visitors.

Another example is electrification leading to television, which alters the local worldview and daily routines. The traditional practices of storytelling around the family hearth to pass on values have generally stopped in villages that have been electrified and have access to television. The literary compositions called *langkey*, which are beautiful serenades sung while fields are ploughed with a bullock, are part of a genre that is now rapidly dying with the advent of tractors and power tillers. The project team made recordings of such folk

stories, songs, *tsangmo* (poems), *lozey* (ballads), and other oral traditions that are vanishing.

The team has reached many places just in time to document the last sample of cultural practices. For instance, they documented the last session of *Yaklha*—the festival to worship the yak god—with yaks in Ura. Yak rearing has come to an end in the valley since the team filmed the festival, as the last family who owned yaks sold off their herd. In addition to oral tradition and festive events comprising rituals, music, and dances, the team has also captured historical and place-based narratives, healing practices, and sporting events.

▼ Aum Dema of Tshaluna playing a flute that is normally played only by men in Bhutan



The researchers have also successfully documented some of the traditional culinary recipes for cooking and food processing.

In documenting cultural practices that are on the brink of change, the teams were also able to record some of the senior Bhutanese cultural doyens who have since passed away. Dasho Shingkar Lam, one of Bhutan's cultural paragons and a renaissance man, passed away in September 2014, but before his death, the Shejun team had the great fortune to accompany him to his native village of Shingkar to document local traditions there. Similarly, researchers were able to interview the late Phurpa Wangdi, a village elder in Sakteng, who shared for cameras his knowledge of the remarkable Ache Lhamo dance, and the late Dasho Sonam Wangdi, who shared his knowledge of harvesting wild forest products in the south central parts of Bhutan.

Teams also gained exclusive access to monasteries and private institutions to shoot monastic practices such as ritual ceremonies, lectures, debates, and sacred dances. But the benefit of the cultural documentation was not merely to record and sustain the knowledge of old traditions and practices. The project was also directly relevant to the enhancement of people's living standards and livelihoods. Researchers were able to record compelling stories and signs of change through modernization and to save and promote some of the sustainable ways of livelihood that were already known to the people but going out of fashion. Teams could document many traditions of local arts and crafts from paper making, carving, sculpting, painting, embroidering, weaving, and



▲ A Loden entrepreneur packing medicinal herbs

sewing to making bamboo baskets, woodturning, and practicing carpentry. The preservation and promotion of these arts and crafts are important for the livelihood of the people in many parts of Bhutan and for the cultural identity of the country as a whole.

Some of the footage created of traditional farming techniques and agricultural know-how, animal husbandry and pasture management, dairy production, and livestock care are important records of sustainable and time-tested practices. At



the hospital for traditional medicine, teams were given access to film and the chance to interview a leading Sowa Rigpa doctor as she was treating her patients. This tradition of health science is fortunately thriving in Bhutan and could do a great deal of benefit to the world if it is promoted widely. The same is true of Bhutan's musical tradition, culinary recipes, ethno-botanical practices, and organic products, which are yet to be exported properly beyond their localities.

A community in the south central region of Kheng that was well known in the past for their knowledge of wild tubers and seeds has now mostly stopped this tradition. In the past, they collected at least three kinds of seeds from wild plants in order to produce oil. Today, with imported oil cheaply and easily available, the culture of local oil production from wild plants has completely stopped. Project researchers were able to interview an elderly citizen from this area to record an account of the practices of collecting and processing wild forest products in his community and also to make recordings of a demonstration of the processes of producing oil from wild seeds.

The project has also been creating a dictionary of places and landmarks in Bhutan in an effort to record and understand Bhutan's places systematically. With the number of cultural and ecological tourists increasing each year, such knowledge of places combining both geographic information and cultural stories will become immensely useful in making their visits to Bhutan fulfilling and responsible. The recognition of important natural and religious sites through project descriptions will also contribute significantly to the conservation

of the environment. For example, when a foreign investor planned to build a golf course in the valley of Shingkhari some years ago, Loden's president led a campaign highlighting Shingkhari's cultural significance as a sacred land and its ecological importance as a watershed, besides other social and economic reasons. The government, consequently, revoked the permission to build the golf course after understanding the significance of the place. Similarly, the cultural study on a sacred marshland in Bumthang by one of the Loden researchers has helped two state media houses to report against a quarry project to sell stone slabs from that place.

In addition to creating video, audio, and photographic records of cultural artifacts and practices, the project has also amassed many collections of early photos and videos of Bhutan. These videos and photos help tell a visual story of Bhutan's tremendous change and the consequences of modern development. For example, a photo taken in 1963 shows Thimphu as a picturesque green valley with only about one percent of the built environment we see today, and a photo of Ura in 1931 has the agricultural fields extending many miles more than they do now. They capture the scars modern development has left on the landscape and the pristine ecology we have lost. These documentary records thus have a great potential to influence the course of development in the future.

## **Project Results**

The project set out to achieve a quantitative list of targets, including audio-visual recording, edited



## Project Targets

<i>Items</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Audio/Video Recordings</b>			
Audio-visual hours created	2575	3,145	122%
Audio-visual hours collected	Not fixed	347	
Audio-visual titles edited	2000	3,195	160%
Audio-visual metadata created	1933	3,036	157%
Audio-visual transcripts created	1933	2,173	112%
<b>Photographs</b>			
Photos created	30,000	123,855	413%
Photos collected		91,000	
Photos catalogued	30,000	36,323	121%
<b>Places</b>			
Place names collected	4,000	6,116	153%
Places catalogued	4,000	3,583	90%
<b>Subjects</b>			
Subjects identified	1,500	1,755	117%
Subjects summarized	1,500	1,086	72%
Subject essays created	250	240	96%

films for online publication with full metadata and transcripts, photos with catalogues, place inventory and descriptions, and cultural subject descriptions and essays. The table above shows the overall target and the results that had been achieved by the end of April 2018.

The audio-visual recordings and photographs cover a wide range of cultural themes, events, and practices, and they are generally supplied with full metadata and produced in a digital format and specification that are designed for online open-access publication. The audio-visual and photographic recordings of oral and artistic traditions will complement some four million pages

of rare manuscripts already digitized through Loden's previous projects in helping us gain a holistic picture of Bhutan's cultural heritage. As nearly 80 percent of the population was illiterate in traditional Bhutan, it is important to study the oral and creative folk traditions alongside written sources to obtain a comprehensive understanding of Bhutan's past.

The place inventory the project created comes with photographic illustrations and GPS coordinates, and the subjects include the whole typology of Bhutan's intangible cultures. Short descriptions of the subjects are created in both Dzongkha and English, and longer essays in English are

being written for over 250 subjects of national importance. The project received wide coverage in the local media, including television, radio, and newspapers, thereby promoting the awareness of cultural preservation. The project director has also delivered many lectures and talks about Bhutan's cultures and the efforts to document and research them.

Understanding the role of festivals as a social fabric in binding communities together and as platforms for transmission of cultural values, knowledge, and skills, project researchers also compiled an inventory of all important festivals across Bhutan. This calendar of festivals will be of immense benefit for promoting tourism, which is the second largest source of revenue in Bhutan. Simultaneously, the team also did what is called a non-human census of Bhutan by building an inventory of important territorial deities and spirits in the country. The belief in these gods and spirits formed a fundamental part of traditional Bhutanese spirituality and has made a significant contribution to the preservation of pristine nature in Bhutan, as already mentioned. Project researchers created the calendar of festivals and inventory of territorial deities by consulting community elders and priests. The researchers also started a survey of the cultural life and heritage sites of every *chiwog* (sub-county) in the country, although this survey remains incomplete.

In its final form, the project outcomes will constitute the largest digital repository of Bhutan's cultural heritage. While original archival sets will be saved in three copies in the National Library and Archives of Bhutan, the Loden Knowledge

Base, and the University of Virginia, all materials will be open access, published via a web platform as a reference and resource for cultural education. Through this effort, researchers hope that the timeless values and practices of Bhutan's past will continue to benefit people in Bhutan and beyond, particularly in finding a sustainable way of life.

The Oral Traditions of Bhutan project was an unprecedented effort to document Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage in terms of its scope and diversity, financial and human resources, outcomes, and impact. It was no doubt, as planned, the most extensive drive to record the intangible cultures of Bhutan, many of which the team knew remained on the brink of disappearance. Yet researchers felt a greater sense of achievement in being able to document the rare and exotic cultural practices that existed unbeknown to them, those which the project revealed after embarking on it. In this respect, even for the local researchers, the project was an adventure for rediscovering Bhutan's own heritage. It was an opportunity for those involved to both broaden their knowledge and deepen their understanding of Bhutan's cultural heritage and to appreciate its significance as a whole.

The project also allowed participants to assess the current condition of Bhutan's cultural heritage, on which the state bases its legitimacy for sovereignty. With a shortage of military might and economic strength, Bhutan has long claimed its rich and unique culture to be its defining characteristic. Given such an important role of culture in nation building, one may ask: how secure is



▲ A Loden entrepreneur who makes traditional Bhutanese boots



▲ A Loden entrepreneur at her weaving center

Bhutan's linguistic and cultural heritage in an era of intense globalization? No doubt Bhutan's geopolitical situation between the two most populated and hegemonic military powers on earth poses a serious risk to Bhutan's status as an independent nation state. Can culture, then, as the state likes to think, be an effective tool for Bhutan to sustain its political independence?

What could Bhutan do, and in fact what should it do, to secure its cultural integrity while also existing as a dynamic and engaged member of the global community? The project provided the space to ask tough questions. The local project director, Dr. Phuntsho, has both written and spoken in many forums<sup>2</sup> to share the findings of the project on how Bhutan could use its cultural strength not only to enhance and spread the existent blessings of Bhutan but also to overcome the new challenges

<sup>2</sup> See Karma Phuntsho, "The Cultural Constructions of Bhutan: An Unfinished Story" and Karma Phuntsho, "Closing Address."

that the digital era of our time poses.

Firstly, Bhutan's cultural diversity needs to be exhaustively inventoried in order to fully appreciate its extent and diversity. This task has been largely done by the project under discussion.

Secondly, there must be clear analysis of which cultures are bound to become a relic of the past, in particular those that can be useful to Bhutan now and in the future and that can be beneficial to Bhutan and beyond. Cultures such as the use of wooden ploughs or bamboo pens may be preserved as museum pieces, tokens of memory, and references for academic study and cultural identity, but they cannot be widely promoted. However, a vast array of cultures including philosophical outlooks, moral values, social norms, oral creations, religious practices and rituals, arts and crafts, festivals, and sports are as useful to the current and future generations as they were to the past. Among them, cultures such as the *driglam namzha* (code of etiquette) or *gho* (male dress) may be only truly useful to Bhutan, while other things

such as mindfulness, compassion, Bhutanese music, and culinary recipes can have great value for both the Bhutanese and others.

Thirdly, even deeper thought must be given to how Bhutanese can best sustain, adapt, or innovate those cultures we wish to preserve and promote without losing their essence while making them relevant and attractive to the current and future generations. If smartly adapted to current context and effectively promoted, most cultures, in addition to their spiritual and social benefits, have the potential to become economic opportunities.

Fourthly, it is imperative that the cultural industries be given support to begin and grow, so that cultural traditions do not become an economic burden but are leveraged as useful sources of economic benefit. Only then will the custodians and practitioners of the cultural traditions be motivated to carry on the cultures without external support. Aware of this, the Loden Foundation has helped start as well as expand many cultural industries by providing calibrated educational and financial support. With a little support in areas such as marketing and packaging, cultural products and services can become successful means of livelihood. This is especially true for Bhutan, which has managed to build a very attractive brand for itself.

However, the most far-reaching and lasting contribution of Bhutan's cultures to sustainable development perhaps lies in the smart re-appropriation of the spiritual outlook and ethos. For instance, Bhutan's spiritual approach to the environment, informed initially by the Pre-Buddhist regard for nature as an indomitable force and

reinforced by Buddhist values such as non-harm, respect for life, compassion, interdependence of all things, contentment, and selflessness, is a powerful discourse for environmental conservation and is applicable to conservation efforts both in Bhutan and the rest of the world. A lot can be learned from the expedient methods used for smooth transition Bhutan had from its Pre-Buddhist animistic and shamanistic worldview to its Buddhist ethos so that the current transition from a traditional, spiritual, local past to a modern, secular, global future is without tension or tumult.

Bhutan's Buddhist heritage, with its focus on the inner well-being of the spirit in particular, has an enormous contribution to make to the stressful era of materialism and social media frenzy we live in today. Buddhist mindfulness, as we know, is already very popular in the world and is being adopted in fields ranging from clinical psychotherapy to military training. Many other Buddhist outlooks, principles, and practices, if properly formulated to suit contemporary context and situations, can have a great value and impact for life across the globe. The Loden Foundation derives inspiration from the Buddhist theories and practices to refine the two activities of our economic life: production and consumption.

Loden promotes an ethical and socially responsible culture of production and entrepreneurship by cultivating the creative and compassionate power of the mind. Presenting the Buddha as a management guru rather than a religious sage, Loden reformulates Buddhist teachings to make them applicable in the daily business life. As the world grapples with the challenge of sustainability





▲ A temple wall painting in Trongsa

so that the reckless rush for prosperity does not cost the prosperity of future generations, there is a great need for humanity to consider moral systems such as the Four Noble Truths, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, concepts which the Buddha proclaimed in his first sermon about 2,600 years ago. While encouraging productivity and economic growth, Loden endeavors to foster meaningful and sustainable growth by eschewing

any negative impact on oneself, others, and the environment. The world, Loden strongly believes, can have a wholesome business culture and development model in which we can effectively coalesce the benefit for both ourselves and others, as promoted by Bodhisattva ethics.

At a time when global economy is driven by the market forces and people's earning and spending habits are influenced by the lowest parameter of

materialistic greed, we have a responsibility, as members of a civil society, to nurture a community of intelligent and ethical producers and a world of intelligent and mindful consumers. Some of this can best be achieved by looking back at our cultural roots in order to design the future routes we wish to take.

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