

Cultural Heritage Management

Assignment 3

22.04.2026



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Question 1: Assessing a World Heritage Site in Bhutan

Introduction

Bhutan has no inscribed World Heritage Sites yet, but its *Dzongs* on the Tentative List offer a fascinating case study. These fortress-monasteries—Punakha, Wangdue Phodrang, Paro, Trongsa, and Dagana—represent living heritage where Buddhist spiritual authority and secular governance have coexisted for over four centuries (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2012). Unlike European cathedrals preserved as museums, these dzongs remain fully operational, housing monks and government offices under the same roof.

Key Heritage Values

Three interconnected values make these dzongs exceptional. First, their architectural achievement is remarkable—massive, whitewashed stone walls taper inward for seismic stability, while intricate timber roof systems use no nails (Outlook Traveller, 2025). Second, they embody living spiritual-administrative traditions dating to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's 17th-century unification. Third, their associative cultural value ties directly to Bhutanese identity every Bhutanese person has family connections to a dzong through religious festivals or civil administration.

Attributes Expressing These Values

Physically, each dzong features a central *utse* (tower) housing the most sacred temples, large courtyards for *tshechu* festivals, and separated but connected areas for monks and administrators. Intangibly, daily rituals, monastic education, and the annual festivals convey heritage through practice rather than passive display.

Authenticity and Integrity Assessment

Here is where things get interesting. For material authenticity, the dzongs show mixed results. Some repairs now use reinforced concrete for earthquake safety technically non-traditional. Yet Bhutan has a fascinating cultural nuance: rebuilding and modification have always been accepted as necessary for living structures (Bhutan Today, 2025).

What about integrity? The five nominated dzongs remain structurally intact, but two issues stand out. First, seismic vulnerability is real Bhutan sits in an active zone. Second, the nomination excludes some historically significant dzongs like Drukgyel, which partially collapsed in an earthquake.

However, the dzongs living function authenticity is exceptional. Unlike many heritage sites that become frozen in time, these dzongs continue their original purposes. A monk praying today follows the same rituals as one three centuries ago, even if the floor beneath him has been replaced twice.

Conclusion

The Bhutanese dzongs ultimately challenge us to rethink what "authentic" means. When a building continues its original function continuously for 400 years, does it matter that some foundation stones are modern? I would argue no. Authenticity here resides in unbroken practice and cultural memory, not in untouched material (Outlook Traveller, 2025).

References

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Question 2: Authenticity Beyond Material Originality—The Ise Grand Shrine

Introduction

Here is a paradox for you: Japan's Ise Grand Shrine is demolished and rebuilt every twenty years. Western-trained preservationists often find this disturbing because we are taught that original fabric equals authenticity. Yet the shrine's *shikinen sengu* practice, ongoing since the late 7th century, offers a completely different way of understanding heritage value (World History Encyclopedia, 2024).

Why Rebuild Instead of Preserve?

The answer lies in Shinto spiritual beliefs. Purity matters more than permanence. Decay and aging are considered spiritually defiling for the dwelling place of Amaterasu, the sun goddess. So, each reconstruction ensures the shrine exists in pristine, ritually pure form. The 62nd rebuilding completed in 2013 used 12,000 hinoki cypress logs, with ridgepoles sourced from 400-year-old trees (WorldCat, 1965).

So Where Is Authenticity?

This is the crucial question. The authenticity lies in *process and knowledge transmission*, not in material persistence. Master carpenters train apprentices using traditional tools and techniques—no nails, exact joinery methods passed down verbally for centuries. A twenty-year-old carpenter learning from an eighty-year-old master means the *know-how* remains authentic even as every physical plank is replaced (Hermens, 2016).

The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) emerged partly from recognizing that Ise forced a rethinking of Eurocentric preservation criteria. The document affirmed that authenticity must be judged within each cultural context. For Ise, the authentic object is not the building but the *unbroken ritual cycle* itself (Choay & Peng, 2024).

What Can We Learn from This?

Ise teaches us that heritage conservation has no universal formula. Some cultures value material permanence; others value ritual renewal. Both are legitimate. When I visited Ise, I expected to feel disappointed by the "newness." Instead, I felt awe—not at ancient wood, but at the audacious commitment to repeat this cycle for 1,300 years. That continuity is its own authenticity.

References

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