10 Communicating Visual Literacy through Drawing
Illustrations of National Dress, Buddhist Monastic and Ritual Attire in Bhutan

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Abstract This chapter proposes that ethnographic drawings in the form of technical illustrations can serve an important communicative function in material culture studies. Using examples of illustrations of clothing that I produced as part of an ethnographic study of a community Buddhist festival in Bhutan, it demonstrates the productive potential of using technical illustrations as a counterpart to text. The chapter is framed around the concept of visual literacy, defined as the human capacity acquired through socialization in specific cultural contexts to make sense of or 'read' the visual environment by seeing and interpreting it. I show how technical illustrations not only have the potential to reproduce emic visual literacy, but can also be designed to break down the layers of visual knowledge and meaning contained in items of material culture and communicate them to visually non-literate readers.

Keywords Bhutan, Tibet, Himalaya, Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, Material Culture, Ethnographic Drawing, Illustration, Visual Literacy, Attire, Dress, Monastic Robes, National Dress, Ritual Attire, Digital Humanities, Visual Anthropology, Ethnography, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Visual Studies, Masked Performance, Visual Culture, Himalayan Art, Ethnographic Method, Ethnographic Practice.

Introduction

We are surrounded by a natural and human-made environment that many of us visually sense and interact with on a daily basis. By seeing, as well as using our other senses, we intuitively evaluate forms, shapes, sizes, materials, textures, colours and ornamentation, and thereby make sense of and interpret them. We acquire this capacity through socialisation in specific social and natural environments, developing what can be conceptualised as 'visual literacy', that is, the capacity to see, process and decode the appearance of material things (Debes 1969). As an ethnographic researcher studying Vajrayana Buddhist tantric festivals in Bhutan, I have been interested in visual literacy as one layer of villagers' everyday general knowledge. Accessing this knowledge requires visual literacy in the slightly different sense of 'understand[ing] how people perceive objects, interpret what they see, and what they learn from them' (Baldessari, Rashid and Wong 2004, cited in Elkins 2007: 2). This raises an important question, relevant to the ethnographic study of material culture more broadly: How can we best communicate this visual layer of knowledge to audiences who have not (yet) acquired literacy in the material worlds that we study?

This chapter discusses the value of ethnographic drawing as a means to visually communicate research findings in the field of material culture studies. More specifically, it highlights the affordances of technical illustration as a subcategory of ethnographic drawing, showing how it offers novel ways to reproduce and thereby communicate the culturally contextualized sense experience of seeing and thereby making sense of visible things. I argue that ethnographic drawings have the potential to do more than simply complement academic written text. Drawings and text can instead be treated as counterparts and interrelated to represent and communicate the visual characteristics of material culture in ways that help to overcome the limitations of the written word. Written descriptions of material culture and its qualities evoke mental images, but these images do not rely solely on the level of precision and detail provided in the text. To a certain degree each mental image is determined by the life experience of the reader. If the reader has never seen or otherwise experienced a certain object, there is a relatively high risk that they might misconstrue its appearance in their mind. Adding visual images to an academic text can significantly reduce this risk, but there still remains a potential gap between how an image is 'read' by emic and etic audiences. As I will show, technical

illustrations can be designed to reproduce and unpack the layers of visual knowledge and meaning that an object contains, making these visible to visually illiterate readers.

The methodological intervention that this chapter makes is based on a discussion of the illustrations I designed for an ethnographic study of an annual communal tantric Buddhist festival in Bhutan (Wulff 2021, 2023), most of which depict the attire and masks worn by festival participants. The purpose of these illustrations was, first, to reproduce participants' emic visual literacy and, second, to communicate this to readers of my academic outputs. For Bhutanese festival participants, the items and costumes to which I refer in my work are part of their lived experiences; they have often been acquainted with each piece from early on in life. But for most non-Bhutanese readers these objects—and the layers of knowledge they contain—might be entirely unknown and, at best, only partially familiar. My illustrations translate and transfer used and living objects into two-dimensional technical line drawings with the aim of making relevant layers of information contained in the objects visible to the etic reader as a counterpart to my written text.

I start the chapter by providing some basic context on my ethnographic study and my engagement with the concept of visual literacy, before discussing why I chose to design illustrations rather than using photographs as the visual counterpart to my written text. The second part of the chapter provides a more detailed discussion of how I created and designed the illustrations and why. I lay out the technical process of producing the illustrations via a manual drawing technique combined with digital processing and vector graphic software, and then take a step back to address the more general decisions that I made about the aesthetics and style of my drawings. I finish with some specific examples that highlight what I see as the main affordances of this kind of technical illustration.

The ethnographic study: A communal Buddhist tantric festival in Bhutan

The illustrations I discuss in this chapter were drawn by me as part of a long-term case study conducted in Bhutan between 2011 and 2019 for my doctoral research project, which documented and analysed a tantric Buddhist festival in the village of Korphu, Trongsa district

(Wulff 2023). Situated in the very centre of Bhutan, Korphu is a rural village in the southern foothills of the Black Mountain range in the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park. The immediate community consists of approximately three hundred permanent inhabitants, who speak Khengkha[1] and identify as Khengpa. The residents still mostly practice subsistence agriculture based on rice and corn farming, but also generate some income from cash crops such as cardamom and oranges. The extended community includes members who live in the capital or abroad, working (and studying) as civil servants or in private companies. A few community members reside as monastics in the surrounding state monasteries (*rdzong*) in Zhemgang, Trongsa and Jakar.[2]

The Korphu community celebrates an annual tantric Buddhist festival called the Korphu Drub (*sgor phug sgrub*; lit. Korphu Attainment). Communal festivals like the Korphu Drub are common throughout the entire Tibetosphere, with either monastic or lay Buddhist communities being the main convenors and participants. In general, these festivals involve Vajrayana Buddhist liturgical action or *choga* (*cho ga*), masked performances or *cham* (*'cham*) and in many cases various folk performances. Although there exists a huge variety in these tantric festivals, they mostly share common aims, namely to ward off potential threats to the community through apotropaic rituals, and to foster communal spirit and luck-generating dharmic activity.[3] The

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1 Khengkha is an East-Bodish language (van Driem 2001) and one of the twenty-four identified languages of Bhutan. It has no writing system and several local dialects. Its less than 40,000 speakers are spread across Bhutan along a horizontal belt covering the dzongkhags (districts) of Trongsa and Sarpang in the West, Zhemgang in the centre and Mongar in the East, the latter being where the majority of Khengkha speakers live.

2 Terms provided in italics in brackets are Dzongkha, Bhutan's national language. Since written Dzongkha uses the Tibetan script, Dzongkha terms are transliterated following the 'Wylie' system, in line with the convention followed in the rest of this volume. Phonetic spellings of Dzongkha proper nouns follow the common Romanized spellings. Since there is no standardized phonetic transcription of Dzongkha terms, I generally follow the "THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan" (Germano and Tournadre 2003), with the exception of terms such as *kira* (*dkyi ra*) that have standard Romanized spellings.

3 I use the term 'luck' here since this is the term generally used by English-speaking Bhutanese. It encompasses various kinds of 'lucky life circumstances' that

Korphu community festival lasts for up to one week and takes place in the winter months during the agricultural break. It starts on the fifteenth day of the eleventh month in the Bhutanese calendar, which usually falls sometime between mid-December and mid-January in the Gregorian calendar. The festival's liturgical actions are based on the teachings of the Bhutanese Nyingma *tertön* (*gter ston*; discoverer of spiritual treasures) Pema Lingpa and most of its cham masked ritual performances also relate to Pema Lingpa. The presiding tantric master (*rdo rje slob dpon*) is commonly a high-ranking monk from the Pema Lingpa lineage invited to the festival from outside. All other liturgies, rituals and performances are carried out by lay members of the Korphu community.

All community members are expected to participate in the Korphu Drub from early on in their lives until their deaths. The annual festival is therefore a life-long companion and a major recurring event in the individual's as well as the community's life (Wulff 2019). During the celebrations, the entire community is involved in preparing food and offerings for the Buddhist choga and communal meals or in one of the several groups of performers. The latter include those performing the Buddhist liturgies, the masked cham dancers, the women who perform folk dances and songs called the *mani amo*, a pair of historical warriors named *bepön beyok* (*rbad dpon rbad g.yog*) and the jester-like *atsara* (*a tsar a*) performers.[4]

The majority of the illustrations I produced in the context of my research depict the attire and masks worn by the participants and performing groups during the festival. These costumes include the national dress of Bhutan (*rgyal yong gyon chas*) worn by lay people, the Buddhist robes (*chos gos*) worn by monks and liturgy performing villagers, and the ritual garb (*'cham chas*) of the cham performers who embody local and Buddhist deities or other mythical and historical beings that appear during the festival. With the exception of a few characteristics that are Korphu-specific, all of this attire is common across Bhutan. The national dress is the formal attire worn by all Bhutanese lay people when entering government and public buildings or

they might wish for when conducting the festival, including (among others) good health, fortune, a good career, a visa approval and a positive outcome in college exams.

4 For more information about the atsara and cham performers' attires see Wulff 2021.

participating in any official function. Although the Korphupa follow the Nyingma lineage of Pema Lingpa, their monastic dress is mostly based on the dress regulations of the Drukpa Kagyu state monk body. Most of the costumes worn for the ritual dances are also standardized and can be found in many places across Bhutan where cham performances are carried out.

Visual literacy

Methodologically, my point of departure for using illustrations of material culture as part of my study was the question of how best to record and communicate a distinct way of knowing that I conceptualize using the notion of visual literacy. The main research objective of my ethnography was to understand how members of the Korphu community made sense of their community's and other Bhutanese festivals through material culture. Best described as an ethnography informed by phenomenological approaches, the study drew on the lived experiences of community members, who are lay Buddhist practitioners with mostly no training in Buddhist philosophy or tantric practice. It outlined their everyday knowledge, which is gained through socialization in the community and wider Bhutanese context through the active practice of the festival, rather than through formal education (Wulff 2023). This knowledge encompasses both 'everyday knowledge' (Berger and Luckmann 1991) and embodied knowledge.

In their influential book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1991) propose that academic, scientific or expert knowledge acquired through formal education is only a small portion of what we know. Most of our knowledge derives from primary socialization. The embodied knowledge that I looked to capture through drawing was the knowledge derived through participants' life-long practice of using the festival's material culture, including the costumes that participants wear. To give just one example, when the women present see a *kira* (*dkyi ra*)—a wrap skirt or dress that forms the main component of Bhutanese women's national costume—each knows what it takes to wrap and fold the garment around herself and her acquaintances, how the material feels on the body, and maybe even how to weave the fabric out of which the kira is made. In other words, I wanted to capture their visual literacy.

Visual literacy can be broadly understood as the human capacity to visually read and thereby make sense of the visual environment

by seeing it—both in the mind's eye and as it plays out in real time—due to one's socialization in a specific social and natural environment. Depending on disciplinary perspective and field of study, scholars and educators have produced different, albeit often complementary, definitions of visual literacy. Some have been primarily concerned with visual literacy as a set of competencies that can be formally taught, while others (including myself) are more interested in visual literacy as an ability innately acquired through personal experience and socialization (Peña and Dobson 2021: 1). A tentative definition was offered in 1969 by John Debes (1914–1986), a technical writer who worked for the Eastman Kodak company and conducted youth training in communication and photography (The Curved House n.d.):

> Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. (Debes 1969: 27)

In the context of the Korphu Drub, visual literacy refers to the ability to discriminate and interpret the visible material culture of the festival, such as the costumes that people wear, but also the interplay between participants and their actions and configurations in space. The visually literate participant-observer for instance understands the social hierarchy among the entities present during the festival—who include both human beings and the intangible beings performed by the mask dancers—by 'reading' how they are arranged in the courtyard and their body language and gestures as they interact with each other, as well as their attire.

The usefulness of visual literacy as a term is under debate, since in everyday use the word literacy tends to connote competence or knowledge gained through formal education or training and is most commonly associated with the ability to read and write. As James Elkins (2009: 1) points out, there is 'an unavoidable contradiction involved in saying that we "read" images'. I embrace this contradiction in the context of my research, as I understand the ability to 'read images' to be a counterpart to the ability to 'read texts'. As noted by Debes (1969), 'literacy' alludes to the fact that specific knowledge has to be learned. In general, reading and writing are considered the most basic skills

we commonly acquire through formal education in early life. But we also develop other competencies through socialization, including the ability to read our visual environment and thus make sense of it.

Visual literacy in the Bhutanese context of (formalized) attire encompasses (among other things) the ability to identify standardized gender identities and the occupation, rank and status of the wearer through colour codes, particular pattern cuts, symbols and the types of fabrics used. For the most part, the process of learning to 'read' this attire is not formalized through school education or training in Buddhist philosophy, which both involve reading texts. Yet, it is one reason why and how the Korphupa have profound individual and collective knowledge of their festival. As Debes (1969: 27) points out, visual literacy does not stand alone, but involves the integration of other sensory experiences, such as the way that a kira feels on the body. It also involves the dimensions of time and memory, as highlighted by Sinatra (1986: 5) who defines visual literacy 'as the active reconstruction of past experiences with incoming visual information to obtain meaning'. When a Bhutanese sees a piece of their material culture they relate events, sensations, places and people to the object in question.

The visual literacy of the Korphupa in Bhutan, which is built in and with their visual environment, is an ability that an outsider arriving in the place lacks—this is what made my study necessary in the first place. Since my aim was to lay open what Korphupa understood when participating in their festival, I needed to find a way to reproduce and communicate (in parts) what they 'read' when seeing the material culture of their festival. The ability to intentionally communicate or 'write' through visuals has been central to the concept of visual literacy among educationalists, who have defined it 'as a group of skills which enable an individual to understand *and use* visuals for intentionally communicating with others' (Ausburn and Ausburn 1978: 291, emphasis added). The idea that visual literacy encompasses the ability to visually write as well as to read the visual environment has important methodological implications. As I go on to discuss in the next section, it pushes us to ask how we can best communicate the findings of material culture studies to readers who are potentially visually illiterate in the material worlds that we study.

Communicating visual knowledge

It is a skill to produce precise written descriptions of material culture, especially if this culture is (visually) unknown to the reader. We usually imagine the unfamiliar in correspondence with what we already know. A Bhutanese ritual garment that has nothing in common with the reader's horizon of visual experience is likely to be misconstrued in the reader's mind if they encounter the garment solely through a written description. It was therefore vital that I include in my study substantive visual material to accompany my written analysis. Moreover, my hypothesis and methodological approach were built upon the assumption, among others, that Korphupa who are socialized in Bhutanese society are able to understand a number of material aspects of the festival because they possess visual literacy. They are able to read their visual environment and know or understand the meaning of certain material culture through the sense experience of seeing it. Therefore, it seemed important to find a way to reproduce this visual layer of knowledge visually for the reader.

During my field research, I took thousands of photographs to document the material culture that I wanted to discuss. Initially, I thought to include this photographic documentation in my study. The problem was that most readers would probably not have acquired the same level of visual literacy in the Bhutanese cultural context as the Korphupa. Indeed, opening up this type of knowledge to the visually illiterate reader was one of the study's aims. Trying to reproduce the sense experience of the Korphupa solely through photographs presented two key challenges. First, photographs contain many layers of information that are difficult for the non-literate viewer to disentangle. A photograph of a performer donning festival attire, for instance, contains information about the individual social actor, the action, several garments and accoutrements worn together, the natural environment (e.g., time of day, weather), bystanders and physical arrangements and orientations, to name the main elements. When overwhelmed by so many visual impressions at once, the non-literate viewer has no means to discern which visual markers are important and which can be disregarded.

Second, photographs lack information that is 'visible' to any literate viewer, who naturally adds information in their mind based on their knowledge and experience. Through interviews and informal conversations, I found that when the visually literate viewer sees someone donning a scarf in a specific colour that demarcates a certain

rank in the Bhutanese administrative hierarchy, they know about the different-coloured scarfs for other ranks and therefore immediately understand how to categorize the person in front of them. One Korphu woman who sees another donning a folded skirt knows how it feels to wear the dress and how to fold it around her own body. On seeing a traditional home-made garment, a Bhutanese might complement the image with the experience of a weaving loom and the (paper) pattern of the garment in their mind, as much as they are aware of the given name(s) of the garment.

In short, in order to communicate the visual layer of Korphupa knowledge, I needed to reproduce the visual sense experience, but at the same time unpack the many layers of information it contained and add information that could not be visually seen. As I describe in the following section, I set out to achieve this by designing illustrations that would allow me to reduce the many layers of visual information stored in the 'visual reality' of a Korphupa and add information not visible in photographs.

Designing illustrations for precise communication

In designing the illustrations, my aim was to create images that literally drew attention to and visualized the details of the material culture I was describing and analysing in my written text. The Latin term '*illustrare*' can be translated as 'enlighten', 'illuminate', 'light up', 'make clear' or 'elucidate', but also as 'embellish' (Glare 1982: 375). Although I do not understand my illustrations as mere 'embellishments' ('pretty, but irrelevant', as my dictionary puts it), they only unfold their full potential in combination with the text, just as the text can only fully be understood together with its visual counterpart. The illustrations that I designed are more accurately 'illustration sheets', that is, compilations of several single two-dimensional illustrations assembled on one sheet, which refer to one topic or unit of meaning. As such they are close to the (old) meaning of a 'plate' or 'Schaubild' in German. In this section I describe how I designed and created these illustrations for the best communicative results.

To understand a garment and how it is made and worn, one needs to see it from different perspectives. Before drawing an object, I chose visual resources as models (see ① in Figure 10.1), selecting them from visual footage in my own photo and video archive, on the internet and in other publications, as well as any available objects. To produce one

Figure 10.1 The technical process. Illustration by the author.

- Selecting/searching for footage:
  photographs and objects
- (Understanding the object)

- Pencil Sketch
- Fineliner pen drawing
  on translucent paper

- Taping the drawing on a pure white A4 paper
- Scanning the drawing
- Cleaning the drawing and
  increasing contrast with AdobePhotoshop

- Converting the .jpg into a
  vector image in AdobeIllustrator

illustration (or one illustration sheet) containing all the essential information for my description and analysis, I needed to compile selected information from many photographs, discarding other details shown in these images in the process. Aside from the conceptual process of understanding and deciding which details to draw, I had to take proportion into consideration. I used Adobe Illustrator to layer component illustrations of masks and garments on to naked 'paper dolls' (a technique to which I will return). Each component piece of attire had to match the proportions of my naked dolls and the other garments when worn together. That is why I decided to use transparent tracing paper, which I often taped to my computer screen with masking tape to trace the outlines of the dummy and then over draw it with the garment in question. I drew these sketches with pencil and then re-drew the main lines with black fine liner (see ② in Figure 10.1).

The next step was digitalization: I 'cleaned' the scanned illustration in AdobePhotoshop and heightened the contrast (see ③ in Figure 10.1). I then copied this AdobePhotoshop raster graphic into AdobeIllustrator and converted the image into a vector graphic (see ④ in Figure 10.1). Vector graphics have several major advantages: they can be scaled in all needed sizes and filled, and stroke colours can be added, changed and made translucent without quality loss. The aesthetic of the line drawings changes slightly during the conversion process. While the hand-drawn aesthetic remains, the images look still slightly 'straightened'.

The first objective in designing the illustrations was the drastic reduction of complexity in order to achieve focus. I reduced the visual details and information to the details that I considered to be the 'core essence' of the represented material object, omitting any visual element that was not needed to understand the object (in terms of my own analysis). I disentangled the many layers of information by splitting these up into separate illustrations. We are all familiar with the idea that carefully chosen words can guide the reader along a thread of argumentation. Well-thought-out illustrations can achieve the same. For instance, when drawing the *go* (*go*), which is the main male garment in Bhutan's national dress (see Figure 10.2), I reduced the defining lines of this piece of attire to its distinctive elements. Go come in many different materials, colours and ornamentations. In this respect they can look very different at first sight. But all have a common cut, neck collar and sleeve collar, each of which should be worn to specific lengths dependent on the rank of the wearer. Therefore, in my drawings, I show these details, but make no reference to colour, ornamentation or material whatsoever.

Figure 10.2   Reduction of complexity. Illustration by the author.

This process of singling out some details and omitting others ideally allows the reader to become literate in the decisive semantic elements of Bhutanese (ceremonial) attire. Additionally, I reduced the figures, garments and accessories to simple outline drawings, taking away much of their plasticity by omitting light reflexes and shadows. For reasons of comparability, figures and accoutrements were always drawn to the same scale. The human figures were also drawn in the same projection, namely standing straight from both a front and back perspective, although I sometimes added a profile view and top view in the same scale.

A challenge in producing the garment and outfit illustrations was the need to show multiple illustrations of one garment in several different combinations in order to visualize different types of outfits. Firstly, I required an image of the isolated garment so that I could describe and analyse that item by itself. Next, I needed an illustration of the same garment in combination with others, as it would appear as part of an outfit. Many of the garments appear as components of various different outfits (see Figure 10.3). If I were to have made separate drawings of the many usages of each garment, this would have created significantly more work. Moreover, it would have been a near impossible endeavour to draw identical versions of the same garment multiple times. I therefore followed the 'paper doll' or 'dress-up doll' principle.

The paper doll principle is derived from the eponymous child's toy, which consists of a human figure cut from paper or card to which separate paper clothes can be attached using folding tabs. As shown in Figure 10.3, I drew a naked body (in this case male) standing straight and used this as the paper doll ①. Matching the proportions of the naked figure, I drew individual garments ② as separate illustrations. Using Adobe Illustrator I then layered the garment(s) above the figure, thereby 'dressing' the paper doll. Several layers of additional garments make up a complete outfit in combination ③ and can be combined differently ④. The complete illustration of the *durdak* (*dur bdag*) performer shown in Figure 10.3, for example, is an assemblage of fourteen individual drawings, which are shown separately in Figure 10.4.

For presenting the illustrations, I used three main colours: black, white and grey. I mainly used black for contour lines (see ① in Figure 10.5) and white for filling elements that I wanted to highlight ②. I used grey in different shades to de-emphasize an element. If I was focusing on a go worn by a male, for example, I would colour the man's body grey ③, while leaving the go white to bring it visually to
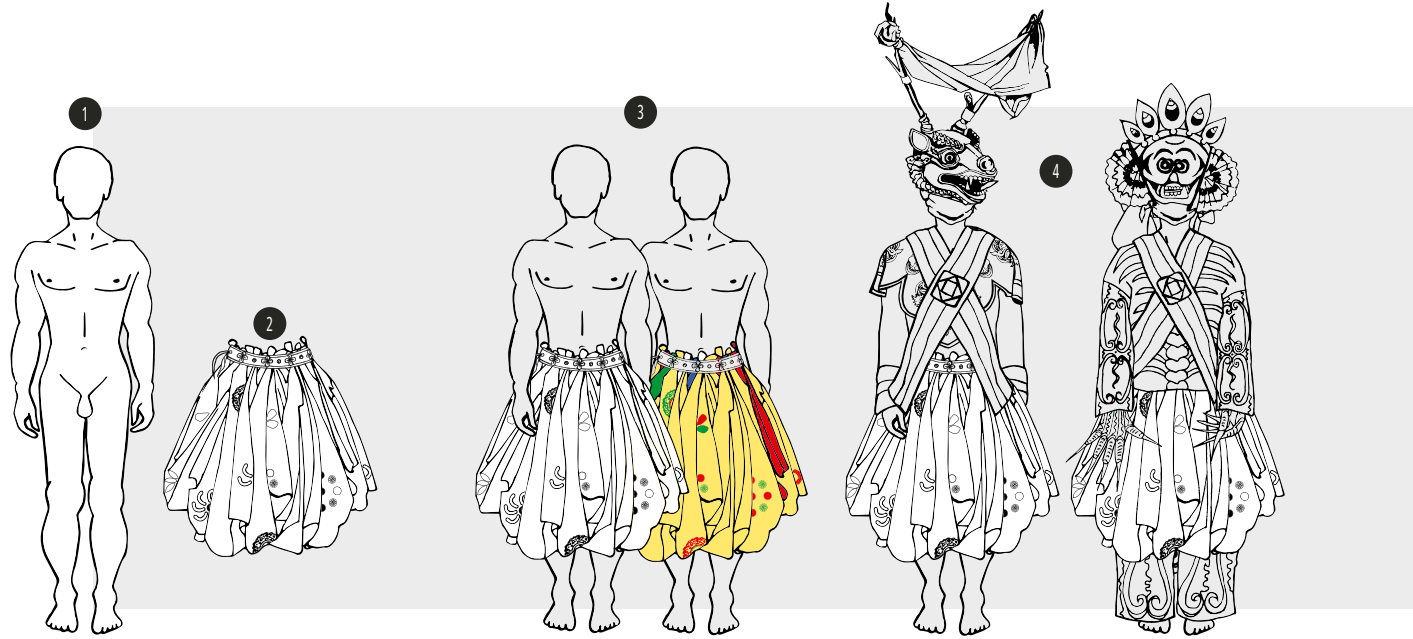
Figure 10.3 The 'paper doll' principle as a building kit. Illustration by the author.

Figure 10.4 Fanned-out illustration of the durdak performer. Illustration by the author.

Outlines 1

Filling - foreground/in focus 2

Filling - background 3

Outlines - background 4

Measurement lines 6
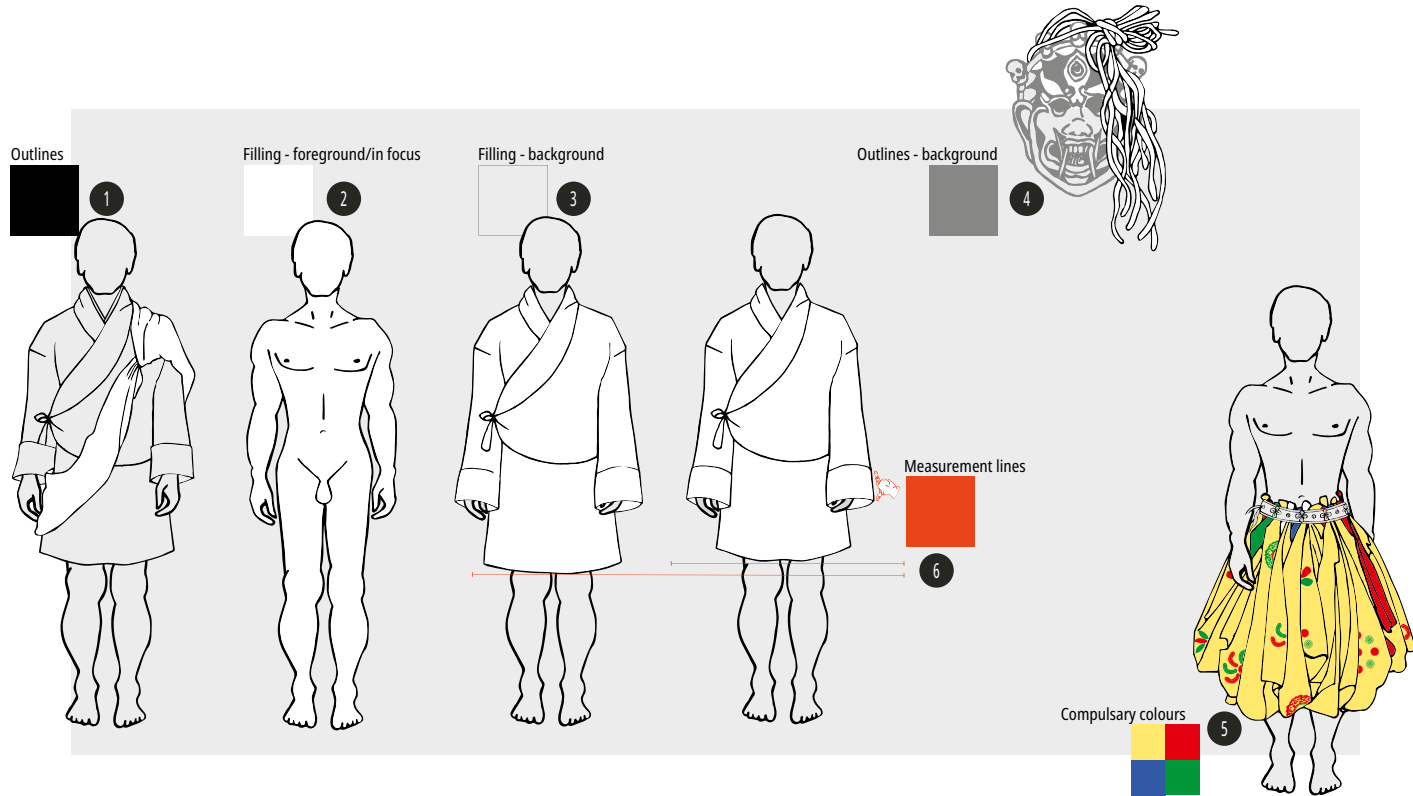
Compulsary colours 5

Figure 10.5 Reduction of colours. Illustration by the author.

the fore. To amplify the effect, I would underlay the entire figure with a grey background so that the human figure blended into it. In some cases, I used a darker shade of grey to de-emphasize lines, but I never let them completely dissolve into the background ④. Colours were applied in the illustrations only when compulsory for the garment and significant for the analysis ⑤. Garments can come in many different colours and colour combinations, many of which the wearer decides for themselves, for instance the upper blouse of the women's national dress, but some are not open to individual choice, such as the colours of the ceremonial scarfs that indicate rank worn by men. I used a dark orange-red to indicate specific measurements, such as the required lengths of a go for men of different statuses ⑥.

Drawing the very thin line: Aesthetics and style of drawings

My illustrations are 'ethnographic drawings' in the broad sense, since they are part of how I sought to record, describe and communicate Korphupa culture and knowledge. However, during the process of creating the visual components, I started to refer to them as 'illustrations'. Ethnographic drawings can vary widely in terms of perspective, form and function. They are often produced during the data collection process as a method of recording or noting down what the researcher encounters in the field. Among the drawings of other ethnographers working in the Himalayas, the beautiful and vibrant drawings and paintings of Naga textiles by Marion Wettstein (2014) and Nepali architecture by Robert Powell (2001) stand out for their extraordinary craftsmanship. Their images have the aesthetic aspiration to be hyper-realistic—to be better at capturing reality than photographs. Very broadly speaking, they try to show the scene they are depicting from a three-dimensional perspective as the viewer would encounter it through natural sense experience, while mitigating some of the disadvantages of photographs such as perspective or colour distortions. My drawings, in contrast, are *technical* illustrations that I consider to represent 'ideas' in a broadly Platonic sense, rather than capturing particular ethnographic moments.

In his 'Theory of Forms/Ideas', Pluto argued that each thing has a corresponding perfect form or idea. I am deliberately drawing on this as a general metaphor to explain the relationship between my

illustrations as drawn two-dimensional representations and their material counterparts. My illustrations depict the ideal version of a facet of Bhutanese material culture from a Bhutanese perspective. All of the garments and other objects I have drawn exist in uncountable variations and stages of life in individual object biographies, especially as they are not industrially produced but are mostly hand-made. The festival participants wearing them have different body shapes and sizes, and they wear and move in these garments differently. What I try to represent in my illustrations is an imagined ideal type, rather than an ethnographic snapshot of one person in one moment.

This ideal type is based on how Korphupa and other Bhutanese have explained to me how the garment should look in its best version and how this is formulated in monastic or lay dress etiquette manuals. The perfect lengths, the perfect drape, the right proportions—these were all conveyed to me in conversations whenever a Bhutanese helped me to dress in the woman's national dress, commented on others whose dress was not 'correct' or responded to my direct inquiries about the main principles of their attire. In the textual counterpart to the illustrations, I often refer to real life, but my illustrations do not show holes, damage or other traces of usage. This is because the analytical focus of my study was on the formal communicative functions of ritual and formal dress, which apply regardless of individual differences (at least the elements and aspects that I have examined). Since the illustrations are ideal types with the function of communication media, the male and female bodies of my 'paper dolls' do not have any facial features. Rather than illustrating individual social actors, they represent types put forward in emic publications and by Bhutanese with whom I talked. In contrast, my drawings of the masks that form part of the attire of cham performers show individual characters by default, since each represents a specific entity.

As technical drawings of ideal types, my illustrations are closer in style to the well-known illustrations of Tibetan Buddhist symbols by Robert Beer (2003) than they are to the abovementioned drawings of Wettstein and Powell. But while Beer's line drawings are perfect—in the sense of symmetrical figures with even lines—my drawings keep the black fine-liner's stroke and unevenness of hand-drawn lines. As proposed by Sullivan (1896) in his classic comment on design principles that 'form follows function', the design and gestalt of an object should be guided by its purpose. Although Sullivan was referring to architecture and industrial design, this principle also applies to my approach to the use of illustrations. The aim of my illustrations is

not to 'beautify' the text of my study of material culture, but to add a visual counterpart that enhances the communication of my research results. Yet, notwithstanding the technical function and importance of my illustrations, I decided to use hand-drawn illustrations that contain imperfections. Despite being digitized and processed with computer software, I have deliberately not levelled out lines that were not completely straight or levelled the overall composition of the image, for instance to make it perfectly symmetrical. Instead of constructing geometrical figures such as the garment patterns with Adobe Illustrator, I drew them by hand.

In short, I have tried to walk (or draw) the very thin line between precision and essentialism by attempting to create illustrations of ideal types that are technically precise but, at the same time, do not entirely look like computer-made technical drawings. The reason for this is that I want my drawings—like my ethnographic vignettes—to be understood as subjective perspectives, which can only display general validity up to a certain level. I want a piece of my subjectiveness as a researcher to be visually preserved. I feel this is more honest than producing technically flawless illustrations that suggest an interpretation beyond doubt.

Communicating layers of knowledge

To further elucidate the potential affordances of using illustration as a communicative tool within material culture studies, I now turn to some specific examples of how I applied my methodology and method. These highlight my two main considerations when drawing and putting together the illustration sheets, namely breaking down the many layers of visual information contained in an object and adding layers of information inherent to but not visible in that object.

Each of the festival outfits I discuss in my study consist of several components, of which many are considered ritual garments exclusively used during the festival. These various individual pieces are worn in layers upon and entangled with each other. Moreover, the range of festival attire includes not only clothes, but also masks and other objects we usually call accessories. Using illustration as a method allowed me to deconstruct each outfit, breaking it up into its individual components and making these visible through individual illustrations. This includes garments that are usually hidden from view. When we see an outfit in real life or in a photograph, we usually only observe

ཙོང་ལག་རྒྱན།
gong lag rgyan

'brug rgyal po

blon po

*gnyis skal ma/
drag shos
mi ser 'thus dpon
drang dpon
blon po ´og ma*

*rab 'byams
drung pa*

*mi ser
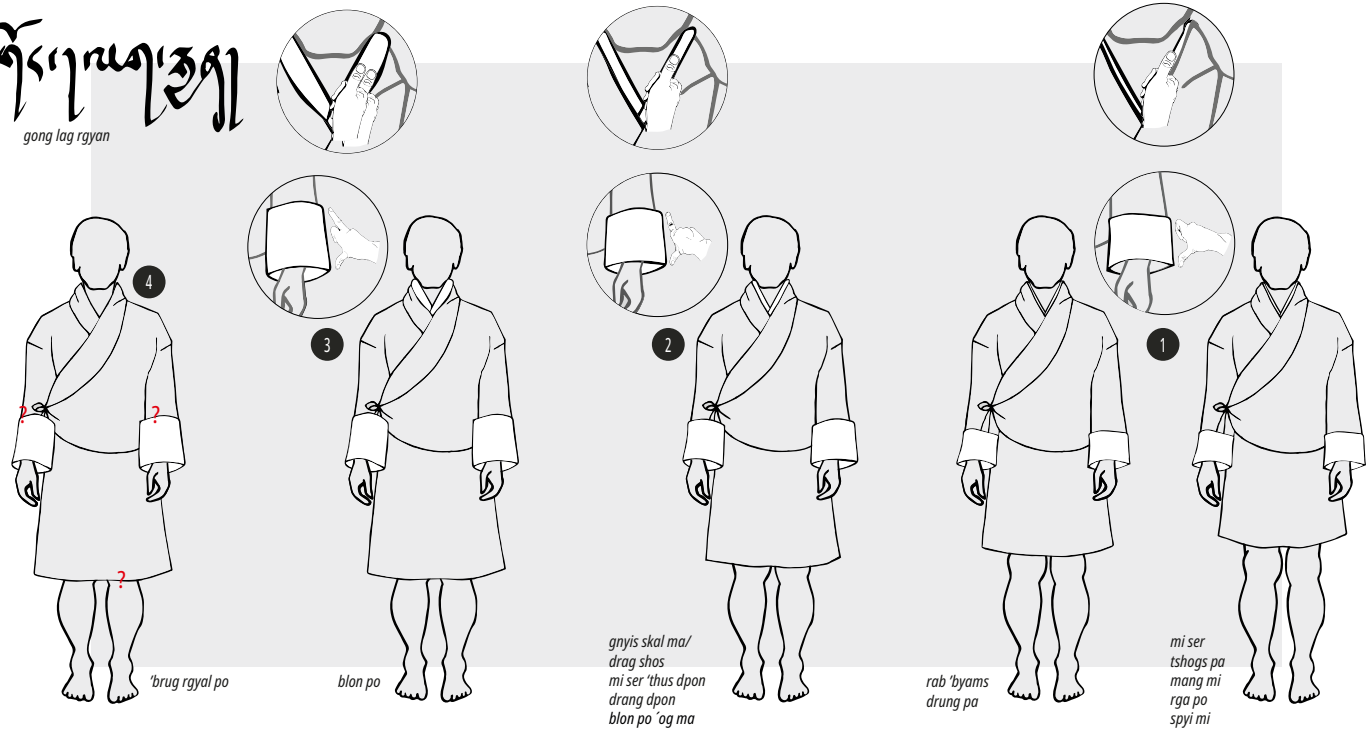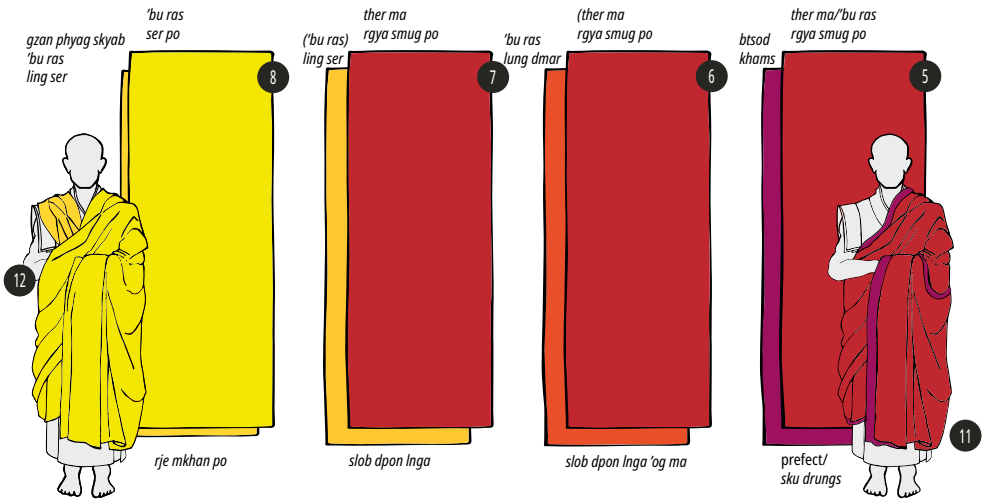tshogs pa
mang mi
rga po
spyi mi*

Figure 10.6　An illustration sheet showing sleeve and collar widths and lengths of go, with measurements, for different statuses, from commoners (far right) to the king (far left). Illustration by the author.

the outer shell; undergarments and other layers beneath the outer garments are completely or mostly invisible. By always showing the garments I discuss in the same perspective and scale, my illustrations allowed me to present them both individually and in combination. For example, my illustration of the durdak performer costume, which I introduced earlier (Figure 10.4), shows its eleven separate component items,[5] which are worn on top of each other, as well as the final assemblage. I am also able to show how they are put on, one after another, and wrapped or folded around the body. Aside from this ability to dissect outfits into individual garments, illustrations have the potential to make visible the components of each of these individual garments by breaking them down into further smaller parts.

While one of the main affordances of the illustrations was to make visible these layers of information, another was the possibility of adding layers of information that are not visible in the material object itself. Here I am mostly referring to the inherent layers of knowledge that a visually literate viewer is able to read by seeing the outfits. The Bhutanese national dress, for example, conforms to

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5   Of the fourteen drawings in Figure 10.4, these eleven components do not include the paper doll ⑤ or the ornaments on the skirt ⑩, while the gloves are counted as one component, even though I drew them separately ⑫, ⑬.
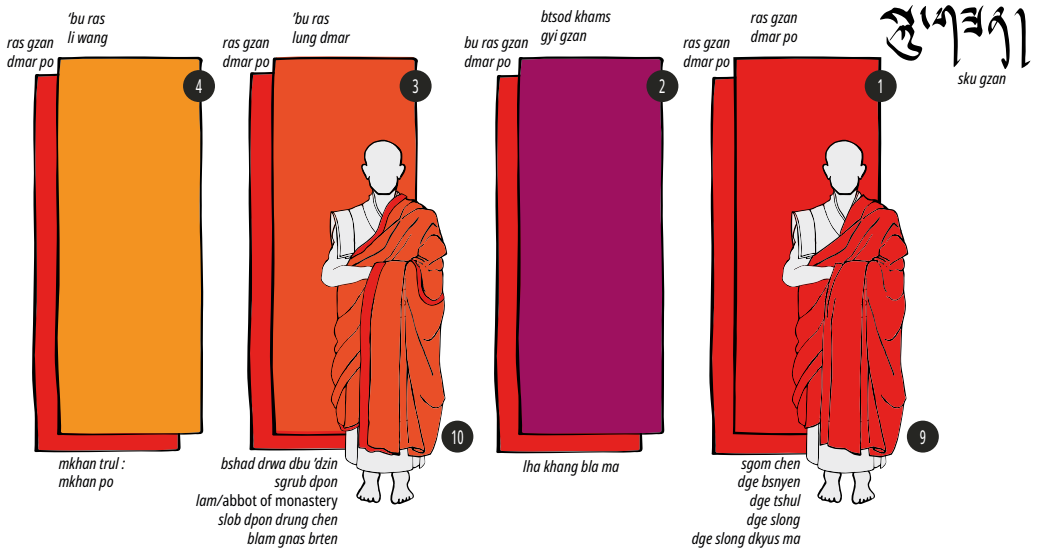
Figure 10.7 Illustration sheets showing the range of differently coloured zen worn by monks of different rank and position, from lay practitioners and novices (far right) to the Je Khenpo (far left). Illustration by the author.

certain regulations,[6] such as variations in the lengths and widths of collars, sleeves and hemlines to represent different levels of status (Figure 10.6). This means that anyone socialized in Bhutanese society can read the social status of other Bhutanese by observing their outfits. The ability to identify and situate others by their clothing is of course not a kind of visual literacy unique to Bhutan, but it is based on knowledge gained through socialization in a specific cultural context. Illustrations allow me to communicate that knowledge.

Similarly, the Bhutanese Central State Monastic Body (*gzhung grwa tshang*) is structured hierarchically. The various ranks and positions of its (male) participants can be read through the colour hues of their outer robe, the *zen* (*gzan*). Some types of zen are also worn by lay Buddhist practitioners called *chöpa* (*chos pa*), who perform liturgies during festivals like the Korphu Drub or who are lay reincarnate lamas. There are eight different types of zen, ranging from that worn by the lowest rank of the simple novice monk or lay practitioner to the highest rank of the Je Khenpo, the abbot of the Central Monastic Body

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6   Some of the dress regulations are no longer strictly adhered to at present.

(see Figure 10.7). Even though not all types of zen are worn and exhibited during the Korphu Drub, I drew the entire set in order to communicate how people socialized in Bhutanese mainstream society see and thereby make sense of zen. When visually literate festival participants see a chöpa wearing a zen, they not only understand that this specific zen is one of many different zen, but also that its particular colour represents a specific rank within a hierarchically structured, colour-coded system of Buddhist specialists.

Conclusion

Drawing on my case study of Bhutanese formal attire, this chapter has shown how ethnographic drawings—and more specifically technical illustrations—can be useful communicative tools in material culture studies. My approach draws on the notion of visual literacy to conceptualize the human ability to make sense of the visual environment by having learned to read it through socialization. Among other aspects of their visual literacy, my research shows that participants in the Korphu Drub festival can immediately understand the status and position of the person in front of them by seeing and thereby making sense of their dress. By presenting the visual characteristics of this dress to readers of material culture studies through illustrations rather than relying solely on textual descriptions, this information becomes tangible and ideally improves the visual literacy of the reader too.

Photographs might suffice as visual representations for readers with emic perspectives and knowledge, that is for people visually literate in that specific cultural context and thus able to identify and make sense of particular objects. But, as I have argued, illustrations are more suitable for communicating to visually non-literate readers since they can be used to break down the layers of potential visual information into as many parts as needed. By describing the practical method of how I designed my illustrations and presenting examples, I have demonstrated what this processing and communication of results can look like. Through deliberate aesthetic decisions such as reducing the illustrations to simple line drawings and omitting colours, patterns and textures whenever these are not essential for the analysis, the focus can be directed to the details essential to the study. Furthermore, information about an object that is not visible, such as measurements or how a garment is wrapped around the body, can easily be added. Anecdotal evidence suggests that illustrations can even be a useful method

of communicating research findings to the visually literate. Whenever I have shown Bhutanese people my illustrations, I have received appreciative feedback. Despite their visual literacy, they have emphasized how information inherent to the objects is made visible through the illustrations. It can therefore be consciously perceived rather than staying in the realm of certain but often unconscious perception.

Note on the author

Mareike Wulff works as a social and cultural anthropologist specialising in Bhutan and the Himalayas. Her research revolves around ritual, memory and material culture studies. She currently holds a postdoctoral position at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney. For her interdisciplinary research project she documents the endangered languages and cultural practices of two indigenous minority groups in Bhutan, the Lhop and Monpa, with a focus on their ethnobotanical knowledge. She received her PhD from Humboldt University, Berlin, with a thesis on a rural highland community's Buddhist masked dance festival. Previously, she worked as a lecturer at the Royal Thimphu College in Bhutan and taught the first BA students in Anthropology in Bhutan. As a studied costume designer and trained dressmaker, she is particularly interested in the production processes, materials used and cultural contexts of man-made objects.

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