

Kushuthara – a token of love

By Karen Greenspan

BOBINS of coloured thread whirl in a blur against the open sky to ethereal Bhutanese flute music as the film *Kushuthara – Pattern of Love* opens. The camera lens comes into focus on a group of women at their looms in a weaving circle singing a folk song. Young and old work side-by-side under their thatch-covered, open-sided weaving tabernacle



Chokimo heads off to work with her radio and basket of thread in hand



set against the early spring Himalayan landscape.

Kushuthara – Pattern of Love, written and directed by up-and-coming Bhutanese filmmaker Karma Deki, had its US premiere in New York City at the Rubin Museum of Art in March 2017. Fully expecting to see a lightweight, Bollywood-type romance, I was instantly turned around and my senses pricked up as I read the weaving song's translation on the screen:

*The warp signifies the nature of wisdom,
The weft denotes the nature of spiritual transmission,
The way of weaving is the union of*

wisdom and transmission.

Thus the weaver should have a noble mind.

Beating the threads is the sign of cleansing ignorance.

Patterns made on cloth are the sign of creativity.

The beautifully woven Kushuthara, if worn by one who is loved, She will attain eternal peace.

And the world will sparkle with light.

In the song, the warp and the weft of the handicraft serve as metaphors for qualities that, according to the Himalayan Buddhist beliefs of Bhutan, speed the cultivation of enlightenment. This is a common attribute

of Bhutanese folk songs. But, also in Bhutan, the Thirteen Arts (*Zorig Chusum*), of which weaving is one, are elevated to sacred activity that is capable of transmitting Buddhist values and uplifting society. As I read the lyrics, I guessed this wasn't going to be your typical Bollywood look-alike.

The film's writer and director, Karma Deki, had to overcome steep odds to become a filmmaker in Bhutan. One of four siblings, she came from a poor family in the district of Lhuntse, where most of the film's scenes were shot. As a child, she would save her coins to go to the movies. Later, her family moved to the capital

The romance builds between Chokimo and Charlie played by Kezang Wangmo and Emrhys Cooper





Bobbins of colored thread dot the landscape of Lhuentse, famous for its distinctive weaving tradition



Karma Deki with lead actors of Kushuthara

city, Thimphu, where she was discovered by Bhutan's senior-most filmmaker, Palden Dorji, while acting in a school drama. He cast her in some of the country's earliest music videos. Deki worked as a post office clerk for seven years until she came to the United States and studied at the New York Film Academy (NYFA) from 2003-2008.

The soft-spoken filmmaker told me that she had had the idea for making a film about weaving since 2003. The traditional art was an integral part of her life. She learned the handicraft from her mother, who was such a skilled weaver that she was hired to weave fabric for the Bhutanese royal family. Karma Deki wrote and shot an earlier version of the film

called *Kushuthara – the Wedding Dress* in 2006. After showing it to her instructor and mentor, Bart Mastronardi, at NYFA, she went back to the drawing board with his encouragement and suggestions. She came up with a new story adding the character Charlie, a foreigner, who would provide the motivation for

revealing the charm and soul of Bhutan to outsiders.

The story unfolds as a Western photojournalist, Charlie (played by British actor, Emrhys Cooper), arrives in a remote eastern region of Bhutan to document the culture of weaving in the district of Lhuentse. The local women



Weavers enjoy conversation and camaraderie as they work together in the outdoor, thatch-covered structure



Chokimo sits at her back strap loom with the alluring Himalayan foothills behind her

produce a prized traditional textile that is used for wedding garments. It is called *kushuthara*, which actually means “love token woven in cloth”. It is told that the weaving style was brought to the region by a Chinese princess, Ashe Jaza, who stayed there on her journey to marry an Indian prince. In a gesture of gratitude for the hospitality she received from the people of the locality, she gifted them some of her finest textiles. The people eventually copied the pattern and became renowned for their fine weaving.

The film adopts the tone and structure of a love story between Charlie and one of the Bhutanese weavers, Chokimo (played by the photogenic Kezang Wangmo). Charlie spends his days photographing

the weavers (mostly Chokimo); his evenings revolve around his homestay with Chokimo and her husband, Bumpala. Chokimo is beautiful, refined, and deeply concerned about the comfort and well-being of their guest. Bumpala is a lovable, but simple, unworldly farmer.

Charlie’s and Chokimo’s

mutual attraction grows as scenes particular to Bhutanese life are lovingly rendered – weaving and socialising in the weaving circle, preparing and drinking butter tea, eating hot chili dishes at mealtimes (morning, noon, and night), hoisting heavy prayer-flag poles, and most especially





Colorful, complex pattern



Karma Deki

the Lhuntse tradition of *tshogchang*. This is a custom in which the members of the community show hospitality to their guest by gathering together and bringing *ara* (the local, home-made alcoholic brew) to serve the guest and to enjoy themselves. The shared drinks are accompanied by a wonderful drinking folksong (which, again, sounds almost holy) and then followed by nightlong Bhutanese folk dancing. The scene's heartwarming twist occurs when Charlie is asked to demonstrate one of "his dances". After some prodding, he lets loose with some highly choreographed moonwalks, pirouettes, and smooth moves that electrify the villagers and inspire them to spontaneously join in the freestyle dancing.

What starts out as a love story between these two characters actually becomes an ode of love to culture and

country. Buddhist values are one of the main threads woven into the storyline. The film explores the characters' memories, dreams, and visions from what might be a past life. The concepts of *karma* and rebirth hover over the conversations between Chokimo and Charlie. Chokimo demonstrates a profound understanding of the Buddhist concept of karma. This is not some idea of moral justice meted out through reward or punishment, but a kind of natural law in which every action sets in motion ongoing effects. The notion that these effects will continue to manifest themselves in the next life and the next, makes our actions feel all the more consequential. Ultimately, Chokimo's fundamental grasp of this idea is what blesses this timeless fable with its unexpected ending.

Moviegoers are fortunate to

have Karma Deki's select and clear vision to guide them into the "Land of Gross National Happiness." The film has won several international awards and is available for rent or purchase through Amazon.

Karma Deki has moved on to her next project titled *Mountains to Ocean*. She plans to begin shooting this low budget film in New York City. It will explore her personal journey into the world of filmmaking—the sacrifices and relationships. No stranger to either, Karma Deki will, no doubt, have a unique story that she will tell in her own distinctly Bhutanese way.



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Wherever she travels, Greenspan engages with the local performing artists to gain a deeper understanding of the world's dance traditions. A former professional dancer, Greenspan is a frequent contributor to Tashi Delek Magazine.