

# **Diminishing Cultures of Bhutan: Costume of Merag Community**

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## **Abstract**

*Preservation and promotion of culture is one of the pillars of Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. Besides, the Constitution of Kingdom of Bhutan enshrines a separate article on culture preservation. Hence, the culture has an outstanding recognition in the kingdom of Bhutan, which has been through generations intact. However, with the contemporary developments, such as economic development, information and communication technology, modernisation, regionalisation and also the so called globalisation, poses a great threat. The question arises that whether the tradition and culture of Bhutan or local communities can thrive in the years to come. Thus, this study, carried out based on secondary sources, interviews, and other oral history, brings out Bhutanese diminishing cultures in general and the costume of the Merag Community in particular, with a dawn of an each new day. As such, to address diminishing local heritages, the local indigenous groups should be given special attention through incentives to protect, preserve and promote their culture and should also be made aware of the importance of their indigenous heritage through education. So that, with the changing time, the degradation and dilution of some forms and values of such cultures are inevitable, its pace can be slowed down. Whereby, it provides time for research and documentation for the future generation, in case of its disappearance. Consequently, despite being deprived of living-culture, the identity, essence of the culture is and will be retained.*

## Introduction

Bhutan, sandwiched between the Himalayan giants, has an approximate area of 38,394 sq. km holding an estimated population of 695,822 (2010). As a result of continental collision between the Indo-Australian Plate and Eurasian Plate, uneven and harsh physical topography evolved, isolating one place from another by valleys, hills, passes and mountains. So, the settlement came along in patches, confined to a single facet of a mountain or a valley, detaching one settlement from another, giving birth to so many indigenous groups in this small kingdom.

By the nature of its separation, inhabitants developed their own lifestyles, dialect, customs, tradition and costume. However, their culture, more or less, rested upon their beliefs, a spiritual solace that they obtained from. So, since the *Bon*, a shamanistic practice, was believed to have been prevailing in Bhutan before the advent of Buddhism, some components of the culture could have been derived from it, playing a common platform amidst diverse differences.

However, with the arrival of Padmasambhava, popularly known as Guru Rinpoche in 7th century, Buddhism provided a common ground for diverse cultures of different factions of the society, as the integration of existing culture took place. Consequently, Buddhism laid the foundation of Bhutan's unique cultural heritage, pertaining to arts, architecture, literature, social structure, and its institution. This distinct inheritance through generations has dived into contemporary world with all its forms and value still intact, which acknowledged Bhutan's sovereignty and independence, and also demonstrating its richness in cultural heritage.



**Figure 1: Merag Village located at an altitude of 3,520m above sea level.**

The essence of Bhutanese culture is rooted in Buddhism as Bhutanese culture pursues the Buddhist principles of *lha-choegewachu* (Ten Devine Virtues) and *mi-choetsang-ma chudrug* (Sixteen Human Principles). The *driglamnamzha*, traditional etiquette, an integral part of culture is also founded on the above precepts. Hence, Bhutan has Buddhist majority that has a direct and unblemished correlation with the culture of its inhabitants.

Integration of various cultures and beliefs took place when the settlements expanded and central administration was formed. Moreover, when the modern developments commenced, the

isolation began to ease with road connections and other facilities. So the modern development not only posed a great challenge to the local culture and traditions but also threw an exigent battle even threatening the mainstream culture.

Nevertheless, Bhutan came up with Gross National Happiness (GNH), a guiding developmental philosophy devised to equilibrate aged-old culture and tradition with the modern development. The developmental philosophy asserts that GNH is more important than Gross National Product (GNP), which precisely stress that material development alone cannot justify the happiness of the people but need to balance the material and spiritual development holistically. So, preservation and promotion of culture was incorporated as one of the four pillars of GNH.

The Constitution of Kingdom of Bhutan also enshrines separate article on culture, emphasising preservation, protection, and promotion of cultural heritage of the country—including monuments, places and objects of artistic or historic interest, *Dzongs* (Fortresses), *Lhakhangs* (Temples), *Goendeys* (Monasteries), *Tensum* (Sacred relics), *Nyes* (Sacred sites), language, literature, music, visual arts and religion—to enrich society and the cultural life of the citizens.

Today, the main functioning body for framing and implementing cultural policies of Bhutan is Department of Culture under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, supported by ten divisions, namely: Royal Academy of Performing Arts, Division for Conservation of Architectural Heritage, National Library & Archives, National Museum (Paro), Division for Cultural Properties, Research and Media Division, Division of Driglam Namzha (National Etiquette), Textiles Museum, the Folk Heritage Museum, Watch Tower



Museum (Trongsa). Besides, Dzongkha Development Commission, Institute of Traditional Arts and Crafts (*Zorig Chusum* or the Thirteen Arts and Crafts of Bhutan), Institute for Language and Cultural Studies, Institute of Traditional Medicine, monastic institutions, and other related organisations. Consequently, it has not only helped in safeguarding Bhutanese cultures against modern influences but also being strengthened.

### **Culture and its Significance**

Culture is defined as “the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought” according to the [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com). In Bhutanese context, culture may be equated to term „*Jam-sol*“, which precisely expounds the above definition though current focus is more on the traditional values that are at stake in this contemporary age. So, term „*Jam-lug-sol*“ is more appropriate which literally means culture and tradition. Sometimes, we also use „*ngar-sol lam-lug*“ that is also equivalent to the traditional system or culture. Likewise, „*sol-chun*“ or „*sol-jun*“ is also used to denote heritage.

Culture is lifeline of Bhutanese identity. This is why it has gained separate space in the constitution of kingdom of Bhutan, and included as one of the four pillars of Gross National Happiness, as stated earlier. Despite Bhutan being geographically very tiny, it has remained independent throughout its history, though the bordering giant countries no longer withstood the foreign occupations. This is because Bhutan not only maintained good diplomatic relations with the neighbouring countries but also preserved its unique tradition and culture which differentiated from rest of the world.

Today, looking at any aspects of life in Bhutan, the totality of Bhutan's value is its rich culture and tradition. Therefore, any new developmental activities, plans and programs have to harmonise with Bhutanese culture and tradition, so as to yield sustainable outcomes for the happiness of the people. Nonetheless, this tradition and culture is not an alienated concept but derived from the Buddhist texts and practices. So, due to such profound and philosophical association and importance, the culture is regarded as very significant subject for preservation and promotion in the Buddhist society for aeons to come.

## **Diminishing Cultures of Bhutan**

Despite repeated efforts in preservation and promotion, some of the cultures and traditions are at stake due to global influences. So, this paper will attempt to give an overview of some of the diminishing cultures of Bhutan which are under great threat, though it will not be able to highlight and justify the entire spectrum of diminishing cultures of Bhutan.

### **1. Local Costumes**

Like any other countries, Bhutan also has diverse social groups who invented their own lifestyle and costumes mainly based on geographical adaptability. Bhutan has few groups with unique costumes and of these, attires worn in Merag and Sakteng in Trashigang, Laya in Gasa, and Lhop in Samtse are the most distinct folks existing today. Highlights on the costume of Merag will be presented later in the paper.

Laya community is located in Gasa Dzongkhag, northwestern part of Bhutan. People of Laya are known as *layaps*, and the community hosts very unique attires, extracted

its material from highland domestic animals such as yak and sheep, and woven into cloth pieces, which is then stitched into their costumes. Their attires are black in colour but it is only worn by women where the male dress is no longer worn, which is a true sign that even the women's dress will disappear down the line. The black woollen dress is worn right down to the ankles. And they also wear conical pointed hat made up of bamboo adorned with beads of jewellery. These people are exclusively dependent on their domestic animals. So, part of their household moves with animals from one place to others in the mountains, herding their animals. Not only it is unique in their lifestyle and attires but they also speak different language which has close connection with *dzongkha* (national language of Bhutan). Hence, it is one of the rarest cultural groups in the country. Though the community has got rich invaluable cultural and traditional heritage, less and less people are interested to track their older generations, partly due to modern developmental facilities at their disposal but also due to globalisation. So, besides their livelihood and language, their attire is under great threat of extinction down the line.

Similarly, in the south-western Bhutan, Dorokha Drungkhag in Samtse has *lhops*, who are also one of the indigenous groups in Bhutan. Besides having their own customs, tradition and language, they also wear distinct dress. It is white in colour made of cotton. The dress worn by men is called *rah-em* and female dress is called *guih-em*. And *pungop* (shirt) over their shoulder is worn by both *lhops* males and females. However, they have gradually abandoned their attires since the beginning of the 1990s and now it is on the verge of extinction and even the cotton plantation for the garments are also disappearing from their fields. Before this, wild nettle plants were used to extract fibre for their dress (Dorji 2009). This is

because cheaper and easy materials are available in the markets. And moreover, people felt backward wearing their indigenous dress, which compelled them to follow the suit of the majority such as wearing *gho* and *kira* and also pants and shirts. So, this phenomenon of disappearing indigenous attires is not a new trend in Bhutan. It has happened and is aware to everyone, but there lacked counter actions by the Bhutanese – be it government or community itself.

## 2. Local Dialects

As in the case of costumes, different local dialects for different sections of the society are prevalent, but it has been observed that it is also disappearing at an alarming pace in this contemporary age. Bhutan has nineteen spoken languages, out of which four are spoken widely; *dzongkha*, *sharchop* or *tshanglalo*, *Lhotshamkha* (Nepali) and *khengkha* amongst other. However, the minorities are vulnerable to extinction such as the local dialect of *brokkat* (Bumthang Dur), *chalikha* (Mongar Chali), *'olekha* (Mangde, Trongsa), *dakpakha* (east), *gongdukha* (Kheng Gongdu in Mongar), and even *Lhops* and *Merag-Saktengpas* dialect are also in the decline, where some minor dialects must have been at the verge of extinction which requires immediate attention.

## 3. Marriage Customs

Marriage is an integral part of life and with no exception there are few indigenous traditions that were practised in some pockets of Bhutan. Generally, couples get married based on love or parent's choice, but in eastern Bhutan, lower Kheng in Zhemgang, and in Merag and Sakteng communities, they have uncommon tradition of tying their knots at their early age.

*Sharchops* or easterners do cross cousin marriage. In lower Kheng, Zhemgang, though it is based on cross cousin marriage, it involves childhood engagement. As a result the marriage becomes a complicated one. Once old enough, the groom has to contribute three years labour service to his bride's household, where his in-laws assess his capability as a husband. In the end, if approved, groom's parents have to supply plenty of drinks and meat for a wedding banquet. Similarly, cross cousin or outside kinship marriage of Merag and Sakteng is a tradition passed down from *Khamsang Ama Jomo*, the female deity of Merag valley, where the wedding ceremony lasts at least for three days.

However, these traditions were challenged when more and more people prefer the idea of love and romance. Besides, cross cousin marriage is forbidden by the law. So, as the marriage became simple, easy, and less expensive, the relation between the husband and wife was also seen less committed and does not last long, where elderly lots feel that social cohesion, ceremonial values, and beliefs are on a declining trend.

#### **4. Oral Traditions**

Oral tradition is also part and parcel of Bhutan's culture and tradition. Oral transmission such as storytelling, folklore, legends, proverbs, and even history are passed down from one generation to another. Though some transmissions were able to document in writing, the illiterate lots hanged on to this tradition, thereby giving ground for those lost manuscripts. With the modern facilities for documenting and storing data and younger generations attending school, the tradition of oral tradition has come to a halt thereby impacting largely on the sustainability of this tradition. Besides, television and internet has occupied the room for storytelling and folklore.

## 5. Traditional Etiquette

*Driglamnamzhag* (traditional etiquette) is considered one of the most important elements of life as a Bhutanese. Without this, it is considered as unmannered and uncivilised individual. These traditional etiquette exhibit the art of dressing, art of looking, art of eating, and art of sitting. In nut shell, it is all about inculcating good behaviour, forming a foundation of peace and stability, as it is absolutely based on hierarchical order. Today, the concept of *driglamnamzhag* is becoming more of an obligation and theory, due to decadence, pressure and negligence especially in urban towns.

## 6. Traditional Songs and Music

Songs and music are essential ingredients of culture, where Bhutanese traditional songs such as *zhungdra* and *boedra* have the potential even to trace our history, culture and religion of the time. These songs were eulogies in honour of great religious or political figures. Additionally, it also gives vivid accounts of religious sites, structures and its significance. Yet, since it is monotonous and complex by nature, younger generations turn deaf ear to it leading to a gradual decline. Similarly, traditional music comes from handful numbers of instruments, confining the enthusiast music lover for any further options to explore, thereby inclining their interest to foreign music that provides variety of choices.

## 7. Traditional Games and Sports

Similarly, the traditional games and sports are also sharing the unpleasant time to revive its popularity in this modern time. This is because access to the games and sports are the main driving force here. And another thing could be the popularity of

the games. Games and sports such as football have seen no limit even in the remote rural areas because of its popularity and easy access to the game. So, when traditional games and sports require a wide range of equipments and moreover, the fact that when it is played only in one society, the popularity is nominal. So, the chances of promoting and popularising the games and sports are very slim. Thus, there is a declining trend in losing the indigenous games in favour of the foreign games and sports.

## **8. Bhutanese Architecture**

To cope with the developing pace around the globe, Bhutan too did not fail in picking up the pace when it comes to architectural design of the buildings or structures, thus degrading its own aged-old architectural designs. So, the unique and majestic views of Bhutanese architecture are now glued only to the historical monuments such as *dzongs*, *lhakhangs*, *gonpas*, and *chortens* (Stupas). With the construction booming in Bhutan, less and less people stick to the original architecture and more and more import foreign ideas and designs, though there is some blend of architectural designs in the Bhutanese buildings.

## **9. Thirteen Traditional Arts and Crafts**

The story of traditional arts and crafts dates back as far as fifteenth century when *Terton* Pema Lingpa introduced his artistic skills in Bhutan. And in the seventeenth century *Desi* Tenzin Rabgye codified the artistic skills under *zorigchusum*, the thirteen arts and crafts. These are *shingzo* (woodworks), *dozo* (stone carving), *parzo* (carving), *lhazo* (painting), *jimzo* (clay arts), *lugzo* (metal casting), *shagzo* (wood-turning), *garzo* (blacksmithing), *troezo* (gold and silver works), *tshazo* (basketry), *dezo* (paper-making), *tshemzo* (needlework), and

*thagzo* (weaving). Products of these artistic works are ubiquitous in Bhutan. Sadly, due to similar easy and cheaper substitutes available, people do not prefer the traditional ones. Consequently, people give up the trade of above arts resulting in gradual decline of people with such artistic skills.

## **10. Local Festivals**

As part of intangible cultural heritage, local festivals, mostly performing arts are lifeline of the indigenous local cultures that are unique even from the mainstream culture. When the local community is small, then the chances of disappearing the tradition and culture is high. To point out an example, the performing art called *lhacham* at Sumthrang in Bumthang Ura was not been able to perform it for the last one decade. The only expert person is an old man. Likewise, there must be even more to add on to the lists that are at the verge of extinction unless appropriate safeguarding measures such as inventories, research, and documentation are done on time.

Besides above extremely ten important areas that have been identified, there are other rich and exotic local traditions and customs that are in the line of disappearance. The “reception and see-off culture” of Merag community is amongst one. This tradition involves lots of beliefs and practices. Forget about someone leaving to a long journey involving time and distance, but even for one to two days journey, their belief compels them to follow their tradition. However, with changing time, these beliefs, practices, and tradition are gradually dying away from the face of local culture.





**Figure 2: Yak Cham (Dance), Merag.**

### **Costume of Merag Community**

The Merag are an indigenous people inhabiting in the high mountains of eastern Bhutan in the village of Merag and Gengo, in the Trashigang district. Located at an altitude of 3,520m above sea level, they live on herding highland domestic animals such as yak, sheep, *dzo* and *dzomo*, cattle and horses. It is two days away from nearest motorable road head. In fact they were known as *drogpa*, highlander, but due to inaccuracy pronunciation they are called *brokpa* by the Bhutanese, a condescending term. The land area spreads to 867.7 sq. km mostly pasture land for their animals with a population of 1957. Ethnically related to the Tibetans, they speak a Tibeto-Burman language called *drogkad*. In *dzongkha* the language is called

*bjokha*, however, since this language is spoken only in Merag and Sakteng communities, the language is also called *merag-sakteng-kha*, the language of Merag and Sakteng.

The costume of Merag is unique though the same is worn in Sakteng community and similar one in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh in India. However, there are minor differences both in the garments used and style of wearing. To introduce the costumes of Merag; firstly, the community has four different types of outfits dressed differently—*lama*, *gomchen*, male and female lots. Secondly, males appear in five different attires and females in two types, though *lama* and *gomchen* dress similar to those in other parts of the country.

Generally, the main garment of men resembles jacket that is tied with a belt (*kerā*) is called *chuba*. The five attires of men are *tsho-khamchuba* (red woollen), *puichuba* (black from yak hair), *rigu* (gray woollen), *paba* (tanned leather), and *pak-tsa* (tanned leather with hair, usually the skin of wild goat, antelope, baby yak, and calf). These attires are all worn not below mid-thigh length. The difference in the colour and material has also got significance, where red denotes formal and black informal. However, *rigu* is worn mostly by the herders especially during damp weather. Whereas, *paba* is worn by the herders especially during late autumn, winter and early spring when herders have to climb trees to trim off its branches for cattle feeds. On the other hand, *paktsa* is worn at any time, but mostly during chilly hours. However, during rainy time, it is worn exhibiting the hair side out and leather side is displayed outside when dry.

*Kang-go* resembling half pant covers hip to knee. It is connected at the hip with a pair of leather stocking-like *pe-shub*. The *pu-lham* (woollen boot) or *pag-lham* (leather boot) is used as footwear depending on time and place. The *pag-lham* is used

only as casual footwear though now both the footwears were used only during winter, when there is snow and frost. The hat called *tsid-paizhamu* is worn by both genders; however, *ching-zha* is used by men especially animal herders, which has less formal values. *Tsid-paizhamu* is black in colour with five finger-like protrusions from its edges with the length of 15 to 20 centimetres. The colour of the *ching-zha* varies, mostly black and brown, resembling to that of cowboy hat. Besides these distinct and locally manufactured attires, there were other features such as *kubtan* (seating mat) dangling behind and *dri* (knife) tied horizontally on the left hip of men. *Khab-shub* (needle case) suspended from the right hip in the case of women and men in their *chuba* pouch. *Nyug-dri [nga-zoror barey]* (small knife) is also included in women's item by hanging along with the *khab-shub*. Women also wear beads of jewellery around their neck composed of precious stones such as turquoise, coral, shell, onyx, and many more depending on how wealthy the person is. Likewise, one significant feature is that both male and female use earrings.



**Figure 3: Male Attire made from wool, Merag**

Similarly, women also wear equally distinct apparels. As a main garment, they wore *ngui-shing* made from wool but now white or red with white striped silk *shingkha* is worn. It's like a long skirt. Anyway, to make it more formal, it is worn both at a time appending white *shingkha* from within, making its edges visible. The *shingkha* is fastened at the waist with a belt, lifting it to shin, assembling three or more folds in the front depending on the size of the *shingkha*. But before fastening it with the belt, *mey-kem*, a black rectangular woollen piece of cloth is attached behind to a knee high.



**Figure 4: Female Dress, Merag**

Then plain white or red with flower patterns of waist-high *to-dung* with full sleeve is worn. The material of the *to-dung* varies from cotton to silk. Additionally, *ba-todung*, a woollen jacket is developed in similar pattern and size. Besides this,

*lhen-ba* which is red and made from wool is worn at the back just enough to cover from shoulder till the waist. As in the case of men, they also have similar designed footwear called *nem-builham* though the colour differs slightly. Since the footwears were as high as edge of knee, it is being fastened slightly below knee by a small belt called *lham-rogkera*. With this outfits, the men and women make perfect distinct.

### **Material of the Costume**

Unlike any other sections of the society, people of Merag community lived on producing their own clothing. These clothing were extracted from the domestic animals they raise—wool from sheep and three types of hairs from yak. The black wool is used for the similar colour of clothing and white is used for various other colours, using dye depending upon the pattern of the garment, predominantly red. Similarly, the hairs of yak were also used in similar purposes. The wool from sheep was sheared four times a year in olden days when there were plenty of grasses to feed on. But now, it is sheared thrice a year. The timing for the shearing of wool was done before or right next morning after arrival to Merag from the highland in the ninth month of Bhutanese calendar to avoid autumnal dry thrones and rubbish, as the wool of that period was considered as the best one. Thereafter, it was done after every four months.

Conversely, in the case of yak, it is quite different. Yak produces three types of hair called *pu*, *tsid-pa*, and *nga-ma*. *Pu* is the softest of the three, which is pulled out from the either side of the yak's body and is eventually used for inner clothing or for blankets. Whereas, *tsid-pa* which is little coarse and hard is sheared from dewlap till lower abdomen. The *tsid-pa* of male yak is used for producing various items such as tents, rain-proof,

and sacks. However, the *tsid-pa* of female yak or male yak under three years of age were used exclusively for hat, while the *tsid-pa* sheared in the first year is called *drab* which is used for developing *kud-pa* (thread) and *nun-da* (rope). *Nga-ma* is the longest and roughest of the hairs which grows on the tail and are used for developing bags–*pha-chung*.



**Figure 5: Milking a Yak, the main source of livelihood, Merag.**

With the limited natural colour of the hairs, various other means to colouring were practised. For natural dyeing, dye is collected from different plants for specific colours. *Tsod* plant for red colour, indigo (*ja'*) plant for blue colour, leaf of *zhunggen shing* for yellow, and *dam-nag* (black mud) is used for black colour. However, *tshur* (rock salt) and sour fruit from *u-shukyur-moshing* is used to hold the colour on the woollen cloth pieces. Each of this colouring requires slightly different process. But with the introduction of chemical dye and easy process and methods, this indigenous knowledge of dyeing and obtaining dye is also on the decline, which is also a concern for the community and government, as it is also part and parcel of intangible cultural heritage of that community. Such processes, methods, and skills not only make them self-sufficient and independent but also provide them with business opportunities. Besides, they can also keep the dyeing culture alive.

### **Art of Weaving and Stitching**

Once the wool and hair is extracted from the sheep and yak, then it is being segregated into different sections depending upon their colour and texture from dust and other sticky dry plants. Then it is being dried and carded using Hand Cards, after which it is being made into thread by spinning both by men and women. They even spin while walking. Then threads are wound in the warping place [board], which involves another art in allocating required size and pattern, when finally set in the loom. It is then woven for weeks. After the weaving is done, it is then soaked into hot water and being softened by creasing with the help of two legs. After hours, then the coarse surface hides itself into the furry fleece, which shows that it is finally developed into fine woollen cloth piece for further development into required cloths and garments. It was then washed and dried.

In case, if we require different colour for white woollen cloth piece, it is then processed further for colouring (dying).

With this fine piece of woollen cloth, it is then cut into various pieces and sizes depending on the various types of garment. It is then stitched for days involving different technique of stitching to last for years without tearing it. And the stitching lines were never seen torn though the garments are filled with patches after many years. Not all the people are equipped with the skills to stitch especially when it comes to garments of all sorts including *chuba* and *lham*, and likewise, not all female are adequately skilful enough in warping and weaving. So, very few lots are proficient in these arts, where it requires lots of patience, care, technique, time, and skills. The finest and softest pieces of cloth are used for *khan-jor* (shirt), *chu-ba*, *kang-go*, *dor-ma*, and in some parts of *lham*. Others are used for developing blankets, carpets, cushions, and pillows. *Tsho-khamchuba*, *rigu*, and *nem-builham* are made from wool and *puichuba* and *pu-lham* are developed from yak's *pu* but the process of developing it into final cloth pieces are as same as the woollen cloth pieces.

Since the art of weaving and stitching requires lots of skills, the profession is not welcomed by most which ultimately leads to decline of this art. As a part of intangible aspect of culture, it should also be addressed before it is too late.

### **Importance of the Costume**

Looking at the above stories on its costumes, material used, and the process of making garments, it is clear that the community had not depended on any other external sources in making it into final products. Be it hat, *khan-jor*, *chuba*, pant, *kang-go*, *shing-kha* [*ngui-shing*], footwear, and other necessary belonging were



crafted, woven, and produced by their own, without having to buy from external sources. Therefore, it clearly signifies that this community was self-sufficient in olden times. Moreover, it proves that people of that time were so skilful and hardworking, and innovative too. But now, with the globalisation in the process, every individual becomes dependent as substitutes of all items were made cheaper and easily available, which was not the case then.

Remaining isolated gave them platform to be independent and maintain their own identity by wearing their own set of attires, which is a matter of pride that should carry in every *meraps'* blood. But looking at the current pace of degradation in its tradition and culture, and particularly in its costumes, it is of great embarrassment even to say that someone belong to that community. It is due to sheer ignorance that, little by little the identity, coupled with many other cultures of the society within and beyond Bhutan, aggravated its gradual disappearance. So, we can hardly say what people or society do those people belong to—dressed in pant and shirt, mixed language of Dzongkha, English, Hindi, Mon-ked, and their own language, and contending for wealth and power creating chaos in the community. Therefore, it is even hard to say that this is a beautiful and peaceful community of Merag, compared to a decade ago.

According to some texts, it is said that *tsid-paizhamu* symbolises head of black bird, where *ba-todung* and *todung* with different colours signify hanging sleeves (*phoi-ka*) worn by descendants of the bird. Similarly, *lhem-ba* represents wings of the bird and *kang-go* symbolises tail of the bird, whereas, the *lham* stands for its webbed feet. This derivation was based on

the theme that people of Merag were descended from *jachung* [garuda], mythical bird.

Additionally, besides the costume, there are other aspects of culture and tradition that are at stake, which are very unique. These includes the way of life or lifestyle, beliefs, religion, language, festivals, and the most interesting part is its female deity called Khamsang Ama Jomo, residing on the highest mountain of the valley overlooking Merag community, which has very rich legends along with various forms and imprints left on the stones. So, these are also of a concern to the community and government for further research and documentation, neglecting which will cause irreversible catastrophe.

### **Preservation Policy and Present Position**

Ever since His Majesty the 4<sup>th</sup> King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck propounded the phrase “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product” in 1972, the developmental plans and programmes were framed based on the GNH principles. As culture being one of the four pillars of the principle, it has gained attention in all aspects of programmes—be it in planning, law making, discussion, conference and even in the education system of Bhutan, which is the most important and influential of all.

In 2010, Ministry of Education launched formal website on “Educating for GNH” providing separate platform for imparting and disseminating the subject to the future citizens of Bhutan which was already incorporated in the education system. Besides sustainable economic development, preservation of environment, and good governance, preservation and promotion of culture is the most applicable to the students. Students of all sections are taught values of culture based on *driglamnamzha*—

being responsible, respecting elders and younger, rendering helping hand for the needy ones, and so on. The value education has reciprocated its results within few months of its implementation bringing harmony and self-consciousness amongst the students. As a result, the youth and everyone are very much aware of the importance of the subject and the state of various diminishing cultures as listed above.

Nonetheless, even after their studies, cultural orientation is given annually to the university graduates to prepare them to serve the nation with loyalty and dedication and also to brief them about the importance and diversity of indigenous cultures prevailing in the nooks and corners of the country, as they may be posted anywhere else in the country. Likewise, even after getting into the job, time and again, the public servants are briefed and trained on the cultural values and its significance in today's world particularly on *driglamnamzha*. Furthermore, even at the grassroots level of the society, people are very much cognisant of government's effort in retaining and promoting local culture and traditions.

Similarly, the costumes of Merag community are also promoted in various ways. To promote the indigenous attires, government had accepted the dress in all the government offices and even the school uniform of that community is in their own local costumes. Similarly, Royal Academy of Performing Arts uses the costumes of Merag community while performing songs and dances in various national and international functions in and abroad.

## **Challenges**

Having presented the ground realities of diminishing cultures of Bhutan particularly the costumes of Merag community, there are

couples of difficulties confronting the sustainability of the culture and traditions. No matter what plans and policies are framed and in place, gradually we do see the downward trend in every bits of culture. These challenges were attributed mainly to globalisation and modernisation process taking place around the globe. The global village formed by globalisation not only allows platform for wide varieties of choices over the goods and services from varied sources but also due to the inevitable phenomenon of modernisation or westernisation provides multifaceted fashion, culture, religion, beliefs and lifestyles. The intensity is aggravated by receiving western or foreign education to the coming generations. As a result, younger generation prefer city life coalesced to hybrid culture with modern amenities.

Modern facilities such as road, electricity, office centres, internet, telecommunication, television, and so on retain people in the city and even the rural folks are coaxed to migrate to experience the exuberant and better life, leaving behind their rich and invaluable culture and traditions. Besides, cultural dilution is also from the fact that internet and television serve as a medium to propagate newer fashions or styles based on foreign themes, thereby affecting the culture and traditions that are in practice.

Since conventional items are based on handmade that entail lots of time and energy, usually products are overpriced. Moreover, lack of varied sizes, patterns, and qualities are common as it is manually produced. As a result, customers fall for the substitute goods that are easily available at all range of size, patterns, and even prices. Therefore, even in the case of costumes of Merag community, similar practicality is pursued to reduce the excessive burden of cost of production of the attires,

and simply people go for the diverse substitutions available in the market, which led them to dress in pants and shirt, merging themselves into the mainstream global culture.

It is the phase of time where local aboriginal culture and traditions are amalgamating with the mainstream culture, and even beyond with the global culture. Consequently, minority who are left with conventional lifestyles are impelled to give up their original lifestyles. Taking into consideration the attire, we find that when one or few dresses that are distinct from the other commonly accepted attires, they become the centre of attention with various remarks. No one knows when someone might abuse them of their backwardness. Moreover, when others bother so much about that distinctness, the minority or that person might feel humiliated and embarrassed, resulting in psychological mayhem. As a result, the minority is compelled to disrobe their distinct attire in other majority due to inadvertent abuse, harassment, and humiliation. Slowly, they trend to adopt borrowing others' (majority's) attire and gradually, vanishing the minority which is a realistic fact. This is the greatest challenge of all, when someone has to deal with the psychological state of other people.

## **Conclusion**

With this identification on diminishing cultures of Bhutan specifically pertaining to the costume of Merag community, it is obvious that some recommendations and proposals are very much required to create conducive environment for sustainable culture and traditions. So it is apparent that culture plays a significant role in the society and happiness of the people. The essence of the culture is the identity it exhibits. A single cultural entity displays its own values and significance, forming distinct

identity. Ultimately, independence and sovereignty is the singular substance of the culture that guarantees harmony and stability at the various social levels.

In view of the above realities and facts, the only possible solution at hand is to educate the people particularly aboriginal groups on values and importance of traditional cultural heritage. With the awareness in place, less and less majority group (mainstream group) bothers about the minority, thereby brushing off the social stigma of backwardness.

The sustainability of indigenous culture and traditions can be prolonged bestowing special attention through guidance, support, and incentives in their daily lives—providing training and resources for weaving in the case of costume of Merag community. Furthermore, giving them chance to interact with other indigenous groups will also at least help to relieve from their social stigmas.

Lastly, SAARC cultural networking of this kind is very important not only to share the unique practices in the region, but also provides platform to brainstorm on the given subject to devise better and refined solutions for the diminishing cultures. In order to enhance its coverage and productivity, setting up of „field office“ in every member state is an utmost importance, so as to safeguard intangible and tangible cultural heritage of the Himalayas through inventorying, research and documentation.

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**Volume 2 - 2011**

**DIMINISHING CULTURES IN SOUTH ASIA**



**SAARC**

**SAARC Cultural Centre  
Colombo**



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