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Dick, Emma (2016) Constructing fashionable dress and identity in Bhutan. In: Modern Fashion Traditions: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity Through Fashion. Craik, Jennifer and Jansen, M. Angela, eds. Dress and Fashion Reserach . Bloomsbury Academic, London, pp. 185-206. ISBN 9781474229494, pbk-ISBN 9781350058491, e-ISBN 9781474229524, e-ISBN 9781474229500, e-ISBN 9781474229517. [Book Section]
(doi:10.5040/9781474229524.ch-009)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

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CH 9 CONSTRUCTING FASHIONABLE DRESS AND IDENTITY IN BHUTAN¹

Emma Dick

INTRODUCTION

Whilst working as Head of Fashion in LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore (2007-2010) I was approached by Singapore International Foundation (SIF) to act as a Specialist Volunteer Overseas to co-develop a tailoring curriculum for the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources in Bhutan in an international development project funded by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2008-2009. In this chapter I present a critical reflection on our curriculum and broadly situate the role of international development projects focused on textiles and dress within discourses of globalisation. I examine how the interaction with non-governmental and inter-governmental agencies may combine with ideas about dress and identity within the recipient country. I wish to personify the processes through which these 'hybrid' identities are constructed, both physically and metaphorically, through ideas about fashionable dress present in garments and online discussions about them to challenge simplistic essentialist thinking about the ways in which 'fashion' is adopted by a 'non-western' culture.

As a small developing nation, Bhutan may seem an unlikely location to situate a discussion of fashionable dress and identity. There exists a popular consensus that fashion is a modern cultural practice that evolved through the emergence of capitalism and consumer culture and exists in modern cities in the 'developed' world. Scholarship offers a variety of opinions. Craik (2009: 19-20) suggests that,

There is a powerful perception and myth that non-Western cultures have stable and unchanging clothing codes, perhaps driven by the synchronic approach to ethnographic case studies and an apparent desire to cleave discernable differences in taxonomy between artificial binary categories of 'us' and 'them'.

Such binary categories are made even more emphatic in the case of 'developing' countries, variously orientalised as 'exotic', 'ethnic', or 'wild' backdrops for photo shoots and open sources of 'authentic' inspiration for designers in the international fashion press. References to Bhutan in *Vogue* assert a mythical association with Shangri-La, an imagined utopia presented by James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, which describes a pristine medieval Buddhist culture, somewhere in the high Himalayas. The *Vogue* discourse about Bhutan is evident from the 1960s onwards, as the country was beginning to engage actively in international socio-political networks. Bhutan is described as 'one of the magic words...organized around castle-strongholds (like mediaeval Scotland)' (*Vogue*, June 1963), ruled by 'a charming family from a small, imperiled kingdom in the Himalayas... [whose name translates as] 'Fearless Thunderbolt, Master of Cosmic Power'...' (*Vogue*, July 1967). The narrative continues, practically unchanged, to the present. In

2005, US designer Jane Mayle described Bhutan as a '*mythical, magical land almost untouched by the modern world*' (Vogue, June 2005). Condé Nast Traveller magazine in October 2008 lavished an eight-page editorial entitled, '*Flying Tiger, Thundering Dragon*' featuring images of Asian supermodel Ling Tan juxtaposed beside masked Buddhist dancers, a prayer wheel, an archer and Buddhist monks. These fashion editorials echo exactly the phenomena Niessen, Jones and Leskovich (2003: 18) suggest,

Contemporary ways of knowing and representing the Oriental Other as timeless, exotic, untouched, dangerous, passive, inscrutable, or oppressed are the legacies of earlier Orientalist frameworks developed to understand and subjugate Asia.

The enduring Condé Nast discourse on Bhutan acts as a driving force to impel the fashionistas of the world to make pilgrimage and transform the Shangri-La myth into reality. Designer Derek Lam holidayed in Bhutan in 2011. Polymath businessman Sir David Tang, founder of Shanghai Tang, reportedly celebrated his 50th birthday there in 2004. Christina Ong, founder of worldwide fashion distributor Club 21 owns a luxury hotel. For Autumn/Winter 2012 Proenza Schouler captured the 'magical beauty of Bhutan' along with a self-confessed pastiche of 'everything Asian' (i-D online, 2012). Diane von Furstenberg and Christian Louboutin travelled to Bhutan in May 2012 to stock up on items including an embroidered vest for Louboutin to wear to the Met Ball. *Diane's Diary* conveys a well-meaning yet patronising rhetoric of the 'other' as she describes meeting the Bhutanese Royal Family,

It is like being in a fairy tale. They look and behave like a fairy tale King and Queen. They are so incredibly nice, simple and caring about their lovely Kingdom (von Furstenberg, 2012).

Due to the country's physical inaccessibility in the high Himalayas, accessed by only the national airline, *Druk Air*, and a deliberate low impact high yield tourism policy which sets a minimum daily cost for tourists of 200 US dollars, Bhutan manages to embody the Shangri-La myth and attains a level of cultural distinction by association with the rich and successful who can afford to holiday there.

But this imagined Shangri-La-La land is in sharp contrast to the economic daily reality of Bhutan, termed one of the world's smallest and least developed economies by OECD, eligible for official development assistance and tabulated by The World Bank to have an average annual gross national income per capita of 2070 US dollars (World Bank, 2012). Bartering for basic foodstuffs is practiced and average life expectancy is calculated within the lowest thirty percent of the world. Money played virtually no role in Bhutan until the 1960s when tax could still be paid in the form of textiles (Pommaret, 1994: 174). Little private enterprise exists and employment opportunities are precarious, especially for the burgeoning young population. The median age of the country is twenty-five (CIA, 2012). Public concern is expressed in the national press about the dangers of drug abuse and violence simmering amongst a disaffected youth with limited future prospects locally, now connected to images of the material wealth and opportunity of the 'outside' world since television was introduced to the country in 1999, to broadcast the fourth King's silver jubilee.

It is against this backdrop of economic uncertainty that our tailoring curriculum was developed, to provide a possible career path and creative opportunities for future generations. Developing nations such as Bhutan may adopt certain elements of the 'historically and geographically specific system of dress' (i.e. 'Western') that Entwistle (2000) identifies, during their encounter with international development agencies and individuals. This is how the hybrid identities theorised by Appadurai (1990) begin to emerge in the discussion of globalisation. Current Anglophone-centric scholarship offers a range of definitions for theorising 'fashion', which broadly agree on its ephemerality; its fundamental need for continual changing of styles; and its geographical, historical and cultural locus of power in the post-industrial cities of Paris, London, New York and their descendants in the second- and third-tier global network of cities now staging 'Fashion Weeks' as a powerful indicator of national economic, cultural and creative success.

I do not believe it is particularly meaningful to try to enforce one universal definition of 'fashion', and from the evidence presented by Bhutan I would suggest that multiple world fashion 'systems' exist in chaotic and variously changing relationships to one another (see for example, Craik, 1993;

Riello and McNeil, 2010; Kaiser, 2011). By looking at the production of garments in Bhutan, through the example of our curriculum, and the production of ideas about what constitutes fashionable identity by a local Facebook group called Bhutan Street Fashion, here I offer a preliminary suggestion of how people within Bhutan actively engage with and construct their own ideas about fashionable dress and identity.

DRIGLAM NAMZHA: A NATIONAL DRESS CODE

The historical and cultural context of dress in Bhutan is framed by the existence of a Buddhist monastic dress code, following models established in the seventeenth century, which since 1989 has been fairly rigorously applied as mandatory in civil society. *Driglam namzha* is an important example to emphasize that what constitutes 'traditional' dress is hardly traditional, authentic or static, but in this case has been adopted for very particular political and social impact. Bhutan was never colonised, thus the internal socio-political, cultural and economic structures evolved without undue external influence. The insistence on strict codes of public behaviour and dress forms part of a conscious agenda of nation building by the Royal Government of Bhutan, to avoid any threat of internal political fragmentation into different factions based along ethnic lines which it was feared could cause Bhutan to become subsumed into its neighbouring Hindu states, as happened to Sikkim in 1975. The official dress code is based on the traditional dress of the *Ngalop* ethnic group, the dominant social and religious group within Bhutan, said to descend from the earliest bearers of Tibetan Buddhism into the country in the 9th century CE. The national dress code rigorously applied since 1989 tightly regulates public attire at all official sites but does not apply to Hindu priests or foreigners, an exception which in itself promotes potentially problematic ideas about national and ethnic identity within an otherwise relatively non-hierarchical society (Pommaret, 1994: 173). Shortly after the institution of the strict dress code in 1989, an estimated 80,000 Hindu *Lhotshampas* of Nepali origin from the south of Bhutan fled as refugees from Bhutan, not wishing to be assimilated into the dominant ethnic-political group.

The national dress for men, *gho*, is the same garment as worn by most Tibetan males but hitched up to the knees to give greater freedom of movement. The word *gho* literally means 'garment' whilst the Tibetan equivalent item of dress is called *chuba*. The *togo* is a shirt with long white cuffs worn underneath the *gho*, the term borrowed from an item of monastic dress. In addition to the *gho*, the national dress code requires men on official business to wear a *kabney*, a large scarf of a specified colour, according to his rank in civil or religious society, which is wrapped around his body from the left shoulder to the right hip. A red *kabney* indicates male members of the royal family or higher ranked officials in the civil service. White is the colour worn by ordinary citizens and saffron yellow may be worn only by the king and the chief abbot, or *Je Khenpo*. As Bhutan is one of the world's youngest multi-party democracies, modern colour codes have been created for *kabneys* worn by members of the new National Assembly and National Council, established by the constitution in 2008 (Bhutan Observer, 2011). The wearing of *kabney* is said to have started from the time of Gautama Buddha and the exchanging of scarves with all official communication was observed by the few Europeans who visited Bhutan in the eighteenth century on diplomatic and trade missions, such as George Bogle, who visited Bhutan on behalf of the East India Company in 1774, and Captain Samuel Turner in 1783 (see Turner, 1800; Stewart, 2009; Teltscher, 2003).

For women, national dress consists of *kira*, a rectangle of cloth, usually about three metres in length of hand-woven textile, which is wrapped around the body, folded into a wide pleat in the front, fastened at the shoulders with brooches, called *tinkhup*, or *koma*, and secured with a tight narrow cloth, *keru*, wrapped around the waist. The *kira* is worn on top of a loose long-sleeved Tibetan-style blouse, *wangu*, and the look is completed with a short wide-sleeved jacket, *tego*. The jacket sleeves are aligned with the blouse sleeves and folded back with them into cuffs worn a little above the wrist. A shoulder cloth, *rachu*, is worn draped across the left shoulder (Myers and Bean, 1994).

In private, Bhutanese people often wear 'Western-style' clothing, of 'pants' and 'shirts' but all people engaged in public capacities must abide by *driglam namzha*. This means all civil servants, students, people engaged in the tourism industry, or those who represent Bhutan officially in any context must embody these rules and regulations, which perhaps inevitably are at odds with the everyday dress practices of some Bhutanese,

I like wearing my tracksuit or my jeans. But I know I will get stop by the police...then I just say that I am on my way to play football. They can't fine me since they can't prove I am not (Whitecross, 2009: 67).

Fines enforced for breaking the *driglam namzha* amount to approximately three days' wages for the average Bhutanese, so the incentive to dress within the law is quite strong. The young Bhutanese people whom I interviewed seem to have no problem in following *driglam namzha*, where required, and dressing in 'pants and shirts' when off-duty. The imposition of conformity through dress and appearance, propagated through the newly codified *Dzongka* national language section of *Kuensei*, the state newspaper, also diminishes the potential applicability of dominant 'Western' theories about fashion to accurately describe the current practices of everyday dress in Bhutan. The two contexts of 'official' and 'off-duty' allowed the Bhutanese to hold both sets of values in their mind simultaneously, to exhibit a dual-consciousness of dress.

A definition often quoted for 'fashion' is from Joanne Entwistle (2000), who determines fashion as, 'a system of dress found in societies where social mobility is possible'. This concept does not correlate with Bhutanese ideas of state sovereignty, which are fundamentally different to those presented by European history. Furthermore, fashion is overwhelmingly construed as a materialistic and superficial field of practice, which seems difficult to reconcile with the non-materialistic philosophy of Buddhist culture. Changes in style may happen more subtly and at a slower rate in Bhutan than in a highly developed economy, but an alternative system of social identification through dress and appearance, governed by its own logic of temporality and location is visible in the traditional dress practices of people throughout Bhutan and exists alongside a range of influences from encounters with the development agencies, celebrities, tourists and media influences present in the capital city Thimpu and other urban centres throughout the country.

The national press regulates and mediates local concerns about how to interpret *driglam namzha* correctly (see for example Yeshi, 2008) alongside an emergent discourse of nostalgia for the loss of authentic national dress practices as older styles of garments become superseded by modern hybrid garments with stitched elements to emulate the appearance of wrapped and folded cloth and modern closures and fastenings adopted for reasons of practical wearability,

Today, it is very rare to see Bhutanese women wearing the complete National Dress. With the hook, half-*kira* and the jacket-*tego*, *ker*a and *wangu* may soon also be heading for the museum like the *thinkhab* (BBS, 2007).

Parallel to this narrative of nostalgia and cultural loss, reports appear in the same newspapers encouraging readers to wear stiletto gladiator sandals with their *kira*, adopt Korean style spectacles, and tweed jackets that emulate characters in the *Twilight* movie franchise, and how to style cardigans, imported from Bangladesh. The seeming contradictions of change and continuity, tradition and modernity are encapsulated by the dual consciousness of dress.

Alongside the Royal Family, who are almost universally admired within Bhutan as equitable forward-thinking bearers of modernity, one of the most revered and recognisable figures actively shaping Bhutan's contemporary culture on the domestic and international scene is the incarnate lama and movie producer Khyentse Norbu, also known as Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, who offers a view that supports Entwistle's belief that social mobility and fashion are in some way connected. He clearly understands the politics of fashionable dress and the need to equate ideas of modernity with those of 'traditional' culture, to give it currency amongst the youthful population of Bhutan. He advises that Bhutanese people should be looking to practice elements of the ancient culture in ways that are relevant, vibrant, alive, dynamic, inspiring, modern, and even 'fashionable' to combat increasing problems arising during the transition through elements of development, modernity and increased urbanization. One specific example he offers is to, 'eliminate clothing items that embody class distinctions, such as scarves and robes showing rank' (Walcott, 2011: 257). One of the most respected Buddhist masters in the world is encouraging a paradigm shift in the way that Bhutanese culture and society is visibly embodied through the dress code. He understands and believes that the right to enjoy a culture is not 'frozen' at some point in times past when culture was supposedly 'pure' or 'traditional'. Multiple parallel examples exist worldwide which illustrate similar tensions in the process of economic and social development in the pursuit of modernity, a result of anachronistic notions of the 'authenticity' of the culture' (see for

example Gilbert, 2010: 38). Choosing which aspects of traditional culture to keep, which to discard, and which to update in what ways, is an extremely problematic area for governmental authorities and inter-governmental agencies to decide. Such evolution is by nature an ongoing, fluid, contradictory and never-ending process. Time-limited policy-driven grant-funded development programmes based on deliverables might interfere with cultural evolution that would otherwise take years to emerge.

Such anachronistic notions of 'authenticity' are significant in the analysis of the *driglam namzha* and the discourse of cultural loss expressed by the national press. This is where I begin situate my own contribution to the construction of ideas about fashionable dress and identity in Bhutan, through my participation in the co-development of a tailoring curriculum for Chumey Vocational Training Institute in Bumthang, Central Bhutan.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF HYBRID DRESS STYLES: TAILORING CURRICULUM FOR CHUMEY VOCATIONAL TRAINING INSTITUTE, BUMTHANG, BHUTAN.

The demand for a curriculum directly addressing the perceived skills gap in tailoring in Bhutan had emerged through a series of events implied in the process of nation building through dress code and appearance. A national design competition coordinated by UNDP Bhutan to design and manufacture uniforms for the *Druk Air* female cabin crew (UNDP, 2007: 16) had highlighted the difficulties of manufacturing standardised garments in Bhutan. The wish to supply uniforms for the military and police out of local manufacture rather than outsourcing production to India and the growing demand for quality items of national dress to clothe the civil service, contributed to the formulation of a development project to request capacity building training in garment design and manufacture through UNDP in Bhutan. Singapore International Foundation responded to the call for proposals and identified LASALLE College of the Arts Singapore as the appropriate academic partner to provide expertise in curriculum development and technical skills training in tailoring. Regional geographies of development may be influenced by a number of personal and professional networks, with Bangkok and Singapore viewed as particularly powerful hubs of global aka 'western' expertise and technological innovation within the South East Asia region.

The scope and framework of the curriculum was established by the Dean of Design in a preliminary needs assessment exercise in 2008. Thereafter my colleague Peck Leng Tan and myself made a series of missions to Bhutan in 2008 and 2009 to develop content and deliver a structured vocational curriculum and a training programme for those who would go on to become the trainers in the final iteration of the Tailoring programme at Chumey Vocational Training Institute. The mode of delivery was based on the 'Training of Trainers' facilitation model, designed to produce a sustainable cascade of knowledge, learned through active participation, which can be passed on to the next cohort of trainees. This approach is used widely throughout the development sector, and it is thought that skills learned through such methods survive long after the initial trainer has delivered the first iteration of the course and moved on.

Through a series of discussions with a range of stakeholders from Chumey Vocational Training Institute, private tailors already established in Bhutan, the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, UNDP Bhutan, Singapore International Foundation and many other agents of development whom we encountered in Thimpu in 2008 and 2009, we agreed to develop a curriculum that would enable the tailors and new trainees to produce high quality garments for the internal market and also create innovative garments from traditional textiles using Western style tailoring methods and quality standards.

These 'hybrid' garments were perceived to be in demand amongst the wealthy tourists who visit Bhutan and seen as a good opportunity to create enterprise, entrepreneurial skills and personal creative outlets for the aspiring fashion designers whom we met amongst and alongside the cohort of trainees. The gradual evolution of traditional dress codes to include items targeted at wealthy tourists existed prior to the development of our curriculum, which may now have in some small part contributed to the technical innovations and further moves away from any anachronistic notions of 'traditional' dress, frozen at a fixed point in time somewhere in the imagined seventeenth century.

The final curriculum consisted of six modules, distributed over two years of full-time study. In line with the vocational training framework which was being developed for Bhutan at the same time, the practical to theory ratio was established as 80:20, although these figures may have evolved since the first iteration of the programme was established.² The six modules were as follows:

- Module 1: Production Methods and Introduction to Flat Pattern-Making
- Module 2: Understanding Fabric
- Module 3: Understanding Garment Construction: Womenswear and Menswear
- Module 4: Design Detailing and Garment Construction
- Module 5: Production of Small Products
- Module 6: Introduction to Production Chain Management

With the introduction of Helen Armstrong's comprehensive manual *Patternmaking for Fashion Design* as one of our core texts, our curriculum aimed to introduce trainees to the fundamentals of hand and machine sewing and the basics of constructing garment blocks by hand to understand and develop the fundamental aspects of 'Western' techniques of garment design and production from the very start of Module 1. Pre-existing knowledge and skill was variable among our first cohort of trainees. Some had little experience but demonstrated tremendous commitment to learning when applying to join the project by competitive entry. Others had been practising as tailors for many years, using a combination of techniques evolved and created locally through encounters with experienced tailors from neighbouring India, or picked up from previous training courses variously organised by different disparate development initiatives. There had been no systematic structured delivery, development or assessment of tailoring knowledge and skills within Bhutan prior to our curriculum, and formalising the current state of knowledge and practical skill would be one of the key indicators of our success.

We encouraged trainees to experiment with locally available textiles, closures and fastenings to enhance the functionality and wearability of garments designed for working in. As already mentioned above, such simple innovations in production had already caused the lamenting of cultural loss in the national press, a fundamental agent in mediating, constructing and maintaining a sense of national identity (Crane, 2008: 364). The hook fastening is gradually replacing the *kera* belt in some garments in Bhutan. The half-*kira* is a stitched form of the lower half of a *kira*, sewn to emulate the correct folds and pleats of a 'traditional' wrapped *kira*. This garment closely resembles 'Western' notions of a 'skirt'. The jacket-*tego* is a hybrid garment with contrasting collar and cuffs stitched directly inside the openings of a 'traditional' style *tego*, to emulate the full appearance of wearing a *wangu* underneath, but without the need for the additional garment.

Further embedded in the hybrid language of UK-centric curriculum design and standards codified by Bhutan Department of Trade, two of the learning outcomes the trainee should demonstrate on successful completion of Module 4 of the curriculum are listed thus:

Identify and select details that are traditional and non-traditional. Apply these details in traditional and non-traditional context (Curriculum, 2010: 35).

This binary categorisation between the traditional and non-traditional is present also in Module 5, which links quality control to 'appropriate commercial standards e.g. *Bhutan National Seal*' (Curriculum, 2010: 39). The Bhutan National Seal is aimed at,

Establishing national quality benchmark standards for Bhutanese handicraft products and encouraging the producers/ artisans to be more innovative and creative in their designs, while preserving the age old traditional craft skills and knowledge (Bhutan Department of Trade).

The judging criteria for the Bhutan National Seal are divided into the same two words referenced in our curriculum. Products classified as 'traditional' will be judged on their 'authenticity, design and finishing skills, technique, material and marketing' and for items deemed as 'non-traditional', the first judging criterion is changed to 'innovation', whilst all the rest remain the same. The criteria of 'innovation' and 'authenticity' may be read as well-intentioned anachronisms, further preserving the mythical authenticity of Bhutanese dress, whilst also legitimating designed products wholly derived from the same semi-mythic traditions as *driglam namzha*.

Technical innovation that enhances creative possibilities available to aspiring designers creates a further blending of the distinctions between the 'traditional' and the 'non-traditional'. Synthetic and processed yarns have become prevalent in Bhutan, through trading links with India, Bangladesh

and Thailand. A frame loom introduced from Tibet has 'augmented the existing technology of back-tension looms and sparked the creative development of brocaded wool twill weaves' (Myers and Bean, 1994: 18). Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights highlights the difficulties of trying to codify legal frameworks to protect indigenous cultures whilst at the same time trying to anticipate to what extent modern technology could form part of such traditional activities and how these could be defined and protected legally as a part of 'traditional' culture (Gilbert, 2010: 37). Joseph Lo, chief technical adviser for the Culture Based Creative Industries project for UNDP Bhutan 2004 - 2009 confirmed similar difficulties in the Bhutan context, in trying to define markers of authenticity within cultural production, how to innovate within those boundaries, and how to measure indicators of success,

It is really problematic trying to codify skills and abilities which are really tacit knowledge and trying to get them to fit into a structured framework (Lo, 2012).

Lees (2011) suggests that some inter-governmental organisation-authored projects become limited by definitions, caught up in documenting the 'authentic' to the detriment of supporting new ideas and innovations. One school of thought would suggest that ordinary individuals are disempowered, rather than empowered, by the intervention and activities of international inter-governmental agency-driven development projects.

Global NGOs come in from the outside very often armed with their own ideas of what is wrong and what should be done to remedy the situation. At precisely this point the issue of representativeness arises to bedevil thinking on civil society (Chandhoke, 2002: 46 cited in Crane, 2008: 374).

This logic should perhaps be applied to issues of representation in its broadest sense, and in our case to the political, aesthetic and cultural sovereignty governing self-representation through fashionable dress and identity construction. The context of our curriculum project should be framed within these broad concerns about cultural autonomy and representation, although the active role which the Royal Civil Service of Bhutan takes in ensuring self-negotiated ideas of traditional culture is significant and our curriculum was developed through a process of genuine stakeholder engagement and collaboration.

These examples from our curriculum may be implicated within the construction of hybrid dress practices and notions of fashionable dress and identity now evident in the national press in Bhutan. The impossibility of unadulterated cultural neutrality on the part of development agents, including myself, may connote diffuse trans-national cultural imperialism on the part of global development agencies. These inter-agency encounters underscore the anachronistic logic presented in a false dichotomy between categories of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional'.

Such binary logic presents an approach markedly different from the holistic ideas expressed by incarnate lama and movie producer Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, who aims to reconcile tradition and modernity, as one universally understood language. Few ordinary people, however, possess the trans-cultural omniscience represented and suggested by Rimpoche. He presents the same universal philosophy beautifully in his film *Travellers and Magicians* (2003). The central character, Dondup, performed by the non-actor and prominent BBS journalist Tshewang Dondup, dreams of escaping to America, smokes cigarettes, listens to rock music and wears a denim *gho*. Dondup represents the frustration of the present-yet-absent hybrid modernity of contemporary rural Bhutan, existing at a further area of remove from the hub of development agents and cultural intermediaries congregating round inter-governmental agencies based in Thimpu, the capital city.

The production of garments through our curriculum presents a narrative of institutionally measurable modernity in dress emerging through structured encounters between agents of inter-governmental development in vocational education. A complementary and related example is unfolding online via the pages of the Facebook group called Bhutan Street Fashion (BSF). BSF has emerged as an active trend discussion forum, established by Karma Wangchuk, whom I worked alongside in 2009 whilst developing the Tailoring curriculum, and he was working for UNIDO in Bhutan. It is interesting to compare a different set of ideas about fashionable dress and identity in Bhutan, quite distinct from the ideas of cultural nostalgia for the loss of traditional

heritage reported in some of the mainstream print media in Bhutan. BSF offers an opportunity to view the construction of ideas about fashionable identity from documenting and discussing what is worn by people on the streets, and to understand the range of people within and outside Bhutan who are driving and contributing to this active and energetic discussion in virtual space.

Bhutan Street Fashion

The STREETS is where the inspiration is. Masses r the new CLASSES. showing the fashion on the street...we show you like it is...no pretensions and no wannabe Mother Teresa promises, no HIDDEN agenda, no moral policing... Everyday life FASHION on the street (Bhutan Street Fashion, 2010).

Bhutan Street Fashion (BSF) was established on Facebook on 19th June 2010 and at the last count had 37, 624 followers (3rd May 2015). Founder Karma Wangchuk studied Fashion Design in India, lives in Thimpu, and describes himself as a,

Design student and Fashion Illustrator at the start of my journey... I am an accidental photographer with no formal training. I am more a visual person and therefore my blog has more images n sketches and less writing but I promise to write more (Wangchuck, 2012),

BSF began as a location for candid street-style photography shots of people 'spotted' in their daily lives in Bhutan.³ As Rocamora observes in her discussion of fashion blogs, such images overwhelmingly attract positive comments by the online community of followers (Rocamora, 2011). Encouraged through the 'like' function, group members engage in communal online discussions usually expressing support and admiration for the subjects' sartorial choices and to Karma for his innovation in starting up the group.

Miaka Wangmo Go Bhutan street fashion.. :) CLICK CLICK CLICK ♥ :) i offer ma services :) LOL
21 July 2010 at 12:16 · Like · 1

BHUTAN street Fashion... actually its always been there people just didnt notice it i guess =)
28 July 2010 at 07:26 · Like · 2

Jiwan Gurung indeed it is true...glad dat v r catchin up wid d world..BSF..u all r doin a gr8 job...kudo's 2 u all...
29 July 2010 at 05:16 · Like

BHUTAN street Fashion... i should have put both the pics tiogther n made the fans choose the look .. tuff dude Vs Chic dude
20 August 2010 at 13:21 · Like

BHUTAN street Fashion... actually both these pics are the same kid ... its amazing what clothes n a haircut can do ... pretty boy to macho =)
20 August 2010 at 13:32 · Like

Karma Kaso Sonam great collection...luv d pics..guess our country is rele developin si...
21 September 2010 at 12:01 · Like

The fluent use of informal 'text speak' abbreviations throughout the participants' conversations highlights the widespread ease of expression in English - and not Dzongkha - as the language of

dedicated followers of street fashion in Bhutan. This makes the group widely accessible on the global Facebook network, which does not yet offer a version in Dzongkha. It also highlights the gap between official language policy and everyday language usage in and about Bhutan. Throughout the photo comments for the album 'Street Trend in Bhutan 2010' emerges a collective sense of what 'Bhutan Street Style' means to the participants in the discussion. Gentle jokes are made about each other's style preferences, but Karma is usually present in the discussion, marshalling potentially offensive comments with direct remarks such as,

BHUTAN street Fashion... @KYT .. agree .. Stereotyping is equivalent to racism ..14
October 2010 at 05:58 · Like · 1

Taking on the role of 'moderator', Karma manages an extremely fluent dialogue about the consensus of meanings and derivations of the various ensembles represented in his and other members' photographs. Information is passed on about popular fashion ideas from Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and how places like Mongar, the fastest growing region in eastern Bhutan, compare to these East Asian countries. Shopping tips are shared about where to get the best fake Converse style shoes in Bangkok and how to make your own T-shirts, clothes and accessories using simple DIY techniques. At one stage Karma enters into a definition of fashion terminologies to correct what he views as misunderstandings about the meanings imparted by the words 'Chanel', 'Marc Jacobs' and 'vintage', related to an image of a girl with a handbag he has taken.

belle époque era mens beautiful era VINTAGE is a terminology used nowadays for second hand clothes n BTW the clothing from the 1920s to 1980s is considered vintage so there u go ...
11 October 2010 at 08:31 · Like · 2

Over the five years since the group was founded, the regularity of the postings and volume of commentary has increased and the range diversified. Karma and his collaborators have gained in confidence and are in demand as photographers, stylists and people to be talked about in fashion related projects across emerging print magazines, including *Yeewong*, launched in September 2009 and *Bhutan Time Out*, launched in April 2012. BSF has amassed followers from all over the world and regularly posts photographs of readers in front of a range of global mythic locations, such as New York Fashion Week, the Houses of Parliament in London and the Merlion in Singapore, carrying a handmade sign of allegiance to BSF. References made in international media about BSF, such as Cartner-Morley's (2011) article about the royal wedding of the Fifth King, and Marie Claire Magazine writer Fabrizio interviewing favourite TV personality Namgay Zam, are also posted on the page, demonstrating a self-awareness of the positioning BSF commands in reference to the global fashion media, attracted in some measure by the exotic otherness of Bhutan, established by the Shangri-La myth and echoed in the pages of mainstream Fashion media such as *Vogue*. The page has become a dynamic discussion forum for a virtual global community of more than 37,000 people interested in Bhutan Street Fashion and contributing to its future ontology.

BSF has been successful in captivating the minds of a virtual worldwide community beginning to actively construct the rhetoric of fashionable dress and identity in Bhutan from observation, documentation and representation of the people on the streets and how this relates to global online social media visual culture. Images of people 'Style Spotted' on the streets of Thimpu wear a multi-coloured array of *gho*, *kira*, pants and shirts, stylishly accessorised with 'geeky' glasses, 'Aviator' sunglasses, small purses crafted out of hand-woven *kira* fabric. The King and Queen are frequently cited as style icons, both in their national dress and in pictures of them travelling overseas in 'western' dress. The written comments show a wide variety of opinions and perspectives on fashionable dress and identity, but the overwhelming attitude of users of the site is positive towards *drighlam namzha*, even though the visuals demonstrate sophisticated awareness and practice of a whole world of clothing styles that exist outside the official dress code. Where users celebrate western clothing styles through imagery, they are often quick to balance this with a positive comment about national dress.

[Aernest Tree](#) mind you the gho loks allways the best haha

14 August 2010 at 16:27 · Like · 3

Aernest Tree gho dang kira for ever
14 August 2010 at 16:28 · Like · 4

BHUTAN street Fashion... we know that showing a lil appreciation for our western cousins the fact is we wear them too
15 August 2010 at 14:00 · Like · 2

Emma Dick 31/5/15 22:43
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Emma Dick 31/5/15 22:44
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The dual consciousness present in everyday people's attitude towards *driglam namzha* is present in the pages, images and commentary evolving through the online community. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche stands as the ideal candidate to legitimise a similar process from within the official structures of the Buddhism-based constitutional monarchy. As incarnate lama and movie producer he embodies an extremely powerful balance between the same realms of 'authenticity' and 'innovation' signified in the Bhutan National Seal judging criteria. His dual role has captivated journalists worldwide, but attracted some disbelief that one person can actually perform two such differently perceived functions into realms usually presented as mutually exclusive. He counters these suspicions thus,

It indicates to me that from certain standpoints working in film is viewed as almost sacrilegious, like I am breaking some kind of holy rule ... Film is a medium and Buddhism is a science. You can be a scientist and at the same time you can be a filmmaker ... Buddhism is not against idolatry – it uses statues as representations ... Film could be seen as a modern day *Thangka* (traditional Buddhist painting or cloth banner) (Prayer Flag Pictures, 2002: 13).

If film is viewed by some as a sacrilegious medium, fashion would almost certainly be viewed by the same people as profane. There is so far very little written about the relationship between fashion and inter-governmental development initiatives. Such a body of work may begin to emerge, given the growth of the ethical fashion sector and the range of organisations promoting equitable trade alliances, in preference to unilateral or bilateral aid, and enabling market linkages between producers and consumers. Figures like Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche act as a cultural catalyst in this process. The popularity of online groups such as Bhutan Street Fashion allows almost unrestricted non-hierarchical and intercultural dialogue between multiple stakeholders to take place. Such forums will inevitably begin to generate even more complex multi-layered forms of hybrid fashionable identity to emerge in Bhutan and elsewhere in cyberspace. Future iterations of development projects such as our tailoring curriculum could easily draw upon the rich market insight, sub-cultural capital and trans-national awareness that BSF possesses. All of these qualities are significant in the process of constructing fashionable dress and identity in Bhutan, and should serve to clearly challenge simplistic binary thinking about how the west and the non-west engage in discourses about dress.

CONCLUSION

The geographical inaccessibility and the psychological 'otherness' of Bhutan, formed through the myth of Shangri-La, derive in part from the semi-mythical foundation stories of the unification of the country and reassertion of *driglam namzha* to the present day. A discourse about fashionable dress and identity formed in Bhutan exists in the international fashion press that retains these metaphors of inaccessibility and authenticity. Within Bhutan, this nebulous discourse has become reified through real hybrid garments, constructed through arenas such as our curriculum, and also generated a discussion of fashionable dress and identity in the pages of Bhutan Street Fashion. Translation between these different ways of systematising knowledge creates a clash of structural logic in the way that these ideas about Bhutan are conceptualised and held together in the competing languages of fashion journalism, international development and Facebook.

The belief in systematising knowledge is deeply linked to ideas forged by the European Enlightenment, 'the 'modern' subject manages to control ideas, classify objects, produce knowledge about identities, and, thus, secure meaning about them' (Constantinou, 1998: 29-30). **It**

is not meaningful to impose such values on a culture which independently developed its own entirely different logic of enlightenment. In Buddhist terms to be enlightened means to have woken up and to understand the world, so that the mind and the body are not separated but are in perfect harmony with one another. Binary systems which exist to impose 'rational' order on the world are deeply unenlightened from this perspective. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche echoes beautifully the complexity with which we should frame the study of non-Western dress,

I believe that all these systems [of global governance] are well-intended but I don't believe that one particular system can work for everyone. In fact I don't believe that every human being on Earth has to learn one particular system. ...Buddhism is a wonderful philosophy. It's a wonderful system. But Buddhism is different from Buddhists. Within Buddhist institutions we see downfalls, corruptions. No system has worked thoroughly in this world (Prayer Flag Pictures, 2002: 19).

Barthes too said that fashion abhors system. There are multiple fashion systems operating under different logics and notions of temporality, all of which are perpetually being reconsidered and constructed in complex hybrid encounters with each other through globalisation. The construction of fashionable dress and identity in Bhutan is just one such encounter which demonstrates the complexity and richness of the many fashion discourses present in the non-West.

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank the following individuals and organisations who made this research possible: Joseph Lo (PhD candidate at Heriot Watt University and formerly of UNDP Bhutan), Karma Wangchuk (Bhutan Street Fashion), Pernille Askerud, Karma Lhazom (MOLHR), Peck Hoon Tam (formerly of SIF), Tan Peck Leng, Nur Hidayah and Emily Wills (LASALLE College of the Arts Singapore), Phuntso Norbu (The Institute of Zorig Chosum, Thimpu), Sangay Dorji, Kinley Wangdi and all the private tailors and students who took part in our Tailoring Curriculum at Chumey Vocational Training Institute, Bumthang, Bhutan.
2. It has not been possible to establish the ongoing status of the tailoring programme as this chapter goes to press and as a precarious environment, it is possible that the delivery of the course has evolved further since the last mission Peck Leng made with another colleague, Emily Wills, in 2010. This is one of the challenges of funding for development. When the funding finishes, it is sometimes difficult to ensure the future sustainability of the project.
3. See the photo album, 'STREET TREND IN BHUTAN 2010' available at: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.140021779348778.20328.132246446792978&type=3> (accessed 30th June 2014). Please note that comments from BSF have been recorded and reproduced exactly as they were posted online.

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