

Travel And Research Award Report
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Finding a balance between old and new; how modern technologies and foreign influence threaten the oral tradition in Bhutan.

It is well known that technological developments bring about changes in human society and culture; the two are interdependent, and exist through a mutually influential relationship whereby cultural needs advance technologies and technologies incite further cultural evolution. The modern technologies we currently possess have drastically revolutionised our society and culture, in particular through the way we interact with people around the world; advancements in communication technologies now allow us to connect with even the most remote cultures. This increase in global interconnectivity further brings with it the ability to imprint our cultural influences on foreign cultures, and this is no more evident than with the influence of the West on smaller communities around the world. It can be argued that the influence and rate of proliferation of Western culture throughout the last century has moved the world towards a potential homogeneity in global culture through acculturation.

Yet despite the reach of such dominant cultures, there are still societies remaining which continue to exist according to their ancient traditions and heritages - Bhutan is one such nation. Often referred to as the last remaining Shangri-La, Bhutan is a Himalayan kingdom located between two of the largest countries in the world, India and China. For years, Bhutan has remained reclusive, favouring isolation as a means of preserving its traditional culture and its national values. Isolationism was a crucial policy for Bhutan, as its culture has historically relied on the oral tradition of storytelling as the foremost means of communicating traditional values and knowledges from one generation to the next.

Yet, since opening its borders to foreign influence and tourism, many Bhutanese people have recognised the threats foreign cultures and modern technologies have posed to their way of life. King Khesar, the fifth Druk Gyalp of Bhutan, stated in an address in 1971 that his 'deepest concern is that as the world changes we may lose these fundamental values on which rest our character as a nation and people.' These concerns were further echoed by Her Royal Highness Princess Sonam Chhoden Wangchuck in a foreword to Kunzang Choden's book, *Folktales of Bhutan*. Here, she recognised the importance of folktales as part of the oral tradition, in guiding and shaping national and personal Bhutanese values. She states that, '[a]mong ordinary Bhutanese, for who the transition from oracy to literacy is not yet complete, the oral tradition is a powerful living medium of communication between one generation and the next. It ensures the survival of undocumented knowledge.' The purpose of this project was to see the effect modern technologies and Western influences have had on the cultural tradition of oral storytelling in Bhutan.

I intended to travel to Bhutan to observe first-hand the processes of cultural change occurring in its society, and to discover the extent to which modern technologies and foreign influences have integrated into Bhutanese society. This I would achieve by first learning Bhutanese folktales through the traditional method of oracy, to see how they are communicated in person and discern any variations in their telling. I was also interested in discovering the popularity of these folktales in modern Bhutanese society by interviewing local Bhutanese people about their past experiences with such folktales, and their opinions of them. Having considered this, I lastly intended to discover the extent to which modern technologies and foreign influences have become integrated into Bhutanese society, and what these technological developments have meant for Bhutan's oral tradition. In short, I wanted to answer to the question, *do these technologies pose a real threat to Bhutanese culture, or are they the exaggerated concerns of a few social traditionalists?* This was documented through a short essay and accompanying photographs. The full story is currently available to read on my website www.chiraagjs.com.

This project would not have been feasible without the grant offered by the Royal Holloway Travel and Research Award. As an effort to preserve its cultural heritage and protect its clean landscapes, the tourism industry in Bhutan is strictly controlled; all visitors require guides assigned through government approved tour operators and must also pay a tourism fee of US \$250 per day. On top of this, flights to Paro are limited, expensive, and available only through connections from a handful of airports in nearby countries such as India and Nepal. As a result of the high cost and difficulty of the journey, Bhutan received only 71,000 visitors in 2017. The Royal Holloway travel and research award afforded me the opportunity to travel to this country and

understand Bhutanese culture through first-hand experience and local stories. I am fortunate to have visited Bhutan at this crucial point in its history, to observe how it works to consolidate modern technologies and foreign influences with its cultural traditions and heritages.