



A traditional house in Pongchaling, a village above Kagtong, Lower Kheng



# KHENG COLOURS

STUDENTS IN THE REMOTE VILLAGE OF KAGTONG  
EXPLORE AND DOCUMENT LIFE AND CULTURE IN THEIR  
VILLAGE USING MODERN DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY.



Neighbour Kezang is grinding maize using her hand mill. Photo by Sangay Wangchuk, 13, student of Kagtong Community Primary School



**Markus Wild,**

*A Swiss photographer and teacher, has been regularly working in Bhutan since 2005. For HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Bhutan he is engaged in the fields of culture and education. For a project on cultural diversity in Bhutan he is conducting a participatory photo documentation in four remote communities. Students and Non Formal Education (NFE) learners are taught in digital photography to explore and document life and culture of their village.*



Tshering Wangmo  
sharing photos with  
teacher Prakash  
Gurung

The eyes of Tshering Wangmo, a 13-year-old student of Kagtong Community Primary School begin to shine when she gets to hold the small black digital camera for the first time. A group of children is sitting in a circle around me and I'm impressed how carefully they listen when I tell them how to handle the camera and how to take good pictures. They are eagerly waiting to take their first photos.

The arduous trek through the mountainous landscape of Zhemgang's Lower Kheng have led me along rivers, through forests and passing by villages surrounded by fields and orchards. The natural environment reminds me of my home country Switzerland but there is a big difference: when I walk through these pristine forests with their incredible richness of species of plants and animals and with the lack of disturbance or destruction by all the negative side effects of development I begin to realize what modern countries like Switzerland have lost.

Bhutan is famous for its extraordinary biodiversity. Less well known however is its cultural diversity. In fact there is a fascinating variety of languages, customs and traditions in the different regions of the country. They all together contribute with their distinct and often unique local traditions to the rich Bhutanese culture.

From the end of the road in Pantang it takes me two days to reach Kagtong. During a former visit at the Community Primary School the principal and the teachers agreed upon my proposal to conduct a participatory photo documentation on local culture at their school. This activity is part of a project on "Leveraging and Preserving Bhutan's Cultural Diversity" (details see below).

The local Primary Community School has 105 students from class PP till VI, all day scholars. Within two weeks some 25 children from classes IV to VI would be learning how to explore and document life and culture in their own village by using a photo camera.

While working in remote villages with students on the topic of local culture I develop a growing respect towards the profound knowledge and experience the villagers have in order to live in harmony with their natural environment. Their



Pema Dorji's father is helping to make a new roof. Photo by Ugyen Dema, 12, student of Kagtong Community Primary School

traditional houses, all the self made objects that people use in their everyday life, their spiritual relation to the land and the beings living within reveal a deep knowledge and understanding about how to live respectfully with and from nature. This knowledge has been developed and handed down over generations.

However, with the arrival of roads and electricity and with modernisation many aspects of traditional culture are at risk of getting lost.

The participatory photo project is connecting the school with the villagers as experts of their local culture. The assignments enable the students to learn about their own local culture, to see it in a new light and to better value and respect local specialists and knowledge keepers.

At the same time the students learn how to use digital photography in a creative and benefiting way.

Everyday the students have other topics to cover and to explore: they have to take pictures and to get information from their relatives –as experts on their local traditions- on the construction of traditional houses, the usage of plants, on rituals and ceremonies, stories and legends, sacred places and many other aspects of their local culture.

Thinley Wangmo, after two weeks of intensive work has compiled an impressive amount of interesting and good photographs. With lively gestures she explained about all the details in the pictures she took. She – like all the other children- is still closely related to everything and everyone in the village, so she has a lot to share when talking about the content of each of her photos.

I am busy writing down all the information that the students share with me. In return I would give tips to each of the young photographers how they could further improve their newly



## Overview of Kagtong Community Primary School





A school class from Thimphu is visiting the Photo exhibition "Life in Ngangla Through the Children's Eyes" at the Tarayana Centre, May 2011



Villagers are making a new roof using bamboo poles and banana leaves



acquired photographic skill. This is the agreement: I would share my knowledge on photography and the students, information local culture.

Two weeks later Tshering Wangmo is among three other students from Kagtong Community Primary School who are chosen to accompany the photos to a big exhibition in Thimphu: "Life in Ngangla Through the Children's Eyes". For everyone of the group it is the first visit in the capital.

At the opening event in the gallery of the Tarayana Centre, Sangay Dorji (12), one of the two boys in the group, delivered a speech in front of Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, ministers and many other dignitaries. The photos impress the visitors as the children explain about their work and life in their village. Later on, urban students also arrive to the life of far away Kheng.

## PHOTO ESSAY

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Walking home  
after school

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A farmer from Kagtong  
with freshly harvested  
cabbage

**W**ith road access and penetration of global forces like the media and international markets, many communities are in transition and their distinctive cultural practices are in serious danger of being lost. Therefore, the project “Preserving and Leveraging Bhutan’s Cultural Diversity” (LCD) was planned with the overall goal to capitalize on Bhutan’s cultural diversity so that it can contribute to poverty alleviation, livelihood improvement and enhanced local ownership for cultural wealth, through capacity building, inter-cultural dialogue and preservation measures. The LCD project is run in four selected communities in remote places of Bhutan by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Bhutan and funded by the European Union. 

