The Conservation of Textiles in Bhutan: Cultural and Conservation Challenges

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Bhutan is a small Buddhist kingdom nestled in the Himalayas, between Tibet and India. 300 kilo from east to west, and 100 kilo north south, population of 800,000, it is a theocracy, ruled by His Majesty, the Chief Abbot, the monk body and elected lay assembly. Buddhism came to Bhutan from Tibet in the 8th century, with the teacher and Saint Guru Rinpoche or Padmasambhava. Monasteries dot the countryside, many of them built high on the sides of cliffs, marking the site of a miracle or merely situated remotely for the promotion of deeper meditation and faith. They are festooned with prayer flags, and host pilgrims for important festivals and holy days. Cut off from the "outside world" until the late 1960's, the countryside, monasteries, monks cells and rituals, and deep religious commitment of the populace has remained undisturbed, continuous since the 1600's. In fact, I often feel as if I am transported to the medieval period. This is not life as you know it here. The spirits are alive, circling, protecting, watching; the ancestors and saints are re incarnated and all around us.

Most of the monasteries I worked in date back to the 1600's when the Shabdrung (Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel) the "George Washington" of Bhutan, unified the country both religiously and politically, quelling the many sectarian disputes, and bringing civil and religious order under

regional Dzongs, or fortressed monasteries. They still serve as the regional seats of government. Many of the textiles I have worked on are housed and used in these ancient crumbling structures, the conditions which are threatening the art, wall paintings, textiles, statuary. The Buddhism is primarily Drukpa and Kagyu sects, similar to Tibet. Like medieval France or Italy, at least 1, if not 2 or 3 boys in each family will enter the monk hood for his life. They bring merit to their families, and are educated and cared for. These monasteries are the essence of culture, the life force of culture in Bhutan.

Within this deeply religious culture, I have worked teaching preventative conservation to both museum staff and monks, three work visits over the last 4 years. Over the years, I have been asked to conserve several "national textile treasures". These textiles are one-of-a-kind, have or currently belong to important religious leaders and are "in use" within active monasteries. They are "relics" - imbued with powers of protection and blessings. These textiles are not art, not art as we see it, a beautiful important historic object to be conserved and stored in an acid free box or put on display in a plexi vitrine. This is not art for arts sake. These objects are life, people live in contact with them, and they are alive. So conservation of these textiles is not about conservation of art as we know it, but about the maintenance of the religion and how conservation fits within its philosophy. It is about understanding the concept of impermanence, integral to Buddhist theology. We are all impermanent, as are our objects. Everything is constantly renewed, objects reconstructed to serve the purpose of devotion. If an 18th century thankgka painting's silk brocade borders have disintegrated, then a tailor or monk makes a new border. If an 18th century sculpture is crumbling,

then a new one is carved. The School of the Thirteen Traditional Arts continues to train young men and women to create these crafts and keep the culture alive and renewed. This is an integral part of Bhutanese culture.

The conservation of these "textile relics" poses multiple challenges with regard to the selection of appropriate conservation treatment for the continued use of the object. Treatment has to be in accord with the theological guidelines which dictate use, as well as the political and educational chain of command. In a deeply religious culture, where "church" and state are unified, profound cultural respect on my part is tantamount to the success of our treatments. In fact, gaining peoples' confidence is the most important foundation, and truly the reason why I feel I have been invited back to continue to train and work on these extremely revered and protected objects.

So the first step on my part to ensure success in training and treatment is to accept that I am a visitor, an outsider. I accept that my views and approach, even my AIC code of ethics, are all subject to philosophical debate. And that conservation in Bhutan is about people and living beliefs. These beliefs guide and shape my work. My guiding principle is that it is not my prerogative to mandate my views, or western views of conservation. Simply telling a chief abbot that a particular textile cannot be touched or viewed any longer, and placed in a dust free dark storage is culturally unacceptable when the objects we are asked to conserve are living and must be used.

I have learned that I can inspire and advise, but that the ultimate say and decision lies with the Bhutanese. My teachings can and have influenced over

time, slowly, as the visible benefits and rewards of conservation are witnessed by the Bhutanese. I have effected change within the museums NOT to remove old brocade mounts on the thangkas, but instead to stabilize them. I have encouraged basic changes in daily practices that better serve the long life of the artifact, such as washing hands, laying down cloth to place an artifact on, and saving the old column for placement in a museum or even tourist hotel. I have provided a foundation in basic conservation skills and launched the first generation of textile conservation technicians. And this is because I recognize the importance of giving people the tools and responsibility to take care of their own cultural patrimony. And I believe that this is why my approach is successful, because it empowers the Bhutanese I work with. I witness on each visit that my training is sustainable. But I always work in an environment of seeking the agreement and decisions of the Bhutanese, from Her Majesty the patron of the Textile Museum, the Minister of Culture, down to the monk caretakers. And my work and treatments are a compromise between east and west.

The first significant relic I worked on was a legendary 17th century pearl-studded silk monk's shawl, called the "moti choegho" from Tsamdrak Goenpa. This shawl is said to have been Guru Rinpoche's offered by the King of Zahor. (The first Tsamdrak Trulku was a contemporary of the Shabdrung.)The first hurdle was the permission to work on it and the assurance that conservation would enhance and extend its life. This had to be secured through Her Majesty, The Ministry of Culture, Head Abbot of the monastery, and the local monk caretakers, truly a complicated political process. The monks who care for this textile were extremely distrustful of the shawl leaving its sacred place. Historically, this relic had never left its

small remote temple home of Tsamdrak Goenpa in central Bhutan. Nevermind the intrusion of 21st century materials into the relic and a non Buddhist foreigner intimately working on it. The second challenge was maintaining it as a holy relic while we worked. These practices of purification and handling are prescribed by religious tradition and authority. Some of the protocol included: blessing the motor vehicle and the entire work place when it was transferred; blessing the non-Buddhist conservator and allowing visitors to come and "take blessings" touch their heads to the edge of the shawl, while we worked on it.

The actual treatment was approved by Her Majesty, Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuk, the Patron of the Textile Museum. We experimented with overlays of netting, silk crepeline and stabiltex, a multifilament sheer polyester fabric. But it was HM's foresight and determination to think in terms of centuries, not decades, which allowed us to fully stabilize the shawl with a comprehensive treatment, design and build a new storage container, and train the monk caretakers in continued monitoring. With Her Majesty's input, we decided to use the stabiltex, the most stable and soft of the overlays. While I trained the group to do isolated patches, ultimately the entire shawl was encapsulated, and the treatment was executed after my departure. A great leap of faith on my part. But it worked. We worked long days, standing, with no light, making merit as we stitched. This was my first experience working on a textile imbued with such powers.

Since we knew that this was a "once in a lifetime treatment", we were able to more fully conserve and protect the shawl for its continued use in the monastery. The purity and power of the object were re-instated by the re-

consecration when the work was completed. It was because of this high level of patronage, that we were able to do this comprehensive treatment. Her Majesty's understanding of the value of conservation, familiarity with actual treatments overlays etc, and her vision to think in terms of centuries enabled us to do this treatment in the most complete manner, following the AIC code of ethics. To add, this treatment was high profile, attracting the attention of The Chief Abbot, and hundreds of other visitors. Our work to preserve the moti choegho was featured in a 45 minute documentary on BBS and in the local newspaper. This put the Textile Museum on the map, and raised awareness of conservation amoung the Bhutanese.

Another challenge was the survey and conservation of thirty personal throne objects belonging to the last Mind reincarnation of the Shabdrung, Bhutan's "George Washington." Housed in the frequently visited Talo monastery and on view, the conservation of this collection had to take into consideration their continual use and exposure. The placement and use of these textiles could not be modified. They are displayed in the temple room where the saint died, and remain there for visitors to come and make offerings, look at, and touch. Our immediate problem was a massive moth infestation. Large pillows and mattresses, carpets, tiger skin throws and silk coverings were riddled with live larvae. The second long term challenge was trying to modify the environment to prolong their life - a southern exposure non-screened room. The throne and textiles were covered with a layer of protective muslin, which is removed by the monk caretaker for visitors. Monks were trained how to vacuum the collection on a monthly basis. Insect traps were provided and monks trained how to use them as a monitoring tool. Incidentally, here I was the one told to wear the cotton gloves not to

protect from oils or dirt on my hands, but to provide a barrier between the "non-Buddhist" and the relics. They really did not want me touching these relics.

The problem of the larvae was the most perplexing obstacle. Extermination of these living creatures was prohibited by Buddhist prescriptions. In fact introduction of sticky traps is problematic and in several monasteries, it takes several meetings with the Chief Abbots before he might agree to the use of traps. The final solution for the Shabdrung's textiles, worked out by the monastery and the Secretary of Culture (a former monk) was fumigation of the textiles, but all debris and insect carcasses, also recognized as holy relics, were bagged and retained with the textiles. They were fumigated in the chamber at the National Library in Thimphu, using methyl bromide. This was our only option, as they would not fit in a freezer, and could not be cleaned. A compromise on my part.

Another obstacle while working on these relics, particularly the degraded crumbling throne textiles, was preventing staff and visitors from physically removing threads as personal relics. These textiles have such powers of protection, that even a small thread worn on the body is believed to guard from evil or illness. Here, the sacredness of these textiles supported my argument not to remove any material. I was fully supported by the Secretary of Culture on this.

This also supported my treatment approach when conserving the First King's Raven Crown, where we overlaid the torn tattered lining with a translucent layer of stabiltex. The first suggestion by my staff and trainees

was to remove the disintegrated lining and replace it with a new one. After all, it is an important living object, and the goal is to restore it to its original appearance, integrity and use. Using the "removal of relic material" argument, coupled with the introduction of "not removing any original material" in conservation theory, we employed a technique of overlaying sheer stabiltex over the existing lining. The importance of preserving relic material applied to our wet cleaning of two of the Shabdrung's textiles. We were asked by the monks and Secretary of Culture to strain off the "relic" dirt from the washing water, dry it out and keep it. The water used for wet cleaning was also saved and then transferred in large drums to the most sacred temple in Thimphu for watering the temple garden.

How does an outsider influence the political and religious authorities for the goal of conservation, while respecting centuries old traditions? In short, very slowly, and through explanation, discussion, and listening to the prescribed rules of use. My suggestions for upgrade of storage and use are most often quite docile and incremental. For example, when working in Sangcheokor monastery last year, on 4 enormous silk embroidered and appliquéd thongdroels (devotional hanging banners) I was able to effect a huge change in the storage of the textiles. For hundreds of years they have been stored in a room off the main sacristy, along with all the offerings of butter, rice, fruit and oil. The room, with an open window, was piled with sacred objects and food, and crawling with insects and mice. Through long discussions with the Chief Abbot, a very learned man, he first allowed me to enter the room, off limits to women and protected by Mahakhali, a woman- devouring protective demon. Once in the storage room, I was able to speak with him about the separation of sacred object and food materials. Three days later, all

food was permanently removed to another storage room, and this room was cleaned out, window sealed, and designated as a room for sacred objects. In addition, we buffered the crates with Marvel Seal linings, and rolled the thongdroels in clean muslin and better padding. This was all done by young monks, eager to learn the rudiments of preventative conservation.

Within the context of a secular museum, I have more flexibility in training, following the basic model of augmenting collections care, storage and display. The Textile Museum in the capital city Thimphu served as the base. Established in 2001, it houses about one thousand textiles which are representative of the country's rich and complex hand weaving traditions. The museum's two floors of galleries, storage, work room and gift shop, are staffed by eight employees and four resident hand weavers. It is a gem of a museum in a land where appreciation of textiles is evident everywhere – in the colorful daily dress, temple hangings and home ornamentation. One objective of the 2003 project was to use a newly acquired collection to teach the fundamentals of collections care and establish proper rolled storage.

A team of six, we examined each textile and compiled a computer-based catalogue record. Textiles were condition reported, and prepared for freezing for pest management. A major aspect of our daily work was the systematic re-organization of storage and identification of future storage needs. We upgraded the storage room; designing and installing new roller racks, using PVC pipes and pre-washed muslin.

The work carried out in 2003 led directly to the upgrading of facilities in 2005 with the introduction of anoxic methods of storage for the non-rolled

collections. Previously these textiles had been stored on open shelves and often in plastic bags. The climate and infrastructure poses major challenges to climate control of large spaces. Moreover, infestations and dust are a constant threat. The solution reached was to create micro climates for the non rolled textiles. Consulting with several conservators and Jerry Shiner of Keepsafe Systems, a technique of encapsulating each textile in an anoxic environment was devised. The imported materials included Escal Barrier Film, Ageless Oxygen scavengers, Ageless Indicator Eyes, and a heat sealer. The nitrogen was obtained locally.

Purging with nitrogen assisted in bringing the oxygen level to less than 0.05% without excessive use of Ageless sachets. In addition, it added volume to the bag, preventing creasing and crushing of the textiles. Creases were padded out with polyethylene rods or locally available hand made paper (with a relatively neutral pH).Each textile was photographed and catalogued before being sealed up, creating a very usable database. The staff were trained in teams how to properly seal the film and create bags of the appropriate sizes. By the end of the 2005 workshop, fifty textiles were successfully re-housed using this method. The anoxic storage technique was big news, heralding the first time use a high tech system in Bhutan for cultural protection. The work continues, and almost the entire non-rolled collection has been housed and is being monitored.

Am I conserving these important religious textiles in the manner in which I would here in the US? Am I effecting changes in storage or display along the guidelines I adhere to here in my practice? Am I compromising my standards for treatment, use of materials which are not perfectly suited? Yes

to all of these. All conservation work in Bhutan is done within the limits of locally available materials, and with respect for the people who use and care for it. Moreover, I am training people for the first time in strange radically new ideas of conservation, and doing it in remote locations, with limited time. To change habits and traditions of hundreds of years takes years. My approach is to teach practical skills, give people the ability to continue this work without me. So my solutions are collaborative compromises, respecting both our ideas and needs. I do make a difference for the objects I work on, perhaps not as long term as I would here in the US. Most importantly, I've seen the sustainability of my work, the continued application of what I have taught, and the desire to learn more, protect more. This is the true success of my training. I see the continued practice of hand washing, textiles covered with muslin, vacuuming, writing of condition reports and project books, and upgrades to museum storage and display.

Believe it or not, placing muslin dust and light barriers over sacred textiles or a monk tacking his own shawl over a sunny window are significant steps forward in preservation. Limiting the number of butter lamps on each alter to one (instead of hundreds) is slowing down the degradation of thankgas and sculpture. Placing hanging curtains in front of wall paintings has saved these images from countless scratches, beetle nut juice and smoke stains. I work within the constraints of what is possible and understandable. These are small steps forward in the preservation of cultural patrimony in this rich kingdom. But done in collaboration with the Bhutanese. Often times, I believe I am more the student than they are.

