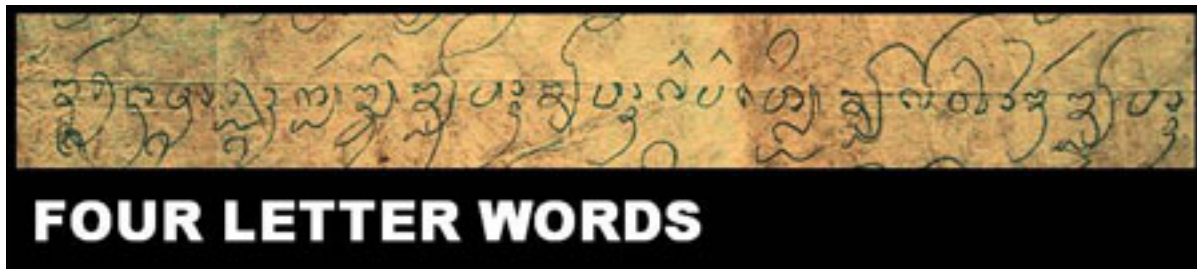


## Kilt



The word is 'kilt'. The metaphor might be a stretch, but in the spirit of the four-letter word series, the word 'kilt' reminds us of why there's more to some policies than meets the eye.

As Thailand careens eagerly toward aims of achieving Gross National Happiness by bringing itself in line with Bhutan on some aspects of domestic policy, it's worth asking if another aspect of Bhutan's domestic policy - let's call it the 'forced-kilt' policy for the time being - bears the weight of scrutiny.

Much like the quaint Scottish kilt, the Bhutanese have a national costume. For the men, it's called a *gho* - a heavy knee-length robe that all citizens wear when visiting official government buildings, institutions and monasteries or during official occasions, and which workers of the government must wear while on duty. And, like the Scots, the men wear it proudly, with pulled-up socks and protuberant shoes.

Putting aside the question of what national dress even means for Thailand (see [previous discussion](#) at *New Mandala*) - the Bhutanese equivalent, the *gho*, is a symbol for something deeply problematic in Bhutan's history: its imposition of a cultural system on an entire country's population, hundreds of thousands of whom belong to a minority ethnicity.

The enforcement of a mandatory dress code in 1989 - men must wear the *gho* and women must wear the *kira* - comes from a far more broad code of conduct, *Driglam Namzha*, which dates back to the 17th century and prescribes behaviour, customs, and language and is a foundational aspect of Bhutan's social and cultural norms. *Driglam Namzha*'s heavy-handed promotion starting in the 1970s, however, has been seen largely as an effort to "Bhutanize" the population by upholding the practices of Bhutan's predominantly Buddhist, and northern- and western-residing ethnic groups, who are collectively referred to as *Drukpa*. Excluded from the *Drukpa* are the southern-residing, primarily Hindu and ethnically Nepali residents of Bhutan, the *Lhotshampa*.

For the *Lhotshampa*, the imposition of *Driglam Namzha* has led to exclusion and isolation. In his excellent book on the topic, [Unbecoming Citizens](#), Michael Hutt notes that local officials in Bhutan often used their discretion to apply *Driglam Namzha* unfairly, resulting in beatings, arrests and fines

for those who were seen out in public without wearing the national dress. While Bhutan's northern climate is suitable for a heavy, kilt-like material from which *ghos* and *kiras* are made, the warmer southern climate makes their wear uncomfortable and impractical. So when local officials lean toward a strict application of *Driglam Namzha* and require Lhotshampa farmers to wear the *gho* and *kira*, let's put it this way: they aren't going to be grossly happy. The same is true for language and education policies in 1989 that eliminated the teaching of Nepali in the schools.

And these compulsory social and cultural laws have not remained an internal matter. *Driglam Namzha* and associated regulations that coalesced to unify Bhutan's identity - including increasingly strict citizenship laws - led to the little known exodus of tens of thousands (the exact number is contested) of *Lhotshampas* from Bhutan in 1990. They crossed through India and on to Nepal, where more than 100,000 live in refugee camps today. In the succeeding 18 years, not a single refugee has been permitted to return to Bhutan. What's happened to the Lhotshampa refugees in Nepal is a larger story and probably deserves another four-letter word article. For now, let's just say that they've been four-letter worded - and I don't mean 'kilted'.

So what does it take to be grossly happy? Bhutan is widely recognised for national policies protecting itself from an onslaught of an overzealous international development regime, and many have pointed to these policies as exemplars on the road to smart development. At the same time, Bhutan has also enacted policies to protect itself against the erosion of 'pure' Bhutanese identity and culture. Are these policies that Thailand truly wants to mirror?

Like a kilt, or a *gho*, what's important is what lies *beneath* the cover. Take a closer look underneath before passing a blanket positive judgment on all of Bhutan's policies.

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