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## **The Commodification of Culture: Bhutan's Tourism in Globalisation Context**

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### **Abstract**

The Bhutanese culture is one of the most important cultures of the world and has a unique identity. The richness of culture and nature have made Bhutan become a major destination for tourism. The Bhutanese government's clear promotion and development strategy have resulted in fast-growing tourism, especially cultural tourism linked to Buddhism. This paper looks at the relationship between tourism and the commodification of culture in the context of globalisation. This article uses qualitative research methodology to study and analyse the effects of globalization through tourism on the culture of Bhutan. This article analyses the primary information, such as Bhutanese official documents, etc. , and secondary information such as textbooks, articles, online news, etc. through the theory of commodification of culture. When the Bhutanese culture becomes a commodity, the culture serves the society more than the traditional ways of life that people practise. Tourism is an important factor that increases the process of social change in Bhutan. It does not impact the country only in terms of economics but it also impacts the culture and society in Bhutan, while the globalisation process is one of the major factors that links the commodification of Bhutanese culture with tourism. The argument of the article is that the Driglam Namzha policy is a major policy in shaping Bhutan's contemporary image to the world, although this policy has also created social change, such as a unique culture in Bhutan. At the same time, the growth of tourism as a result of globalisation is eroding this policy, especially among younger generations who interact with foreign travellers. This situation has changed Bhutanese culture significantly.

### **Keyword**

Bhutan, Commodity, Culture, Globalisation, Social Change

## **Introduction**

Many countries have a transition in politics, economics and society but few countries can transition those systems very peacefully. Bhutan is one of the few countries that have transitioned from a traditional political system (Monarchy) to a modern political system (Democracy) very peacefully. The background history of Bhutan dates back to 1616 when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal a Buddhist monk from Tibet came to the land. He settled snatching parts of both the country and rival religious schools as he came to merge the head of secular and holy power. Authority was separated between the secular ruler (Desi) and the monastic head (Je Khenpo), each controlled their own domain after his demise. In 1907, Ugyen Wangchuk was the highest head of a hereditary monarchy and one of the key regional rulers (penlops) of Bhutan. He was sponsored by British India after their extension of power over the Himalayan regions. Bhutan was ruled by a King since then. The fourth King willingly abdicated, although he is very famous. He decided to introduce a constitution and enthroned his son as the new King under the constitution. He announced that Bhutan's stability, serenity and development were due to two primary factors: Buddhist aspects and the relations between the palace and people. The fifth King of Bhutan was enthroned in 2006 and a public coronation ceremony was held in 2009 (Bartholomew & Johnston, 2008).

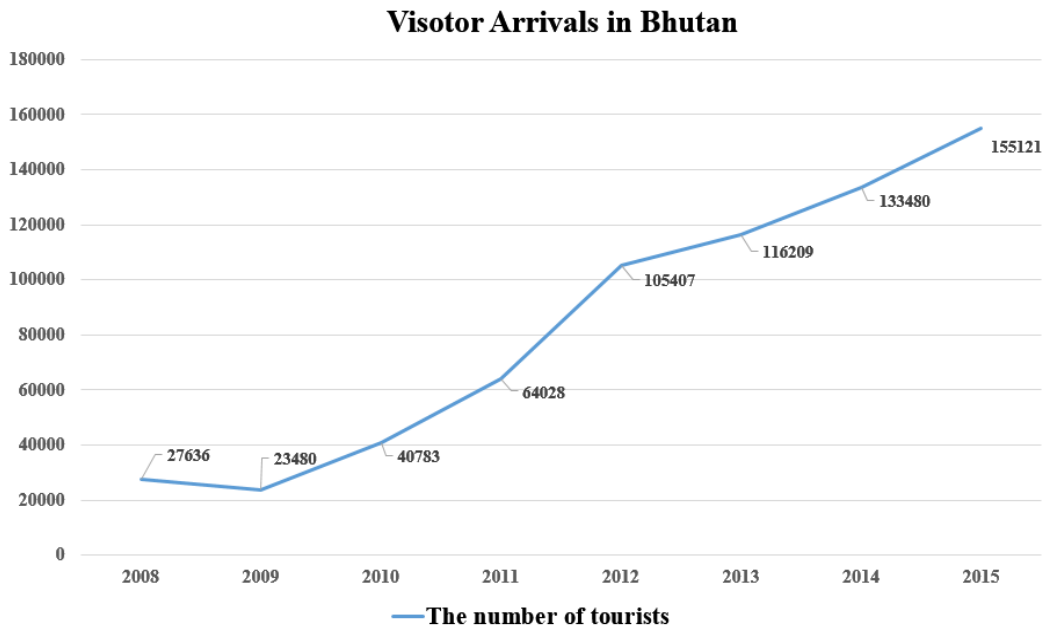
Bhutan is a small country that is located at a trans-Himalaya region between Tibet (China) and India. It is a land-locked country that has 38,394 sq. km. and includes the area dispute between Bhutan and China (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2011). The Northern part of Bhutan connects with the Tibet Autonomous Region of China and the other parts which are connected with India such as Sikkim and West Bengal at the west, Assam at the south and Arunachal Pradesh at the east. One of the characteristics of Bhutan is its inaccessibility because of geographical factors such as dense forests, high mountain ranges, climatic conditions such as severe winter and heavy rainfall. All of these factors make Bhutan inaccessible and unconnected from the east, west, and also from the north.

The geographical factors of Bhutan limit its economic activities in more than one way. Bhutan's economy is based on the sale of hydroelectric power to India, agriculture, forestry and tourism. More than 80 percent of the population depends on farm and agriculture. The growth domestic product (GDP) of Bhutan increased from 5.9 % in 2015 to 6.4% in 2016 (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Moreover, there is also a handicrafts industry, particularly weaving and the manufacture of religious art for home altars. The agricultural production of Bhutan is low due to the natural environment and lack of an irrigation infrastructure, quality of seeds and new scientific methods that were used to grain the production. Bhutan has a policy to control some economic sectors such as industrial licences, trade, labour, and finance which continue to interrupt foreign investment, so hydroelectricity exports to Indian have supported Bhutan's economic growth. The lack of

communications means and effective transport have hurt the developmental process in Bhutan. India is an important neighbour country because Bhutan's economy is 90% related to India including foreign trade and telecommunications. An important concept for economic development that is applied by Bhutan's government is Gross National Happiness (GNH). It is a measurement of the collective happiness in the nation that began in 1972 by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck (Givel, 2015). GNH continues to be promoted as a symbol of Bhutan and its economic development.

Tourism is an important sector that helps boost the economy of the country. The government of Bhutan want to raise revenue and promote the culture, natural resource and traditional ways of life to the outside world, so the government of Bhutan opened the country to foreigners to travel and it was the beginning of the tourism in Bhutan. By 2015, more than 155,121 tourists from South Asia and other countries visit Bhutan. The figure increased from the previous year to 16.21 percent (The Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2016). Although the government of Bhutan open country for the foreigner to travel, it also has a restricted the level of policy to protect the environment and culture as it was affected by the tourists. The foreigner that wants to visit Bhutan must book the Bhutan's travel agencies for planning a trip to travel for preferring higher quality tourism in the country. The most important sightseeing for tourism in Bhutan is the capital city of Bhutan (Thimpu) and the western city of Paro. The rich and unique cultural heritage of Bhutan that has mainly remained unharmed because of its isolation from the whole world until the mid-20th century is a destination of the foreigner to visit Bhutan.

The number of foreign tourists coming to Bhutan has increased year by year (figure 1). So the main question of the study is 1) What major tools are being used by the government of Bhutan to promote cultural tourism? and 2) How does cultural tourism impact Bhutan? This article focused on the relationship between tourism and the commodification of culture in the context of globalisation in Bhutan. This article uses qualitative research methodology to study and analyse the effects of globalization through tourism on the culture of Bhutan. The research involved collection from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included Bhutanese documents, speeches and interviews of its leaders. The secondary sources included books, journal articles, English newspapers and other online sources. The available data from relevant organisations were collected and reviewed for relevant information such as the Bhutan Tourism Monitor Annual Report.



**Figure 1** Total visitor arrivals in Bhutan (2008- 2015)

Source: The Tourism Council of Bhutan. (2016). Annual Report Bhutan Tourism Monitor 2015. Thimphu: Tourism Council of Bhutan.

### **The Commodification of Culture: Globalisation and Tourism**

Tourism growth is a significant result of the expansion of globalisation, which facilitates regional connectivity through communication and transport. The linkage has resulted in a more convenient transfer of tourists to different countries (The Asian Entrepreneur, 2016). Tourism is a growing economic sector coupled with capitalism because of the growth of the middle class. The middle class is a group that drives the capitalist economy through the purchasing of tangible and intangible products. Tourism has become a new economic factor that generates revenue for many countries under the capitalism umbrella. Tourism is also an important way to promote harmonious international exchanges and commodity cultures across the globe (Reid, 2003, pp. 1-2). Tourism is, therefore, an important product that is produced and driven by globalisation, while many academics believe tourism is one of the key drivers of globalisation (Brown, 1998).

A commodity is a form of productivity that was produced by a human. The productivity is not the same as the commodity because the productivity sometimes is produced only for use. The productivity will become a commodity when it is sent to be sold in the market, so the commodity is different from the productivity (Marx, 1967, pp. 38-39). The increasing importance of goods is not only in terms of quantity but also in the value of goods

exchanged in society. Therefore, the expansion of the exchange system has resulted in a significant increase in the currency and commodity system because the currency and commodity become a part of wealth in the world economic system. The consumption of human goods does not depend only on the utility of the product but also on the satisfaction of the consumer as a result of the purchase (Baudrillard, 1998, pp. 78-79). Therefore, the product is not attached only to the object but also to the value goods that are intangible especially the culture.

The rapid growth of capitalism has had a significant impact on the cultures of many countries around the world. Many countries have been reforming their economic structure to match more market-driven systems to support capitalist economies since the end of the Cold War. The culture becomes the economic product because the society gives a value and meaning to it, so many countries try to promote their unique culture for stimulating the needs of tourists. The emerging commodification of culture is an important part of a capitalist economic system that focuses on economic growth and promoting the production of goods for sale (Appadurai, 1986, pp. 3-5). However, the commodification of culture has a direct effect on social change because it can freeze culture or promoting some specific culture.

The commodification of culture is a part of globalisation that is a process of the world connectivity. Globalisation plays an important role in fostering the expansion of cultural goods markets, both in terms of supply and demand (Nye Jr. & Welch, 2014, pp. 267-268). Cultural goods are not limited to objects that convey identity, but also other intangible values such as visual arts, language, lifestyle, etc. The commodification of culture is not only a matter of promoting the object, but also promoting the intangible cultural value of the market. Unique intangible cultural values lead to the visit of consumers that demand cultural goods through tourism.

Cultural tourism is one of the most popular forms of tourism in the world, as it encourages the learning of exotic cultures that travellers cannot see in their own country. Cultural tourism can be defined as a form of tourism where people outside the community who are interested in studying the history, religion, art, or the way of life of one community (Silberberg, 1995, p. 361). Therefore, cultural tourism is a common form of tourism under the shadow of globalization, which facilitates the movement of tourists. Each country competes to produce more marketable products, including their culture. Many cultures were produced, managed, and turned into commodities (Ryan & Aicken, 2006). One of the key driving forces behind this process is cultural tourism.

Cultural tourism promotes dramatic changes in the global cultural system. These have a negative effect on the aesthetic quality of culture that exists in many countries. In addition to the commodification of culture by the host country, which has contributed to the collapse of traditional culture, the expansion of tourism as a result of globalisation has also

led to the destruction of cultural diversity (Shepherd, 2002, pp. 185-18). The commodification of culture also has a direct impact on the way people live, especially on the issue of development, due to the needs of tourists who want the community to live in the traditional way (Lundup, 2013). These demands are in contrast to the real needs of the community, especially in improving the quality of life.

### **Why Does Bhutan Promote Culture and Tourism?**

Bhutan today is different from what it was like in the past. Bhutan's history outlines that the present Bhutan was covered and governed by many landlords (Penelope). The territory of Bhutan was formed after it was defeated by British India in 1865 and signed the treaty of Sinchula (Phuntsho, 2016, pp. 458-468). Even though the territory was formed, Bhutan was unstable because of the civil war among the landlords until 1907. The landlord of Tongsa Ugyen Wangchuck defeated all the other landlords and stopped the civil war within the country. He became the first King of Bhutan and finished the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal regime. Bhutan's society transferred from the feudal society to the absolute monarchy system. The absolute monarchy system in Bhutan was supported by the British India Government (Rajput, 2011, pp. 85-86). Ugyen Wangchuck tried to move Bhutan to become a modern state after he visited India (Calcutta). The development in Calcutta made him realise that development through education would help people to have a good life without inequality.

After the death of Ugyen Wangchuck in 1926, Jigme Wangchuck became the second king of Bhutan. He followed his father's modernisation development of Bhutan. The biggest challenge of his power was the independence of the Republic of India in 1946. The king used the difference in terms of culture, religion and habitation as a key reason for being an independent country from India. The king agreed to sign a treaty of peace and friendship between India and Bhutan in 1949. The importance of the treaty was the limitation of external relations that impacted Bhutan until it was revised in 2007 (Phuntsho, 2016, pp. 561-562). The modernity of Bhutan is more apparent when the third king (Jigme Dorji Wangchuk) took the throne. He is a symbol of modern Bhutan. His most important legacy was the Tshogdu or National Assembly that was set up in 1953. He set up this assembly as a learning resource for the people's autonomy. He reformed the land policy to ensure the security of tenants and enabled the country to change over from a barter to a money economy (Rajput, 2011, p. 89). He started promoting the study of Bhutanese art such as painting, dance, singing and sculpture. Many schools were established to teach the Bhutanese language (Dzongkha) and culture. The Bhutanese culture was dominated by the Ngalop people. "The Ngalop introduced Tibetan culture and Buddhism to Bhutan and comprise the dominant political and cultural element in modern Bhutan... For these reasons, Ngalops are often simply identified

as Bhutanese" (Driem, 1993, p. 88). The king developed a road project to link Bhutan with India. Bhutan registered to the United Nations in 1971, having held observer status for three years. The king increased Bhutan's interaction with other countries based on the fear of neighbouring countries. Bhutan realised that it cannot be isolated from the outside world because it would impact the independent status of the country and limit its ability to progress.

The fourth King of Bhutan (Jigme Singye Wangchuk) also agreed to continue the open country policy of his father. In 1974, he passed a tourism policy for opening the country. It was the starting point for tourism in Bhutan. In the first year, there were 2 8 7 tourists (Kharat, 2016, p. 248). The opening policy of Bhutan was pushed by external affairs. For example, China took up Lhasa in 1959 and India annexed Sikkim in 1975 (Duff, 2015, pp. 294-295). The opening country policy was a major turning point in the political, economic and social structure of the country including the culture. Social and economic institutions are considered to be the most affected by tourism in both positive and negative terms because tourism refers to the arrival of modernity that directly influences traditional culture. Although tourism would bring foreign currency to the country, it would also bring consumer culture and capitalism to the country. However, the king expected that opening Bhutan to the world would support and secure the independence of Bhutan in the world community. The activities of the monarch that have been disseminated through advertisement are considered as an important display in Bhutan's tourism promotion such as the coronation of the fourth and the fifth King, Tshechu festival, etc (Walcott, 2011, pp. 260-261). All of the activities are linked with Buddhism which is the most common religion in Bhutan.

The increased promotion of Bhutanese culture and Buddhism are supported by the monarch and government after Sikkim merged with India. The success of the Nepali movement in Sikkim that aimed to join India had an impact to the Bhutanese because many Nepali people settled in southern Bhutan. The fear of the Nepali movement in Sikkim urged the Bhutan government to build and develop Bhutanese identities by cultivating Buddhism and Ngalop culture. Promoting and supporting Buddhism and Ngalop culture made a significant impact on the perspective of foreigners about Bhutan through the Driglam Namzha. This policy for supporting a particular ethnicity impacted other ethnic groups in Bhutan especially the Nepali people and the Lhotshampa who are mentioned below. So the monarch played an important role in nation building through culture sponsorship especially the sponsorship of Ngalop culture. The Ngalop culture was important for the monarch because the king and elites within the country were Ngalop. Therefore, cultural tourism in Bhutan that was supported by the government is only representative of Ngalop culture. Moreover, the culture that is perceived and absorbed by tourists through Bhutanese advertisement is the Ngalop culture. This policy is considered destructive to the existing cultural diversity of Bhutan.

## **Bhutanese Culture: Cultural Marketing**

Although the opening country policy of Bhutan was pushed by the foreign policy of neighbouring countries, globalization was also important. While many countries in the world are connected with each other, this global social change impacted the situation in Bhutan and the decision-making of the Bhutan's government. The link between Bhutan and India, both at the public and higher levels, has a major impact on the perception of information and new innovation in the world including the Bhutanese who have studied abroad and returned to work in the Bhutanese government. These factors and causes promote Bhutan's social transformation through the process of globalisation, especially their entry into the capitalist economy. The Bhutanese government has promoted an export-oriented economic system, as well as promoting tourism. The introduction of Druk Air service in 1983 took the development of communication even further and improved the infrastructure for supporting the tourism policy (Phuntsho, 2016, pp. 584-585). Tourism is one of the key economic sectors of Bhutan and a focus of the paper.

According to a report from the Tourism Council of Bhutan in 2015, the purpose of tourists that come to visit Bhutan is 84.98% for cultural sight-seeing, followed by 5.79% for trekking, 3.62% for adventure, 2.68% for Tshechu and festivals, 1.74% for nature and 1.2% for spirituality and wellness (The Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2016, pp. 22-23). Bhutan's cultural identity is a major attraction for tourists visiting Bhutan, such as architecture, costumes, lifestyle, etc. Since the country has opened it has been successful in the commodification of culture. The culture has been promoted through many policies of the Bhutan's government. The most important policy in 1989 was *Driglam Namzha* which is the traditional code of etiquette of Bhutan. It covered how the Bhutanese would dress in public and how they should act in formal settings. It also regulates a number of cultural assets such as art and architecture (Phuntsho, 2016, p. 579). Under the *Driglam Namzha*, the national dress that was recognised by the government was the Kira for women and the Gho for men (Wangchuck, 2012, p.3). The national dress became one of the symbols of Bhutan for tourists. It is a very successful cultural commodity because the Bhutanese dress has an impact on visitors including journalists. The Bhutanese national dress became a commodity that was known worldwide through travel books and documentaries.

Apart from Bhutanese national dress, Bhutan's cultural attractions such as the Paro (Taktshang Monastery) and Thimphu (Tashichhoedzong) have been successfully commoditised by the government.. Both landmarks are related to Buddhism and a significant and popular place for tourists. They illustrate that the culture that has been sponsored by the government of Bhutan is only Ngalop culture and Buddhism. Both cultures were defined as Bhutanese culture. It is no surprise that Bhutan is known as the land of Buddhism. The success of the commodification of culture by the Bhutanese government can be classified



into 3 reasons. Firstly, The Bhutanese government has a clear policy of promoting cultural tourism, while traditional cultural preservation policies, which result in the maintenance of indigenous culture and practises, such as Driglam Namzha, play an important role making Bhutan unique. Buddhism and the promotion of native culture became major selling points of Bhutan in the market. These selling points can increase the number of tourists that come to the country seeking a nostalgic indigenous way of life as well as a Buddhist pilgrimage. As a result, most tourists come from a country that is Buddhist, such as China, Thailand, Singapore, and Japan. Most of them are also more than 46 years old (The Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2016, p. 21).

Secondly, the government of Bhutan has a high value and low volume tourism policy that restricts the number of tourists because the government wants to protect nature and their culture from foreigners. It limits the tourist supply of Bhutan, while the demand of tourists is huge. Economically, it results in higher prices because the demand exceeds the supply. The high value and low volume tourism policy supports the cultural commodity of Bhutan to become a high premium commodity that improves the demand of tourists. Finally, the commodification of culture of Bhutan can be achieved because of their strong tourism policy and the tourism framework that sponsors tourists to visit particular areas through the development of infrastructure and advertisement. The major institution for foreign tourists is the tourist agency where a license was allowed by the government of Bhutan. Most tourists are unable to travel independently in Bhutan. All foreigners (groups or individuals) must visit on a planned, prepaid, guided package tour or custom designed travel program. The preparedness must be made through a formally approved tour agent, either straight or through an external operator. This arrangement allows the government to frame and channel its culture more effectively. The government can choose what it wants its visitors to recognise and see through its policy-making to the agents that are responsible for selling travel packages to tourists. It is therefore the commodification of Bhutanese culture that has helped tourism become successful and Buddhism/Ngalops culture become a globally recognised commodity. The governmental advertisement and tourism reviews have been instrumental in highlighting Bhutan's image to the global community. The culture can consume in the term of capitalism as the government open their gate for cultural tourism. Bhutanese culture is expected to serve its people as a way of life through its religion, knowledge, and beliefs etc. It is also serving as a product or commodity that drives the economics of Bhutan.

### **Globalisation, Social change and Culture: The Opportunity and Challenge of Bhutanese Culture**

After the government of Bhutan changed its policy from isolation to interconnection with the world, many things in Bhutan changed including the society, economics and politics.

Bhutan became a part of the current process of globalisation that pushed all nation-states to connectedness and interdependence. Globalisation in terms of tourism has created both opportunities and challenges for the Bhutanese government to drive the country by providing a better quality of life for its people through various forms of development. The Bhutanese government has received financial, expert and innovative support from various countries and international organisations in their efforts to lead the country toward development. The changing role of government in seeking increased cooperation has played a major role in changing social, economic and political structures, and has been both positive and negative.

It is clear that Bhutan is now more closely linked to the outside world through political and economic cooperation, especially tourism. The Bhutanese government is using this channel to promote their transitional and local values to the international community through globalisation. Bhutan is a country that strongly promotes Asian values and Easternisation in the international arena, especially in the United Nations. GNH was introduced by the King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. The purpose of the principle was people-centric and consists of 4 pillars. The second pillar is the 'Promotion of basic cultural and human value' that related to the great moral and cultural confusion. In the other word, the government want to preserve the traditional way of life along with the economic development. This pillar was always mentioned by the fourth King in speeches because the moral discipline is important for individual happiness (Rajput, 2011, pp. 269-276). At the same time, this policy plays an important role in promoting cultural tourism and transforming it into a product for sale to foreign tourists. GNH has become more accepted in many countries and was adopted into the UN General Assembly Resolution 65/309, which was titled "Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development" in 2011 (The UN General Assembly, 2012). GNH is considered one of the important new cultural commodities of Bhutan that is being marketed in the global market.

On the other hand, Bhutan's openness and tourism promotion have created many changes and challenges, both socially and culturally. The attempt to create a culture into a commodity through the measures and policies of the Bhutanese government has resulted in the destruction of traditional indigenous cultures in many areas, especially indigenous peoples who are not Ngalop or Buddhist. For example, the 1989 Driglam Namzha policy did not impact the Nepali people or Lhotshampa because they do not follow Buddhism and they have their own traditional culture (Pulla, 2016, pp. 14-15). Bhutan's policy of the commodification of culture resulted in conflicts in the country. It led to the exodus of the Lhotshampa people because of the domination of culture, politics, and economics by the Ngalop people. The commodification of Bhutanese culture through the promotion of tourism became a major reason for the destruction of cultural diversity and started a social change in Bhutan (Shakoor, 1995, pp. 31-32). Even though the government of Bhutan has a policy to

maintain traditional Bhutanese culture and restrict the number of tourists to protect the indigenous culture from foreigners, it does not mean the culture and society of Bhutan will not change. In fact, investment and tourism policies have resulted in changes in terms of lifestyle i.e. labour from the agricultural sector has shifted to the service sector. The culture that functions to respond to domestic social needs becomes a commodity that is made to meet tourist demands. Cultural festivals have become a part of economic stimulus and income generation. These have resulted in Bhutan society becoming a consumerism in the term of capitalism because they operate the festivals to serve the expectation of the tourists.

The increase in tourists has resulted in a change of lifestyle. The lifestyle of tourists, which is different from the Bhutanese in terms of dress and eating, has led to social change in Bhutan, especially among youth. Many business groups have come up to cater to tourists, despite the differences in government policy to preserve traditional culture. The arrival of multinational corporations such as Coke and Pepsi is a key indicator of Bhutan's Western culture exposure, while access to the internet and the perception of information from all over the world directly affects the thoughts of Bhutan's young population (Walcott, 2011, pp. 261-262). Bhutan's young population has begun to wear western clothing, such as jeans. These things are eroding and challenging the traditional Bhutanese culture that is considered a key commodity of Bhutan in the global travel market. Therefore, it can be said that globalisation in terms of tourism and the commodification of culture have had both positive and negative impacts on social and cultural change in Bhutan. Bhutan's young generation is a major turning point for maintaining the country's traditional culture and promoting new forms of development.

## **Conclusion**

Bhutan is a country with a long history and is comprised of 3 main indigenes, the Ngalops, Sharchops, and Lhotshampa. Bhutan's nation building started since the founding of the Wangchuk dynasty in 1907. Bhutan's development continued until it initiated a policy of dealing with the outside world. The policy that promoted the opening of Bhutan's country to tourism was in 1974. The Bhutanese government's tourism efforts have led to many policies to create a selling point for Bhutan's tourism. The Bhutanese government initiated the construction of an international airport in Paro city, in cooperation with India, and it was opened in 1983. This airport directly linked Bhutan with the outside world by flight. Cultural richness is a major focus of tourists visiting Bhutan, so the government has issued a policy to promote the creation of Bhutanese culture into a commodity.

One of the key policies of the government that created a turning point in promoting the Bhutanese culture is the Driglam Namzha. The Driglam Namzha is a policy that resulted in the creation of a national culture for the first time in Bhutan, which both positively and

negatively affected Bhutan society. Globalisation is an important driving force behind the changes in Bhutan's society and culture. In addition, globalisation has played an important part in promoting Bhutan's values and spirits, and concepts such as GNH have helped them to become recognized among a global community. Tourists and expatriates have an illusion about Bhutan's social and cultural changes and feel that Bhutan's culture and society are unchanging. In fact, Bhutan's society and culture are constantly changing, especially after the opening of investment and tourism. Bhutan's culture is not only a part of life but also an important source of income for the government of Bhutan that is trying to commodify the Bhutanese culture.

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