

BHUTAN'S NATIONAL ARCHIVES:
PRESERVING THE PAST, BUILDING THE FUTURE

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Introduction

Bhutan's first five-year development program was launched in 1961 with generous support from India. The National Library was established in 1967 as part of a government program to preserve and promote the rich cultural and religious heritage of the country in the face of the modernization process. The library finally moved to its own purpose-built premises in 1984. The complex comprised the Stack Building, which had been consecrated as a *lhakhang* to provide the appropriate environment for preservation of the literary treasures written in classical Tibetan (or *Choekey*, as it is known in Bhutan) to be housed there and a small administration building to accommodate the library staff. In 1996 the National Library entered into a long-term twinning project with the Royal Library, Denmark funded by Danida¹ to establish an online database of the collection, classify the religious literature, conduct literary surveys across the country and set up a library network. The project also included extensive staff training programs, including conservation workshops. This far-reaching project set the National Library on its own path to modernization.

Archives project launched

With the passing of the Legal Deposit Act (1999), the National Library attained official depository status as the National Library & Archives of Bhutan (NLAB) and became responsible for the collecting, conserving and managing of Bhutan's documentary heritage.² In 2000 a further

¹ Danida (Danish international development assistance) is the term used for Denmark's development cooperation. Danida is not an independent organisation, but rather an area of activity under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

² The Act mandates that within three months of publication/production, private sector publishers and producers must deposit at the NLAB, free of cost, four copies of the

project was initiated, to construct and equip an Archives Building and send nominated staff for training in Archives work. The Royal Library, Denmark was also responsible for implementation of this project.

In April, 2002 a ground-breaking ceremony was held for the new building. Senior librarian Kunzang Delek—the appointed project manager who would later take the post of archivist—was sent on a study tour to Denmark in October that year to familiarise himself with activities of the National Library's Project partner-institution, the Royal Library in Copenhagen. He also visited Moesgård Museum in Aarhus, to study archives storage there with the chief conservator, who was working as a consultant on the Archives Project. In September, 2004 Kunzang Delek went to Singapore to study for a Master of Science in Information Studies—Archival Informatics at Nanyang Technological University. An assistant conservator (a fresh secondary school graduate) had been appointed that month and received general in-house library training until the newly qualified archivist's return the following March³. The Archives Building had already been finished and fitted out by then. It was formally commissioned with a consecration ceremony in late June, 2005.

Though traditionally Bhutanese in outward architectural style, the Archives Building meets international standards for storage of library and archival materials, with detailed specifications for every aspect provided by the funding agency. Both floors are fitted out with standard library adjustable steel shelving and on the upper floor there is also a long bank of manually operated compact steel shelving.⁴ The upper floor also includes a digitization and preservation workshop, equipped with a two-door refrigerator for storage of preservation materials as well as a large chest freezer which may be used instead of the fumigation chamber for fragile items. The building is closed to the public. Archives staff work from offices in the Administration Building

material if printed, and two copies if non-printed. Government and government-related sectors must deposit ten copies of the material if printed, and five copies if non-printed. For the full text, see Archives section of the National Library website, www.library.gov.bt/.

³ The nominally one-year course had been compressed into six months for Bhutan's trainee archivist, who could not be spared from library duties for a longer time.

⁴ In a meeting with the author in July 2001, the then library director, Mynak R. Trulku explained that the project had allowed for installation of electrically operated compact shelving, but he had opted for manual operation on grounds of safety and because less could go wrong (an important consideration, as servicing would have to be carried out by technicians called from India).

and the Conservation Building, the latter also accommodating the library fumigation chamber and a conservation studio.



National Library & Archives of Bhutan
From left to right: Administration Building, Stack Building housing
Choekey Section, Archives Building

Archives work in the 1980s

The initial focus in developing a national collection had been on first identifying original manuscripts and block-printed works held within the country and then acquiring these through purchase or donation. Printing blocks had also been surveyed, and most of the 4,400 wood-blocks held at the time of the 1984 move had been transferred from religious complexes for better preservation. Archival printed materials then amounted to around 900 volumes. In 1987 the library embarked upon a microfilming project, the purpose of which was to build up an archival and research collection of old and rare books, archives and documents held in the National Library as well as those held in *gonpas*

and *lhakhangs* across the country.⁵ The project was very active for some years, during which most important manuscripts in the library collection were microfilmed, and also a selection of works from religious complexes in the vicinity. In mid-1992 the library acquired a fumigation chamber together with a sufficient number of custom-built, airtight aluminium storage boxes for the Wood-block Collection, under a conservation project funded by the Japanese government.⁶ Library staff fumigated the wood-blocks first, then all the archival materials. Thus, by the time the Archives were established there was already a substantial collection of materials to be reviewed for possible transfer.

Launching the National Archives

So as to allow time for the interior of the building to dry out and reach the humidity and temperature levels recommended for archival storage, staff began the fumigation and transfer of archival materials only in March, 2006. While existing facilities were rather limited, the archivist insisted that whatever they did, they should try to fit in with internationally established standards for archives preservation and control. Collection of letters of historical value began immediately. The Wood-block Collection was reviewed, and by mid-year the oldest and most valuable sets had been transferred to compact shelving in the Archives. By the end of 2007 the entire Microfilm Collection of 337 rolls of film representing 1,250 rare books and manuscripts had been relocated in the Archives. The Choekey Collection in the Stack Building was reviewed, and during 2007 the oldest and most important works were transferred to the Archives. These included several manuscripts, including a 12th century manuscript with gold lettering written on black paper.⁷

⁵ Start-up costs were funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as part of a UNDP-assisted project, Preservation of Cultural Heritage, and on-going expenses for film and other materials were covered through Ford Foundation grants for some years from 1990.

⁶ In December, 1991 Bhutan and Japan signed an Exchange of Notes for a Japanese cultural grant of ¥46 million relating to procurement of the fumigation equipment. The fumigation chamber and storage boxes arrived in June, 1992. (*Kuensel*, vol. 6, no. 48, December 7, 1991, p. 1; vol. 7, no. 24, June 20, 1992, p. 7)

⁷ The Buddhist doctrine of merit provides motivation for copying the scriptures. The copying of text in silver or gold ink is considered to earn the copier extra merit, while the writing of some especially important texts in gold aids purification of negative karma. Often text is written in gold ink on black or indigo blue paper. Lapis lazuli may be powdered and mixed with black to dye the paper. A *serdrim*, or gold-letter

A substantial body of new material came into the Archives under the provisions of the Legal Deposit Act during 2006, and in 2007 the Legal Deposit librarian began transferring the materials accumulated since 1999. Fumigation and transfer of other works was suspended until this backlog had been dealt with. Bhutan-related governmental and nongovernmental publications held in the Foreign Books Collection were reviewed later.

In 2008 library security came under review: as a precautionary measure it was decided that any valuable works still housed in the Stack Building should be moved to the Archives. First priority was given to transfer of 14 *serdrim* (manuscripts written in gold ink) dating from the 12th to the early 20th century. During 2009 the archivist surveyed the entire contents of the Choekey Collection and transferred all other very old and/or rare works into the Archives. Some rare items (especially those which the archivist judged too fragile for treatment in the fumigation chamber) were fumigated in the chest freezer.



Digitizing a *serdrim* for the Archives

manuscript, is a manuscript written in gold ink, made by mixing gold dust with animal glue (traditionally made from boiled cow hide).

Some items were also digitized, including all 14 *serdrim*, a very time-consuming process as some of the works comprised many volumes. (Digitizing is done by photographing works page by page with a Canon EOS 400D digital SLR mounted on a tripod. Each page has to be separately focused.) On average, the three staff working on the digitization could process one volume per day. Digitization was followed by quality assurance (i.e. checking the files on the computer) and the making of corrections (i.e. digitizing any pages which had been missed and/or re-digitizing any work found to be faulty). The final step involved analysing the contents of the volumes for the library database records.

Archives staff

Staff comprise the archivist, assistant conservator and assistant archivist, the latter recruited in 2009. The assistant conservator is responsible for all aspects of paper preservation, while the assistant archivist is in charge of the Archives Repository, with full responsibility for stock inventory.⁸ Through the nature of their duties, the Legal Deposit and Microfilming & Records librarians are also closely associated with the Archives. Other staff may be drafted to lend a hand as needed (for example when works are to be digitized). Fresh school leavers on trainee attachments to the NLAB provided valuable assistance over several years, especially during 2009 when the transfer and digitizing of rare books was at its height.

National Archives Act and beyond

After transfer of materials was well under way, the archivist began work on the drafting of a National Archives Act which, when eventually in force, would heighten awareness of the importance of archival material and also alert individuals and organisations to their responsibilities under the Act. The draft has undergone several

⁸ The archivist, already an experienced arts administrator, undertook postgraduate studies in archival informatics on appointment to his post. The assistant conservator has had two one-month stints of hands-on training at the National Archives of India, New Delhi (2007) and at the Royal Library, Denmark (2009) respectively. The assistant archivist, a formerly an administrative officer in government service, attended a six-month general library training course mounted at the National Library of Korea in 2010. The course was an Education and Training Program for Librarians in Asia and Africa under Korea's Cultural Partnership Initiative Program (CPI).

revisions over the years, some reflecting the archivist's own changed perceptions as he gained more experience. Further inhouse discussion within the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (Home Ministry) is still required to ready the draft for cabinet approval and subsequent legislative committee review, but it is expected that the National Archives Bill will be ready for presentation to Parliament during 2012.

Once the Act has been passed, a nationwide mapping survey of all record-creating agencies and repositories, including *gonpas* and *lhakhangs*, will be conducted. Everything of historic value will be listed, even those items in family houses. The survey will be followed by an appraisal exercise to decide which records should be collected up (or copied) for the Archives, as having national archival value for Bhutan. Records Officers will be appointed in each Ministry/Division and Archives staff will train them in filing and care of the records. Guidelines will be drawn up concerning what kinds of records should be discarded and what should be retained for the Archives when a file is closed. The long-term aim is to maintain district archival centres throughout the country, as foci for material to be collected up for the Archives.

Collection development policy

In general terms, the archivist sees the National Archive as documenting the identity of the country and he is keen to make it as comprehensive as possible for the benefit of historians of future generations. It is important to note that at later stages in the development of the Archives the majority of items will be secular in nature. The Archives collections are fairly static in size at present. Transfer of the most important old and rare scriptural works and other archival materials from the main collections has now been completed: the only documents flowing in on a daily basis are those few which arrive under the provisions of the Legal Deposit Act. Following the mapping survey and appraisal exercise, it is envisaged that documents will start arriving in much greater numbers.

With experience gained to date, the archivist now has an enhanced perspective. Instead of gathering in scriptural materials from the districts, his goal is to leave the religious works comprising Bhutan's cultural heritage where they are and train the local caretakers and/or householders in simple conservation measures. Valuable works will be digitized on site for the Archives. Storage arrangements will be

checked and improved where possible by Archives staff, who will also provide training to those who are looking after the collections. Works brought in for conservation will be returned to their owners afterwards. Transfer of any works to the Archives for permanent safekeeping will be considered only if local storage conditions are clearly inadequate, no better arrangement can be provided, and consent has been obtained from the local people. Housed in village *gonpas*, *lhakhangs* and private homes, these sacred texts, symbolising the verbal body of the Buddha, have a much deeper significance than just the printed word.

Training in conservation and preservation

Four conservation workshops were held under the auspices of the DANIDA Project. Major workshops were held at the NLAB in 2005, 2007 and 2009.⁹ These workshops were conducted in the Conservation Building, where office space on the upper floor had been equipped for development as a conservation studio in 2005. Though primarily for the benefit of NLAB staff, the 15-20 participants also included staff of other culture-related institutions and several monk body representatives. In their report on the final workshop the facilitators noted that—as with the previous workshops—participants showed great interest and enthusiasm, and that a core group had now gained a fairly good insight into problems of preservation both in general and also specifically for Bhutanese conditions.

Looking to the future, the facilitators suggested that a national preservation centre be established as this would be best suited to the situation in Bhutan, where there were only a few conservators available to take care of all kinds of materials, and that such a centre could also be responsible for education in conservation and preservation within Bhutan.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the conservation facilities already established at the NLAB would remain until there was a better alternative in place.¹¹

⁹ The first workshop, held at the Royal Academy for Performing Arts in 2000, was conducted by Jonas Palm, Head of Conservation at the Royal Library and Jesper Trier, Head of Conservation, Moesgård Museum, Aarhus, Denmark. The three workshops held at the NLAB were conducted by Jonas Palm, now Director and Head of Division of Preservation, The National Archives, Sweden and Birgit Vinther Hansen, Consulting Conservator, Dept. of Preservation, The Royal Library, Denmark.

¹⁰ They also stated that there was a need for more workshops in the country and mentioned the then library director, Gyonpo Tshering's proposal that there should be a major event held in central Bhutan to make it possible to get participants from around the country. The event could be either a workshop on preservation or an international conference on preservation of cultural heritage in the Himalayan region.

Promotional and outreach activities

The goal is to promote the Archives Project positively, rather than to just archive materials which arrive via the Legal Deposit Act. Although formal promotion can come only after the passing of the National Archives Act, there is still plenty of scope for informal promotion. In order to heighten public awareness of the Archives and to promote its activities, the archivist actively encourages donation of private papers by individuals, directly approaches government departments to request transfer of old records to the Archives, offers advice on record-keeping, and initiates and then arranges conservation and restoration of historical documents and literary treasures. The Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) has approached the archivist for advice on record-keeping and he is now helping RCSC to set up its own records system.

After protracted negotiation, the Home Ministry agreed to the transfer of two series of old land records into the Archives, the results of surveys undertaken between the late 1960s and early 1980s. The records are held in hundreds of book form registers of approximately foolscap size. Transfer of the registers and digitization of the records began in early 2010. After the work has been completed a set of the digital records will be sent to the Home Ministry. The registers will be fumigated and then stored in the Archives repository, and a set of the digital records will be stored in a closed access section of the library server. The public will have limited access to the library digital records, subject to permission from the Home Ministry on a case-by-case basis. On successful completion of this project, the archivist hopes to get agreement for the country's earliest census records to be transferred to the Archives on the same or similar terms for storage and access.

Learning that an 18th century *serdrim* held at Kilung Lhakhang, eastern Bhutan was in need of restoration, the archivist arranged for it to be brought in to the Archives. The work to be restored was an 18th century, 352-leaf manuscript copy of *Gyetongpa* ('The 8,000 verses of

(See Palm, J. & B. Hansen. *Report from Workshop in Preventive Conservation/ Preservation, Thimphu, Bhutan, October 2009*. Copenhagen, Dec. 2009, p. 6-7)

¹¹ Although a building at the NLAB had already been equipped for development as a conservation laboratory, its long-term suitability later came into question. Originally erected for another purpose, the traditionally styled building was dusty inside due to the plastered walls and ceilings; there were no facilities for proper storage of chemicals and the upper floor lacked easy access to piped water; further conversion work would be costly.

transcendental wisdom'), the short version of the *Prajnaparamita* sutra. When the book arrived in early 2010 it was digitized for the collection and then passed to the assistant conservator. Repair of the damaged parts of the leaves took about two months.¹² Afterwards, the library carver made upper and lower boards for the book which had lacked these traditional protective covers. Then the book was wrapped up and tied between the new wooden boards, fumigated, and returned to its *lhakhang* with advice for the caretaker on conditions required for proper storage.



Restoring a *serdrim* from Kilung Lhakhang, Lhuentse

¹² The book had been wrapped in cloth but not held between boards, so damage was particularly marked at the centre of the upper and lower margins of each leaf, where there was pressure from the tapes wound around the bundle. The upper and lower margins of the leaves were quite badly damaged (from damp and insect attack, it appears) with much of the surface partially crumbled away. The assistant conservator carefully scraped off the loose flakes which had been discoloured by iron oxide. Fortunately, the damage seldom went beyond the wide margins: the gold-letter text has survived virtually intact. After scraping away the damaged parts, the assistant conservator tore Bhutanese handmade paper to the right shape and gently fitted it into place to fill the gaps, using flour paste to bond together the edges of the insert and that side of the thick leaf. Turning the leaf over, he repeated the process. After finishing, he painted the patched-in paper inserts to match the dark bluish-black colour of the leaves.

Also in 2010, the archivist initiated restoration of an ancestral document which was amongst the family papers of a public figure. The document was digitized for the Archives after repair, and copies made for the collection. The owner of the document was very happy with its restoration. It is hoped that any attendant publicity might encourage others holding such documents to request their restoration, or even offer them for the Archives.

Pema Lingpa's autobiography

A longer-term project has recently begun, to conserve a set of 641 wood-blocks believed to have been carved by Bhutan's patron saint, Pema Lingpa and to carve a new set of printing blocks and then offer a block-print edition for sale. The archivist initiated this project which is being undertaken jointly with conservators at the Division for Cultural Properties, Department of Culture.



Wood-blocks believed to have been carved by Pema Lingpa himself

Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) is revered as Bhutan's patron saint and stories of his colourful life and daring exploits in revealing *terma* form part of Bhutan's vibrant cultural tradition. He is regarded as the direct incarnation of Longchen Rabjampa (1308-1363) one of the great codifiers of the Dzogchen teachings of the Nyingmapa tradition. Notable descendants of Pema Lingpa include male members of the Bhutanese royal family and the sixth Dalai Lama. Born in the Tang valley of central Bhutan, Pema Lingpa travelled and taught in both Bhutan and Tibet. In 1488 he founded the monastic hermitage of Kunzang Drak on the side of a cliff high above his home village, Drangchel.¹³ In later life Pema Lingpa wrote his autobiography, and a set of wood-blocks on which the autobiography is carved is preserved at Kunzang Drak along with many of his most important sacred relics. The wood-blocks are believed to have been carved by Pema Lingpa himself (legend has it, in a day).

Conservation of the wood-blocks: It was quite well-known that the autobiography was held at Kunzang Drak, and the archivist had taken a small inspection team to Tang to check on it because he had heard that the condition of the wood-blocks was deteriorating. On returning to Thimphu, the archivist arranged for the wood-blocks to be brought in for conservation. The local community was reluctant to let the wood-blocks leave the *gonpa*, fearing that misfortune would follow for the village. However, when it was explained that the wood-blocks would be returned after conservation work had been carried out to preserve them better, the villagers agreed to the proposal. A final invocation and appeasement ceremony was held at Kunzang Drak for the safe journey and return of the wood-blocks, which were carried to Thimphu in two Toyota Hiluxes. Villagers at the sending-off ceremony were seen to have tears in their eyes. The wood-blocks were first fumigated and digitized at the NLAB, and then sent to the conservation laboratory at the Department of Culture.

The printing blocks are carved from birch,¹⁴ a common tree in Bhutan's mountain valleys and the hardwood generally used for this purpose. The chief conservator reports that the condition of most blocks is satisfactory apart from a few blocks which are broken or have broken bits in the carved text. A conservation-approved adhesive is used to repair broken pieces. The main problem is woodworm. The four

¹³ There is no village at Drangchel now, only a small chorten; the walk up to Kunzang Drak is a steep climb of around two hours from the road to Tang.

¹⁴ *Betula utilis*, locally known as *Takpa Shing*

conservators fill the holes with sawdust mixed with animal glue and a conservation-approved insecticide, combining the mixture with a black powder bought from the town. In past times, a black powder from Tibet (composition unknown) was used but this is not available now. Conservation work began in September, 2010 and is expected to take from one to two years.



Conservation laboratory, Dept. of Culture

After conservation the wood-blocks will come back to the NLAB for further fumigation and may be re-digitized. One or two sets for the NLAB will be printed from the wood-blocks in the traditional way (with roller, ink and brush) before they are returned to Kunzang Drak. A ceremony will be held at Kunzang Drak to mark their return and Archives staff will give the caretaker full instructions about how the wood-blocks should be preserved in good condition in the *gonpa*.

Preparation and carving of a new set of wood-blocks: The carving of a new set of wood-blocks for Pema Lingpa's autobiography will be the NLAB senior carver's final project, taking him through to retirement. Pema Lingpa's carving style was not particularly good (letters a little

fat and curved according to the archivist, who also observed that Pema Lingpa was himself quite short and wide) but the style will be reproduced as accurately as possible, for the sake of authenticity.

The archivist and senior carver selected and marked three birch trees in the upper Chumey valley of central Bhutan for the project and requested the Home Ministry to give the order for the trees to be felled. The wood was delivered as roughly sawn planks, which were then sent to a Thimphu wood-craft centre for fashioning into printing blocks. After delivery to the NLAB, the blocks were left outside for a few months to season and subsequently treated to kill/repel insects etc. The carver himself attends to the finishing work of smoothing the blocks with a plane and then sanding them.

As the original set of printing blocks was rather worn as well as in need of some repairs, the senior carver borrowed a copy of the autobiography printed on Bhutanese handmade paper which had been made from the Kunzang Drak set at an earlier time, and has photocopied that to use as template for the carving of the new set. He began carving in January, 2011. When the carving is finished some years hence, the NLAB plans to offer for sale by public subscription both a block-print edition on Bhutanese handmade paper and a regular edition on standard paper.

Outstanding problems for resolution

Climate control in the Archives Building: Although when commissioned in August, 2005 the climate control system appeared to work properly, it was later found that if left running round the clock, the system heated up and the temperature control function was lost. Attempts to fix the problem have so far been unsuccessful, as locally based technicians are unfamiliar with this particular system. Meanwhile, the system is run during office hours only. Temperatures and humidity remain within the approved range. The archivist has already requested urgent recruitment of an appropriately qualified technician for maintenance of the climate control system in the Archives Repository.

Compliance with the Legal Deposit Act: Government compliance was good from the outset, but although private sector compliance has improved, publishers remain reluctant to supply materials when expensive items are involved. Producers of audio-visual material may also be reluctant to provide copies for fear of illicit borrowing and then piracy. Revision of the Act is under consideration in association with

the coming up of the National Archives Act. Regarding audio-visual media, the archivist stresses there is clearly a need to include clauses to assure producers that there will be no breaches of copyright where items deposited under the Legal Deposit Act are concerned and that such items will be kept secure and not loaned out.

Lack of awareness of the importance of records: There is a need to enhance awareness of archives as the repository of the collective history of the nation. At present there is little awareness in Bhutan of the importance of records, and papers dealing with completed exercises are often thrown out.¹⁵ There is also a strong reluctance to send closed files to the Archives. Once the National Archives Act has come into force it will become easier to address these issues. Meanwhile, the Department of Culture has already distributed an official order to all the districts requesting people to be on the lookout for old books and other documents and to carefully look after any such materials in their possession.

Establishing balance between traditional cultural practices and archival security: The wish to show proper respect to the religious literature may be at odds with the need to preserve the books safely and securely. When the Repository first opened, there was some pressure from outside to include in it an altar on which a butter lamp would be lit on the four special days each month, but the archivist was able to resist this. However he failed in his attempt to move representative early editions of the Canonical scriptures from their wooden shelving at either side of carved wooden altarpieces in the Stack Building to the clinical security of compact steel shelving in the Archives Repository. The archivist took a philosophical view of this setback, observing that professional archive keeping was just beginning in Bhutan and that it was hard to convince everybody concerned at this stage of archival development. Times do change however: the traditional practice of lighting a butter lamp at each Stack Building altar on the four special days each month has recently been replaced by the symbolic lighting of electric candles as is now commonplace elsewhere in the region.

¹⁵ Bhutan is not alone in this: similar attitudes prevail in the author's home territory Hong Kong, which is only just beginning to see the necessity for Archives legislation. The informal Archives Action Group which had been established to address the issue saw some good progress in meeting with various government officials during 2010. Hong Kong's governing body, the Legislative Council, has now established its own archives reflecting professional guidelines with the help of an Archives Advisory Committee.

Promotion and preservation of culture under GNH

The concept of gross national happiness (GNH) was developed in an attempt to define an indicator that measures quality of life or social progress in more holistic and psychological terms than gross domestic product (GDP). It attempts to serve as a unifying vision for Bhutan's five-year planning process and all the derived planning documents that guide the economic and development plans of the country. Proposed policies in Bhutan must pass a GNH review based on a GNH impact statement. The four pillars of GNH are defined as sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance.

Though the formal policy for preservation and promotion of culture, the third pillar of GNH, is still being drafted in the Home Ministry, promotion and preservation activities are already being carried out with considerable emphasis. Preservation and promotion of culture may well be only one of four pillars accorded equal importance under the philosophy of the planning process, but the important thing is that the pillar is there.

Looking ahead

The archivist's long-term goal is to digitize printed materials held in the Archives and make them electronically available for public reference. Archived printed materials would be stored in three formats: paper (i.e. the original document); digital format; microfilm format. The documents themselves would be kept in storage and not be for handling. He also wishes to revive the microfilming project active in the pre-digital era and microfilm the records of the monasteries as first priority. The records would be digitized as part of the same exercise. However, a funded project would be needed to achieve this goal.

A more immediate concern is preservation of Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage, especially the *cham* (mask dances). In December, 2008 Core of Culture¹⁶ presented a high-definition video archive of

¹⁶ Core of Culture (<http://www.coreofculture.org/about-us.html>) is a Chicago-based organisation devoted to dance heritage preservation. Creation of the Bhutan Dance Database has been its biggest project to date. A second copy of this pioneering dance archive has been deposited in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library, the world's largest archive of original documents and films on dance.

over 300 hours of footage on Buddhist ritual dances (mainly *cham*) to the Royal Government of Bhutan, to be housed in the Archives. Between 2005 and 2007 the dances of some 20 *tsechus* (festivals) around the country had been filmed for this audio-visual record, with principal focus on the smaller and hence more endangered *tsechus*. The Bhutan Dance Preservation Project was part of a cultural exchange program between the government and the Honolulu Academy of Arts which concluded with the exhibition “The Dragon’s Gift: the Sacred Arts of Bhutan” in 2008.¹⁷ This valuable record of Bhutan’s traditional dance culture has now been deposited in the National Archives. Observing that a nation has both tangible and intangible cultural properties the archivist (formerly a vice principal at the Royal Academy for Performing Arts) is keen to extend the brief of the National Archives to document and digitally record other traditional dances and ceremonies, the authenticity of which are now endangered by the combined challenges of an increasing tourism presence and consequences of the modernization process.

The archivist considers that generally speaking, everything is going extremely well in his department at present. The only areas for improvement would be more staff and additional funding for purchase of equipment. For the 11th five year plan (starting mid-2013) the archivist will propose an increased staff establishment along with all necessary equipment to support their various programs. His current equipment wish list includes the following: dedicated fixed digital camera setup for archives work at the NLAB; duplex scanner for processing less fragile loose-leaf material (i.e. traditional format books); more archival storage boxes for wood-blocks; fumigation chamber upgrade (desirable but not essential).¹⁸ The archivist would also very much like to acquire—for on-site work—a portable microfilm

¹⁷ In June, 2004 a memorandum of understanding had been signed to establish a five-year cultural and artistic exchange program with the Honolulu Academy of Arts, concluding with an exhibition entitled “The Dragon’s Gift: the Sacred Arts of Bhutan”. Opening in Honolulu in February, 2008, the exhibition later travelled to museums in New York, San Francisco, Paris, Cologne and Zurich, returning home in late October, 2010. The exhibition was then mounted in Thimphu, Trongsa and Trashigang before finally closing.

¹⁸ The archivist observes that although present day fumigation chambers are safer and more environmentally friendly, their own fumigation chamber (acquired in 1992) uses carbon dioxide cartridges and the exhaust from these is not considered to be very harmful.

camera which can also capture data digitally, if such a dual function camera exists or is under development.

Although administrative arrangements for proper record keeping cannot be put in place until passage and formal enactment of the National Archives Act, there is nevertheless much that can be achieved in the meantime. Achievements to date in promoting the Archives demonstrate that a resourceful, positive and self-motivated approach can bring rewards even in the absence of an Archives Act or of project funding. There is no danger of donor dependency here.