

Karin Altmann

# FABRIC OF LIFE

Edition Angewandte

Book Series of the  
University of Applied Arts Vienna

Edited by Gerald Bast, Rector

*edition:* **Angewandte**

Karin Altmann

# **FABRIC OF LIFE**

Textile Arts in Bhutan – Culture, Tradition and Transformation

**DE GRUYTER**





## CONTENTS

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 6   | Introduction  |
| 9   | Textiles in the Cultural History of Bhutan  |
| 91  | Bon and Buddhism  |
| 105 | Colours, Threads and Cloths in Ritual Contexts  |
| 121 | Sacred Festivals and Dances   |
| 133 | Jampe <i>Lhakhang Drup</i> – A Case Study   |
| 183 | <i>Cham</i> Lineages and Dance Costumes of Bhutan   |
| 233 | The Production of Textiles  |
| 289 | Creativity and Tradition – Positioning Textile Art between<br>Freedom of Artistic Expression and Subjection to Strict Rules |
| 303 | Textiles and Mysticism  |
| 309 | Gender-Specific Attribution in Bhutanese Society  |
| 329 | The Importance of Textiles to the Life of Society and Individuals   |
| 359 | Bhutan's Textile Art in Transition  |
| 391 | Prospects: Textile Art as a Cultural Heritage for Young People in Bhutan?   |
| 414 | Epilogue  |
| 417 | Acknowledgments   |
| 419 | Appendix  |
| 420 | Glossary  |
| 432 | References  |
| 435 | Imprint   |

## INTRODUCTION

Along the southern slopes of the Eastern Himalayas, wedged between its two powerful neighbours China and India, lies the small but quite remarkable Kingdom of Bhutan. Bhutan is the last remaining Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas and the only country in the world where the Tantric form of *Mahayana* Buddhism, the *Vajrayana*, constitutes the official state religion and infuses all aspects of life, from state policy to the everyday lives of its inhabitants. It is a small, independent country that was never colonised and which remained largely cut off from the rest of the world until the 1950s. It was only in the 1960s that it was opened up to the outside world, since when this little kingdom, which is undergoing a self-determined transfer to democracy, has been increasingly influenced by western culture. However, despite worldwide tendencies towards cultural homogenisation and globalisation, Bhutan's confidence in itself as a nation has enabled its cultural traditions to be preserved. A code of etiquette (*driglam namzhag*) obliges all Bhutanese people to live in accordance with Bhutanese culture, by establishing norms that apply not only to manners and the organisation of public events, but also to clothes. Thus, this decree contains rules about dress, whereby all Bhutanese people are obliged to wear the national dress when attending official occasions; apparel that goes back to the Buddhist cleric and national unifier Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, who lived in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Within the context of its specific geography, history, and way of life, Bhutan has developed a whole range of traditional arts. Among the richest and most complex of these art forms are the textiles of Bhutan, which combine many centuries of knowledge with individual creativity, and have been held in great regard as a symbol of the country's national identity, right up to our times. It is this art form that this publication is dedicated to.

As a result of its long, self-imposed isolation, it was subsequently identified by some westerners with an imaginary 'last Shangri-La', the utopian earthly paradise in the Himalayas – a permanently happy land, isolated from the outside world – that the American author James Hilton presented to the world as a modern myth in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. Bhutan is among the countries of the world that have always exerted a powerful attraction over travellers, researchers and scientists in very different disciplines. The first travellers to Bhutan undertook what was then the very difficult journey to this remote kingdom with very different motives. The first western visitors were two Portuguese Jesuits called Estevão Cacella and João Cabral, who travelled to Bhutan in 1627. Among those who entered the country after them in the

service of the British Government were George Bogle (1774), Dr Alexander Hamilton (1776–77), Captain Samuel Turner together with Lieutenant Samuel Davis, who accompanied this trade mission as an artist (1783), Captain Robert Boileau Pemberton (1838), and Ashley Eden (1864). In 1904, a British Colonel called Francis Younghusband led an expedition across Bhutan to Tibet, and in 1905 and 1907 John Claude White visited Bhutan as Political Officer of Sikkim. He was followed by researchers such as Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Marshman Bailey, who travelled in Bhutan between 1922 and 1928, and British botanist George Sherriff, who together with Frank Ludlow, undertook the journey to Bhutan and Tibet six times, between the years 1937 and 1949, in the service of the British Museum. In addition to these, French ethnologist Michel Peissel was driven by his enormous ambition to enter Bhutan, intending to be one of the first to cross on foot, 'in the year 1968 [...] the last country of Asia that is still unmapped'.<sup>1</sup> The letters, reports and drawings and, latterly, photographs from these expeditions witness to Bhutan's textile art, and the fashions of the age.

In 1974, when Bhutan opened up to a managed form of tourism under the rule of the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, more and more travellers started coming to Bhutan. Accordingly, the number of books on Bhutan increased and it soon seemed that anyone who had spent more than a fortnight in this small Himalayan kingdom felt qualified to publish an account of their experiences in a book. However, the last twenty years have also seen the appearance of qualitative academic studies and, although this present publication is largely based on my own empirical observations, it is also built on research that has already been conducted by a few important scientists. Among the profound experts on Bhutan whose sources I refer to are, in the first instance, British historian and Tibetologist Michael Aris, French ethno-historian and Tibetologist Françoise Pommaret, Austrian cultural anthropologist Christian Schicklgruber, and Swiss ethnologist Martin Brauen. With regard to expert accounts of the Bon religion, I have relied on the research carried out by British Tibetologist David L. Snellgrove, Norwegian anthropologist Per Kvaerne, German Indologist and Tibetologist Helmut Hoffmann, and Tibetan Tibetologist Samten Gyaltsen Karmay. With regard to information about Buddhism, its rituals and dances, the research published by French Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, who not only holds a PhD degree in molecular genetics but also translates for the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, has provided valuable information. In this context, I have also relied on the writings of Mynak Tulku Rinpoche, a Buddhist monk

and high cleric in Bhutan. With regard to Buddhist iconography, the work of British artist and author Robert Beer must be acknowledged. Information about Bhutan's dances was supplied by *Dasho Sithel Dorji*, former Director of the *Royal Academy of Performing Arts*, and by the *Core of Culture Dance Preservation*, a NGO that has documented Bhutan's mask dances as part of a lavish project involving the *Honolulu Academy of Arts*. Among the most significant Bhutanese authors whose reflections I have quoted in my work, are *Dasho Karma Ura*, President of *The Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research* (formerly *The Centre for Bhutan Studies*), an interdisciplinary research institute that engages with the culture and history of Bhutan; Bhutanese novelist Kunzang Choden and the Bhutanese lama, film-maker, novelist, and truly the most innovative spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism today, *Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche*. Important and up-to-date information has been supplied by Bhutanese weeklies *Kuensel*, *Bhutan Observer* and *Bhutan Times*, and *Drukpa Magazine*, all of which have their own Internet portals. Further mention should be made of the *Thunlam Newsletter* of The Bhutan-German Himalaya Society, in which German Tibetologist Gregor Verhufen and the Honorary Consul Manfred Kulessa publish up-to-date articles.

With regard to Bhutan's textile art, it should be noted that prior to the 1980s, Bhutanese textiles were scarcely known in the West. Although a few, mainly British museums already held textiles from Bhutan, these items were not included in their collections as examples of textile art but simply as evidence of diplomatic relations between Bhutan and Great Britain. Blanche Olschak was the only person to publish an article on *Bhutanese Weaving* in 1966, and there were no further publications in this field for the next 18 years. Most of the great collections of Bhutanese textile art that are nowadays on show in international museums were acquired item by item in the 1980s, from merchants in Kathmandu, Nepal. Among these private collections are those that belong to Barbara Adams and Mark Bartholomew. Both Barbara Adams's publication *Traditional Bhutanese Textiles*, published in 1984, and Mark Bartholomew's book, *Thunder Dragon Textiles from Bhutan*, published in 1985, describe the coincidental way that these collectors initially stumbled onto Bhutanese textiles. It was only years later, after a market had gradually been established, that Bhutanese people started coming to Kathmandu to exchange old textiles for new wares. Kathmandu became the most important source for collectors of Bhutanese textiles. In fact, during the last three decades, Bhutanese textiles have become some of the most high-

ly sought-after items in the world. According to an article in *The Wall Street Journal*, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Osaka Museum in Japan and others have all acquired Bhutanese textiles. Private collectors have even paid tens of thousands of dollars for a single Bhutanese textile.<sup>2</sup> 1985 saw the appearance of David Keith Barker's *Designs of Bhutan*, a collection of designs from the Kingdom of Bhutan collated in graphical format. Just a decade later, in 1994, Diana K. Myers and Susan S. Bean worked with Françoise Pommaret and Michael Aris to produce the catalogue for the exhibition, *Textile Arts of Bhutan – From the Land of the Thunder Dragon* in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem/Massachusetts. This was one of the most extensive and remarkable publications on textile art in Bhutan yet to be published. A further contribution was made in 1997 by the Australian economic expert Barry Ison who wrote an article on traditional crafts, called *The Thirteen Traditional Crafts*, which was published in *Bhutan – Mountain Fortress of the Gods* by Christian Schicklgruber and Françoise Pommaret, for the exhibition under the same name at the Weltmuseum Wien (formerly Museum of Social Anthropology in Vienna) that ran during 1997 – 1998.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it was this exhibition that sparked my interest in Bhutan, and my enthusiasm to research this subject.

The task of this book is now to present Bhutan's textile arts, not in isolation but in connection with all aspects of life. Starting from the assumption that all forms of Bhutan's art and culture are imbued with spiritual meaning, its textile arts can be used to show how the spiritual impact of Tantric Buddhism and pre-Buddhist religions has influenced the art and culture of Bhutan, and how closely art, spirituality and life are interwoven, like warp and weft. Through the medium of textiles, new insights into the cosmology of Bhutan, its worldview, culture, and society can be provided, which are, in turn, associated with a variety of historical, philosophical, religious, social and artistic perspectives.

---

#### Notes

- 1 Peissel 1970, p. 23.
- 2 Karen Mazurkewich, in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 10.08.2001: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB997395127401053441>, last accessed on 02.05.2014.
- 3 A virtual online version of the exhibition *Bhutan – Mountain Fortress of the Gods* can be viewed at: <http://bhutan.ims.tuwien.ac.at/ahtcdd00/a-entr/a-entr/start.html>







# TEXTILES IN THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF BHUTAN

*opposite:* Bhutan, compared with other dry regions in the Himalayas, is blessed with a rich natural environment.



## DRUK YUL – LAND OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

*above and opposite:* Bhutan's environment, with high rugged mountains and deep valleys, feature ecosystems with an astounding diversity.

Bhutan, known in *Dzongkha*, the official language of Bhutan, as *Druk Yul* ('Land of the Thunder Dragon'),<sup>1</sup> lies on the southern slopes of the Eastern Himalayas, wedged between two powerful neighbours, China and India. To the north, the country borders the autonomous region of Tibet, and to the east, south and west lie the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal and Sikkim. With only 634,982 inhabitants<sup>2</sup> living in an area that measures 38,394 km<sup>2</sup>, Bhutan has an extremely low population density. Whereas 61.1 per cent of the population live on the land, 30.9 per cent live in urban centres; the capital Thimphu has 79,185 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup>

The geography of Bhutan is roughly divided into three main lateral zones that run from north to south: the Great Himalaya, Inner Himalaya and Sub-Himalaya.<sup>4</sup> The mountainous central area extends from the glacier zones in the north with their eternal ice and snow, to the mild monsoon and alpine climates of the verdant valleys of Central Bhutan, right down to the sub-tropical zones in the south of the country. Rainfall levels and temperatures vary according to topography and degree of exposure. This is due to the high north-south divide, which runs from the main chain of the Himalayas in the north to the Brahmaputra valleys in the south. Whereas to the south, the lowest point of the country is at 150 m above sea-level, you have only to fly 90 – 160 km north to encounter huge snow-covered mountains rising to





7,000 m. Furthermore, seven large rivers flow in a north-south direction, through clearly-demarcated valleys that can attain depths of 3,000 m, which themselves are subdivided into different climate zones and feature a great variety of habitats.<sup>5</sup> This diverse environment, together with its bio-geographical location, has allowed Bhutan to develop a notable level of biodiversity, and the country's long isolation has also been beneficial for its biodiversity inventory. With many rare and endemic plants and animals, Bhutan boasts an extraordinary wealth of flora and fauna. 70.5 per cent of the country is still covered with forests, and one tenth of the entire area is permanently enveloped in snow and ice, which leaves only seven per cent that can be cultivated, although 80 per cent of the population relies on agriculture for its

livelihood.<sup>6</sup> To date, nine national parks and nature reserves have been set up; they are linked by biological corridors; the Constitution of Bhutan has declared that at least 60 per cent of the land area should remain under forest cover for all time, and that more than one quarter of the country must be preserved as a national park or a protected area for biodiversity conservation.<sup>7</sup>

This means that Bhutan, compared with other dry regions in the Himalayas, is blessed with a rich natural environment; this plays a significant role in the country's cultural development. Although Bhutan is strongly influenced by Tibetan culture, its ability to establish itself as a state in the 17<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to a separate culture, with distinctive features that serve to distinguish it clearly from other areas that have been influenced by Tibet.





## HISTORY AND NATIONHOOD

*left:* The Tantric mystic and teacher Guru Rinpoche introduced Tantric Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century; from a wall painting inside a private temple in Northeastern Bhutan.

*right:* The spiritual leader Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651) unified Bhutan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, forming a Buddhist kingdom; from a wall painting inside a private temple in Northeastern Bhutan.

There are only a few sources that cast light on the prehistory of Bhutan,<sup>8</sup> but stone implements and megaliths have survived in different parts of the country, suggesting that Bhutan was already populated around 2000–1500 BCE.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest written records about the history of Bhutan date from the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, when Buddhism reached the country for the first time, and the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (629–710) built the first two Buddhist temples, Kyichu *lhakhang* in Paro (Western Bhutan) and Jampe *lhakhang* in Bumthang (Central Bhutan). Many records about this ‘mystical’ Himalayan kingdom present a closely interwoven web of reality and legend, a fact that serves to complicate and enrich the history of Bhutan. Imaginative narratives of religious events are often viewed as more significant than the actual historical and political developments. *Mahayana* Buddhism has primarily influenced the historical development of Bhutan. The Indian mystic and Tantric master *Padmasambhava* (‘The Lotus-born’), who is generally referred to in Tibet and Bhutan as *Guru Rinpoche* (‘Precious Master’) and is nowadays still revered as the Second Buddha, engaged in radical missionary activity during the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. His teaching brought about a flowering of Tantric Buddhism in Bhutan.

Nevertheless, Buddhism was not firmly established until the 13<sup>th</sup> century; in the course of the following centuries it developed into a rich and independent culture based on the population’s firm adherence to the teachings and values of the *Mahayana*. At that time though, Bhutan still consisted of numerous isolated valleys with their own

culture and topography, and small independent principalities, which meant that the country still lacked any form of political unity.

It was only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that a unified Buddhist kingdom was established by a cleric called Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651). Ngawang Namgyel was an adherent of the Buddhist *Drukpa* School, which was based in Ralung monastery in Tibet. In 1616, political power struggles forced him to leave the Tibetan monastery<sup>10</sup> and, guided by the protective deity Yeshe Gonpo (Mahakala), who appeared to him in a vision under the aspect of a black raven, he came to the region of what is now Northwestern Bhutan, specifically, Laya. There, he was sure of the support of many *Drukpa* clans.<sup>11</sup> Known in Bhutan simply as *Shabdrung* (‘at whose feet one submits’)<sup>12</sup> the unificator and founder of Bhutan conquered the previously independent principalities. Under his leadership and government, Bhutan coalesced into one state with a single administration, law and belief system based on the premises of Buddhism. The Shabdrung built impregnable fortresses (*dzong*) at strategic points, which can still be seen, dominating the landscape in every district (*dzongkhag*) in Bhutan. Since those days, *dzong* have been used to house the monastic community and the administrative organisation of each particular *dzongkhag*. Shabdrung also codified a system of rules of etiquette in the form of *driglam namzhag* (‘Code of Disciplined Behaviour’). The origins of the 13 traditional crafts (*zorig chusum*) can also be found in it. However, one of his most significant changes was the establishment of a dual system of government (*choesi nyiden*).<sup>13</sup> The Shabdrung separated the religious





powers from the secular and proclaimed the *Drukpa-Kagyü* School the official state religion of Bhutan. To start with, the Shabdrung personally assumed both the spiritual and the secular leadership; later on, though, after retreating to the Punakha *dzong* to devote his final years to meditation, he appointed two individuals from his circle of relatives and close clerical friends to these central positions.<sup>14</sup> A hierarchy of officials was appointed to run the regional administration, and he introduced the posts of *Je Khenpo* and *Druk Desi*. While the *Je Khenpo* (addressed by the British as *Dharma Raja*), the head abbot, represented the highest instance for religious matters and ruled over the monastic community (*sangha*), the *Druk Desi* (referred to as *Deb Raja* by the British), held the political and secular power. The secular ruler headed a hierarchy of officials, most of whom were monks<sup>15</sup> because in those days, monks were the only people who could read and write. The duties of the *Desi* included the administration of the monastic community's wealth and landed property, the gathering of taxes in the form of goods – including textiles – and labour dues (*gungda ula*), by which means the public roads, bridges, temples and *dzong* were built. They also adjudicated in legal cases and were responsible for defence.

Due to Bhutan's remote mountainous location, in the course of his 35-year rule, the Shabdrung had to defend it against several invasions from Tibet, some of which involved Mongol troops. The legends tell how he was aided by deities who assumed the form of swarms of ravens and forced the invaders to flee. The raven is regarded as a manifestation of Mahakala, the guardian deity who had previously guided the Shabdrung to Bhutan. Later on, it was adopted as the protective deity of the Kingdom of Bhutan, which is why, nowadays, it

still features on the King's imposing Raven Crown. However, it was some time before the monarchy could be established. Back then, Bhutan was divided into three large provinces; Paro, Trongsa and Dagana, which were administered by Provincial Governors (*Penlop*), who followed on from the first *Desi* Umzey Tenzin Drugyel (1591 – 1655). The reorganisation of the administration involved the appointment of additional district administrators to sub-districts in the individual provinces; they were based in the local *dzong* and called *Dzongpon* ('Lords/Masters of the *dzong*'). Nowadays they are referred to as *Dzongdag*. After the Shabdrung's death, these regional rulers became increasingly powerful. Internal disputes and tacit power struggles between the *Druk Desi*, the *Penlop* and the *Dzongpon* served to rend the country's stability.<sup>16</sup> The central government was weakened and soon lost control of the country; furthermore, Bhutan came into conflict with British India.

Jigme Namgyel emerged as the most powerful figure in Bhutan at that time, and he was made *Penlop*<sup>17</sup> of Trongsa in 1853.<sup>18</sup> It was said that the protective deity Mahakala appeared to him, too, in the form of a raven, urging him to re-establish Bhutan's former unity.<sup>19</sup> Jigme Namgyel was given the honorific title of 'Black Regent' on account of his dark countenance, and because he always wore black robes and rode a black horse.<sup>20</sup> In 1870, he was enthroned as the 50<sup>th</sup> *Desi*. Later on, even after he had delegated the position of *Desi* to his half-brother, he continued to hold the reins of power. Jigme Namgyel appointed his son Ugyen Wangchuck to the office of *Dzongpon* of Paro at the age of 17. Three years after his father's death, the latter became *Penlop* of Trongsa Province and thus the ruler of Bhutan.<sup>21</sup>

Monastic fortresses (*dzong*) constitute the seats of secular and religious power in the district; Rinpung *dzong* in Paro (left) and Trongsa *dzong* (right).



The first Raven Crown, which belonged to Jigme Namgyel, the Trongsa *Penlop*, the 50<sup>th</sup> *Druk Desi*, and the father of the first king, Ugyen Wangchuck, dates back to the Tibetan Lama Changchub Tsöndrü (1817–56). The Lama designed this crown in the early 1840s to be Jigme Namgyel's personal symbol, one that endowed him with the combined strength and protection of two deities, namely Mahakala, who gave the Raven Crown its name and whose head rises above the crown, and the warrior god Gönpö Changdü, represented by the three eyes on the blue fabric. The first time the Raven Crown was displayed, it was regarded as a kind of magic war helmet rather than a royal symbol. Furthermore, the classical helmet shape of the crown refers back to Gönpö Changdü, also known as the 'Northern Demon', who was one of the warlike *dralha* deities. Gönpö Changdü was also Namgyel's birth deity (*kye lha*), his personal protective god who had accompanied him since his birth. Jigme Namgyel's Raven Crown is made of Chinese and English silk brocade and silk damask, silk satin, cotton, silk embroidery, silver-plated brass fittings and gilt copper foil (The Textile Museum, Bhutan, Photo by Erich Lessing).





The Raven Crown, as worn by the kings of Bhutan, is based on Jigme Namgyel's original crown, but the intention seems to have changed. Whereas the prototype was still viewed as a symbol of protection and victory in wartime, the subsequent model features brilliant kingship insignia. Bhutan's monarchy is still protected by the Raven-Headed Mahakala, symbolised by the raven's-head crest. The three eyes on the front represents the warrior god Gönpo Changdü who protects Their Majesties throughout their lives. The Raven Crown is made of cloth, adorned with embroidery and appliqué work. The raven head has a crescent moon, a sun disc, and a small turquoise on the top, and tassels of red threads flowing from its base. The upturned circular rim features embroidered skeletal heads. These tantric symbols were later replaced by the mythical bird garuda which is considered a positive force and a symbol of subjugation. The raven crown with the garuda was worn by the fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck. On the crown of the fifth king Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, however, the tantric skeletal heads appear once again (The Tower of Trongsa Museum, Bhutan, Photo by Stefan Zeisler).









On the 17<sup>th</sup> December 1907, Ugyen Wangchuck (1862 – 1926) was finally installed as the first hereditary king of Bhutan, and invested with the title *Druk Gyalpo* ('Dragon King'). Since that time, Bhutan has been ruled by the Wangchuck dynasty. Ugyen Wangchuck's son and successor Jigme Wangchuck (1905 – 1952) reigned as Bhutan's second king until his death in 1952. The reigns of these first two kings were marked by political stability, which helped consolidate the kingdom. Bhutan was never colonised and was the only one of the seven Himalayan kingdoms that succeeded in maintaining its independence with regard to the neighbouring powers, China and India.<sup>22</sup> It was only during the reign of the third king Jigme Dorje Wangchuck (1924 – 1972), who reigned from 1952 to 1972 and is acclaimed as the 'Father of modern Bhutan', that the kingdom began to open up after its long, deliberate isolation, and to make cautious approaches to the West. His son, the fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck, ascended the throne in 1972 at the age of 17. He is known all round the world for having instigated the widely-applied concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH).<sup>23</sup> *A few years ago, in 1976, a small group of journalists visited Bhutan. They had an audience with the fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. One of the journalists asked him this question, "What is the annual Gross Domestic Production of Bhutan?" Of course, the journalist knew the answer precisely. At fifty US dollars it was the world's lowest rate. [...] The King replied spontaneously, saying: [...] "I am not very interested in our GDP. In my opinion, our Gross National Happiness rate is more important". So that's how a term was created that has gained world-wide recognition.*<sup>24</sup> Since that time, it has constituted an alternative to GDP and is used as

the strategic basis of Bhutan's development policy. Whereas conventional development models concentrate on economic growth, the concept of Gross National Happiness starts from the premise that happiness requires not merely material prosperity, but also an intact environment, and a social, cultural and spiritual context. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck laid down the principles for his country's social and economic development, albeit without neglecting the traditions and cultural heritage of Bhutan, or impairing the quality of his people's lives and their largely intact environment. Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness claims that happiness is the central value of its political process and defines it in terms of four columns: sustainable socio-economic development, conservation of the natural environment, preservation and promotion of cultural values, and good governance – thereby upholding the main principles of Buddhist ethics – harmony and compassion. Before King Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated in favour of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who was enthroned on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2008, he surprised his people by introducing democracy to Bhutan; the hereditary monarchy thereby became a democratic and constitutional monarchy. On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2008 the first free elections were held in all 20 administrative districts and were won by two parties; the *Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party*, *Druk Phuensum Tshogpa* (DPT), with 45 representatives in the Lower House, and the *People's Democratic Party* (PDP), which has two representatives in the Lower House. Lyonchhen Jigmi Yoeser Thinley was appointed Prime Minister by the majority party *Druk Phuensum Tshogpa*. The principle of Gross National Happiness was enshrined in Bhutan's first constitution, which was

*above left:* In 2004, the crown prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was installed as the *Penlop* of Trongsa (Photo by Christine Leuthner).

*above centre:* The fifth king Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck wearing the Raven Crown (Karin Altmann Private Collection, copies of this photo were distributed in Bhutan during the coronation in 2008).

*above right:* In 2011, the King's marriage to a commoner called Jetsun Pema was celebrated (Karin Altmann Private Collection, copies of this photo were distributed in Bhutan on this occasion).

*opposite:* The first four kings on hand-coloured monochrome photos: Ugyen Wangchuck (top left), Jigme Wangchuck (top right), Jigme Dorje Wangchuck (lower left), and Jigme Singye Wangchuck (lower right) (KHM-Museumsverband).





above and opposite:  
Bhutanese citizens  
are required to wear  
the national dress in  
public places and at  
official occasions;  
apparel that goes back  
to the Buddhist cleric  
and national unifier  
Shabdrung Ngawang  
Namgyel.

signed in 2008 by the fifth king Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck; it continues to underpin state policy in Bhutan. Of the offices that the Shabdrung had introduced only one remained – the *Je Khenpo*, who still represents the highest authority in the religious sphere. The current *Je Khenpo*, Trulku Jigme Choeda, was born in 1955 and is the seventieth postholder in his lineage. On 30<sup>th</sup> July 2013, Tshering Tobgay was nominated as the Prime Minister by the *People's Democratic Party* (PDP).

### DRIGLAM NAMZHAG – THE ESSENCE OF BHUTANESE IDENTITY

Karma Ura, one of the country's leading intellectuals, explains that the concept of the three foundations (*tsawa sum*) – Nation, People and King – is one of the key notions underpinning national sentiment in modern Bhutan. They are aligned with the holy trinity of Buddhism – *Buddha*, the ideal of enlightenment, *dharma*, his teachings and *sangha*, the spiritual community of his followers.<sup>25</sup> The religious concepts and traditional values of

Buddhism constitute the basis for the country's spiritual and political consolidation and thus form a vital part of Bhutan's cultural identity. Some of these values and norms have been incorporated into a system which goes back to Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel and regulates all the secular and religious aspects of their culture. As mentioned above, this religious officeholder has long been viewed both as the founder of the state and as the instigator of Bhutan's cultural identity. In 1637, the Shabdrung introduced the first rules of social conduct, which go back to the teachings of Buddha, especially to the *vinaya*, which are instructions about Buddhist monastic discipline.<sup>26</sup> The rules in this text provide a framework for monastic communities; they determine the monks' and nuns' daily schedule, and the forms of address to be employed. These regulations are designed to ensure a harmonious co-existence, both inside a monastery, and between monastic and lay communities. These principles were called *driglam namzhag* and were practised by the monastic and elite classes; later on, they were disseminated by the *Desi* and their aristocratic followers. Thus, the *driglam namzhag* is a Code of Etiquette based on





a Buddhist codex that stipulates the correct forms of physical, verbal and spiritual conduct. The term *driglam namzhag* is formed by combining the word *drig* ('harmonious'), *lam* ('way', 'presentation', or 'behaviour'), *nam* ('in order') and *zhag* ('to keep', or 'to preserve'),<sup>27</sup> and so it can be understood as 'the way (*lam*) of conscious (*namzha*[g]) harmony (*drig*).'<sup>28</sup> *Driglam namzhag* is viewed by Karma Ura as, 'the observation of a distinctive [Bhutanese] culture.'<sup>29</sup> In the mid-1980s, this unique culture and value system underwent a revival. The fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck appointed a *Special Commission for Cultural Affairs* (SCCA) in 1985 and gave it the task of preserving the country's cultural identity. The aim of this decree was to prevent specific features of Bhutanese culture from disappearing, by ensuring they were re-rooted among the population, and to emphasise national identity. While this cultural code still influences the way Bhutanese people behave, and regulates their social events, it also affects every aspect of public life, including what people wear. Even in his day, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel seems to have had a high regard for clothing and outward appearance. The Bhutanese scholar *Dasho Rigzin*

Dorji, now deceased, wrote that, 'Ever mindful of the small size of Druk Yul and the hostile and hegemonic attitude of the rulers of Tibet, the Shabdrung found it necessary to promote a distinct cultural identity for Bhutan although she shared with Tibet the common heritage of Mahayana Buddhism. He, therefore, developed distinct Bhutanese characteristics in religious ceremonies and rituals as well as in the dress and costumes of the people.'<sup>30</sup> The 1963 National Assembly was the first occasion when these regulations about wearing national costume at official occasions were made statutory,<sup>31</sup> and in 1989 the first *driglam namzhag* decree made its appearance, along with a dress code that obliged all Bhutanese citizens to wear their national dress in public places, both within and in close proximity to monastic fortresses (*dzong*), monasteries (*gompa*) and temples (*lhakhang*), and in government buildings, including when on official business, in schools and institutions, and at official occasions and assemblies. However, residents of Bhutan who are not citizens are not obliged to wear the national costume. People in religious life are also exempt because they have their own dress code. In the National Library in Thimphu,









for instance, the following regulation can be found in the *vinaya* sections of the *kanjur*,<sup>32</sup> the 108-volume set of canonical texts that contains the Buddha's direct teachings: *'The lower gown of the monks should be worn well wrapped around the body. The gown should be worn neither too high nor too low. It should not be worn like an elephant's trunk or like palm leaves; it should not be folded or worn crumpled like hay. It should not even be worn spread out like a snake's hood.'*<sup>33</sup> Further information about the dress code of the *Drukpa Kagyu* School in Bhutan will be provided in the section on *Robes of Monks and Nuns* in the chapter on *The Production of Textiles*.

## GHO AND KIRA – THE NATIONAL DRESS OF BHUTAN

The invention of the Bhutanese men's garment (*gho*) is attributed to Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel himself. To recall *Dasho Rigzin Dorji's* explanation, the Shabdrung seems to have developed the *gho* as a mark of Bhutanese identity, to distinguish Bhutan from Tibet. For this purpose, he altered the Tibetan costume for men (*chuba*) and adapted it to the occasionally warmer and damper climate of Bhutan.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the Bhutanese *gho* is worn drawn up to the knees whereas the Tibetan *chuba* is worn long. In the Shabdrung's time, the *gho* was mandatory only for members of the elite, but over time, it was gradually adopted by the whole male population, and since 1989 the *gho*

has been the national dress for Bhutanese men. Michael Aris and Françoise Pommaret think that the original Bhutanese clothing consisted of a *pakhi*, a wraparound garment that is still worn, very occasionally, in Southern Bhutan.<sup>35</sup> This garment consists of a square length of cloth that is knotted at the neck, falls in two folds down the back, billows over a belt like a blouse and is worn short for the men; and knotted at the shoulders, fastened with a belt and worn long for the women.<sup>36</sup> According to Françoise Pommaret, this dress was once woven of nettle fibre and nowadays made of machine-woven Indian cotton.<sup>37</sup> The Bhutanese costume for women (*kira*) was also established as their national dress in 1989. Although parallel forms of their weaving and design techniques can be found among South East Asian textiles,<sup>38</sup> there are no records of how the Bhutanese dress for women developed, and therefore, its origins are uncertain. However, it is generally thought that the *kira* was already being worn long before the Shabdrung's time and that, prior to the *kira*, Bhutanese women traditionally wore a tunic-style garment made of nettle, cotton or wool fibres; the material and type of production determine whether it is a *kushung* or a *shingkha*. This archaic form of clothing will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on *Cham Lineages and Dance Costumes of Bhutan*. As mentioned above, the decision to specify the *gho* and *kira* as the national dress was intended to strengthen Bhutanese national identity and to prevent its culture from disappearing. The main reason for this was the

above: The national dress for men (*gho*) consists of a long robe, which overlaps in front and is folded into two wide pleats at the back and held in place with a belt (*kera*) so that the hem hangs to the knees.

opposite: The man's robe (*gho*) and the woman's wrapped dress (*kira*) are the national dress of the *Drukpa*, the largest ethnic group in Bhutan. Bhutanese monks (*on the left*) have their own dress code; their garments are mostly red and maroon, colours associated with the clergy.





Men combine their *gho* with knee stockings (*omso*) and every conceivable kind of footgear.

opening-up of Bhutan, which had introduced foreign clothes and had a profound impact on the prevalence of national dress among the population. Before *driglam namzhag* became law in 1989, many Bhutanese people could be seen wearing western clothes, mainly in the towns, and especially in Thimphu. Western fashions became status symbols that were displayed, for instance, by wearing trainers, which were adopted by court ladies and later by many other Bhutanese women, and by the fashion for jeans, which developed in Bhutan in the 1990s. The Royal Government of Bhutan tried to put a stop to this trend by establishing the traditional costume of the *Drupka*, the largest ethnic group in Bhutan, as its national dress, and by issuing a decree to that effect. In spite of all this, young Bhutanese in the town are generally dressed in western styles.

### GHO – THE NATIONAL DRESS FOR MEN

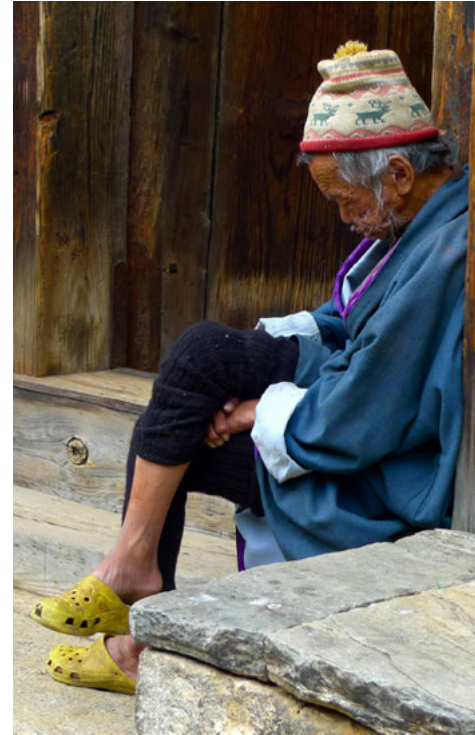
The term *gho* is used for the national dress for men; it consists of three to four lengths of cloth that are sewn together to form a floor-length kimono-style robe with very long sleeves. This robe overlaps in front and is folded into two wide pleats at the back and held in place with a belt (*kera*); it is then drawn up to achieve the desired length. When wearing a

*gho*, the lengths of cloth (*bjang*) must be vertical, and are generally woven in cotton or silk. *Gho* are made in a variety of patterns, which are discussed at length in the chapter on *The Production of Textiles*. The *gho* is lined with an 8 cm-wide band of contrasting silk or cotton fabric at the inside collar, cuffs and hem. A *gho* can also be fully lined, in which case the lining (*nashab*) is generally made of a lightweight cotton fabric. But, linings are not obligatory, and men often avoid them, particularly in the warmer regions of Bhutan. Bhutanese men wear a shirt (*tego*) beneath their *gho*, along with knee stockings (*omso*) and possibly trousers and long underwear during the cold season.

### GO – MEN'S SHIRT

Shirts for men (*tego*) consist of a loose, basic shirt with a collar and long sleeves that are turned back into long cuffs, like the sleeves of a *gho*. About 15 cm of the turned-back cuffs should be visible, along with a narrower strip of collar. The shirt cannot be closed at the front – it is simply overlaid. *Tego* for men are mainly made of cotton, sometimes silk, and are white or light blue. Nowadays, people tend to wear a cotton vest or T-shirt under their *tego*. Sometimes, *gho* are lined with light blue cotton cloth that can be seen at the collar





and cuffs; thus a *gho* can be worn without a shirt underneath it. However, the collar and cuffs soon become grubby, with the result that the entire *gho* has to be laundered. Therefore, some city people tend to opt for a simpler solution and wear white or blue cuffs and detachable collars; they simulate traditional shirts but are easy to change and wash. In everyday life, a fashionable T-shirt often replaces the shirt, and nowadays, western underwear has even replaced the cotton shorts that used to be worn under a *gho*. During the cold season, Bhutanese men wear trousers beneath their *gho*; here too, every possible kind of modern trousers has now replaced the traditional trousers (*domtha*) that are made of cotton or wild silk.<sup>39</sup>

### OMSO AND TSHOGLHAM – KNEE STOCKINGS AND TRADITIONAL MEN'S BOOTS

In fact, trousers are only worn beneath a *gho* during the cold season. Generally speaking, men wear their *gho* with knee stockings (*omso*), which are an important accessory for Bhutanese men and are often given as presents. The first knee stockings were introduced, along with European shoes, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. To start with, these knee stockings were imported from England and then, in the 1980s, they were brought from the USA.<sup>40</sup> They were all argyles, which feature checks and crossed stripes in contrasting colours. These traditional tartan knee stockings were originally

the preserve of the nobility but in the 1970s they became very fashionable in the towns; nowadays, though, they are definitely considered out-of-date by fashion-conscious Bhutanese. In fact, black and single-colour knee socks in dark hues are the fashion now – any patterns should be very small and discreet. However, the market currently offers knee socks in every possible format; most of them are imported from China and India. Nowadays, knee stockings are combined with every conceivable kind of footgear. Previously, Bhutanese boots (*lham*) made of leather and fabric were generally worn; Myers reports that they were padded with long aromatic pine needles for warmth and comfort.<sup>41</sup> Leather sandals (*thebthem*) were also worn but nowadays, modern leather shoes, trainers, gumboots and plastic sandals have definitely replaced them. Of course, the choice of shoe depends on the topographical conditions and the climate. In the warmer regions, men prefer not to wear knee stockings, and indeed some still go about barefoot, the way they used to. Walking without shoes or socks has been the custom for a long time and has nothing to do with poverty. For instance, the first king Ugyen Wangchuck can be seen barefoot in some photographs taken by John Claude White. The embroidered and appliquéd boots (*tshoghlham*) made of leather, silk damask and silk brocade are particularly interesting because the colour denotes the rank of each individual wearer. In the old days, *tshoghlham* were only worn by nobles on formal occasions. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when high-ranking per-

Today cheap plastic sandals from China have now become so widespread that they crop up in even the most remote regions.





above left: Walking barefoot has been the custom for a long time and some Bhutanese still prefer it.

above centre: The first king Ugyen Wangchuck, in this famous and much publicised photograph taken by John Claude White in 1905, is shown barefoot, for yet another reason: 'Ugyen Wangchuck wearing the Raven Crown and the insignia of the KCIE at Punakha, 1905. He is barefoot not only because this was his habit and preference but more particularly because the investiture ceremony in the main temple of the dzong required this gesture of humility in the presence of the ecclesiastical dignitaries who were presiding.' (Aris 1994, p.75) (Photo by John Claude White, The Kurt and Pamela Meyer Collection, Los Angeles, California).

above right, and left: Embroidered and appliquéd boots (tshogllham) made of leather, silk damask and silk brocade are still worn at official events.





sons such as ministers (*lyonpo* or *lyonchhen*)<sup>42</sup> and *Dasho*, royal government officials who have been awarded the non-inheritable title of *Dasho* by the King for their services, were the only people who still wore these valuable boots, they had almost been forgotten. However, the Bhutanese government was able to prevent the exponents of this craft from dying out, and in 2002 the *Royal Civil Service Commission* (RCSC) called on all higher officials to wear Bhutanese boots as part of their official functions. As a result of this, richly decorated *tshogllham* can once again be seen at official events such as the Bhutanese National Day, or the Birthday of the King, and at other important ceremonies. Boots for lower-ranking officials and ordinary citizens are called *changkha tshogllham* and there is no obligation to wear them. In spite of the relatively high price of up to 5,000 Ngultrum (about 80 Euro) that a pair of richly embroidered boots costs,<sup>43</sup> *tshogllham* are steadily gaining in popularity with the Bhutanese population, and even among tourists. This is helped by the fact that the soles have undergone a change over the last few years. The thin leather soles have now been replaced with thick rubber soles with low heels; this may not be an improvement in aesthetic terms but they are much more comfortable to wear.

## KERA – MEN'S BELTS

Bhutanese belts for men (*kera*), are long densely woven belts with twisted fringes at both ends; they are simply used for binding the *gho* at the waist

and end up hidden between the garment and its overlap. *Kera* are about 180 cm long and 5 cm wide; the materials used are cotton and wool. The pattern usually consists of narrow vertical warp stripes in various colours. Unlike the richly decorated belts for women, these men's belts are very plain. This is because the belt is almost completely hidden by the overlapping *gho*, unlike the women's national dress. Nevertheless no other textile of this type is so strongly associated with as many secret beliefs as these Bhutanese belts for men, which are invested with countless legends and mystical notions. Further information about these beliefs and meanings is provided in the chapter on *Textiles and Mysticism*.

## JEWELRY AND ACCESSORIES FOR MEN

When a man holds a senior rank in the government service, he wears a long sword with gold and silver decorations (*pata/patang*). It is fixed to a sword belt made of woollen or leather panels, which may be partially decorated with carved silver plates. Traditional sword belts are equipped with two rings, one for the sword and one for a decorative woven sword band (*losil*) that features auspicious symbols such as the tree of life (*shinglo*). Swords are worn on the right hip, and the sword band on the left. According to Myers, there are several styles of swords, whose names refer to their place of origin.<sup>44</sup> In rural areas, Bhutanese men also carry a knife. This may be a small dagger (*dozum*) or a round 40 cm-long kni-

Bhutanese men's belts (*kera*) are long densely woven belts with twisted fringes at both ends and vertical warp stripes in various colours.





Short straight knives are traditionally carried by Bhutanese men but most of them have simple wooden handles and scabbards (*left and object below*); the knife is tucked under the belt within the large pocket made by the fold of the robe (*right*) (Photo by Christine Leuthner).

*Objects clockwise from top right:* This intricate silver amulet container (*gau*) is a personal charm box, containing prayers, small statues or relics. It is carried around the neck when travelling, and used as a portable altar or as a shrine on an altar for a precious relic. The reliquary is often ornamented as here with the eight auspicious symbols; this gold-plated silver dagger with intricate metal work is probably of royal provenance; length: 39.5 cm (National Museum, Paro, Bhutan, Photo by Erich Lessing); previously worn as a prestigious symbol of the nobility, today only senior officers in the government service are allowed to carry a sword. These swords with sheaths and textile covers, however, come from a protective deity's chapel (*goenkhang*) and belong to the local deity's armoury; length: 93 cm (Photo by Erich Lessing).





fe (*patang*) fitted with a wooden grip and sheath. The knife is included for practical reasons because it is a useful adjunct to village life; for cutting a path through the undergrowth, for slicing betel nuts, for peeling vegetables, for harvesting and chopping up bamboos – its uses are many and various.

Bhutanese men sometimes also wear jewelry. For instance, the yak herdsman of Merak Sakteng in the East wear earrings made of turquoise (*yue*). Large silver or gold rings with turquoise, coral (*bjuru*) and beads of black agate (*dzi/zi*) are more commonly worn, though nowadays there is a growing trend to replace them with smaller and more modern silver and gold rings. One accessory that is scarcely ever worn these days is a small charm box called a *gau*. This is a little amulet container that is strung from a cord and worn around the neck, at chest level. They were used as travelling altars and would be worn as protective talismans, during long journeys or when fighting in a war, for instance. Inside was a miniature of a protective deity, a relic of a holy person, prayer scripts, sacred diagrams or other objects that had been blessed to protect the wearer from danger – for instance, evil-intentioned demons at the passes and rivers, and in the mountains.

## PUTTING ON AND WEARING A GHO

Putting on a *gho* takes a bit of practice. You start by slipping on the man's shirt (*tego*), then you slide your arms into the sleeves of the voluminous *gho* and let it hang loosely to the ground. At this point, you can already see if your *gho* is the right size, because the lower edge of the *gho* should ideally reach your ankles. The shirt collar is turned up, although only a narrow strip will be visible once it is covered by the *gho*. The two front panels of the *gho* are made to overlap, the right half beneath the

left half. This is done by aligning the upper part of the right panel with the seam on the left side, and then covering it with the left front panel, and aligning it with the right seam. The front left panel is fixed to the right side by means of two attached narrow strips (*jogthag/drothag*). After briefly checking that the seams on both sides are aligned, the *gho* is drawn up to the knees. This forms a large sack-like pouch over the stomach. To finish, the two parts below the waist are pulled backwards to form two deep folds. These folds reveal whether a man is correctly dressed or not. Indeed, this is probably the most challenging aspect of putting on a *gho*, because the folds at the back need to be the same size and symmetrical. After checking the folds and smoothing the fabric down, the *gho* is bound by wrapping a woven belt (*kera*) tightly around the waist. The pouch that was formed at the front is smoothed flat. Finally, the shirt sleeves are cuffed over the *gho* sleeves twice. The cuffs (*lagyen*) must not be too narrow, and, above all, they have to be the same size, and, like the collar, clean. According to the *driglam namzhag*, the depth of the cuffs depends on the rank of the wearer; high-ranking government officials should have deeper ones. The same rule applies to the length of the *gho*. The seams of a *gho* should run parallel, and reveal or cover the knees, depending on the wearer's social standing. Consequently, ordinary citizens raise their hems above the knees to indicate their lower status, but high-ranking officials may lower their hems halfway over the knees, and the King may cover his knees entirely. These rules are discussed in greater detail in the section on *Bhutanese Etiquette and Dress Code – the Rules of driglam namzhag*.

While men have the disadvantage of wearing a knee-length costume in the winter – the *kira* is much warmer, being full-length and possibly lined – it is a great advantage during the hot sea-

How to put on a *gho* (Drawing by Karin Altmann after Bartholomew 1985).





top row, left: The front pouch of the *gho* has room for all sorts of things;  
top row, right, and middle row, left: The back part of a *gho* displays two deep, symmetrical folds;  
middle row, right: Bhutanese men can easily slip off their *gho* sleeves and tie them comfortably around their waist;  
bottom row: The sleeves of a man's shirt (*togo*) are cuffed over the *gho* sleeves twice. The cuffs must not be too narrow and, above all, they have to be the same size, and clean.







son: in summertime, men – when the occasion allows – can easily slip off their *gho* sleeves and tie them comfortably around their waist. The front pouch of the *gho* constitutes a special feature. It is considerably larger than the pouch that is formed on a *kira*, and has room for all sorts of things. Traditionally, it was used to hold wooden drinking cups for tea or home-brewed alcohol (*ara*), a couple of lumps of dried cheese (*chugo*) to chew on the way, eating implements and silver boxes containing the ingredients for chewing betel (*doma*). Nowadays, it is more likely to hold wallets, handkerchiefs, sunglasses, car keys, papers or files, all of which are stored in this extensive pouch – occasionally, it will even hold a baby.

### KIRA – WOMEN'S NATIONAL DRESS

The Bhutanese national dress for women is called *kira*; it consists of a large square cloth that is wrapped tightly around the body, fixed at the shoulders with two brooches (*koma*) and held in place at the waist with a belt (*kera*). Under this is worn a long-sleeved blouse (*wonju*), with a short, long-sleeved jacket (*tego*) on top. A *kira* consists of three panels of cloth (*bjang*), which – unlike the *gho* – are aligned horizontally and sewn together lengthwise. The exception to this is the style of *kira* that is made of woollen cloth, in which case it is aligned vertically and consists of at least six lengths. Regardless of the material that it is made

from, a *kira* will measure between 150 cm and 170 cm in width and between 215 cm and 270 cm in length. The exact measurements depend on the size of the wearer. The narrow ends of the *kira* have fringes made from the warp threads. Normally, these threads are cut off at lengths of between 1.5 cm and 3 cm, but sometimes they are not cut off at all, to allow the *kira* to be sold on as 'new'. The ends of a woollen *kira* are edged with an 8 cm-wide strip of cotton or silk material. If a *kira* is too short, it can be extended by adding threads or sewing on ties; these extensions are not visible beneath the jacket.

### WONJU AND TEGO – BLOUSE AND JACKET

Under their *kira*, Bhutanese women wear a long, loose blouse with wide sleeves (*wonju*) in Tibetan style. It is cut very plainly and fitted with a collar that is turned over twice. It does not fasten at the front but many women use a safety pin to hold it together. *Wonju* are made of silk, synthetic fibres (mostly polyester) and light cotton; the fabrics are mainly imported from China and India. Another short jacket (*tego*) is worn on top of the *kira*; it has long, wide sleeves, cut in a very similar style to the *wonju*. It can be worn open or can be closed with a brooch. The long sleeves of the blouse are folded back over the sleeves of the jacket into about 10 cm deep cuffs, to just above the wrist, ensuring

Bhutanese girls and women wearing their national costume (*kira*).





Bhutanese women wear a long-sleeved blouse (*wonju*) under their *kira*; a short, long-sleeved jacket (*tego*) is worn on top.

that both the inner side of the contrasting blouse sleeve and the woman's jewelry – nowadays, mainly her watch – are clearly visible. The jackets are also mostly made of imported silk, polyester or cotton. Occasionally, *tego* will be made of wild silk; they are then worn on special occasions by better-off women, the same applies to jackets that are made of richly-decorated brocade cloth. Silk brocade from Hong Kong is particularly popular. For practical reasons, Bhutanese women generally prefer their everyday jackets to be made of solid fabrics in dark colours, such as blue, green, brown or dark red. According to Myers, elite women at the start of the 1990s favoured *tego* made of pastel-coloured Thai silk for everyday wear.<sup>45</sup> The blouses and jackets are always in matching colours, with a preference for strongly contrasting colours over more harmonious hues. Furthermore, colour combinations are dependent on changing fashions and the age of the particular wearer.<sup>46</sup> Previously,

Bhutanese women used to wear sleeveless vests (*gotsum*) or petticoats made of Indian cotton as underwear. However, over time these items have been replaced by western underwear.

### LHAM – TRADITIONAL WOMEN'S BOOTS

These items used to be finely worked leather-soled boots (*lham*) with woollen shafts that were bound beneath the knee with woven shoe bands (*lhamju*); this constituted the usual footwear for elite women in Bhutan. According to Myers, these decorated boots were modelled on Tibetan examples.<sup>47</sup> Simpler but very similar boots were also known in Bhutan, but they were only worn in the colder regions; in the warmer regions, Bhutanese women went barefoot, just like the men. For longer expeditions on foot, Myers tells us that they bound sturdy pieces of leather (*thebthem*) to the





soles of their feet.<sup>48</sup> Nowadays, traditional women's boots are seldom seen, and only a few elderly women in rural parts of Bhutan still go barefoot. That's because cheap rubber sandals from China have now become so widespread that they crop up in even the most remote regions. Gumboots and trainers are gaining in popularity, too. As mentioned above, the latter were already being worn by court ladies in the 1930s, and Bhutanese women in the cities prefer high-heeled western shoes.

### KERA – WOMEN'S BELTS

Bhutanese belts for women (*kera*) are long, densely woven belts with long twisted fringes at both ends; they are tucked between the dress and the belt to hold the *kira* firmly at the waist. *Kera* are always between 180 cm and 240 cm long, but their widths differ greatly – showing how fashion has

changed over time. Old models still had widths of between 30 cm and 45 cm, but modern belts are only between 5 cm and 8 cm wide. The old broad belts were folded over lengthwise twice or three times, and then wound several times around the waist. As we can see from old photos, this was the style until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when solid figures and hips were considered elegant, and it was quite normal for Bhutanese women to sew two belts together, to emphasise their stomachs. Often, two belts would be woven as a single piece with intermittent patterning in the centre. The woven fabric was then cut in half along the middle weft, which is why these older examples have fringes at one end only. This patterned fringed end was visible when worn. Occasionally, two differently coloured belts would be sewn together to provide alternate colours. The matching jacket (*tego*) was worn very short, to direct attention to a jutting stomach. These days, however, traditional broad

Traditional women's boots (top left) give way to high-heeled shoes (lower left/Photo by Bhutan Street Fashion).

Plastic sandals (right) have definitely replaced traditional women's footwear and are popular with all age groups.





from left to right: This *kera* from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is 45 cm wide and 200 cm long (without fringes) and shows naturally dyed wild silk supplementary-weft patterning on an unbleached cotton ground; the next *kera* is 22 cm wide and 210 cm long (without fringes) and made of pure silk; the contemporary *kera* is 7 cm wide and 190 cm long (without fringes) and features different synthetic-dyed silk patterning on cotton ground at both fringed ends, so that they are reversible (Karin Altmann Private Collection); far right, from top to bottom: Bhutanese women's belts (*kera*) through the ages.

*kera* of this kind are mainly worn by elderly women. Young Bhutanese women prefer narrower Bhutanese belts that are 5 cm to 8 cm wide, to show off their slim waists. They are made as a single piece and have a fringe at either end which is shorter than the fringe on the older *kera*. In addition to the traditional very wide belts and the modern, slight variants, *kera* were also woven in widths of around 12 cm to 22 cm. These versions are not bound as tightly, but are still considered old-fashioned by young women. As a weaver in Eastern Bhutan commented pointedly, they are only popular with women who want to hide their fat bellies. According to a Bhutanese woman from Bumthang, though, these wide *kera* are used for supporting the spine and making it easier to carry heavy burdens. The designs on the early *kera* consist mainly of red and blue or black patterns on an unbleached white ground. Myers thinks that this style of *kera* came from Eastern Bhutan, because the patterns on these belts are all described in *Tshangla*, the language

of Eastern Bhutan: 'The textiles show single-color, geometric pattern bands (*Tshangla*: *thangshing*), executed in red alternating with blue or black on a white ground. Every fourth pattern band combines two colors and features repeating diamonds (*thok*). In some belts, floral pattern bands (*komtsham*) also occur. Between the bands of patterning are narrow weft-wise stripes (*tsimpiring*), formed by supplementary weft floats whose intervals (*jhipi*) create almost identical patterns on both sides of the fabric.'<sup>49</sup> At the same time, there are older *kera* that feature colourful patterns on a yellow or orange ground (*lungsem kera*). Modern belts have decorative patterns woven in silk, cotton, acrylic, and even metallic threads on a cotton ground, which may be distributed all over the belt, or concentrated at the ends. The cotton ground sometimes features vertical stripes that appear horizontal when worn. Every now and again, different patterns will be woven at the ends, so that the wearer – to some extent as in earlier times – can display each pattern alternately.



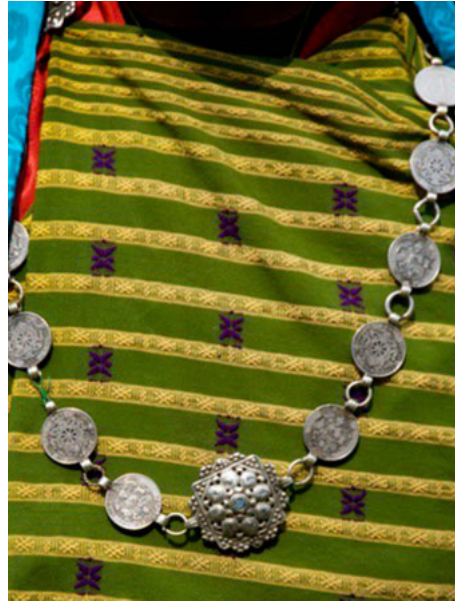


## KOMA AND THINKHAB – BROOCHES AND PINS

Every *kira* needs these accessories; two brooches (*koma*) to clasp the edges of the *kira* at the shoulders. In the old days, needle-like pins (*thinkhab*) were used to hold garments in place. The simplest versions were plain bamboo slivers, and the most precious ones were made of gold and silver. Metal *thinkhab* were about 10 cm to 30 cm long and were also used as weapons for women to defend themselves with when attacked. Generally, metal *thinkhab* were linked by a chain (*jabtha*) that was fitted to large rings at the ends of the pins. This chain would hang over the woman's back, to offset the heavy weight of the pins. The size of the pins varied depending on how many layers of fabric they had to pierce, because it was very usual, earlier on, for Bhutanese ladies to wear several

superimposed *kira*. Consequently, their pins had to be long and strong enough to hold several layers of cloth together. During the 1930s, smaller pins made an appearance, paired with a brooch, to clasp the fabric; these designs were called *khah thinkhab*.<sup>50</sup> Later on, presumably during the 1940s, the pins were replaced by brooches (*koma*). They are made of silver and gold, using pure metals, and alloys. Older models are rather larger, with an average diameter of 8 cm. Like the pins, they are joined by a chain (*dongtha*), which can be very artistic and involve a row of little diamond sceptres (*dorje*) or eternal knots (*peyab*). Consequently, these chains are worn in front, on the woman's chest, so they can be seen. There are also some chains that are made of old silver coins, which Myers claims are mainly derived from China and the former British India.<sup>51</sup> Silver coin jewelry is still very popular, and many Bhutanese women

Bhutanese women fasten their wrapped dress (*kira*) with dress fasteners at the front of each shoulder; *lower right*: In the old days, needle-like pins (*thinkhab*) were used to hold garments in place (Photo by Erich Lessing); *top right and lower left*: *thinkhab* were often attached to a chain (*jabtha*) (Photos by Erich Lessing); *top left*: in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the pins were replaced by round brooches (*koma*) (Karin Altmann Private Collection).



Occasionally round brooches (*koma*) are still combined with ornamental necklaces worn on the chest. A woman from Radi in Eastern Bhutan (*left*) wears a necklace with eternal knots – one of the eight auspicious Buddhist symbols – and a traditional style of earrings; sometimes these necklaces are made of old silver coins (*centre*), originally from China and the former British India (Photo by Dorji Wangchuk); a woman from Laya in Northwestern Bhutan (*right*) adorns herself with necklaces made of turquoises, corals, dzi beads and other pendants; Layap women also wear conical bamboo hats (*opposite right*); sickle-shaped knives are kept under the belt (*kera*) and are mainly used at harvest time (*opposite left*).

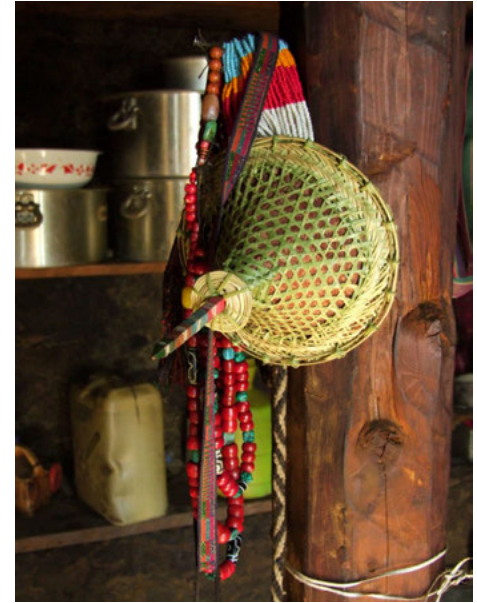
are delighted to receive foreign silver coins, which they then have made into chains, brooches and other kinds of jewelry. Traditionally, round *koma* are decorated with chased flower decorations and auspicious symbols, often with a small round piece of turquoise embedded in the centre. There are also other designs for brooches, for instance, in the shape of a small thunderbolt (*dorje*). The more recent *koma* are very light and, since the 1990s, they have also been made in a strap-like style. This innovation has led to a new trend for wearing the *kira* a bit lower down.

## JEWELRY AND ACCESSORIES FOR WOMEN

In Bhutan, items of jewelry – like textiles – are family heirlooms that are passed down to the daughters, who treasure their inheritance and pass it on to the next generation. Many pieces of jewelry form an essential part of the textiles that comprise a woman's outfit, since her brooches, pins and chains perform an essential function by holding the fabric together and making it wearable. Furthermore, most Bhutanese women also wear earrings (*sinchu*), which are made of silver and gold, and shaped like droplets, blossoms or leaves, and are often decorated with small pieces of turquoise. Bracelets (*dobchu*) are also favourite accessories and are skilfully fashioned from silver, partly gilt, and frequently decorated with auspicious symbols and blossom motifs. Necklaces (*dongtha*) are worn with little silver and gold amulet or charm boxes (*gau*), turquoises, corals and other pendants. As everywhere in the Himalayas, turquoises are the favourite semi-precious stones in Bhutan as well.

These stones are believed to bring good fortune and – when worn around the neck – to emit vital energy. Similarly, red coral is traded as a precious decoration. Beads of black agate are called *zi* or *dzi*; they are very special because they are believed to provide effective protection against magic, misfortune and illness. These rare agates are worn by many women in the Himalaya region, from Ladakh to Eastern Tibet, as auspicious stones, which are passed from mother to daughter as their most precious family heirlooms. Their value depends on their place of origin, and on the quality of the eye in the agate stone. Naturally occurring *dzi* beads are very rare and expensive, and can cost up to 300,000 US Dollars depending on their quality. There are also elaborate ways of making *dzi* beads out of agate; these beads are more affordable albeit still expensive. In Thimphu, a *dzi* with a single eye will cost about 100,000 *Ngultrum* (equivalent to 1,600 Euro). Recently, these high prices, together with the strong demand, have stimulated the introduction of glass or plastic imitations on the market; nowadays, these beads are worn alongside the rare single pieces that cannot be sold. Silver headbands (*rumnang*) that are made of fine chainwork and set with turquoises are also rare, these days. According to Myers, these decorative items originated in Eastern Bhutan and can be traced right back to pre-Buddhist times; they were worn prior to the conversion of women to Buddhism, when they cut their hair off.<sup>52</sup> Regarding the women's hair, Aris remarks that this short hairstyle is similar to that worn by monks and nuns when the hair has grown back on their shaven heads; consequently, it symbolises the lay community's religious commitment.<sup>53</sup> Nowadays, these silver diadems are owned by a few women in





Eastern and Central Bhutan and, as Myers claims, are worn at ritual ceremonies.<sup>54</sup> The accessories that are worn by women in rural regions will occasionally include a knife, which they keep under their belts with the point facing backwards. These knives are generally small and sickle-shaped; they are mainly used at harvest time.

## HEADWEAR

To protect themselves from the weather, especially the fierce rays of the sun, women in the rural regions of Bhutan cover their heads with hats made of woven bamboo (*buley/bello*). All over Bhutan, women (sometimes also men) can be seen working in the fields and wearing a variety of bamboo hats. These hats mostly come from the Kheng region. However, the conical bamboo hats from Laya region (*layap bulo*) constitute an exception, as do the felt caps that are called *shamu* and are made by the *Brokpa* people in Merak and Sakteng. Furthermore, Bhutanese women can fairly often be seen working on the land, wearing a garland of leaves to protect their faces from the sun.

## PUTTING ON AND WEARING A KIRA

A woman starts by slipping on the long-sleeved blouse (*wonju*) followed by the *kira*, which is put on this way: the square material is laid over the back with one corner of a shorter end lying on the left shoulder. Now, while the left hand keeps this corner firmly on the left shoulder, the right hand conveys the material around the back, under the right arm and over the chest to the left shoulder,

where it is pinned relatively tightly at the corner with a brooch (*koma*). The brooch is positioned about four fingers in from the edge. Next, the second corner, which is still hanging loose, is conducted under the left arm and over the back to the right shoulder. The remaining material at the front is gathered in a deep fold on the right, where it will be pinned when the second *koma* is fixed to the right shoulder. To make this move easier, it's also possible to pin this corner to the right shoulder as temporary measure, thereby leaving both hands free for getting the fold right. This temporary clasp can then be released in order to pin the fold at the corner. To finish, the front fold is straightened and smoothed. To achieve this, the left hand holds the fold firmly while the right hand runs along the line of the fold, adjusts it and pulls the *kira* up a bit from inside so that only the outer hem can be seen, and the hems of the inner layers are hidden. At this point, the *kira* is fixed in place with a belt (*kera*), which is drawn very tightly and firmly round the waist, to give the whole garment its shape. Binding the belt tightly makes sure that the *kira* doesn't slip. The long twisted fringes at both ends of the belt should be invisible. The first fring is hidden under the *kera*, and the one at the other end is split into two halves, and each half is tucked behind the belt, one above, and one below. When the belt is in place, a sizeable pouch is formed above the waist. Various small items are kept inside it – in rural regions, these are generally wooden drinking cups and implements for chewing betel; city women are more likely to use their pouch for storing mobile phones, car keys and the like.

As with the men's *gho*, certain criteria need to be observed with regard to the *kira*, which deter-



Bamboo hats (above) and garlands of leaves (top centre) fend off the sun's fierce rays when working on the land; woven bamboo hats (*buley/bello*) mostly come from the Kheng region and are still worn in rural regions of Bhutan.



How to put on a *kira*  
(Drawing by Karin  
Altmann after  
Bartholomew 1985).

mine whether it has been put on correctly. For instance, on the right side of the *kira*, where the inner and outer layers of cloth meet, the patterns must be aligned. This means that the horizontal stripes must form a single line, and not meet at a tangent. Furthermore, the distance between the front fold and the furthestmost-fringed edge on the right hip must be no more than a finger's breadth. In addition, the hem of a properly arranged *kira* must be parallel with the ground, and its length from the waist must be the same all the way round. The length of a *kira* depends on the age and social standing of its wearer. Formerly, village or low status women were supposed to reveal their ankles, while higher status women, including those in government employment, could allow their *kira* to reach their instep, and women of the royal family could let their *kira* sweep the ground. Over time, this has changed to the extent that *kira* are generally worn longer nowadays and are only hitched up above the ankles for the sake of convenience, as when working on the land, or walking a long distance. Nowadays, old women are far more likely to wear their clothes rather shorter, to avoid tripping over them while walking. Young woman, especially women in town, prefer to wear their *kira* long. The role models for this style are female members of the royal family, as well as Bhutanese film stars and singers.

The colours, materials and patterns of each *kira* depend on the wearer's status, age, region and wealth, while also reflecting the fashions of the day and her personal taste. When choosing a *kira* Bhutanese women take a lot of care to ensure that its patterns, colours and material match the occasion. Simple striped or checked *kira* in dark colour schemes are preferred for everyday wear; rather lighter shades combined with a more expensive jacket in a lighter colour are used for office wear.

Formal occasions require small patterns and a silk jacket, while richly decorated *kira* made of pure silk with a *tego* made of silk or silk brocade are worn for special ceremonies, together with the best jewelry. Religious festivals such as *tshechu* provide the main opportunities for Bhutanese women to show off their best clothes and most precious jewelry. In addition to the occasion, the woman's age plays a very important role when choosing a *kira*. While girls and young women tend to reach for bright colours and delicate patterns, their mothers wear stronger colours and striking patterns, and their grandmothers wear dark colours with restrained patterns. Myers explains this approach as follows, 'As people grow older, dressing "soberly", as the Bhutanese put it, is more the rule – partly as householders they must provide for their children's education, clothing, and well-being, and partly because older people are supposed to become less worldly in their concerns.'<sup>55</sup>

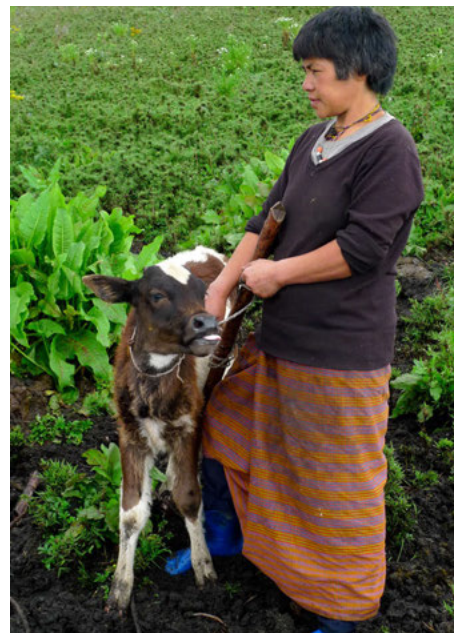
### KABNE AND RACHU – CEREMONIAL SHOULDER CLOTHS

However, the traditional dress is not complete until the ceremonial shawl (*kabne*) has been laid on top of it; it is worn by women as well as men on official occasions. Such occasions include visits to *dzong*, monasteries and temples, and attending religious festivals such as the *tshechu*. Since monastic forts, monasteries and temples are places where holy objects and texts are kept, and which often house members of monastic communities, all visitors to these sacred places, even foreigners – if they are wearing Bhutanese national dress – are obliged to wear a *kabne* as a mark of respect. The same rule applies with regard to an audience with a Rinpoche, a spiritual leader, or a high-ranking





*clockwise from top left:*  
The front pouch of the kira has room for all sorts of things. There is also room for prayer wheels and snacks inside a kira; richly decorated kira made of pure silk with a tego made of silk or silk brocade are worn for special ceremonies and sacred festivals; simple striped or plaid kira in dark colours are preferred for everyday wear (*bottom right*: Photo by Christine Leuthner).







*Left:* Ordinary citizens wear white *kabne* made of unbleached cotton or wild silk, with long fringes at the ends.

*right:* Milarepa is shown here as an ascetic, wrapped in his white cotton robe (*repa*). The green highlights on Milarepa's skin refer to his practice of eating only nettle soup when meditating in the mountains; from a *thangka* in Dhodeydrag gompa, Thimphu, Bhutan.



government official. In these cases, too, a ceremonial shawl will be worn as a sign of respect and veneration. The term *kabne* – literally, covering<sup>56</sup> – is applied to ceremonial shawls in general, but can also refer specifically to shawls for men. Ceremonial shawls for women are called *kabne* or *rachu*, depending on their design.

### KABNE – CEREMONIAL SHAWLS FOR MEN

The *kabne* that is worn by Bhutanese men is a long shoulder cloth measuring 90 cm by 300 cm, with long fringes. It is made of wild silk, sometimes cotton. Ordinary citizens wear white *kabne* made of unbleached cotton or wild silk with long fringes at either end. In addition to these, there are other ceremonial shawls in different colours, which designate the wearer's rank or office. The origins of these shoulder cloths go back to the time of Buddha Shakyamuni; more precisely, to his first discourse in Varanasi, when Buddha Shakyamuni first turned the Wheel of *dharma*. At this discourse, the five ascetics and other monks made an appearance, wrapped in shoulder cloths

to show respect for the Buddha. These white ceremonial shawls are still used in Bhutan, and go back to the time of Shabdrung's yogi-attendants, who wore white *kabne*, in accordance with their Tantric tradition<sup>57</sup>. These white cotton cloths also recall the cloths that yogis and ascetics in the Himalayas wear to cover themselves. In Bhutan, they are primarily associated with a much-loved personality in *Vajrayana* Buddhism, the poet and holy man Milarepa (1052 – 1135), who played an important part in the transmission lineage of the *Kagyü* School.<sup>58</sup> Milarepa devoted most of his life to a strict form of asceticism and for this reason is always depicted wrapped in a white cotton cloth. The name Milarepa is actually derived from the word for white cotton cloth (*repa*) and can be translated as 'the cotton-robed member of the Mila clan' or as 'Mila, who wears the cotton robe of the ascetes'. Milarepa derived his teachings from the *mahasiddhas* (84 Indian saints, the first to receive the Tantric teachings), along with the teachings of Naropa (1016 – 1100), especially the practice of 'inner heat' (Tib. *tummo*). *Tummo* refers to an advanced, Tantric meditation technique used in *Vajrayana* Buddhism. The aim of this contemplative practice is to consciously raise the body





temperature while simultaneously immunising it against low ambient temperatures without resorting to external aids. The higher aim, however, involves directing a stream of energy from within to the outside, to extinguish negative emotions and attitudes by burning them away. Milarepa's name also refers to the perfectibility of this Tantric meditation technique, whereby he managed to raise his body temperature and retire for a whole year to the icy mountain caves of the Himalayas, wrapped in only a thin cotton cloth. According to Aris, the white *kabne* is intended as a reminder that every Bhutanese man took the minor vows of the yogin, not with a view to assuming the burden of celibacy, but in order to be inducted into the generally applicable moral guidelines of society.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Myers stresses the links between the *kabne* and the monks' shoulder cloths (*zen*): 'When religious and civil authority first emanated from the dzongs, senior lay officials took certain monastic vows, and some even received religious names when they assumed their positions. [...] Out of deference to their surroundings, officials living in proximity to the monks, as well as citizens visiting the dzong on business, were required to wear shoulder cloths.'<sup>60</sup> She goes on to say that, in former times, wild silk textiles of this kind were believed

to protect their wearers from swords and knives during battles.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, they are useful in everyday terms, for carrying packs, as covers at night-time, and they can be rolled up to serve as pillows. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, according to Myers, these shoulder cloths were used for special purposes by the elite. Noblemen, and later on kings as well, employed a red-white-red striped cloth of wild silk (*tshoré khamar*) to cover their feet, legs and knees when seated. This cloth was similar to the shoulder cloths that are called *khamar* ('red mouth') *kabne* and are worn by village headmen (*Gup*) and occasionally by lay priests these days.<sup>62</sup> Similar to the former *tshoré khamar*, a *khamar kabne* has a white central panel and two red panels with fine white lines running along both lengths, and long fringes at either end. What's more, on formal occasions, it is nowadays still obligatory for both officials and ordinary citizens to cover their legs and knees with their shoulder cloths when seated. Myers adds that, 'Thus, the multipurpose wraps have evolved into a particular element of dress governed by a code of etiquette that is vigorously taught and strictly observed.'<sup>63</sup> As mentioned above, shoulder cloths in Bhutan are made in different colours. For the clergy, red cloths have, since the arrival of Buddhism, primarily been

*left:* The Trongsapenlop's medical attendant, a lama from one of the Lhasa monasteries, is shown wearing a *khamar kabne* (Photo by John Claude White, The Kurt and Pamela Meyer Collection, Los Angeles, California). *right:* *khamar kabne* are woven in wild silk and dyed with lac.





clockwise from top left: *khamar kabne* worn by the village headmen (*Gup*); *Drungpa* and *Dzongrab* both wear a white *kabne* with fringes and a red central stripe along its length, and three red vertical stripes at either end; green *kabne* without fringes are reserved for judges (*Drangpen*), white *kabne* with blue stripes were once worn by the *Chimi*, the people's representatives in the National Assembly, and yellow scarves with red and green decorations, in the style of *mentsi* cloths, mark the organisers of the Thimphu *tshechu*.

worn by Bhutanese monks, who drape them over their left shoulders. For his part, the country's senior religious leader, the *Je Khenpo*, wears a yellow shawl to indicate his rank. The use of ceremonial shawls then passed from the monastic tradition to the secular sphere, which is why the King wears the same fringeless yellow *kabne* as the *Je Khenpo*.<sup>64</sup> To the present, the saffron yellow shawl is reserved for the King and the *Je Khenpo*, thereby emphasising once again the close bond between the secular and spiritual leadership of Bhutan. The manner in which the King is wearing his shawl is similar to that adopted by monks. The King lays the left end of his cloth in nine folds over his left shoulder. A fringeless shawl in dark red wild silk (*bura map* or *kabne map*), is presented by the king as an exclusive honour. It is given to a *Dasho*, a royal official, on being awarded the non-hereditary title of *Dasho* in recognition of his or her special services. According to Aris, this shawl is equivalent to the outer red shawls (*zen*) that monks wear. In much the same way as Myers, he writes that, 'It

is a reminder of the fact that all senior officials under the theocracy were either fully ordained monks who took on secular duties or else laymen who were required to observe monastic vows for the duration of their office.'<sup>65</sup> Women who have been awarded the title of *Dasho* do not wear a dark red shoulder cloth like their male colleagues; they wear a monochrome dark red women's shawl. *Kabne* in other colours all indicate the wearer's official ranking. It is said that Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel had already established the official *kabne* colours for the different ranks, back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition has been retained to this day. Ministers wear an orange *kabne* (called *namza leewang*) without fringes, while a *Dasho* receives the dark red fringeless *kabne* mentioned above; blue fringeless shawls go to members of the National Council, and members of Parliament; green *kabne* without fringes are reserved for judges (*Drangpen*). Furthermore, there are *khamar kabne*, mentioned earlier, which have white and red lateral stripes for village leaders (*Gup*), and dark red





*kabne* with no fringes but a white central stripe for district administrators (*Dzongdag*). A white shawl with fringes and a broad red central stripe along its length and three thin red vertical stripes at either end, denotes a *Dzongrab* or *Rabjam*, an assistant to a district administrator and a *Drungpa*, the administrator of a sub-district. The *kabne* of a deputy *Dzongrab* features just two thin vertical stripes. White *kabne* with blue stripes, which were formerly worn by the *Chimi*, the people's representatives in the National Assembly (*tshongdu*), have been abolished, along with the position. In their place are the elected members of the National Council with their own blue fringeless *kabne*. All *kabne* that designate a rank of service are issued only for the duration of that position and when the officeholder leaves that job, he or she must revert to wearing white shoulder cloths with fringes. However, government secretaries and officials are given a white fringeless *kabne* as a mark of distinction. In the meantime, scarves that indicate an official rank have been introduced. For instance, the Royal Bodyguard, the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) and the Royal Bhutan Police (RBP) wear narrow scarves made of stiff material to which their insignia of rank are applied. As for the Thimphu *tshechu*, the organisers are identified by their yellow scarves with red and green decorations, in the style of *mentsi* cloths.

### KABNE/RACHU – CEREMONIAL SHAWLS FOR WOMEN

Ceremonial shawls for women (*kabne* or *rachu*) are between 180 cm and 240 cm in length, with varying widths of between 15 cm and 90 cm, and long twisted fringes at both ends. The wider examples are folded twice lengthwise before being folded again to bring the fringed ends together and laid over the left shoulder in such a way that all the fringes are aligned and hanging in front, down to the waist. Women are supposed to place their shawls over their left shoulders, to cover their hearts. Sometimes, especially when dancing, Bhutanese women can be seen tucking the loose ends of their shawls into their belts at the back, to avoid losing them. In fact, this is a very popular manoeuvre, although not officially sanctioned on formal occasions. With regard to the women's dances which take place during religious festivals, yet another variation in how they wear their scarves can be noted: the dancers cross their *kabne* over their chests and back, and either tuck the ends into their belts or fix them at one side with a pin. In the secular sphere, *kabne* are used for carrying babies, as well as for transporting packages and large goods. In these cases, they are used fully extended. *Kabne* are also practical for journeys: when folded up, they serve as pillows; when extended, they are used for sheltering from sun or rain,

The yellow fringeless *kabne* is reserved for the King (*left*) and the *Je Khenpo* (*right*), thereby emphasising once again the close bond between the secular and spiritual leadership of Bhutan. The photo of His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel was presented to the author by His Majesty (Karin Altmann Private Collection).





left: *kabne* (top) and *rachu* (below); nowadays, all these variants exist alongside each other.

right: Women are supposed to place their shawls over their left shoulders, to cover their hearts. As officially required, this *kabne* is worn in such a way that all the fringes are aligned and hanging in front, down to the waist.

far right: These examples display how the shoulder cloth has become more and more narrow, transformed into a textile for ceremonial use only (Karin Altmann Private Collection).

opposite: Dancers often cross their shawls over their chest and back or tuck the ends into their belts at the back, to avoid losing them. In the secular sphere, women's shawls are constantly used for carrying babies. In this case, they are being used fully extended.

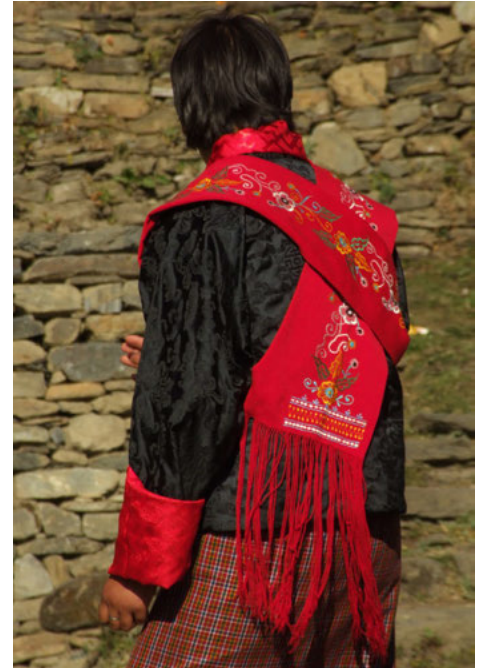
or as a covering. When the popular archery tournaments are taking place, the Bhutanese women wave their shawls in the air to distract the opposing team and to encourage their own team. Traditional women's shawls are red with all sorts of patterns. When a shawl has alternating stripes along its length and small woven patterns with wide, colourful patterned borders at both ends, it is called a *rachu*. All other variants, regardless of whether their patterns are small and regular, or on a large scale, are generally referred to as *kabne*. Cotton, silk, and wild silk are the preferred materials. As with *kera*, ceremonial women's shawls are also subject to the vagaries of fashion. Recently, *kabne* appear in various shades of red – varying from a bright orange-red to pink tones, and to a deep wine-red – and their patterns are partly composed of large format motifs, such as eternal knots or other auspicious Buddhist symbols. For special occasions, they are elaborate and made of pure silk; for a while, examples with metal threads worked into the pattern were very popular. Furthermore, women's shawls have become narrower. While some still measure between 45 cm and 90 cm in width and are used for all sorts of purposes, the latest versions are often only 15 cm wide, and no longer need to be folded lengthwise, just once, width-wise. According to Myers, these narrower shawls for women came into fashion in the 1970s, showing that these items are definitely intended for formal wear only.<sup>66</sup> These modified *kabne* are particularly popular with Bhutanese city-dwellers. For some time now, women who hold high-ranking positions in the government have been wearing *kabne* that are the same colour as the *kabne* worn by their male counterparts. Female *Dasho* can be

recognised by their monochrome dark red *kabne*, and female members of the National Council by their monochrome blue *kabne*, while female judges have a green one, and women who assume the position of *Dzongdag* wear a dark red *kabne* with a white central stripe.

## BHUTANESE ETIQUETTE AND DRESS CODE – THE RULES OF DRIGLAM NAMZHAG

Regardless of whether worn by men or women, the clothes that Bhutanese people choose for their national dress should always observe the conventions. Overdressing is just as much of a faux pas as underdressing. Generally speaking, a neat appearance is greatly valued, and when entering a *dzong* during festivals and ritual ceremonies, attention is paid to the quality of the material and the pattern. While the suitable selection of women's clothes has already been mentioned, Bhutanese men also make sure that their clothes are appropriate. For special occasions, if they can afford it, they will wear a richly decorated *gho* made of wild silk or silk, with a white *kabne* made of wild silk. *Tshoghlham* boots made of silk damask and brocade complete the well-dressed Bhutanese citizen's outfit. The rules about the correct way to wear these clothes are enshrined in the *driglam namzhag*.<sup>67</sup> This decree contains rigorous regulations about how higher officials should appear in public. The following regulations have been taken from the 1999 *driglam namzhag* with a view to providing an insight into the strict rules that Bhutanese government officials are subject to. According to these rules, a









The former Prime Minister Lyonchhen Jigmi Yoeser Thinley (wearing an orange *kabne*) with Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, the patron of Bhutan's Textile Arts (second from left), and the Royal Princesses (right) (Photo by Christine Leuthner).

minister is obliged to wear his *gho* just below knee level, his sleeves (*lagyen*) must be turned up one *tho* (the distance between the thumb and the middle finger when the hand is stretched as widely as possible), and his collar must be folded over the width of two fingers. A minister's *kabne* must be orange and measure 21 *tho* in length, and be 6 *tho* wide. The left end of the cloth must fall in seven folds over his left shoulder. No more than the tip of his sword should be visible beneath this *kabne*, but its grip can remain in view. During an audience with the King, he is not allowed to hold his sword or place his hand on the grip. Boots are also subject to specific rules with regard to colour. Accordingly, the colour of the lower part of the boot shank (*tshogllham kor*) – i.e. the coloured decorative strip at ankle level that indicates the rank of the wearer – must be orange in the case of a minister. A deputy minister must wear his *gho* at knee level and his sleeves must be turned up a *chatho*'s worth. *Chatho* means the span between thumb and index finger when splayed. The deputy minister's collar turnover must not exceed a finger's width (*sor*). The deputy minister's *kabne* must be bright red and measure 21 *tho* in length, and be 5 *tho* wide. He is not allowed to fold his *kabne* at the front, and his sword tip must emerge rather

further from beneath his *kabne* than that of a minister. His sword grip must also be visible. The colour of the lower strip on his boot shank (*tshogllham kor*) must be bright red. For a *Dasho*, the same regulations apply as for the deputy minister, with the difference that his *kabne* and his boot strips must be red. *Drungpa*, administrators of a sub-district, together with *Dzongrab* or *Rabjam*, assistant district administrators, are supposed to wear their *gho* just above the knee. Their sleeves (*lagyen*) should be turned back a *gi*'s worth; this is the span between thumb and index finger, when both are splayed but bent at the joints. The collar turnover must not exceed half a finger's width. Although a *kabne* that is worn by a *Drungpa* or *Dzongrab* must measure 21 *tho*, its length can be adjusted to fit the wearer. However, its width must measure a constant 4 *tho*. *Drungpa* and *Dzongrab* both wear a white *kabne* with fringes and a red central stripe along its length, and three red vertical stripes at either end. A deputy *Rabjam* is entitled to two vertical stripes. Everyone, whether they be *Drungpa*, *Dzongrab* or a deputy, is obliged to make sure the lower fold of their ceremonial shawl does not cover the flat strip of metal (*dolep khachang*) that is fixed to their sword tip. The strips on their boots (*tshogllham kor*) must also be