

**Butter Lamps, Natural Disaster, and Climate Change in the Himalayas:
Preserving and Accessing the Textual Literary Heritage of Bhutan Through the
Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library***

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Introduction

Often, when a Buddhist monastery in the Himalayas burns down to the ground, the association that comes to mind is butter lamps as the main culprit of the fire, because they are used so extensively as a central offering in the Tibetan Buddhist world. However, while there is certainly some truth to that, the causes for the loss of the textual literary heritage of Bhutan held within the libraries of these buildings, such as monasteries, temples, shrines, and fortresses, due to sudden destruction or more gradual decay are indeed manifold.

Apart from fire, causes for the endangerment or the actual loss of the textual literary heritage of Bhutan can also be simply human neglect, the lack of resources, dampness, rodents, insects, theft, natural disasters and, more recently, but even more worrying, the negative effects of climate change. Wangdüpodrang Dzong (1638), for example, one of the many important fortresses that united political and religious governmental institutions in Bhutan and were originally built by the founder of Bhutan, Zhapdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–ca. 1651, hereafter: Zhapdrung), was destroyed in 2012 after it had already suffered previous destruction due to fire in 1838 (Phuntsho 2013, 364).

Out of all these causes for decay and loss, natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides have always figured quite prominently in the mountainous terrain of the Himalayas. Rebuilding Buddhist sites, therefore, features quite prominently in the life of many rulers and Buddhist masters in Bhutan throughout history—often quite a mixed blessing. On the one hand, such work could enormously contribute to the fame of a Buddhist master or ruler due to the accumulation of positive karmic merit that is traditionally associated with activities

such as erecting Buddhist sites, producing Buddhist statues, or printing Buddhist texts; on the other hand, if unlucky, it could also have quite the adverse effect, such as of losing support in the populace, very well exemplified in the case of the Sixteenth Regent of Bhutan, Zhidar alias Sönam Lhundup (?–1773). After the fortress of Tashichö Dzong burned down in 1772, Zhidar had it rebuilt within just a year, but at the costs of many lives that were lost due to the cruel conditions of labour he forced upon the general populace (Teltscher 2006, 65 f.). One can undoubtedly say royal coffers and monastery funds were only too often substantially and lastingly drained by reconstruction costs due to fire and natural disasters in the course of Bhutanese history.

Once one starts looking into historical and autobiographical/biographical sources in Bhutan, they are full of references to natural disasters and how they affected religious and political life and the Bhutanese people more generally. One quite sad example is found in the writings of the eminent Buddhist master, polymath, and diplomat, the Ninth Chief Abbot of Bhutan, Je Shākya Rinchen (1710–59). As a child, age four, he tragically witnessed one of the gravest natural disasters in pre-modern Bhutan, the earthquake of 1714, which had an estimated magnitude of $8 \pm$ (Hetényi 2016). Je Shākya Rinchen reports in his autobiography about the traumatic experience of being pulled barely alive from the rubble, only protected by the body of his dead mother. The long-lasting physical and emotional effects of this traumatic experience are frequently addressed in his writings (Dorji 2011).

Bhutanese EAP Projects

The block print of this very autobiography/biography by Je Shākya Rinchen is preserved digitally in the EAP570 project “Digital documentation of Dongkala, Chizing, Dodedra and Phajoding temple archives” (2012). It includes finely printed drawings of Buddhist masters and deities and was originally produced in the famous Punakha printery in Central Bhutan.



Figure 1: Print drawing of the 3rd Gyelwa Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339) on the title page of the 8th chapter of Je Shākya Rinchen’s autobiography/biography. EAP570/5/3/14, 014 shAk rin nam thar, p. 78. <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP570-5-3-14>.

In addition to their work in the initially planned sites of Dongkala, Chizing, Dodedra and Phajoding in this project, the team led by Dr. Karma Phuntsho was able to digitise the libraries

of four other temples in the vicinity of Phajoding and Dongkala, namely Phurdogkha, Menrikha, Thujedra and Pumola.

So far, also under Karma Phuntsho's lead, three other extensive digitisation projects in Western and Central Bhutan have been successfully completed: EAP 310 "The digital documentation of manuscripts in Thadrak, Tshamdrak and Nyephug Temples" (2009), EAP105 "The digital documentation of manuscripts at Drametse and Ogyen Choling" (2006), and EAP039 "Archival records from digital documentation of manuscript collection in Gangtey" (2005). Unfortunately, the precarity of monastic libraries in Bhutan is all too present.



Figure 2: Damaged temple after earthquake (September 18, 2011) in Bhutan. Photo courtesy of British Library Endangered Archives Programme.

In 2011, several sites of the EAP 570 project, such as Dongkarla were damaged by an earthquake that affected as many as 339 temples in Bhutan, 17 destroyed beyond repair (Young 2014).

Taking the severe endangerment of Bhutanese textual collections into consideration, the British Library Endangered Archives Programme, funded by the Arcadia Fund, recently offered a

major Area grant, the most extensive grant of the programme, to the project EAP1494 "Digitisation of 20 remote Bhutanese archives" (2022).

The project will not only include libraries of monasteries and temples but also fortresses (Dzongs) and covers a much wider geographical area including Western, Central, and Eastern Bhutan. In detail, digitisation at the following sites and regions will take place: Goenpapung temple, Jadrung Lhakhang, Kupa Jigsa (Khaling, Tashigang); Yonphula temple (Kanglung, Tashigang); Tashigang Dzong (Tashigang); Mongar Dzong (Mongar); Yongal temple, Tshelingkhor temple, Wangchilu (Pema Gatshel); Buli Lhakang, Corten Nyingpo, Zhuri, Chumipang, Nyimalung temple (Chumey, Bumthang); Kartsho Goenpa, Sidcha Goenpa, Anag Goenpa, Tsunmi Tsangnang Goenpa, Yangthang Goenpa, Jadued Goenpa (Haa); Tencha Goenpa (Paro); and Talakha Goenpa, Lhongtsho Tashigang Goenpa, Semtokha Dzong (Thimphu).



Figure 3: The current offices of the Loden Foundation in Thimphu, Bhutan. Photo courtesy of British Library Endangered Archives Programme.

As such, this project, with two sites completed, Semtokha and Mongar Dzongs, will substantially add to the other four existing collections of Bhutanese materials at the EAP, with an estimated 4.38 million pages already digitised (Loden Foundation Annual Report 2023, 35 f.).

Besides monasteries, temples and fortresses, former residences or retreat places of important Buddhist masters and private households of religious family lineages sometimes also hold important textual collections and autographs—Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

Although some of the formerly privately held textual heritage that constitutes part of Bhutan's tangible culture has been transferred to the National Library and Archives of Bhutan (NLAB) in Thimphu since its foundation in 1967 through legislative acts between 1969 and 1973 (Shaw 2013, 13–14),

substantial amounts remain in private ownership. This is another worthwhile research avenue to follow up on in future individual digitisation projects or ethnographic research.

Structure and Content of the Bhutanese Collections

In the following section, to provide some insights into the great value of the materials for researchers in the fields of Tibetan and Bhutanese studies and some practical information, I will give a brief overview of the general structure and characteristics of the Bhutanese collections in their digitised form and highlight some, to me personally, very appealing examples.

As to my background in working with these materials, several works for my current research project *BhutIdBuddh: Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Travel: Identity- and Nation-*

Building in Bhutan that address Je Shākya Rinchen's role as diplomat in identity- and nation-building processes in Bhutan, are located at Phajoding monastery, as Phajoding monastery was one of the two major seats of Je Shākya Rinchen (the other being Shrī Nālandā monastery near Punakha). They are digitised in the EAP570 project, with some also having been made available previously, for example, as lithographic print reproductions through the efforts of Gene Smith for his Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), now Buddhist Digital Archives (BUDA).

To begin with, the Bhutanese materials in the different libraries of monasteries and temples were generally divided by the project teams into two main categories: (1) canonical works, which include the Kanjur and Tenjur, the Old Tantras collection (*Nyingma Gyübum*), and individual, often expensively manufactured canonical works, such as the supposedly world's largest *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* or other important Buddhist *Sūtras*, and (2) very diverse autochthonous works by Bhutanese and Tibetan Buddhist scholars that contain, for example, topics of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, such as exegetical comments on the canonical materials, philosophical treatises, and works on meditative and ritual practices; historiographical materials, such as religious and monastic histories, annals, genealogical accounts and clan chronicles, legal codes, and administrative documents; "treasure" literature (Tib. *gter ma*); autobiographical and biographical literature; literary and artistic works from all traditional Buddhist fields of knowledge, but also Bön and non-religious works from Bhutan and the larger Tibetan cultural area. The Tibetan cultural area is here understood not only as the Tibetan Autonomous Region within the People's Republic of China but includes in this broader definition Bhutan, as well as parts of Western China, the Indian Himalayas, Nepal, Mongolia, and the former Soviet Union, depending on the point in Tibetan history we are looking at.

The project team has preliminarily dated most of the existing texts from the monastic collections to the sixteenth century onwards, but there are certainly much earlier materials. Moreover, even in the collection of one specific site, we often find a great range of codicological and palaeographical features to analyse, such as different Tibetan and Bhutanese scripts and writing styles, print formats ranging from expensively executed manuscripts and block prints to codex formats and loose scrolls, various *mise en page*, and different kinds of Bhutanese and Tibetan papers.

Thus far, researchers in the field of Tibetan and Bhutanese textual studies have especially shown an interest in the canonical materials extant in Bhutan and digitally preserved in the EAP collections. For example, Orna Almogi has extensively worked on variants and the transmission history of the Nyingma Gyübum, for example, the Dongkarla version. Conveniently, the EAP



Figure 4: Title pages of *Astasahasrikaprajñāparamita*. EAP039-1-1-1-1, *Sher phyin 'Bum*, Vol. 1, p. 2. <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP039-1-1-1-1>.

collections of Bhutanese canonical works are also linked to the Vienna Resources for Kanjur and Tanjur Studies (rKTS) webpage and are accessible via permalinks at the Buddhist Digital Archives (BUDA)

webpage. At the rKTS the Bhutanese Kanjur collections are currently listed under Chizi (Cz), Dodedrak (Dd), Dongkarla (Dk), Gangteng (Gt), Neyphug (Np), Phajoding I Ogmin Lhakhang Monastery (Pj), Phajoding II Khangzang Lhakhang Monastery (Pz), and Thadrak (Td).

To a lesser degree systematic cataloguing and research work to understand the collections containing the works by later Bhutanese and Tibetan scholars has taken place—with notable exceptions, such as documented in Karma Phuntsho’s and Samten Karmay’s work (Karmay 2004; Karmay 2013; Phuntsho 2013; Phuntsho 2015). While many of those deemed important works have been made accessible in the form of reproductions either as singular publications or via BUDA, a large number of works still await further investigation. When it comes to the value of these manuscripts and block prints for researchers working on Tibetan and Bhutanese history and religion not only are their contents often not yet accessed and translated, but they also provide new information about transregional and transcultural knowledge exchanges between Bhutanese and Tibetan Buddhist masters and lineages and, along with that, the production, printing, and circulation of texts between Bhutan and Tibet over many centuries.

In addition, such effort is crucial as many works are no longer extant or accessible in Tibet. The example that probably illustrates this best is the collected works of the eminent Sakya scholar Shākya Chogden Drimé Legpā Lodrö (1428–1507, hereafter: Shākya Chogden), which

scholars had considered lost within Tibet until they were discovered in Je Shākya Rinchen's monastery Phajoding in the 1970s (EAP570). Je Shākya Rinchen had considered himself to be an emanation of Shākya Chogden and even implemented important doctrinal concepts into his own intellectual agenda as a scholar from the Drukpa Kagyü tradition. Due to his devotion, he had a manuscript version of Shākya Chogden's collected works reproduced, most probably acquired during his travels in Tibet (Smith 2004; Schwerk 2020, 87 ff.). In brief, as this example shows, the texts contained in the four Bhutanese EAP collections are much more diverse than would be expected, including, for example, works on all four major Tibetan Buddhist traditions (Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyü, and Geluk) and smaller lineages, although, they are mostly located in what are now Drukpa Kagyü or Nyingma monasteries.

As a background, after the foundation of Bhutan in the seventeenth century by Zhapdrung, his newly founded Bhutanese branch of the Drukpa Kagyü school (Tib. *lho 'brug*) consecutively became the dominant religious tradition in Bhutan—albeit with a stronghold of the Nyingma tradition in Eastern Bhutan until today. Prior to the unification of Bhutan, various other traditions had flourished and been in close exchange with their Tibetan counterparts, such as their main monastic seats, affiliated patrons, or traditional sacred places. For the interested reader, Karma Phuntsho (2013, 119–87) and Michael V. Aris (1979, 147–97) have provided a detailed overview of all Buddhist traditions and lineages and their entanglements with Tibet prior to the unification of Bhutan in the seventeenth century.

One fascinating example of the religious and political history of Bhutan is Chizing monastery (EAP570/4), which formerly belonged to the Ngor lineage of the Sakya tradition and was founded by the not very well known Sakya master Thinlé Rapyang (1505–65). It was the main Sakya centre in Bhutan and, therefore, also holds many works of the Sakya tradition. Interestingly and contrary to other traditions, it retained its Sakya affiliation even after the takeover of Bhutan by Zhapdrung in the seventeenth century (Phuntsho 2013, 184 f.). However, today, this temple is also under the administration of the Central Monastic Body (Zhung Dratshang) following the Drukpa Kagyü school.

In general, until the present day, there is a natural closeness and unique interaction between the Drukpa and Nyingma schools in Bhutan that can, for example, be observed in terms of the monastic education and activities of numerous important Bhutanese Drukpa Kagyü masters. This then naturally resulted often in an individually diverse identification with various Tibetan Buddhist traditions and practice lineages. The personal libraries of many of the Bhutanese Drukpa Kagyü masters, which we find digitised as part of the monastic libraries in

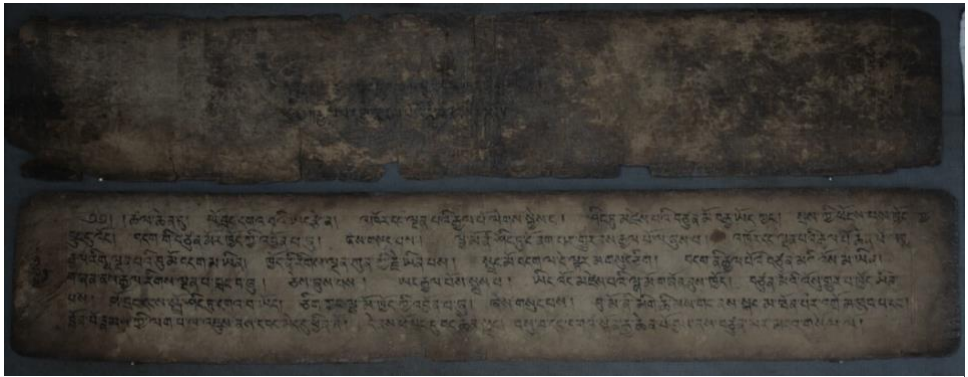


Figure 5: Incomplete biography of Drukpa Künlé (1455–1529) from Chizing monastery in poor condition. EAP570/4/2/13, 013 'brug pa kun legs nram thar, p. 52. <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP570-4-2-13>.

the EAP projects, bear witness to this, for example, in the form of commentaries on Longchenpa Drimé Öser (1308–64, hereafter:

Longchenpa’s works, treasure cycles, or the eminent non-sectarian (Tib. *ris med*) Tibetan Buddhist masters’ works with whom intense knowledge exchanges had taken place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schwerk 2020).

Especially in the—for a cataloguer or researcher albeit challenging—category of miscellaneous writings (Tib. *thor bu*), we are equally rewarded with the most interesting and unexpected, rare finds, and I have selected a few here that I would like to briefly introduce. In Ogyen Choling monastery (EAP105/2), one of the eight famous seats that Longchenpa established during his exile in Bhutan, as Samten Karmay has pointed out in his catalogue of

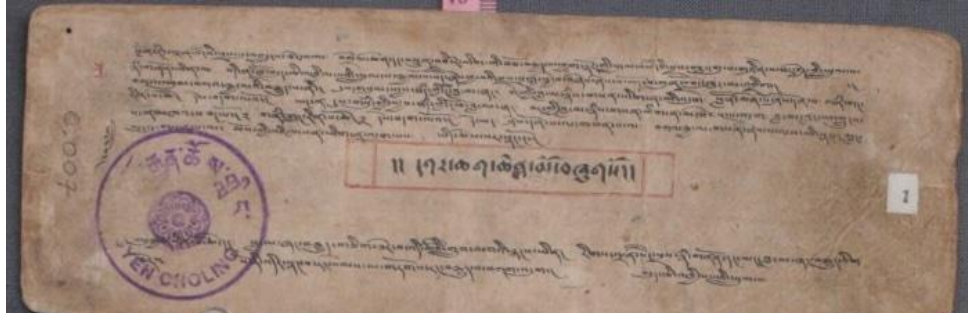


Figure 6: Collected writings of Lama Zhang Tshelpa Tsöndrü Drakpa in Ogyen Choling monastery. EAP105/2/3/2, *dkar chag chen mo nram thar bka' rgya ma*, p. 1. <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP105-2-3-2>.

the monastic collections (Karmay 2004), we find quite some rare gems. One exciting example is the collected works

of Lama Zhang Tshelpa Tsöndrü Drakpa (1121/1123–91), a famous Buddhist master who founded the Tshelpa Kagyü branch of Tibetan Buddhism. He became a controversial person not only due to his unique interpretation of the “self-sufficient white remedy” (Tib. *dkar po chig thub*) in the Mahāmudrā doctrine and meditative system, but also as a military and political ruler in the Tibetan region of Tshel Gungthang. Certainly, after the collapse of the Tibetan Empire, his rule was the first, albeit only short-lived, concrete example of the twofold system of religious and political governance (Tib. *chos srid gnyis ldan*) in Central Tibet, which then also served as an important basis for reflection and conception of Tibetan rule and law in later times.

Another interesting example is the numerous works connected to the treasure literature corpus in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. As a background, “treasures” (Tib. *gter ma*) are mostly texts but could also be ritual objects or relics, which are said to have been hidden by Guru Rinpoche and Yeshe Tsogyel in the eighth century all over the Tibetan cultural area, either physically in a certain place or as well in the mind of “treasure finders” (Tib. *gter ston*) who are qualified through their spiritual realisation to reveal them at a later point in time when the conditions and the karma of the sentient beings are considered to be right. Through to the present day, treasures are revealed by treasure finders, with Bhutan indeed an extremely important place of this tradition with many hidden treasures yet to be discovered.

From the well-known treasure finder and Bhutanese cultural hero Pema Lingpa (1450–1521) to much lesser-known treasure finders, the EAP collections again contain interesting works. For example, in Dongkarla (EAP570/1), which is home to the above-mentioned distinct Bhutanese Kanjur, the project team came across an old autobiography of a treasure finder who was very active in Western Bhutan in the sixteenth century, Paro Tshering Dorji (EAP570/1/2/1) and had discovered a highly advanced cycle of Dzogchen teachings in Tibet (Phuntsho 2013, 142 f.). His autobiography may also date from as early as the sixteenth century, as do many other texts in this collection.

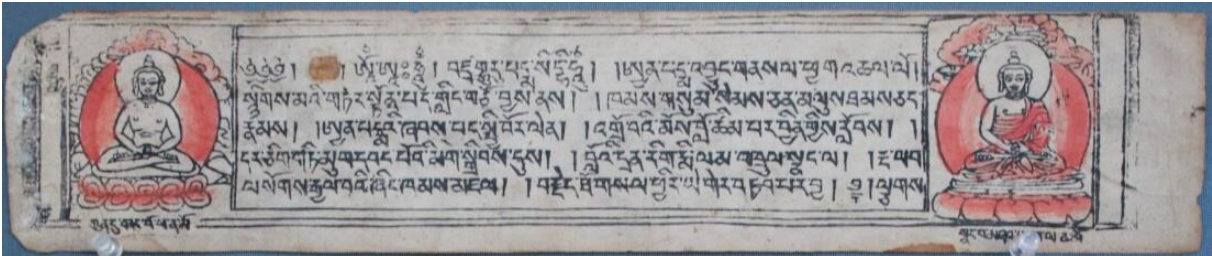


Figure 7: Colored print of Pema Lingpa’s works from Neyphug temple. EAP310/2/2/6, Pad gling bka’ ’bum, p. 10. <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP310-2-2-6>.

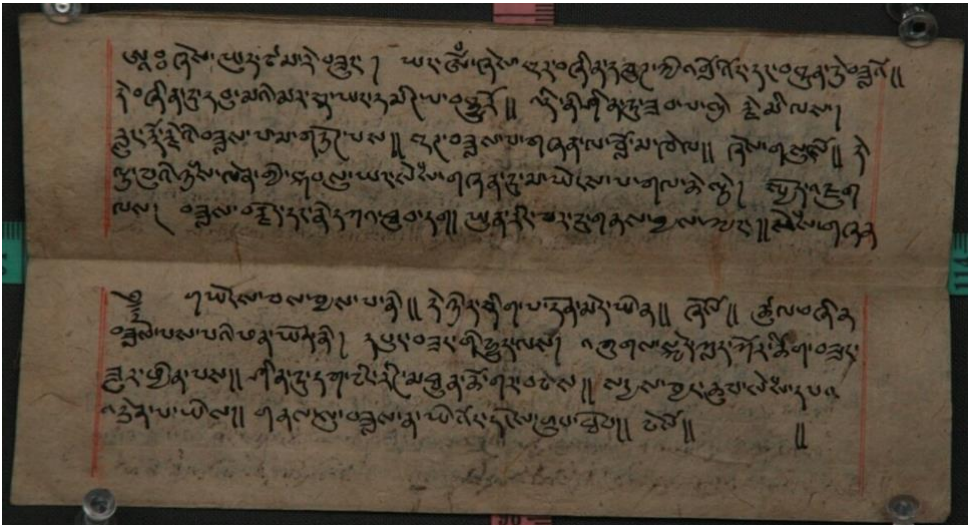


Figure 8: Folded sheet in headless Tibetan script (dbu med) from Ogyen Choling. EAP105/2/6/6, Scrolls, p. 19. <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP105-2-6-6>.

Moreover, we come across all kinds of unsorted religious and administrative documents and notes in other than the dominant pothi format in manuscript or

block print form, such as codices and scrolls. These have not yet been systematically catalogued, analysed, or translated. In addition, it is always important to remember that the texts' condition can vary enormously (see *Figure 5*). All this calls urgently for much more systematic research into the contents, genesis, physical production, and circulation of these important Bhutanese works in the EAP collections.

As a last curious example, I would like to mention that the Dodedrak collection (EAP570/5) contains unique short works of spiritual advice within the collected works of the Thirteenth Chief Abbot Je Yönten Thayé (1724–84) composed in the local vernaculars. This certainly shows how important timely research on these textual collections in Bhutan is. In particular, the accompanying orally transmitted knowledge about their content and text genesis may also not necessarily be transmitted to the next generation of Bhutanese scholars or people and is therefore equally endangered.

These are just some examples of works in the four already completed Bhutanese EAP projects that I have come across and personally found intriguing. For the interested, and hopefully by now very curious researcher or reader, it may be good to know that the ongoing fifth Bhutanese project (EAP1494) will also provide additional systematic metadata besides titles (in Tibetan script), such as content types, subject, and context of the materials, sizes, condition, age, related countries, subjects, beliefs, provenance, the language of the materials, and access conditions. This will make future research work with these collections much more convenient.

Digital, Inclusive, and Sustainable Archives and Research

To conclude, the generous funding of the five EAP projects in Bhutan has enabled a long-term global open access to a significant portion of the rich, often thus far unstudied textual literary heritage of Bhutan covering many centuries of Bhutanese and Tibetan history. In addition, through training of the local communities in the monasteries, storage, and maintenance of the physical collections can hopefully lastingly be improved.

As in all other EAP projects, four principles for access and reuse also apply to the Bhutanese collections: (1) the original archives remain in their country of origin; (2) digital files created are placed in a suitable institution in the country of origin with secondary copies of the digital material archived by the British Library; (3) lower-resolution images are made available free of charge on the British Library website; and (4) neither EAP nor the British Library will use the digital material created by EAP projects for commercial gain and, for example, requests

to use images or recordings for commercial purposes are referred back to the owners or archival partners for permission.

In my opinion, the EAP projects in Bhutan do not only enable global open access to previously inaccessible collections but also contribute to more *inclusive* access. For the Bhutanese scholars and the Bhutanese people within Bhutan, the digital EAP collections enable them to have their own literary textual cultural heritage, which is often located in very remote parts of the country, at their fingertips (if internet connection allows for it). Moreover, access for foreign researchers in Bhutan is not always easy, for example, due to the strict national policies on tourism and research, the lack of funding opportunities for researchers in very early career stages, researchers with socio-economic restrictions, or those whose family responsibilities or health simply make it impossible to go on an extended research stay to the Himalayas. In that sense, indeed, access, engagement, and inclusion of *everyone*, as intended by the *Knowledge Matters Strategy* of the British Library, is put here into best practice.

Although nothing compares to looking at (and touching) the actual and original physical material object of a work one spends endless hours researching on and pondering about as a textual scholar, when it comes to sustainability, it is amazing to realise that exclusively (or largely) digital archival research is indeed possible nowadays. For example, in my current two-year research project, I have been able to work exclusively with digitised texts regarding the Bhutanese primary source materials that I needed without travelling to Bhutan. This made my research project more sustainable and saved quite a substantial amount in my carbon budget. This part of the budget can then better be utilised, for example, in a future collaborative research project where indeed, a longer physical research stay would benefit more researchers and institutions.

Very much has indeed been achieved through the efforts of the EAP in terms of the digitisation, accessibility, and preservation of the Bhutanese literary textual heritage. However, one should also continue to think about the increasingly uncertain future of the physical collections, not only due to natural disasters and other causes for deterioration but also the unknown extent to which the climate crisis will add to the irreversible loss of Bhutanese (or in a broader sense Himalayan) physical textual collections.

The adverse effects of climate change and the warming of temperatures are already hitting mountainous regions in the Himalayas disproportionately hard, and many places, including religious buildings such as monasteries, temples, and shrines, safe until very recently, will eventually be severely impacted. Already today, Bhutan is adversely affected by the rise of temperatures from surrounding countries and the negative change in global climate patterns,

witnessed in an increase of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOF), flash floods, landslides, smog, and forest fires. And this, even though Bhutan itself is carbon-negative and a global role model in sustainable development in the Buddhism-induced ideas and policies of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Scientists and scholars in Bhutan therefore propose a coordinated approach for climate mitigation very urgently (Tshewang, Tobias, and Morrison 2021, xvi). In general, there are already several climate-change initiatives coordinated under the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, such as the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conversation, Bhutan for Life, and the Bhutan Ecological Society. Such an approach should naturally also include cultural institutions containing Bhutan's tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

This is even more critical, as long-term data shows that climate change is and will much more drastically increase global inequality in terms of health, mortality, income, and education (Hsiang 2022). On average, poorer populations will be affected for the worse on a non-linear scale due to their climatic and geographical locations, mostly in the tropical and subtropical zones, which also applies to Bhutan. Moreover, although they naturally already have far fewer resources available to protect themselves from the harmful effects of climate change, they will need to spend a proportionally much more significant portion of their small GDP on climate mitigation measures—in brief, the global divide in the form of climate injustice will grow even much bigger.

However, beyond Bhutan, the negative effects of climate change will eventually hit everywhere, beginning in regions that, alone through their location, are affected by climate change strongly, for example coastal cities due to the rise of sea levels. Consequently, cultural institutions in the galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) sector should, through long-term thinking and securing sufficient financial resources, better sooner than later, begin to implement mitigation measures to preserve their cultural heritage not only digitally but also physically as best as possible.

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Technical note: Tibetan and Bhutanese proper names and places are spelled phonetically roughly according to Nicolas Tournadre's and David Germano's *THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan*. Bhutanese places and names may occasionally deviate from this and are spelled according to today's conventions (for example "ue" for "ü"). Tibetan

technical terms or works are transliterated according to Turrell V. Wylie and set apart in brackets. The transliteration of Sanskrit names, places, and works follows the *International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST)*. For the reader's convenience, works are numbered according to the British Library Endangered Archives Programme catalogue. Live dates of persons follow the respective Buddhist Digital Archives (BUDA) entries.

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