

## **Gho - The National Dress of Bhutan**

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People, societies, groups and organisation, all have the possibility of sharing their views on a clothing platform. From Mahatma Gandhi to Malcolm X and their fight not only comes from their voices and cause but it also signifies what they wear. Some wear it to create a platform on ideology, symbolism or patriotism to their country all the while also creating a national identity. Many symbolic dresses are going extinct and many are also being invented. I am from a country called Bhutan, a small Himalayan country and we have a national dress. It has not only created a national identity in a globalized world, but it is followed by a deep history and significance that it possesses. The men wear the 'Gho', a knee-length (gown) tied with a belt of cloth enough to make a series of 2-3 rounds around the waist known as the 'Kera' (approx. width is 2-4 inch depending on the preference of either on their height) to hold the robe in place. The females wear 'Kira', a rectangle piece of woven fabric that runs down till the ankle wrapped around the body. This paper will be focused on the Gho, basic history and how it is manufactured and its current challenges. The 'founder of Bhutan' and his principle of 'Driglam Namzha' will also be highlighted.

The history of Bhutan is as peaceful as it sounds, never colonized and was ruled on an enriched monarchy while the other two countries neighbouring Bhutan received global attention. One was Tibet being overtaken by China in 1959 and the other is the kingdom of Sikkim which was overthrown overnight by the Indian government under the leadership of Indira Gandhi in 1975. Both these countries had their unique existence but failed to portray it to the world. Bhutan being landlocked between two large economies right at the foothills of the Himalayas and with many fears of insecurity, the Royal Government of Bhutan became the 128th member with its official registration into the United Nations on Sep 21, 1971. But the question of Bhutan's existence was still raised as it was located between two giant nations. India, being one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse nations in the world and the next with China, who is also known for its

global dominance in business since 2000 with its membership in WTO. People in the west were still unaware of Bhutan's existence and many never even heard of it. With many questions asked about how this country with a population with 1% to that of China and India along with the global influence from the Western world on how they will strive to create an identity. It was then with its preservation of unique culture that few explorers from the west noticed and then ultimately due to the internet, it is now a country that is known to be in existence in this world. Currently, along with Bhutan's initiative of prohibiting smoking and its pledge to remain carbon neutral, the national dress with its etiquette which the government has pushed focusing on the preservation and cherishment of our unique culture.

Buddhism was introduced by Guru Padmasambhava in the 17th century. Since then the culture, tradition, and philosophy have been fully based on Buddhism. It is noted by the Bhutan Tourism Corporation of Bhutan (BTCB) that the "Gho was reproduced" from the dress worn by Guru himself by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal who is also known as the 'Father of Bhutan'. Whereas, the female dress 'Kira' also according to some oral literature as noted by the BTCB, is believed to be evolved from the dress of Guru's cohorts. It was Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's far-sighted vision of keeping the country united and creating a national dress for a unified identity of Bhutan. Before this, he is also responsible for uniting the country against violent internal conflicts and his system of governments still exists until the modern era. He is also accountable for the construction of numerous monasteries (dzongs) within Bhutan to hold its military, administrative meetings for elected officials in various districts and also to ultimately hold a common ground for cultural teaching centre and preservation of it. As Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was originally from Tibet, the construction of the Gho is considered very similar to that of 'Tibetan Chuba' worn by the nomadic tribes living in high cold altitudes of Tibet. Both the dress is bound by the waist with a long sash that holds the attire in place, and both consist of a gown of different materials depending on its on the area of climate. However, it is distinguishable and identifiable as the 'Tibetan chuba' is worn loosely and is mostly worn off on one shoulder whereas the Bhutanese

Gho is ironed and fittingly worn. It is complemented by white cuff by the wrist and a small white collar is shown by the neck. The pattern, design and the material itself is witnessed completely different. The 'Tibetan chuba' is mostly thick, heavy and consists of plain design with a simple print for special occasions. But the Bhutanese Gho comes in various patterns and design and are brightly produced. Both Guru and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal are prominent figures in Bhutanese culture, religion, and history with their photos found in monastic institutions, temples, sacred sites and even in a normal household's altar or on a living room's shelf or wall.

The production of Gho's piece is mostly handwoven and its textiles are brightly colored, a variety of patterns, and consists of a lengthy process of dyeing and weaving. It is known to take immense time and artistic skill work to weave one of these, altogether while depending on the pattern and design which the weaver wishes to print. The rise of machine produced Gho piece is a huge threat in the already dying handweaving industry. Many present-day weavers gained their skill hereditary from a system of mother to daughter but due to the modernized approach which the younger generation takes, it is a dying culture within Bhutan. The government of Bhutan has proceeded with the necessary steps in its preservation, such as the introductory hand weaving courses offered in certain colleges and establishing a completely separate entity known as the Royal Textile Industry to preserve and promote this culture. A typical weaver working 10-12 hours a day takes about a year depending on the patterns and design it involves. The price is also a by-effect on how much time it takes and the pattern and design that it produces. The quality of the product varies with silk, cotton, and wool and in terms of quality, anyone with minimum knowledge will be able to sort the difference in the quality that it carries compared to a machine manufactured piece. In a phone conversation with a stage performer/comedian/ singer and an animal impressionist named Ulap Lekhi, who currently resides in New York. He hosts and performs in all major festivals and ceremonies held in New York such as the annual Bhutanese gathering for the celebration of National day or New Year and even performs during high profile visits of the King of Bhutan or prime minister. As I asked him on his

views on the manufacturing of machine produced Gho piece coming mostly from neighbouring countries like India. He says that “it is a threat” in Dzongkha, to the current home-produced goods and tells that there is no escaping it. Our conversation proceeded with talks on how it is a normal change that was expected. On the irony, he says that the demand for hand-knitted will still be in demand due to the quality that it possesses and the value they carry in the society.

Bhutan follows a series of ethical techniques may it be with giving gifts or with the dress we wear. It is known as the ‘Driglam Namzha’ and it is believed to be originated under Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal’s authority. In the words of Howard, an author who discussed Bhutan in his book ‘countries and their culture’. He notes that this Driglam Namzha was created to preserve “a distinct national Identity” thus creating a National dress code. To promote this distinctness further, there was a series of implementation of ‘Gho’ and ‘Kira’ to be worn in public during the day with hours between 9 AM-5 PM with fines charged if opposed. But to a more liberal approach opening with the constitution (Schmidt 63), the law was withdrawn. Currently, it is only a compulsion to be worn only in government schools and offices and the people even wear it during a celebration of a promotion or even during rituals and festivals. But towards the end of 2017 in a small town named Zhemgang, the local govt. raised the concern again about national identity and even implemented it again in their province in both its city and its village. The Dzongkhag Tshogdu (DT), the highest decision making person in a specific district Thrizin Sangay Letho restated his concerns that “Our country is very small and we cannot compete with our much bigger neighbors either in military strength or population so the most important thing we have is our culture, which is also our separate identity from these bigger countries.” (The Bhutanese). This topic was even further raised in national meetings with urban city officials criticizing that this seems like an impossibility without the public backlashing especially in main cities like Thimphu and Phuentsholing, two of the biggest urbanized cities in Bhutan.

The western fashion has been a huge influence for its comfort and easy accessibility, some examples can be the use of pants and shirts. Many ethnic

nationalists like the DT of Zhemgang and some other DT's debate that it is a threat and many modernized youths seem to have lost their interest in their culture, especially with the internet being so globalized and accessible. Two culturally rich countries do surround Bhutan but according to the founder of Bhutanese street fashion, he notes that "When our country is squashed between two giants, like India and China, it's so easy to lose our identity." (Newbold) but on his interview with the telegraph, he tells that fashion has transited not in a single way but on a dialogue basis. He tells that during the Balenciaga's AW 2007 catwalk, a platform for easy-to-wear clothes that highlights the use of multicultural symbols and colors, some of the design of tribal prints that the model was presenting bared similar descriptions to that of our national dress. He then says that "young women rifled through their grandparents' closets to be seen wearing the en vogue design". This tends to depict that western fashion with smooth accessibility and comfort has become a part of our lives, but our representation and symbol are also being viewed positively from the outside world.

In conclusion, Gho originated with a series of doubts and troublesome national identity especially between two mega countries but through time it has prospered as a culturally unique and identifiable national identity in the world. A few of the reasons can be the use of our national dress that the 'founder of Bhutan' himself pictured that would create a unified and distinct identity of Bhutan at all times. With this, it brings me back to the introduction of Anthropology of which the "strange becomes familiar and the familiar becomes strange". It is a dress that I wore for the last two decades but how it is constructed and its identity in the world was the least of my knowledge. I was troubled by further questions such as how the art of weaving that is passed down from generation would face and keep up their dying profession up to existence.



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