



## Cultural and Textile Heritage of Bhutan: A Study of Chumig in Bumthang Dzongkhag

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### ABSTRACT

Bhutanese textiles symbolize a rich and unique art form. Textiles are recognized for their multi-colour, intricate dyeing, weaving techniques and variant patterns. Weaving textiles is one of the integral components of Bhutanese unique culture and tradition. The Bhutanese textiles was further intensified with the emerged of Wangchuck Dynasty and the introduction of a unique development philosophy known as Gross National Happiness. Textile weavers are not only confines to the clothing but it is an artistic expression of a weaver and every region has its own specialty based on raw materials and the pattern. In Bhutan, women used to weave textiles at home using different looms in small quantity for personal usage but today weaving has become an economic activities. The paper focus on analyzing the evolution and significance in preserving the cultural and textile heritage of Bhutan with reference to Yathra tradition.

**Key words:** culture, pattern, textiles, weaving,yathra

### Introduction

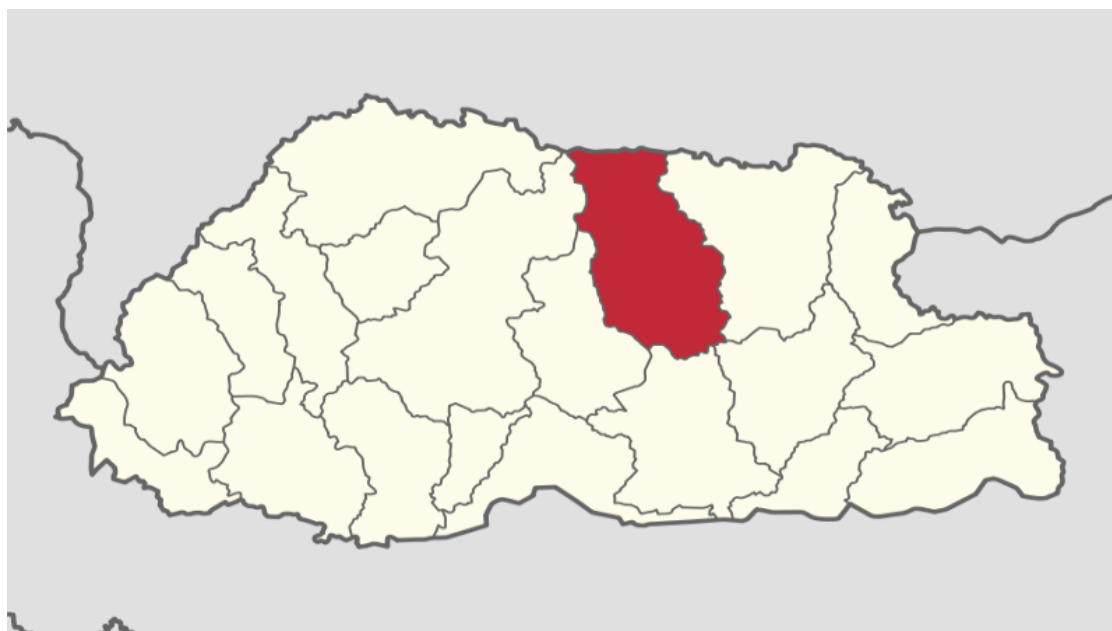


Fig 1.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bumthang\\_in\\_Bhutan.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bumthang_in_Bhutan.svg)

Bhutan a small landlocked country with a population of over 771,612 (*World Bank data*) and a territory of 38,394 square kilometers (*nationsonline.org*) is located between two giant, china in the north and India in the south. Bhutan's geographical features and policy of self-imposed isolation helped the

country in surviving the influence of communist from the north and conquest from the south during British Empire in India. Beside it the preservation and promotion of Bhutanese unique national identity introduced by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel during 17<sup>th</sup> century and further intensified by Wangchuck Dynasty helped Bhutan remain as an independent country. Among it, the national dress which play an essential aspect of Bhutanese culture. The culture of wearing national dress makes condition favorable for the preservation of Bhutanese rich heritage of Thagzo<sup>1</sup>. It is, one of the component of Zorig Chusum (zo = the ability to make; rig = science or craft; chusum = thirteen) or simply known as the thirteen arts. The 13 arts are believed to have been introduced by Pema Lingpa in the 15th century and are rooted in Buddhism.

The historical information about the evolution of origin of cultural weaving started in Bhutan is not available, although it established the fact that Bhutanese wove for themselves for centuries (*The Bhutanese art of weaving, 2014*) Till then weaving culture can be traced back as far as 13<sup>th</sup> century with the preserved master pieces maintained in Tashi Chhoedzong<sup>2</sup> and Tango Monastery woven by non-other than by Khandro Sonam Paldon herself. She was the visionary consort of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo, the founder of Drukpa Kargyudpa sect in Bhutan (*The Bhutanese art of weaving, 2014, pp.4*). The progressive move had been further intensified within the country by royal families and especially after the emergence of the Wangchuck dynasty. And today the weaving culture ventured into arena of globalization with the start of the Textile Museum and the Royal Textile Academy both under the Royal patronage and guidance of Her Majesty the Queen Mother Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck.

Today in Bhutan to some extent few Dzongkhags<sup>3</sup> are specially known by their unique textile culture. For example, Bumthang that is centrally located district is known for its famous wool weaving called "Yathra", a unique textile in Bhutan, which is gaining popularity in market.

1. Weaving
2. Name of fortress in Thimphu Dzongkhag
3. District

Bumthang retained its political importance during the rule of the first and second kings, both of whom had their principal residence at Wangdichholing Palace in Jakar<sup>4</sup>. (*Brown.L & Mayhew.B, 2014, pp.113*). The Dzongkhag is also known for its religious sites. It is home to some of the oldest Buddhist temples and monasteries in the country. Bumthang, which consist of two term *Bumpa/bum* and *thang*. *Bumpa*, the Bhutanese term for water vessel, which describe the shape and nature of the valley. Or *bum*, the term for girl, indicating the valley of beautiful girls and *thang* which means flat ground. It consist of four gewog<sup>5</sup> namely Tang, Ura, Choekhor and Chumig with population of 17,820 (Population & housing census of Bhutan, 2017). Yathra cloths were initially used as blankets and rain coat, but now days they are turned into coats, jackets, shawls, bags, seat cushions and many more (*Altmann.K, 2016, pp.67*). Yathra used to be woven on backstrap looms with locally made dyes, used only yak and sheep's wool. But today weavers use horizontal frame looms using chemical dyes and synthetic fabrics.



**Figure 1:** yathra strip with different patterns

4. Name of fortress in Bumthang Dzongkhag
- 5 Block (district subdivision)

### The objectives of study are as follows:

1. To understand the yathra weaving culture and its significance at chumig village, Bumthang
2. To investigate and enquire about the evolution of yathra weaving customs at chumig village, Bumthang
3. To analyze the contribution of Bumthaps community to preserve the cultural heritage of Bhutan with special references to Yathra tradition.

### Literature Review

**Yathra weaving, the uniquely Bumthang culture** (13/9/2021), an article written by **Chow Ping** highlights on the evolution of yathra from raincoats to fashion accessories. Author mentioned that due to less agricultural work community are inclined towards weaving. During vacation students are given the opportunity to earn and learn through weaving yathra. Due to decrease in sheep rearing in community the weavers are inclined to use materials from India. The author has also mentioned the name of three yathra weaving centers in Chumig gewog.

**Yathra – The local luxury and authentic souvenir made in Bhutan featuring yarn and yathra** (16/6/2020), an article written by **Tshering Denkar** begins her article with how the usage of yathra has chance over time. The article consist of question and answer session between the author and karma Tshoki, the owner of handicraft shop named Yarn and Yathra.

**Bhutan: Textile and Traditional Clothing** (2020), an article published by **textile value change**, gives brief information on the Bhutanese art of weaving. The article includes Bhutanese national attire by highlighting the pattern used and its significance in textile.

The Bhutan newspaper known The Bhutanese with the title Weaving traditional Yathra brings income and villagers together (05/12/2018), written by Kinley Yonten mentioned about the success and challenges faced by the yathra weavers and the owners of three Yathra weaving centers located in Chhumig gewog in Bumthang District.

**Fabric of life: Textile Arts in Bhutan – Culture, Tradition and Transformation** (2016), written by **Karin Altmann** mentioned that sheep wool used to import from Tibet followed by Kashmir and later from Austria. The wool was distributed by the National Women's Association of Bhutan.

National Sheep Breeding Centre in Bumthang was established to fulfill the need of wool for the weavers. Today with ready-dyed from India, knowledge of recipes for dyes is slowly dying out. Therefore an organization named Handloom Development Centre (NHDC) in KHALING, are trying to keep the culture of dyeing yarn alive. And with much details the author have highlighted on the ingredients and process of dyeing yarn with colorful photos and explained about two types of hand looms used for weaving yathra with beautiful photos.

**The Bhutanese art of weaving: Druk Thagzo** (2014), published by **Agency for Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC) Ministry of Economic Affairs** include general information on Bhutanese textile but also with much details regarding weaving practice in different region of Bhutan, which include Bumthang dzongkhag. The name of receipts along with process of dyeing yarn is mentioned and two types of hand looms used for weaving yathra are explained with a diagram. Some names of pattern with its meaning are explained with beautiful photos.

### Methodology

The present research is based on both qualitative and quantitative research method which involves descriptive as well as analytical research. Survey method was used to conduct survey with the help of questionnaire. Out of 291 households [Dzongkhag Administration, Bumthang, 2019], survey was conducted in 50 households including the owner of three Yathra factories located in Chumig gewog. With prior permission from Chumig gewog administration, the survey was completed in ten days. 23 households were covered in first five days and remaining 27 households were done in remaining five days. Pre-schedule was framed before visiting participant's house and most all the interview were conducted outside under blue sky because Chumig valley turns very cold during winter. All the participants for the survey were weavers and were selected based on their work experiences i.e. number of year's weavers has spent in weaving yathra in Chumig [Table no.1]. And thanks to the elderly local resident who helped in sorting out the participants for the survey.

Table.no:1

Areas / Years of experience in weaving	Upper Chumig Gaytsa	Middle Chumig Chumig	Lower Chumig Zhuney
Category-1 >15 years	5 households	10 households	10 households
Category-2 Above 15 years	5 households	10 households	10 households
Total	10	20	20

The participants were age ranged from as young as 15 years to as old as 85 years old. Data was collected in both form i.e. oral and written. Just a set of questions were developed with fifteen questions to be asked to the weavers of fifty households.

### Challenges during the study

The difficulty faced while conducting the survey was the language barrier and less participants. Due to covid-19 pandemic it has created some instability of social life in country and strict country's covid protocol, research could not cover large number of population. Although the residence of Chumig can speak the national language of Bhutan but most of the elderly local residents are inclined in speaking local dialect known as Bumthapka, for which a translator was required. Sometime expected daily quota i.e. five households per day for survey could not be fulfilled due to participants' ad-hoc activities. As a result survey took time longer than expected.

## Result and Findings

Through survey it was found that many yathra weavers are not aware about what does yathra means. Nor the definition of yathra is mentioned in any available resources. But few experienced weavers shared similar thoughts on what yathra means and could be the definition of yathra. Lady Lhamo Yangchen, an experienced weaver from middle chumig said, 'In Bumthapkhā<sup>6</sup> 'Yathra' consist of two term, 'Ya' which mean rainbow and 'Thra' means pattern'. It could be the definition of yathra because the observer can clearly see the rainbow pattern [Figure no.1] in Yathra. Local dialect of Bumthang



Figure no.1

### Piece of yathra with two rainbow pattern

While another experienced yathra weaver whose name is Lady Sonam Lhamo, also the owner of yathra factory at Zhnuey said 'while weaving yathra all the processing work is done by bare hand and no objects like hook or some kind of sharp pointed objects are used in making patterns in yathra. Therefore in Bumthapkhā 'Yathra' consist of two term, 'Ya' which mean **hand** and 'Thra' means **pattern**.'

In ancient days yathra got limited use and purpose but today it has become identity for weavers, souvenir products for the tourist and the source of income for the chumig community. Where the weavers prefer to exchange their yathra designs for groceries and garments, whereas some appreciate the cash. Although every household owns loom and weave independently but some time weavers in a group of three or four weave under the same roof. Where weavers not only spent time chatting with each other but also share their resources and diversify their weaving. So by spending time together weavers not only brings cooperation but also maintain peace and harmony in the community.

In an average each household got two weavers in Chumig Gewog. The art of weaving has being passed from one generation to another and the trend is still alive in each household. Mother teaches her daughter the skill of weaving at early age and later daughter not only become expert in weaving but also earn some extra cash for the family.

Weavers used two types of hand looms to weave yathra namely Pangtha [Figure no.2] and Thritha [Figure no.2]. For generation weavers have used Pangtha to weave yathra but today it would be difficult to find a weaver weaving yathra in Pangtha at Chumig gewog. Today almost all the weavers use a loom known as Thritha to weave yathra. None could remember as when and who introduce the Pangtha in their locality but most of the weavers shared similar viewed regarding the introduction of Thritha in Chumig. Many weavers claimed that the popularity and usage of Thritha spread after the arrival of some Tibetans from the north and settled in chumig valley in the middle of eighteen century. As per the article title Weaving – an art form in Bhutan (2015) published by little Bhutan mentioned that Thritha was first introduced by the sister of second king Ashi Wangmo from Tibet in 1930s.

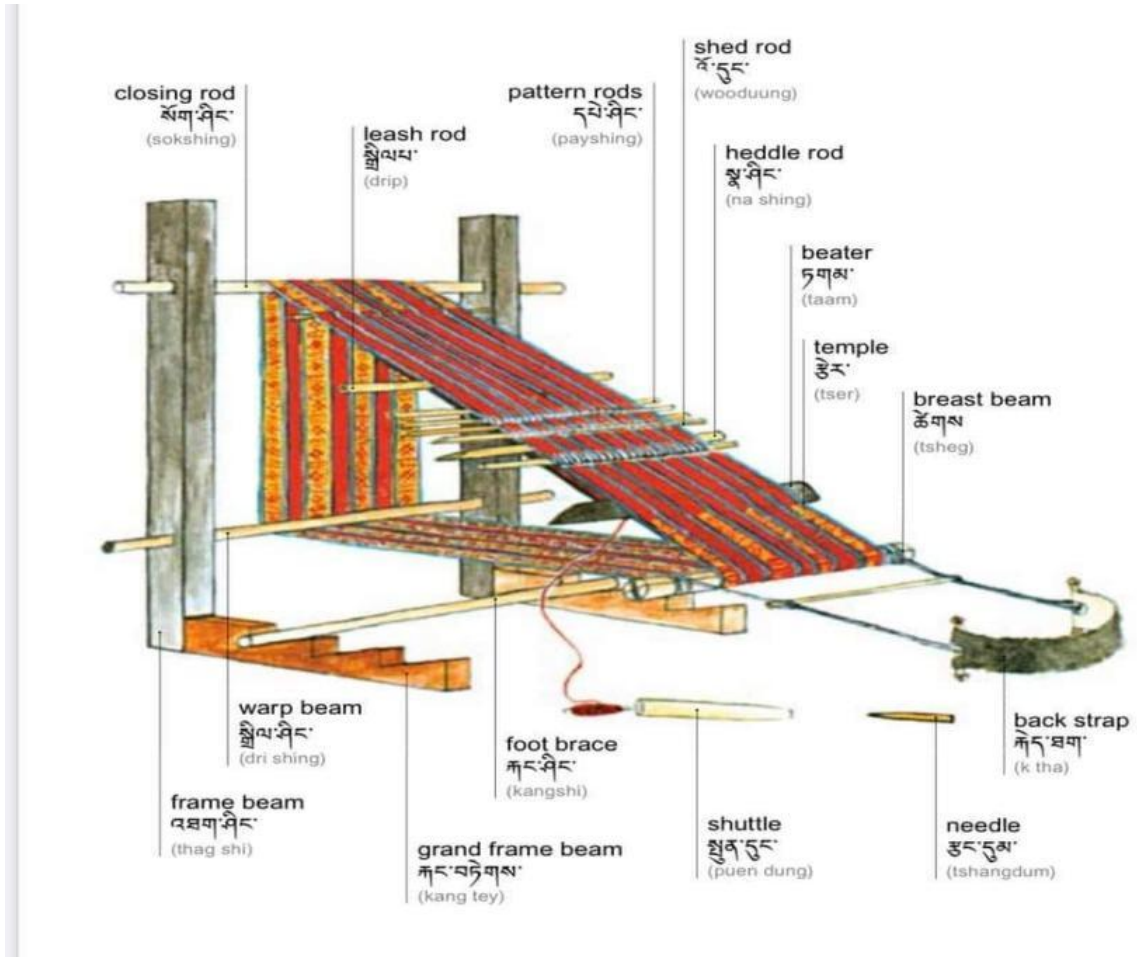


Figure no.2. Pangtha (back strip loom)

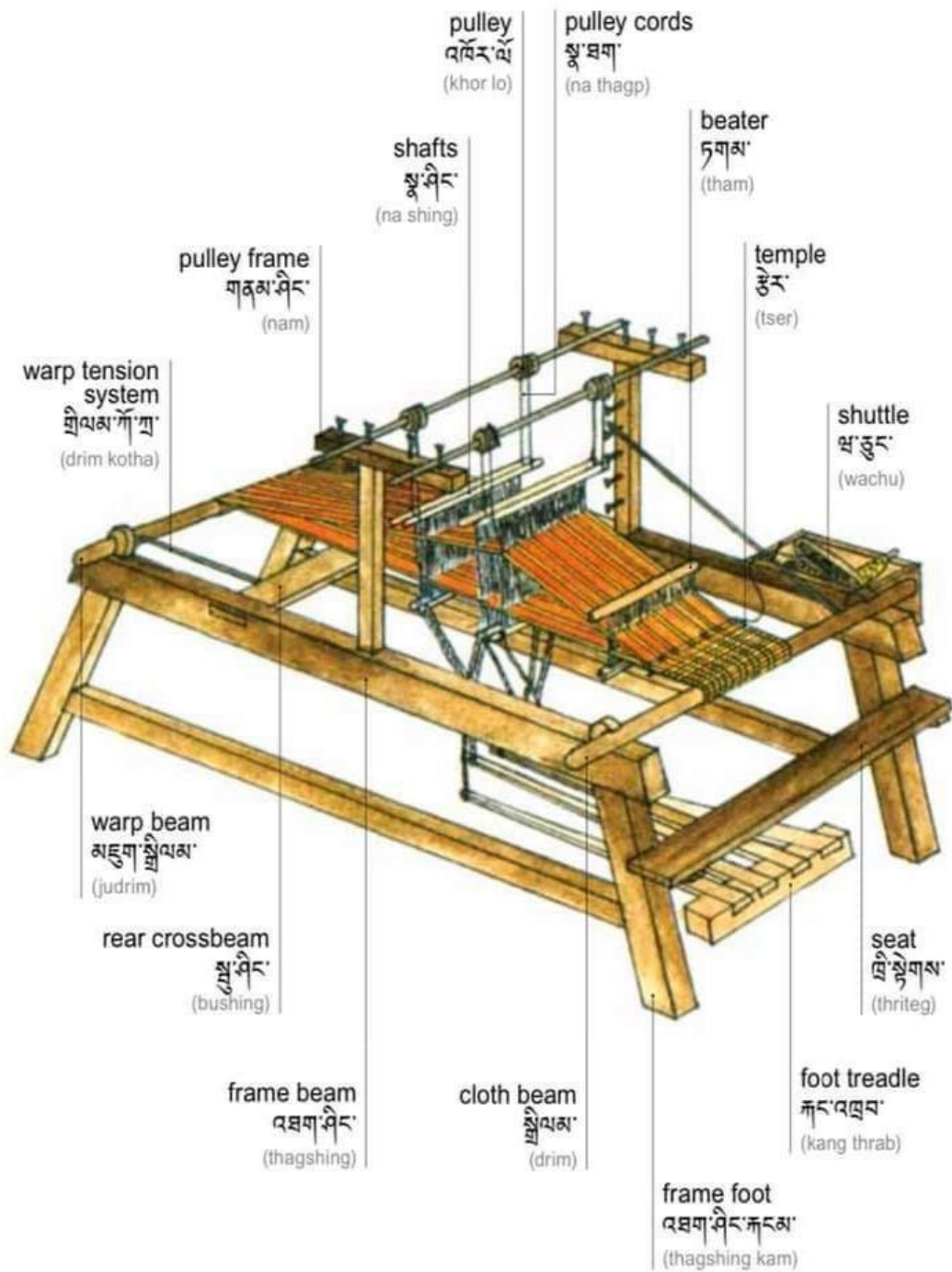


Figure.3. Thritha (horizontal loom)

Traditionally, yathra weavers use local wool and ingredients to dye the thread but with the decreasing number of animals and availability of cheap and readymade thread has led to the need to import raw materials. As a result weavers don't know the process and name of ingredients used in dyeing the thread. Today almost all the weavers use imported materials to weave yathra. There are three types of thread [Austrian, Indian and Local yarn] available in the market, out of which maximum weavers use the thread from India as it is easily available and comes with low price. Thread is available in yathra factory located in Zhuney village and most of the weavers buy yarn from the factory.





Figure no.4 Austrian yarn



Figure no.5 Indian yarn



Figure no. 6 Local yarn

Through patterns weavers can display their skill and take a pride of their end products. It is the pattern that makes textile a unique and beautiful products. Depending upon the type and design of the patterns the weaver might take days or months to complete a roll. The patterns can be simple as well as elaborate ones. Pattern used in yathra has its own name with the meanings mostly in Bumthapkh. Although it was not possible to get the name and meaning of all the patterns used in yathra by the weavers, still than some could be found. One unique feature of weaving yathra is that while making pattern weavers don't use any objects but rather use bare hand to design the patterns. Ancient patterns are complicated, required more time and it seems that the weavers got inspiration for their designs from their immediate environment and most importantly from religion. Whereas present weavers use simple pattern and does not required much time to complete the product.

Most of the yathra weavers sell their product in a roll [figure no.7] with the initial price of ngultrum one thousand and three hundred. A roll traditionally consist of eighteen patterns with the length of five meters But the price of yathra varies as per the materials and patterns used in the yathra by the weavers. The trend today is that the youth, especially who got skill in tailoring buy yathra from the weavers in a roll and they make other products out of yathra. In this way both weavers and buyers get financial benefits.



Figure no. 7 Yathra roll



Figure no.8 Yathra hand bag



Figure no. 9 Yathra cap



Figure no.10 Yathra Jacket



Figure no. 11 Yathra Laptop Bag





Figure no.12 Yathra sofa cover



Figure no. 13 Yathra bag



Figure no. 14 Thankhab [bed cover]



Figure no. 15 Charkab [rain coat]



Figure no.16 Table cloth

There are many more products that can be made using yathra with the help of skill and innovative ideas. The yathra products shown in figure no. 14 and 15 are one of the oldest products of yathra. Toady most of the weavers do not know how to weave Thankhab and Charkab nor there is much demand from the buyer because it has been replaced by modern materials.

Due to less customers in the Bumthang Dzongkhag, most of the weavers send their finished products to Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan. The customers prefer to buy yathra in a roll and with the help of tailoring skill, the yathra is used in different products. For local and especially for the tourist, Authentic Bhutanese Crafts Bazaar [figure no.17] is set up using eco- friendly bamboo at the heart of the Thimphu city. The market consist of around 80 shops and display different Bhutanese handicraft including yathra products in different types and forms.



Figure no.17 Authentic Bhutanese Crafts Bazaar

## Analysis

In Chumig community each household consist of at least two weavers out of which one is fully dedicated in weaving yathra. Besides weaving yathra, weavers also weave cloth piece for gho and kira to get additional financial benefits in the family. The skill of weaving yathra has passed from one generation to another, thus making mother the first teacher for a daughter in her life. As a result culture of weaving yathra has become a sort of hereditary trend and it indicate promising future for the weavers. Thus it also indicate the fulfillment of one of the pillar of Gross National Happiness i.e. preservation and promotion of culture. Thus it is great to see that both generations are playing their respective role in preservation and promotion of yathra weaving culture in the community.

Many weavers has forgot the name of the ingredients used in dyeing along with its process with the upcoming of readymade synthetic fabrics from neighboring state, where few weavers expressed their concern over it. With the decreasing number of sheep raring by the individual household and receiving less supply of wool from the National Sheep Breeding Centre at Tang Gewog has forced the weavers to go for the readymade synthetic fabrics. The readymade synthetic fabrics comes in two varieties i.e. quality and another one is the price. Today the weavers has the choice to pick readymade synthetic fabrics that cost between ngultrum five hundred to two thousand per kilogram. With the establishment of yathra factory in Zhuney village, the task of the weavers has become much easier because weavers not only buy yarns from the factory but also placed their finished yathra products in the factory for sell.

Patterns on the yathra are beautifully designed by individual weaver but many do not know the name and its meaning. Each pattern are unique and has its name but mostly in Bumthapkha as yathra is originated from Bumthang valley. But one conclusion can be made that the weavers are fascinated with the immediate environment, as most of the patterns names and design are aligned with the environment like flowers, trees, stars, water mills and few

are also related with feelings. Therefore yathra weaving culture served two purpose, firstly it is a skill that helps weavers earn some extra money and secondly it helps in preservation and promotion of local dialect as name of the patterns are mostly in Bumthapka.

More number of regular yathra weavers was found in middle and lower Chumig as compared to upper Chumig. In upper Chumig weavers weave yathra as a part time activity and they do not sell much of their finished products because they usually used in different occasion like promotion party, baby shower, birthday and gift to lamas and friends. Another reason could be that most of the community are engaged in agricultural work due to warmer climatic conditions as compared to middle and lower Chumig. As a result weaving has become second important activity for the community of upper Chumig.

Yathra weavers possessing more experiences got sound knowledge on yathra and most of them are not a regular weavers. Most of the experienced weavers use old patterns on yathra and keep themselves for personal use. Sometime they also weave yathra when they get orders from the buyers and earned good amount of money. Whereas young weavers take weaving as a full time activity and earned an average of ngultrum 10,000-15,000/- per month. But young weavers use simple and innovative patterns in yathra.

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## Conclusion

Yathra, although does not have any definite definition, the culture of weaving yathra has been practiced by Bhutanese ancestor since time immemorial. Yathra used to be woven in small scale using local materials for personal purpose. The reason could be due to less demand and lack of innovative ideas, which limited the weavers to make varieties of products out of yathra. Today the scenario has changed. Weavers from middle and lower Chumig are today regular weavers and they earn substantial amount of money for livelihood. Therefore, the art of weaving yathra contributes not only to the preservation of traditional culture but also provides source of financial alternative in the community. Indigenous yathra weavers are basically self-trained as they don't receive any kind of formal training from any agency, however the legacy continues as the art of weaving yathra has been passed down from mothers to daughters as family tradition.

However, there is always a risk of losing this beautiful indigenous art of yathra weaving culture- as it is transmitted as oral tradition- if discontinued to the onslaught of modern textile industry dominating every fabric of Bhutanese clothing. With the increasing demand of yathra and decreasing supply of local materials, the yathra weavers are inclined towards using imported materials. It also indicates that Bhutanese weavers are consistently innovative in adapting to new materials. Although the imported ready-made materials has reduced the work load of weavers, young weavers become ignorant of the traditional process of yathra weaving culture. Many experienced weavers do possess skills of using traditional pattern in yathra, however with the coming of innovative patterns (that are easy and less time consuming) the traditional patterns are gradually taking back stage. Patterns on yathra do play a vital role in preservation and promotion of culture in a community as the name suggests in Bumthapka, however it is disheartening that many young weavers are unaware of name and meanings of patterns in yathra. With the onset of modernization and innovative designs, many young generations of weavers have now found the creative ways of marketing yathra products. These yathra products are gaining popularity in many places and are even liked by youth, which is very encouraging.

Bhutanese weavers are fortunate that their skills are appreciated and loved by many, including the royal families. Her Majesty the Royal Mother Azhi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, has established the Textile Museum and the Royal Textile Academy in Thimphu as an appreciation to Bhutanese weavers and to promote and preserve the art of weaving. Here the weavers not only get the opportunity to display their creative art of weaving but also can access to the history related to the weaving. To promote the indigenous crafts, the Royal Government of Bhutan has set up the Agency for Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC) in 2011, coinciding with the celebrations of our His Majesty's Royal Wedding. Youth who are interested in learning the art of weaving are being trained in various institutions in country. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the future of yathra weaving culture looks promising. Our yathra weavers today have good reason to be proud to be a vital part of the country's prized culture, as they literally weave the motifs and patterns of our tradition in their indigenous art.

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