

## **Investigating Markers of Authenticity: The Weavers' Perspective.**

### **Insights from a Study on Bhutanese Hand-woven Kira Textiles**

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#### **Context of the Study**

The research arose from the author's practice and professional experience whilst working on a culture and development project in Bhutan (2004 – 2009). One of the components of the project was to assist artisan communities generate income by expanding their markets into non-traditional sectors such as the tourism and the export trade. As such, traditional craft objects had to be re-presented as contemporary products in order to satisfy the demands and tastes of non-local customers (UNDP Bhutan, 2007). Activities involved substituting of materials, changing the form, varying the function, improving in the process of fabrication and reinterpreting the meaning of these objects for new markets. In the course of such transformations, the author was conscious of the fine balance between design innovation and retention of cultural authenticity of the craft item as one of the Unit Selling Points (USP) of such objects is the cultural element of culture embedded in the object.

The author found that Bhutan, like many Asian countries, did not have institutions to define and govern craft's cultural characteristics (UNDP Bhutan, 2007; UNDP Bangladesh, 2007; UN China, 2008). At best, these are tacit concepts that are well accepted and acknowledged by those who are familiar with its cultural practices but are unable to articulate or recommend guidelines to the extent to which a traditional craft object can be changed or modified but remains within the cultural boundaries of the artisan.

It is therefore imperative that those essential characteristics of the craft item, which fundamentally embed the cultural identity of the community, be identified and retained before any transformation process is undertaken. The recognition of these essential cultural characteristics is expressed in the form of 'markers of authenticity'.

## **The Land of the Thunder Dragon and its Transformation**

Bhutan, also known as *The Land of the Thunder Dragon*, is a land-locked state in South Asia on the eastern, south-facing slopes of the Himalayas. The country is bounded by Tibet/China on its northern borders and to the south, east and west by India. Its total land area is about 47,000km<sup>2</sup>, making it comparable in size to Switzerland. The 2005 census recorded a total of 672,425 inhabitants with only 8% living in urban areas (Office of the Census Commission, 2005).

As a small country, surrounded by large and powerful neighbours, the continued existence of Bhutan as a sovereign state is precarious. In order to distinguish itself politically and culturally from Tibet/China and India, a distinctive identity based on Mahayana Buddhist principle was established in the 1600s by Bhutan's founder Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. This distinguishing character is evident today, permeating all aspects of life in Bhutan. Most obvious is the formulation of the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a means of guiding economic development, based on Buddhist values (Centre for Bhutan Studies, n.d.).

The pervasiveness and continued existence of Bhutan's culture can be attributed to its geographical and political isolation. In the past half-century, however, both the third and fourth *Druk Gyalpos* (Dragon Kings) embarked on an intensive modernization programme that introduced modern technology and infrastructures to a medieval kingdom thereby irrevocably changing the social, cultural, political and economic fabric of Bhutan. The fourth *Druk Gyalpo*'s abdication in 2006 in favour of his son – Jigme Khesar Mangyal Wangchuck (born 1980), and the abolition of the absolute monarchy for a constitutional monarchy, and establishment of a constitution with a fully democratically elected parliament in 2008 were significant steps in the path to modernity.

The modernization of Bhutan brought about many positive changes but it has also impacted on Bhutan's culture. For example, the traditional dress – *gho* for men and *kira* for women (Figure 1) – which was everyday wear for all Bhutanese, has been losing ground with the younger generation opting for jeans, T-shirts and tattoos (The Canberra Times, 2012).



Figure 1. Full Bhutanese National Dress: Gho (Left) and Kira (Right)

Yet, in spite of these changes, the core identity of Bhutan remains distinctively ‘Bhutanese’. This could be attributed to *Driglam Namzha* – the formal cultural code for Bhutan and its citizens outlining all cultural forms, behavior and expressions such as dress, etiquette, protocol and social propriety. It is this framework that has maintained the market for Bhutanese textiles. However, it does not mean that these traditional garments have remained unchanged. Today, *ghos* and *kiras* need not be made of traditional hand-woven textiles. Rather, these textiles could be industrially woven textiles or perhaps hand-woven in the likeness of Bhutanese textiles but produced by neighboring communities in India. During the 1990s, kira underwent a significant transformation when the “*half kira*” – worn like a wrapped skirt– was introduced (Myers and Bean 1994, p106).

## **Hand-woven Textiles and the Bhutanese Culture**

Bhutan has been described as the “last surviving cloth-based culture in the world” (Adams, 1986) as textiles have permeated into many aspects of Bhutanese life: from the spiritual to the secular, the formal as well as the informal, in the world of leisure and the commercial, political and social spheres (Bolland, 1995).

Moreover, Bhutanese textiles are heavily coded. A person’s status, wealth, identity, age, region can be readily deciphered from their clothing (Myers and Bean, 1994; Gyeltshen, 2002). The canons that govern dress in Bhutan dictate that one must dress appropriately, according one’s status, context and the occasion or event. For example, although cotton plaids are suitable for daily wear, they are not proper for a formal occasion. Also, it is expected that rural women engaged in farming will wear *kiras* above their ankles while royals are expected to wear longer, floor-length *kiras*. Mature people are obliged to dress in sombre colours and plainer fabrics with fewer motifs and patterns to reflect their wisdom and maturity. Younger and single women are encouraged to wear more colourful *kiras* with elaborate designs. Silk *kiras*, because of their high cost and prestige are reserved for significant events such as weddings, celebrations and *tsechus* (the annual religious festivals held in each district of Bhutan). Dressing out of context is considered an embarrassment to oneself, the host and others at an event (Myers and Bean, 1994).

The presence of textiles also filters through to other aspects of Bhutanese life. Textiles are an important method of income generation, particularly for women, serve as personal and diplomatic gifts, a means of paying taxes and fines (pre-cash economy) and an expression of spirituality (Myers and Bean, 1994; Myers, 1995; Bartholomew, 1985; Gyeltshen, 2002).

Importantly, culture preservation and promotion of cultural values is one of the four pillars of GNH (Ura, 2012). The patron of Bhutanese hand-woven textiles, Her Majesty, the Queen Mother, Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuk said, “Weaving, which began as a necessity among our rural ancestors, has now evolved into an art form that enriches Bhutan’s distinctive identity. We consider all of you who are engaged in weaving and in the production of textiles, major contributors to Bhutan’s art and culture and, therefore to our identity as Bhutanese” (Gyeltshen, 2002).

## **Hand-woven Textiles and the Economy**

Two major studies have been conducted to understand the Bhutanese hand-woven textile sector: both the 2009 and 2010 reports were commissioned by the National Statistics Bureau and the Department of Culture with assistance from UNDP Bhutan. These studies found that hand weaving comprises a large segment of the creative industry and therefore, weaving is considered as an important driver for development (National Statistics Bureau and Department of Culture, 2009). In 2010, weavers in Bhutan generated an estimated income of approximately US\$2.2 million from selling traditional products. Weaving, in spite of being an informal activity, is an important form of income generation for rural communities. It has also assisted in reducing unemployment and has mitigated against rural-to-urban migration.

One of the major challenges to the industry, however, is the high cost of Bhutanese hand-woven textiles. In 2008, a study by UNDP Bhutan was undertaken to understand why Bhutanese textiles were so expensive, compared with hand-woven textiles made elsewhere (UNDP 2008). This study concluded that this can be primarily attributed to the low productivity of the most commonly used traditional back-strap looms, as these are not suitable for large-scale commercial production of hand-woven textiles (Pelden, 2008). One of the immediate consequences is that consumers started to look elsewhere for alternatives. Seizing this economic opportunity, the Machey community in Assam, India, living near the borders of Bhutan, started to weave textiles similar to native hand-woven textiles and to sell them to Bhutan (Dema, 2008).

The UNDP 2008 report recommended introducing new and more efficient looms to replace back-strap looms (Nuthall, 2008). The Queen Mother, the patron of Bhutanese hand-woven weavers, believes “The biggest challenge for Bhutan is to replace traditional techniques in crafts with modern technology without forgetting traditional skills and knowledge” (The Times of India, 2011).



Figure 2: Back-Strap Loom

There have been several attempts to introduce new technologies to improve weaving productivity including a joint weaving workshop with weavers from India to exchange ideas about weaving on large horizontal frame looms (Lees, 2001) and another in 2009 introducing Laotian frame looms (Handicraft Association of Bhutan, 2009).

Because of the importance of the hand-weaving sector, government departments, local stakeholders and international development agencies have come together to address these challenges. Programmes such as the Bhutan SEAL and Seal of Origin have been established benchmarks for quality as well as establish credibility and authenticity of Bhutanese crafts including hand-woven textiles. The definitions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘origin’ for both programmes, however, are unclear and vague (Agency for the Promotion of Indigenous Arts, n.d.; Department of Trade, n.d.).

### **Addressing the Issue of Authenticity in the Current Period of Social and Political Change**

Although the need to transform Bhutanese hand-woven textiles is acknowledged in order to ensure its relevancy and continued existence in the modern world, the extent to which they could be changed without damaging their cultural integrity has not been fully understood, a consequence of the essence of being “Bhutanese” having never been explicitly articulated. As long as this concept remains undefined, the pathway

for cultural development programmes that advocate the need for Bhutanese craft to “retain its originality” (Choden, 2005) and “yet adapting traditions to contemporary demands” (Liebl 2003) remains unclear. Such ambiguity could result in commercial abuse (Myers and Bean, 1994).

This research is particularly timely because of current political developments in the country. In the past, the national identity of Bhutan along with its cultural norms, traditions and resources had been protected and defended by its custodian – the Monarchy. In an elected democracy though, custodianship will be in the hands of the Bhutanese citizens who will decide how and what aspects of their cultural heritage, traditions, norms and resources to preserve, even though the Constitution provides for an overall structure for cultural preservation (Lees, 2011). This investigation is a contribution to this dialogue with the aim of identifying markers of authenticity of hand-woven *kira* textiles even as major changes transform society.

### **Investigation Methods and Methods of Analysis**

This research employed three approaches (in three phases) with an objective of identifying and validating markers of authenticity for Bhutanese *kira* textiles (though triangulation). Methods included open-structured interviews with weavers (Phase 1), observations of *kiras* being worn at a *tsechu* (Phase 2), and closed option questionnaires (Phase 3). The research was conducted in Thimphu with the assistance of the Agency for the Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC) and the Handicraft Association of Bhutan (HAB).

In the first phase, a total of 14 weavers were recruited through a snowballing scheme for the interviewed. Among these, eight were self-identified as experts, each with more than 10 years of weaving experience; five said that they possessed intermediate weaving skills with less than 10 years of weaving experience; while one stated that she is a beginner, as she is still learning weaving from her mother. For phase two, a total of 168 photographs were taken during the *tsechu*, with 54 successful images. These images were selected based on the clarity of the photographs, showing details such as fringes, borders, seams, types of motifs, etc., and most crucially, images being in focus with *kiras* visibly featured. The final phase involved six well-known experts

identified by APIC and HAB. Weavers were requested to fill in a closed option questionnaire identifying the characteristics of various *kiras*.

Results were analysed in detail by grouping responses to questions in interviews and questionnaires. These quantitative results were used to identify, and explore in more detail, objective markers of authenticity for Bhutanese *kira* textiles. When this was not possible to examine fully, a combination of quantitative and qualitative results, comments and observations were considered in the framework of the diversity of current theories of authenticity, which have been applied to tourism, souvenirs, crafts and culture. These theories include

- Objective Authenticity (Trilling, 1972; Sagoff 1978; Harbin 2008, Reissner and Steiner, 2006, MacCannell, 1973, Goffman 1959), which incorporates Nominal and Expressive Authenticity theories (Dutton 2003);
- Work Being theory (Heidegger, 1962, 1971, n.d.; Littrell, et al, 1993), Subjective Authenticity (Harbin, 2008; Heidegger, 2008);
- and in particular Constructive Authenticity (Burner, 1994; Cohen 1988(a) (b); 1992; Olsen 2002), Existential Authenticity (Wang, 1999) and approaches which bring together a number of these theories (Kettley, 2007, 2010, n.d.).

This study adopted a ‘deconstructive’ approach to identifying markers of authenticity, recognizing both tangible and intangible characteristics of a textile. As a result, the ‘Object Being’ definition proved to be most useful in discussing markers of authenticity, offering ease of definition and audit. The starting point for the research, the analysis of physical markers of authenticity for the *kira*, broadened into an examination of the meaning of authenticity from a Bhutanese social and cultural context, contributing to a richer discussion viewed through the lens of Nominal, Expressive and Existential Authenticity theories.

## **Findings**

The study also assumed that there are certain universal characteristics of *kiras*, which could help to identify truly authentic *kiras*. After interviewing weavers at length, careful examination of *kira* photographs taken during the *tsechu*, and a



comprehensive analysis of the results from the closed option questionnaire, however, the study found that there was no single characteristic that is common to *kira* textiles. Moreover, features that were considered to be universally found in all *kiras* were found not to be so universal on closer examination. An initial conclusion appeared to be that it is not possible to identify an objective marker of authenticity for Bhutanese hand-woven *kira* textiles.

For example, the study noticed that all *kiras* have seams and there are just the two types: those running perpendicular to the body, and those aligned along the length of the body.



Figure 3 a & b: *Kira* with Seams Running Perpendicular to the Body and Detail



Figure 4a & b: *Kira* with Seams Running Aligned Along the Length of the Body and Detail

Weavers explained that *kiras* with seams sewn perpendicular to the body indicate that the textile has been woven on a back-strap loom while *kiras* with seams running down the length of the body suggest that the *kira* is hand woven on the Tibetan horizontal frame looms with a woolen yarn (See Figure 5).



Figure 5: Tibetan Horizontal Frame Loom

A universally observed aspect is that the placement of motifs and patterns of *kiras* is horizontal, running at right angles to the wearer's body.



Figure 6: Examples of Placement of Motifs and Patterns Running at Right Angles to the Wearer's Body

The identification of these features showed initial promise in consideration of markers of authenticity for hand-woven *kiras*. However, upon closer analysis, both features could be easily manipulated by cutting up textiles, or industrially weaving narrow fabrics into appropriate panels and stitching them together in a manner that resembles hand-woven kira textiles. Therefore, these physical characteristics appear not to serve as credible markers of authenticity.

Another design characteristic of *kiras* is the border design along the selvedge of the *kiras*, which at one stage offered the promise of being a marker of authenticity.



Figure 7a: Border Design along the Selvage of the *Kira* and  
7b: *Kira* with No Borders Design

However, no conclusive evidence was found to support this proposal as not all *kiras* have this design feature, especially those woven on Tibetan horizontal frame looms.

The study also assumed that all *kiras* have fringed-edges, and this could be a credible marker of authenticity. However, many photographs of *kiras* taken during the *tsechu* established that this was not a relevant aspect of *kira* authenticity. For example, *Sertha kira* (Figure 9a and b) did not have fringes while their presence is evident in those such as the new *Kushu Tara Mapsham kira* in Figure 8a and b.



Figure 8a & b: *Kira* with Fringed Edges and Details



Figure 9a and b: *Sertha Kira* without Fringed Edges

Colours are also not credible markers of authenticity as *kiras* do not have specific colour codes and colour choice is largely dependent on the context of the wearer – personal preferences, responding to local colour trends, astrological signs, etc. Moreover, the colours and colour combinations of *Pesa kiras* have changed over the years, oscillating between strong vibrant colours and paler, softer tones. Hence,

during the *tsechu*, there was a kaleidoscope of different coloured *kiras* worn by women.



Figure 10: Differently Coloured *Kiras* at a *Tsechu*

In terms of materials used to weave *kiras*, the research discovered that a wide range of yarns is currently in use. These include poly-cotton (also known in Bhutan as Teri-Cotton), silk, Bura or spun silk, wool, mercerized cotton (also known locally as Khaling cotton) and nettle. Hence, again, there appeared to be no single type of yarn that can be associated with the weaving of authentic *kira*.

Therefore, it is important to go beyond the physical appearance of the *kira* to search for markers of authenticity. For example, it is necessary to understand how the *kira* is woven. Although weavers initially claimed that kiras are only woven with back-strap looms (as shown in Figure 2), upon further consideration, they realized that Tibetan horizontal frame looms from Central Bhutan are also used. Moreover, weavers are not exacting in adhering to conventional, traditional looms to weave *kiras*, and indeed 71% of the weavers welcomed the changes and improvements in the looms over recent years.

The search continued with a review of the techniques used to weave the motifs and patterns on *kiras*, as these might prove to be unique to weaving of *kiras*. It was found

that at least some of these techniques, such as *hor* are also in use by neighbouring communities such as the Machey to weave similar textiles. Moreover, both *Timah* and *Sepmah* motif construction techniques have also been successfully deployed on the Lao horizontal looms.

In terms of the processes associated with weaving *kira* textiles, the research demonstrated that the processes in preparing and making Bhutanese textiles are also subject to change over time, with some traditional processes discontinued while others, such as natural dyeing of yarns, have been revived. With these processes changing dynamically, no aspect appeared sufficiently stable to offer the potential as a distinguishing feature for authenticity in weaving *kiras*.

An initial assumption of the study was that to be authentic *kiras* would need to be woven by Bhutanese themselves. However, according to the weavers who took part in this study, there is no specific rule stating that *kiras* must be woven by a single individual from start to end. Indeed, sub-contracting is currently the norm in the production of *kiras*. Moreover, the ethnicity of the subcontracted weaver does not affect the authenticity of the *kira*; the majority of those interviewed (58%) reporting a willingness to hire non-Bhutanese to assist them in their work.

Normally, no special practices or rites are required before weaving starts, the exception being when special *kiras* are to be woven, such as those commissioned by the Royal family. A special blessing of yarns and the saying of prayers are employed as mitigating actions to prevent mistakes, and *kiras* woven without these rituals are no less authentic than those that are blessed.

The examination between old and new *kiras* disclosed that most aspects of the *kira* have changed including the way that the length of a *kira* is calculated. . Therefore, the function of the *kira* (now used as materials for life-style products), the methods of exchange, skills, form and design, and quality have all been transformed and thus, these characteristics cannot be identified as markers of authenticity for *kira* textiles. The change in calculating the length of the *kira* is because contemporary *kiras* are longer while old *kira* are shorter. This additional length of the *kira* is to accommodate the wearing of high-heeled shoes.

Perhaps the differentiation between authentic and inauthentic might lie in the terms of the monetary value of the product, or the proportion of the added-value attributable to involvement with the Bhutanese economy? The study found that all yarns are currently imported, and all those weavers (92%) interviewed, except for the apprentice weaver, believed that as long as more than 50% of the total value of the textiles is added in Bhutan, the *kira* could be considered Bhutanese. Such simple criterion for authenticity needs to be carefully defined. The value cost of imported textiles, such as the Machey textiles woven by Indian communities living along the border, could also be increased, reflected through import duties, rental of the shop, salary of service staff, etc. These could be conceived as value added in Bhutan, rendering Machey textiles as authentic Bhutanese *kiras*. The proportion of the cost attributable to Bhutanese labour is a candidate for consideration as a marker of authenticity from the weaver's perspective. Proposing that the value of the product be used as a marker of identifying authentic *kira* textiles would need to be very tightly specified.

One would assume that the geographical indication – *kiras* woven in Bhutan – would serve as a credible marker of authenticity. Yet, only slightly more than half of those interviewed (57%) maintained that it is extremely important for *kiras* to be woven in Bhutan. Indeed 86% of the interviewees believed that *kiras* would be authentic when produced by Bhutanese weavers working outside of Bhutan. Hence, geographical site for the production of *kira* would seem to be a weak marker for recognizing authentic *kira* textiles. The weak support for physical markers of authenticity, including geographical indicators, suggests that the search for markers of authenticity may need to probe beyond physical markers, and turn out to be more subtle and more complex.

By noting the existence of different types of *kiras*, with each category of *kira* having its own individual characteristics, the study sought to discover whether specific markers of authenticity could be identified for each type of *kira*. For example, *Matha kira* (Figure 11) can be woven on both back-strap and Tibetan horizontal frame looms. The design of *Matha kira* is only plaid and the predominant colours are white, green, blue, red - with yellow or orange highlights. There is a notable absence of *Timah*, *Sepmah* and *Hor* motifs, and stripes are also not used. There is no border edge

design or continuous band on the main body of the *kira*. Each of these features therefore become possible candidates as markers of authenticity for specifically *Matha kira*.



Figure 11: *Matha Kira*

On the other hand, *Kushu Tara kira* can be woven only on back-strap looms. Yarns used in their making include spun cotton, poly cotton or silk; wool is never used. *Kushu Tara kiras* are produced with fringes, borders at the selvedge, and continuous bands on the body of the *kira*. Stripes are also found on the textile. The base weave for the textile is always plain weave, and the base colour of the cloth is always white, but the colours for motifs and patterns can vary widely. These characteristics could be used to identify authentic *Kushu Tara kiras*.





Figure 12: *Kushu Tara kira*

### **Reviewing *Kiras* within the context of the Bhutanese mindset - *Driglam Namzha* and the Bhutan Social Ethos**

In addition to the physical characteristics noted above, the research examined the intentions of the weavers in their specific social and historical contexts, prompted by the insights of Nominal and Expressive Authenticity theories. Such analysis of the context and intention of the weaver proved especially important when examining authenticity from the weavers' perspective. Moreover, the study concluded that a synthesis of the two approaches (one based on *kira*'s physical features; the other based on an examination of the weaver's intention) allowed this research to propose a holistic and evidence-based identification of the markers of authenticity for Bhutanese hand-woven *kira* textiles.

As mentioned earlier, *Driglam Namzha* is the formalized cultural code for Bhutan, governing most cultural expressions and each individual's behaviour. Discussions with the country's Secretary of Information and Communication, Dasho Kinley Dorji, during the author's mission in 2012, revealed that the ethos of Bhutanese society is

very formal. Social propriety directs all aspects of life, setting rules of behaviour and managing expectations. Some of these are formally defined in *Driglam Namzha*. The majority of cultural norms and mores, however, are transmitted unofficially, often through observation and informal learning. One domain where no code is formalized is that of wearing of appropriate *kiras* for specific social contexts. The knowledge is implicit, and rules are not vocalized or externalized.

Weavers from the first phase of this research commented that different activities and occasions require the wearing of dress appropriate to the situation. This is consistent with Myers' observations (1994) that appropriate dressing is paramount in Bhutanese society. Hence, most Bhutanese women own several types and qualities of *kiras* in order to wear the right one for the specific event. For example, for *tsechus*, *kiras* must be neat, clean and tidy, and reflective of the wearer's social status and the importance of the occasion. Importantly, the appearance of such a formal *kira* is very highly regarded. For example, the front fold of the *kiras* must be stiff and sharp; the entire *kira* must be straight, and the texture of the fabric should not be easily creased. A good *kira* for these formal events should be able to hold its form. Such *kiras* are usually *Kushu Tara* and *Aikapur kiras* densely woven in silk with detailed designs. Characteristics of such formal *kiras* need not apply to *kiras* for everyday wear, which can be lighter and softer. The designs for such *kiras* need not be as elaborate, but being crease-free remains an important quality. In colder climates such as in Central Bhutan, thicker yarns such as wool and spun silks are preferred.

It is important for weavers weaving *kira* textiles to be aware of the situation in which the *kira* will be worn when designing and weaving the material, so as to give it the appropriate quality and characteristics befitting the context. The study therefore proposed to put forward the concept of 'appropriateness' as a criterion in the identification of markers of authenticity for hand-woven *kira* textiles.

### **Proposal for a Marker of an Authentic Bhutanese *Kira*: Appropriateness of the *Kira* in Relation to its Social/Cultural Context**

In order to weave the 'appropriate' quality and characteristics for a particular situation, the weaver must use the correct quality of material; employ the right technologies and relevant skills to produce the suitable *kira* textile. This research has,

therefore, identified appropriate quality of yarns, weave density, and the type of loom as possible candidates for physical markers of authenticity - but only in relation to specific events/contexts. These will be individually examined.

### **Manifestation of ‘Appropriateness’ through the Selection of Yarns**

Although no yarns have been specified in the weaving of authentic *kira* textiles, the quality of the yarns is an important consideration in the production of *kiras* that are appropriate to wear for specific events or activities. Hence, *kiras* made with poly-cotton yarns or silk yarns are equally acceptable, and each will produce authentic *kiras*. However, the quality of silk yarns renders their use appropriate for *kiras* for formal occasions while poly-cotton yarns are suitable for more casual wear. For example, formal *kiras* need to be stiff and heavy in order to maintain the required folds. Most *Kushu Tara* and *Aikapur kira*s are woven with silk yarns, and these silk yarns need to be thicker and heavier than standard ones. Silk yarns from India need to be specially formulated for the Bhutanese market as standard Indian silk yarns are too light to be used for hand-woven *kiras*.

As *Kushu Tara* and *Aikapur kira* textiles take a long time to weave with their complex and complicated designs, production is time-consuming and the retail price is therefore high. Hence the use of expensive good quality silk yarns can be justified. Moreover, yarn quality including colour fastness in washing, light, etc. is extremely important. As a high investment item, the yarns for the *kira* need to be durable, standing the test of time in order for the owner to pass the garment on to future generations. Therefore, while it is not inauthentic for *Kushu Tara* or *Aikapur kira*s to be woven in cotton or poly-cotton yarns, it is far more common to see such *kiras* made in silk. *Kiras* for every day casualwear require the textiles to be less heavy and stiff. As noted earlier, they should also be easy to maintain, and therefore poly-cotton yarns are preferred as the resultant material does not crease easily and the colours do not bleed. Although the use of specific yarns cannot be identified as a marker of authenticity for *kira* in general, the type and quality of yarns might be markers of authenticity for individual types of *kira* in specific contexts.

### **Weave Density and Types of Looms**

When weaving a *kira*, the weaver needs to consider the weave density. High-density weaves will render the textiles stiff and heavy. Such textures are appropriate for formal *kiras* to be worn during *tsechus*, weddings and official functions, with less densely woven *kiras* are suitable for everyday activities.

The weave density of a *kira* is directly related to the looms used in weaving. The study found that textiles woven from horizontal frame looms, such as the one shown in Figure 5, do not produce the necessary weave density to make stiff formal *kira* textiles. On the other hand, back-strap looms enable the weaver to increase the density of the weave, especially through the warp yarns, without being restricted by the number of reeds on the beater (beaters on back strap looms have no reeds; it is just a sword). This also explains the predominance of warp-faced *kira* textiles. In order for the textiles to acquire such a high density, it is necessary for the weaver to beat the weft yarns down hard so as to compact them. If the width of the textiles is too high, the pressure in beating down the weft yarns will be dispersed over the wider span of material. Therefore, it is important for the width of the textile to be kept narrow, resulting in these panels having to be stitched together to form a *kira*. This also results in the horizontal placement of designs, motifs and patterns, perpendicular to the main axis of the body.

It is also notable that, because the tension of the back-strap loom is created by the weaver's body, the length of the textiles woven on such a loom is dictated by the length of the weaver's legs (the distance between her back and the foot brace). Hence, the maximum length is 2.5m (as the warp yarns are looped to double the length). As a result, these panels are stitched length-wise and when worn on the body, the seam-lines lie perpendicular to the body.

There are fewer restrictions on the warp length with textiles woven on the Tibetan horizontal frame looms. In these, each panel, although narrower than in textiles woven on the back-strap looms, is longer. When stitched into panels for *kiras*, they are sewn lengthwise. Myers (1994) noted that it requires some 12 or 13 vertical panels to be sewn together to make a *kira*. This explains why the seams of such *kiras* run parallel to the main axis of the body.

The study proposes that changes in technology, or modification of the back-strap loom, are irrelevant when considering authenticity, as long as these do not jeopardize the appropriate quality of the *kira* textiles and their weave density. Wooden frames for the back-strap looms were introduced in the 1990s enabling weavers to beat down the weft yarns harder, allowing the density of the cloth to be increased. Such changes were welcomed as they enhanced the quality of formal *kiras* such as *Kushu Tara* and *Aikapurs kiras*. Weavers do not shy away from using unorthodox means of improving the quality of *kiras* including using condoms to pick up the lint so that the *kira* becomes smoother and has a better finished appearance.

Industrial looms, although able to weave Bhutanese motifs and patterns, were not appreciated by the weavers because the results were described as ‘flat’. Motifs and patterns woven on the back-strap looms appear embossed - a quality that is appreciated by the locals. This ‘embossed’ characteristic of motifs and patterns could be considered as a marker of authentic Bhutanese hand-woven *kira*.

### **Pride in Work and Gross National Happiness**

Finally, because hand-woven *kiras* are an intrinsic legacy of, and relate to, the identity of Bhutanese people, all the weavers interviewed for this study commented that their sense of pride in their work is intrinsically bound to the inherent value of hand-woven *kira* textiles. This manifests itself in many ways: the quality of the craftsmanship, the sophistication of the designs, the techniques by which motifs and patterns are woven, the neatness in the work (even on the reverse side of the textiles), cleanliness of the final product, and even in the way in which the textiles are folded and presented to the person who has commissioned or purchased the textiles.

Those interviewed contended that weaving is not merely for making of clothing or generating an income for the family. For them a greater significance is found in weaving as a way by which Bhutanese tradition and cultural heritage can be conserved, nurtured and developed. This is evident when asked what makes the interviewees most proud when weaving *kiras*. All three groups of weavers attribute their sense of worth and pride to being part of living cultural heritage. Their skills have been transmitted from generation to generation. Yet, these are not archived skills

but an intrinsic part of everyday life in Bhutan. Their skills are a living heritage, enabling them to make a living while the products – *kiras* – are a fundamental component of everyday life in Bhutan. Importantly, this traditional heritage is also ever changing and expanding, and with each new generation of weavers, new motifs and patterns are created adding to the ever-growing stock of *kira* designs.

This resonates with the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) where emphasis has been placed on the preservation and promotion of cultural values, diversity and resilience. GNH is a development concept that has firmly established Bhutan's unique identity on the global stage. Weaving, as an indispensable part of Bhutanese culture and identity, is a humble but key cornerstone of the physical manifestation of GNH. Contributing to this macro national characteristic instills pride among weavers and should possibly even be acknowledged as a marker of authenticity for hand-woven *kira* textiles but it is difficult to know how to legislate for, and communicate its essence to customers.

## **Conclusion**

Three common physical elements feature in all hand-woven *kira* textiles - seam lines, the horizontal placement of designs when the *kira* is worn and the dimensions of the *kira*. These are necessary indicators of a hand-woven *kira*, but by themselves seem not to be sufficient for consideration as markers of authenticity. The study suggests that other aspects need to be included, in particular characteristics referred to by the weavers themselves. Analysing their perspective framed against the author's observations, discussions with experts and reviewing the literature on Bhutanese textiles, intangible characteristics such as the appropriateness of the *kira* in relation to the social/cultural context where it is worn appear to be significant. The tangible manifestation of this concept is through the appropriate quality of yarns, density of weave, and the looms on which the textiles are woven.

Another factor emerging from this work is pride in weaving the material for a *kira* – an additional candidate for a marker of authenticity. This is made visible in the quality of the workmanship, the design, the way in which the motifs and patterns are executed, the neatness and cleanliness of the textiles and finally, the way in which the *kira* is folded and presented to the person commissioning or purchasing the textiles.

This study, thus, offers that it is a combination of these markers - the physical, objective indicators set alongside the understanding of the use of the *kira* textiles – that weavers themselves use to identify authentic Bhutanese hand-woven *kira*.

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