

***Thuenlam*: Keeping ‘Harmonious Relations’ Through the Lens of Hosting and Hospitality in Bhutan**

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Abstract

In this article, I introduce selected aspects of the concept and practice of *thuenlam* (མཐུན་ལམ) in Bhutan, the local term for maintaining ‘harmonious relations’. Most Bhutanese consider *thuenlam* an important prerequisite for successful co-existence and co-operation within society. I describe the views and experiences of my three Bhutanese fellow travelers on the way from Shingkhar, a village in Bumthang (Central Bhutan), to Zhongmay, a village in Lhuentse (Eastern Bhutan). While trekking along the ancient footpath that connected both valleys, I explore the different ways my companions keep *thuenlam* with a variety of *neypo* (གནས་པོ་ hosts) through the exchange of food and drink, gifts, and services. I furthermore draw on my interviews with Bumthap villagers and my field notes resulting from living and traveling with Bhutanese over many years. This account includes my perspective as a researcher who depends on the hospitality framework to establish *thuenlam* in the field. Hence, drawing on four years of dissertation research and over 23 years of familiarity with Bhutan, I focus on the informal etiquette, *beyzhag* (འབད་བཞག) and hosting traditions of day-to-day village life rather than the formalized and codified etiquette of *driglam namzhag* (སྤྱི་ལམ་རྣམ་གཞག), the official Bhutanese code of conduct. Both nurture various types of *thuenlam* in society: the former, informal practices are organic and transmitted within the family and community; the latter, mandatory during official events and settings are taught at schools and in specialized courses.

Keywords

Bhutan; *thuenlam*; hospitality; sociality; gift exchange

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Introduction

Early in my fieldwork in Bhutan, I came across the popular story of the *thuenpa puenzhi* (མཐུན་པ་ཕུན་པའི), the harmonious four friends. Depictions of the *thuenpa puenzhi* are everywhere in Bhutan and serve as a reminder of the importance of ‘harmony’ and ‘cooperation’ for society: the central role of *thuenlam*, literally the ‘harmonious way’, for a variety of relationships. In Bhutanese schools, the *thuenpa puenzhi* are used to teach students the Buddhist foundation and values on which the concept of *thuenlam* rests. One version tells how four friends want to find out who was the oldest among them. After comparing accounts the bird was nominated the oldest, followed by the rabbit, and then the monkey whilst the elephant was the youngest. Although the elephant was the strongest and largest animal, the highest respect was given to the bird because of its seniority. The story emphasizes communal harmony, cooperation, interdependence, and respect for

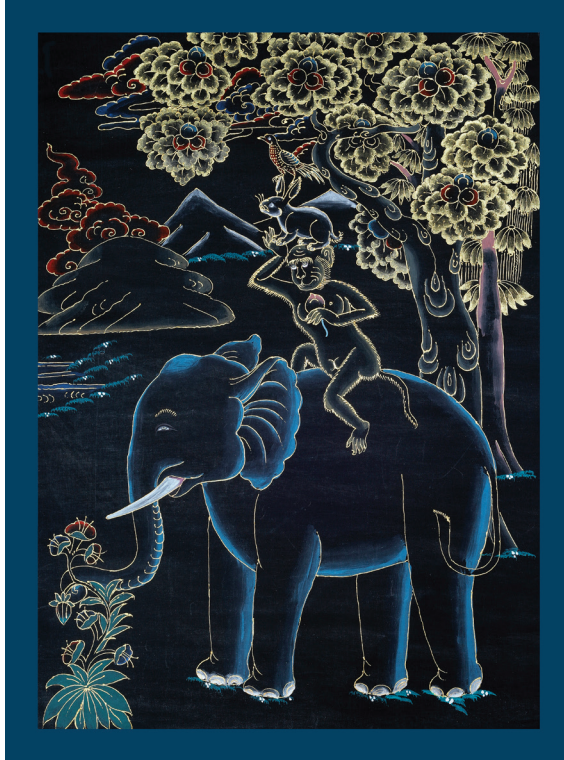


Image 1: The Four Friends symbolize harmony and cooperation in society without a pecking order.

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family, parents and seniority in general, a hierarchy that should not follow a pecking order but experience and wisdom.

Within numerous hospitality situations in Bhutan, I myself learned how to establish and manage *thuenlam* with Bhutanese. I took part in cultural hospitality practices and rituals at various levels, ceremonial and non-ceremonial, informal and formal. By understanding the importance of hospitality for *thuenlam*, I learned how to manoeuvre in a society where knowing how to create and manage *thuenlam* helps to gain access to people at different levels who are enmeshed in a complicated web of hierarchical relationships. This is reflected in everyday etiquette, *beyzhag* and the type of gifts one has to offer to people of different ranks and status. For my doctoral research on *thuenlam* and hospitality from 2012-2015, my already well-established familiarity with Bhutan and my *thuenlam* with a variety of Bhutanese were invaluable for my ethnographic fieldwork approach: I was a researcher and a guest at the same time and therefore a constitutive part of what I observed.

I explored how *thuenlam* works in everyday life for ordinary people within the hospitality context of the *neypo* system. What does *thuenlam* mean for them and how do they create and manage it in everyday life in the village context? The following is a selected ethnographic account from my doctoral thesis (Čokl 2019).

Due to the limited scope here, I can only briefly touch on transformations of *thuenlam* practices, especially in the wake of the sharply increased rural to urban and outmigration of the very recent past. However, I will say that even though the modalities may have changed and my participants have adjusted to changing technological and socio-economic circumstances, the idea of *thuenlam* as a tacit and explicit cultural practice of relationship fostering continues to be important and meaningful. Furthermore, whilst I confined my research to two valleys in Bhutan, mobility has been an important aspect of Bhutanese life in the places I visited. The

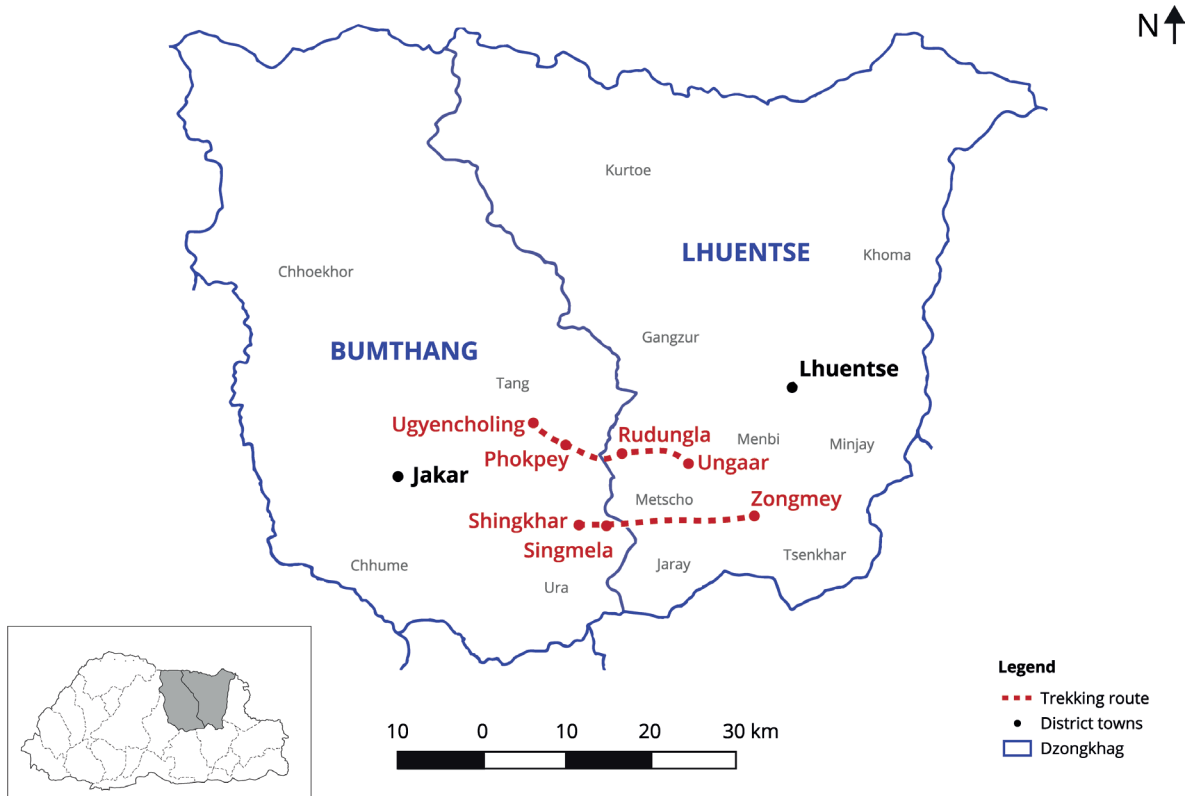


Image 2: The traditional *neypo* footpaths between Bumthang and Lhuentse.
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composition of the village population in Shingkhar is far from homogenous in terms of origin and language of its members. For instance, there are several households where one spouse is from a different part of Bhutan and being multilingual is the norm rather than the exception.

I embarked on a two-day trek along the old footpath from Shingkhar, a village at approximately 3400 meters elevation in Bumthang (Central Bhutan), to Zhongmay in Lhuentse (Eastern Bhutan) below 2000 meters.

Three village friends accompanied me on this trip: Sonam¹, a middle-aged farmer and married horseman lives in Zhongmay but hails from Shingkhar; Nonola, a young civil servant who at the time of my research lived in the capital Thimphu but has since moved to Australia; he continues to have deep roots in Shingkhar and is a member of various online *tshogpa* (ཚོགས་པ་)—associations from friends and family to community level. Through these chat groups he remains

actively involved in everyday village issues. Lastly I was accompanied by my friend *Aum* (ཨུམ་) Sangay, a middle aged farmer from Shingkhar with whom I spent many hospitable events and who still lives in Shingkhar. Nonola organized our trip and was in charge of logistics. Sonam was our guide and horseman and Aum Sangay came along to share her memories of this past practice. From the perspectives of my three friends, I will describe how they understand, create, and negotiate *thuenlam* through acts of hospitality in everyday life.

Initially, when I reached Shingkhar and explained the purpose of my research, my village friends were in disbelief that someone would show interest in their ordinary village lives, listening to their experiences as opposed to those of more accomplished scholars and religious experts far away in Thimphu. Indeed, ethnographies of ordinary people and their everyday lives have long been confined to the margins of the academic field of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies.



Image 3: A view of Shingkhar village when coming from Ura valley. © 2012 Benjamin Hörbe

This underrepresentation in the literature among other reasons motivated me to pursue the research introduced in this article. I first reached Shingkhar in 2005 for my undergraduate research. After that I frequently returned and for my doctoral research I lived in Bhutan from 2012 to 2015 continuously. Each year I spent several months in Bumthang. Most of my participants I consider friends or family.

***Thuenlam*: ‘The Source of Harmonious Living’**

Prior to my trip from Bumthang to Lhuentse, I asked my friend Lhendup, a well-educated civil servant from Bumthang who lives in Thimphu, about the meaning of *thuenlam* and he explained:

We usually say *thuenlam ja dang boe yang go* (མཐུན་ལམ་རྒྱ་དང་བོད་ཡང་དགོས), there must be good relations even between China and Tibet. It means that all have to maintain the *thuenlam* spirit between all levels, standards, castes, and even between neighbors

and the spirits. Experiencing peace and happiness in the country, society, and in the community solely depends on how strong our relationships are maintained in society. *Thuenlam* is the source of harmonious living and social cohesion.

The Dzongkha expression *thuenlam* was used by several of my participants and may be a neologism. I chose it as my analytical term when referring to relationship fostering practices in Bhutan. However, people engage in everyday *thuenlam* practices without naming them as such and would not use the term constantly to describe what is considered embodied practice.

According to Lhendup, *thuenlam* permeates Bhutanese ways of life which emphasize a strong sense for collective identity, sociality, and conformity. It is about keeping good relations with a variety of parties, human or non-human, in order to nurture harmony and social cohesion in society at large. He explained further that:

Most Bhutanese live in a joint family situation which is very much based on *thuenlam*. We work with others to achieve a lot of social goals. For instance an annual religious ceremony in a household cannot be a success without having *thuenlam* within the family members, village lama, monks, and fellow villagers. Even farm chores are still carried out by helping one another although this may change rapidly when we become technically more advanced.

Important key characteristics of *thuenlam* as an ideal include: it has a positive connotation, different types of *thuenlam* exist within hierarchical relationships as illustrated by the four friends, and ways of establishing and nurturing *thuenlam* are embedded in moralities based on shared tacit, but not uncontested, cultural assumptions regarding customs and etiquette. However, *thuenlam* should not be misconstrued as a clearly delineated cultural practice consisting of a strict set of rules people act upon, but rather as relating/connecting to others in a certain way that ought to establish mutuality and trust, the important prerequisites for all sorts of tangible and intangible exchange. Different personalities and characters have their own ideas, motives and agendas when it comes to *thuenlam* creation and as I will show, within the hospitality context, there are ways to negotiate one's position and status.

Thuenlam with the Lha

When I reached Shingkhari in Ura valley, I settled into my family's house and started doing my rounds. I had brought gifts to offer to all my friends. Most already knew me from previous stays and I often heard them say, "you are one of us now". This expression should not be taken literally. Rather, it conveys our connectedness, intimacy, and mutual respect, developed over the many years I have worked in the community. After initial refusals to accept gifts, my friends were very happy about the small tokens from abroad. I had been away to Europe for a while and visiting their

homes re-established our connection and was appreciated.

I informed the villagers about my new research interests and in our conversations, just like many times before, they brought up the *neypo* tradition. Prior to the launch of infrastructure development in Bhutan in the 1950s², a vast network of host-guest relationships existed across the kingdom and beyond its borders, the *neypo* network. In *Bumthangkha* (བུམ་ཐང་ཁ་), a host would be called *nadpo*³ or *naspo* and a guest *ngud* or *ngus*, depending on accents. Different communities in Bhutan have their own terms for 'host' and 'guest' depending on the local vernacular. My friends from Shingkhari village in Ura valley, Bumthang, however commonly used the terms *neyp* or *neypo* when talking about their hosts in Lhuentse. Here, I use the term *gyoem* (མཚོན་མོ) for 'guest'.

There were many reasons for the Bumthang to embark on seasonal migrations to adjacent valleys depending on wealth, social class, rank, and status. Some, such as cattle migration, are still practiced. Most of them were about survival and complementing the scarce food stock in Bumthang. Here, my context is largely what was described by my participants as *gren* (Bt), 'begging/asking for food'. While squatting near the wood stove in Aum Sangay's kitchen, drinking hot *ara* (ཨ་ར་), she reminded me about the *grendo* practice in the past:

Well, I went to Kurtoe⁴ when I was eleven years old. During those days, it was a little difficult for us to sustain ourselves here in Bumthang. Therefore, during summer, we relied on our agricultural work for sustenance and in winter, we went to Kurtoe to beg. After leaving from here we held our first night at Khan. The next day we travelled from Khan to Zhongmay, and after arriving at Zhongmay we started begging into three directions. In Zhongmay we had our own *neypo*, where we set up base. Today we have about thirty-six households here in Shingkhari, but when I was a child, we had only about

twelve to thirteen households. These twelve or thirteen households each had their own hosts in Zhongmay. In some cases however two households or more from here had one host in Zhongmey.

While listening to her recollections from the past, I realized that in order to fully grasp how *thuenlam* fostering within the *neypo* system works, I needed to understand the recent history of social stratification which continues to linger today. One's status in the social hierarchy determined the purpose and modalities of one's seasonal migrations. The *thuenlam* of different hierarchical relationships also corresponds with associated practices in the hospitality context. How one travels and the reception one receives by the *neypo*, what type of gifts one presents and what one receives in return and in general the kind of hospitality one can expect depends on one's social status and positioning in relation to the host. Just to give an example from the past: the majority of villagers I talked to in Bumthang, including those who accompanied me on my trip to Lhuentse, went for *grendo*, barter or gleaning. They were more or less on equal footing with their *neypo*, regarding status and class, and small gifts would be exchanged upon arrival and departure⁵. However, some villagers perceived themselves as *grenkhang* (Bt. Beggar) and felt that this might have impacted how they were received by hosts at times.

Finally, it is also important to know that the notion of *neypo* includes the category of the non-human host, 'numinous inhabitants' (Ura 2001) with whom good relations have to be kept or else it can lead to misfortune and sickness. The Shingkarpa impute meaning to their natural environment. While traveling, for instance, they traverse 'sacred landscapes' (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995), believed to be inhabited by a variety of local deities, earth- and water spirits. These numina are associated with places such as groves, crags, cliffs, lakes, and river confluents. Polluting them can cause an imbalance in the relationship with these cosmic dwellers. The *lha* (ལྷ) and spirits are

of different ranks, some benevolent and some malevolent, and they can affect the well-being of travelers and pack animals if their dwelling places are defiled. Numerous legends, myths, and stories underpin such beliefs and emphasize the moral obligation of keeping good relations with the *lha* who, in return, will protect the humans against evil influences.

The tenets of participant observation correspond to my personality since I enjoy being sociable and immersing myself in the field deeply. I believe that it is shared experiences such as joint hospitality events, treks and pilgrimages, and other communal activities that help me better understand the daily lives of my participants. Therefore, I decided to 're-enact' the annual seasonal migrations of the Shingkarpa to the adjacent Lhuentse valley. Together with my friends Nonola, Sonam and Aum Sangay, I planned to trek from Shingkar in Ura valley to Zhongmay in Lhuentse along the old footpath, which nowadays is hardly used. On the way, they would tell me more about the adventures, dangers and joys entailed in the hike and how they were hosted by their *neypo*. After a few days of preparations, we finally started our trek in the early morning and moved towards the mountain pass Singmela at approximately 4000 meters above the village, passing Zhamsur *gonpa* (དུལ་ལྷོ་ལྷ་པོ) on the way. Our first aim was to reach Khan, the old camp site of the Shingkarpa. We had five horses along with us to carry our luggage. Sonam had a hard time reining them in because the footpath had not been maintained properly over the past years. He had instructions to return the horses to their owner in Zhongmay. Sonam himself hails from Shingkar but, following the local custom of uxorilocality, moved to his wife's household in Lhuentse after marriage.

Until Singmela it was a steep climb on a footpath that Nonola jokingly called the 'tantric way', because it was not aligned in serpentine but rather straight up the hill like a short cut. Despite his young age of 28 years, Nonola turned out to be a great narrator on everything related to traveling



Image 4: A view of Shingkhar valley en route to Singmela, near Zhamsur gonpa.
 © 2013 Yeshey Dorji

past and present. He told us, for instance, that the chirping of a particular bird when heard repeatedly on the way is a sign of good luck. My companions described travelling in the past as tough: summer season entailed the danger of hailstorm, heavy rain, muddy footpaths, landslides, and the constant attacks by leeches. In winter, it was very cold, dry, and the occasional heavy snowfall made it difficult for people and horses to move forward. Aum Sangay narrated an incident from childhood. She did not have sneakers, it was raining and her father didn't allow her to wear even the traditional boots. When I inquired why she said, "The traditional boots will get damaged in the muddy water. When we took rest however, I dried my feet and put them on. After reaching home I could not take them off as they would have shrunk, so I had to wear them until they dried."

Aum Sangay, like many other villagers I interviewed, kept referring to the dangers of evil spirits and local deities. Indeed, when we were about to reach Singmela

pass, she grabbed some thorny twigs and wiped everyone's back with it to chase back the evil spirits to Ura valley where they belonged. She made sure that they would not follow us to Lhuentse where they could harm our hosts. Next, Nonola sprinkled *serkyem* (གསེར་སྒྲེམས) an alcoholic libation to the local deities inhabiting the landscape at the pass. We drank a cup of *ara*, the *lamchang* (ལམ་ཅང་) for travelers, the alcohol on the way. Upon reaching the *chorten* (མཚོད་རྟེན) and *labtsa* (ལཔ་ཙ), a pile of stones believed to be the residing place of a local deity, we added a stone, a flower, and some edibles as a gift offering. I was told that by doing so the deity will consider protecting us throughout the journey. In addition, while approaching a pass some travelers shout "*lha gyelo*" (ལྷ་རྒྱལ་ལོ) which means 'may good win over evil' or 'may the gods be victorious'. We enjoyed the wonderful views of the Himalayan mountain range with its snow peaks, believed to be the residence of mountain deities, protectors such as *yulha* (ཡུལ་ལྷ) and *kyelha* (རྒྱེས་ལྷ). I



Image 5: Offering incense to the local deities on a mountaintop.
 © 2009 Marina Beck

felt touched when I saw that my fellow travelers were equally in awe of the beauty that surrounded us. We then continued our journey in silence for a while.

When we reached our camp, my friends made a fire, prepared tea and warmed up some leftovers. Aum Sangay instructed me, “We must not spill milk into the fire; it could upset the local deities and cause *drib* (འཇིག་ spiritual defilement). We also must not fry meat over open fire because the deities do not like the smell.” This was all part of the ‘dos and don’ts’ in order to keep *thuenlam* with the local deities, respecting their likes and dislikes. While camping, they are considered our *neypo*, and just like with human hosts we should follow the rules and etiquette in their ‘house’, and not do anything that might upset them. My friends referenced a variety of local deities and numina who reside in particular places, mostly *tsan* (བཙུན་) in the mundane and *lu* (ལུ) in the sub-mundane categories. For example, *neydag* (གཞན་ལ་བདག་) are guardians of particular places and travelers must not

anger them while traversing through their territory.

I asked Nonola what young people think about such beliefs and he responded that those who grow up in Thimphu are estranged from village life and practices; they follow the customs during family rituals out of respect for their parents and grandparents but do not understand the deeper meanings. Others see no harm in following the customs because one never knows whether there is something to it or not. Again others take such beliefs seriously. Many Bhutanese abroad request their family members back home via mobile phone to appease the protector deities before an upcoming exam or job interview. Nonola pointed out that even if youth don’t believe in these customs, while teasing their parents and grandparents about them, they will not antagonize them.

After a warm dinner and with hot *ara* in our hands, I suddenly remembered my first arrival in Shingkhari in 2005. I suffer

from chronic headaches and had a terrible migraine that day. I tried to explain my condition to my hosts but they started fumigating my room to appease the local spirit they thought responsible. I asked my friends what the repercussions were, should someone upset the local deities. Aum Sangay explained that in bad cases it can lead to the demise of the horses and people will get sick. She shared the following incident:

During those days if somebody held the night at Khan and if the travelers happened to burn something filthy on the fire, a wild predator like a tiger might come and kill the best horses. It is the *neydag* because it can take any form. I remember one incident with Ap Tashi. His best horse was killed by predators in Khan and we had to carry the entire load on our back, until we reached here. We were lots of people and the whole night we were playing dice and unintentionally some dirty things must have gotten into the fire. Some must have silently roasted beef and when our firewood was finished they fetched some random twigs that we used as our mattresses and threw them into the fire. So while grabbing them the leftover skin of some dried fish we had eaten for dinner was also pulled with it and accidentally burnt. The next morning, when we were about to resume our journey, we couldn't find Ap Tashi's best horse. The local deity had been angered and retaliated.

I remembered what Ap Dendup back in Shingkhar told me. Now an elderly man, he was part of the group Aum Sangay was talking about and, during one of our many evenings in Shingkhar, he had shared the following story:

On the way to Singmela we have a little *gonpa* called Shamzur. Previously we used to lock the *gonpa* and keep the key hidden under a stone so that whoever comes can make offerings, pray for their safe

trip and leave. I still remember my parents praying to the deities: 'Now, deities you know that Kurtoe is a place of cliffs and rivers. So if I encounter a river please build a bridge for me and if I encounter a cliff please build a ladder for me. So that I may be safe until I return back'. We used to hold night at Khan and wherever we stayed our bonfire had to be kept clean. While cooking our dinner we must not burn anything filthy and milk must not boil over into the fire because it will cause heavy snowfall or rainfall with strong winds that will soak the place in no time and extinguish our fire. We should not forget to pray for the help and protection of the local deities. We believe that the deities are just like us and a Bhutanese saying goes: *lha dre mi sum joe lam cig* (ལྷ་འདྲེ་མི་གསུམ་སྤྱིང་ལམ་གཅིག) 'Gods, demons, and humans share the same conduct!'. If we pray for their help they won't let any harm come to us. If we don't pray to them they will be angered and can cause harm to us. There is a *neydag*, a territorial deity in Khan too. I haven't seen the deity myself, but Ap Tashi had an encounter. He had to go and collect the harvest of his paddy fields in *Zhongmey*. His father in law reminded him to keep his bon fire clean. If not the deities will harm us. Back then, Ap Tashi, being a young man, didn't listen to his father-in-law and roasted dried pork on the fire instead. After dinner, when we all fell asleep, Ap Tashi dozed off near the fire. All his friends were in a deep slumber, but he himself woke up in the middle of the night. As soon as he opened his eyes he saw a very old woman looking at him from the other side of the fire. He quickly closed his eyes and turned his back toward the fire. But when he turned around he saw the old woman's back again with her skin looking like the bark of a tree, very rough. He was really terrified and woke up his friends, telling them

that he is unable to sleep because an old woman kept appearing. His friends didn't see anything, and they all went back to sleep, and the old woman appeared again to Ap Tashi. So, that entire night he could not sleep well.

Musing about Ap Tashi's encounter with the *neydag*, we settled into our blankets around the bonfire. The next day, I was about to meet several traditional Lhuentsep (ལུན་ཅེས་) hosts of my Bumthap (བུམ་ཐའཔ་) friends who had not met them in years.

We started early morning and after a long downhill hike we finally reached Zhongmay village. By then, I was very exhausted and could barely walk. We went straight to Sonam's house where his family served tea and snacks and prepared hot water for us to wash after the long journey. I handed over my *chom* (ཅོམ་), consisting of typical local gifts: four laundry soaps, four face soaps, one package of sugar, one package of biscuits, some noodles, some sweets, one package of tea bags, and a container of oil. This established my *thuenlam* with Sonam's family and henceforth he would be my *neypo* in Zhongmay. He explained that whenever I came back to Zhongmay in the future I would first have to visit his house.

Hospitality and *Thuenlam*

In order to understand the complexity of Bhutanese hospitality, I started out with Tom Selwyn's (2000) general definition that the basic function of hospitality is to establish or to promote an already established relationship through acts of hospitality within moral frameworks. Acts of hospitality refer to the exchange of goods and services (material and symbolic) between those who give hospitality (hosts) and those who receive it (guests). However, since hospitality is at one end of a continuum with hostility at the other, it is also ambiguous and implies the possibility of danger. Furthermore, hospitality can sometimes be coercive and manipulative and the outcome of mediated exchange as part of hospitality is not always clear (March 1998).

In her ethnography on Sherpa society, Sherry Ortner conceptualizes hospitality as the "central ritual of secular social relations" (Ortner 1978: 62). She locates hospitality as "being on the border between ritual [the latter a special (sacred) context removed and bounded off from everyday life] and everyday life itself, the ongoing flow of work and casual interactions that simply happen as people go about their business" (Ortner 1978: 62). In this regard, Ortner attributes a central role to etiquette:

The ritualism of hospitality is etiquette, a trivial term in our own culture, but a tremendously fruitful domain of analysis for the anthropologist. In etiquette, certain social interactions have been shaped, formalized, and raised, one might say, to the level of statements about the meaning of sociality in the culture. (Ortner 1978: 62)

In Bhutanese society, hospitality is an important mediating framework for managing and negotiating social relationships of all sorts, including challenging social norms by breaching etiquette. Hospitality is associated with commensality but also with exchange and ideas around reciprocity as well as status and hierarchy. Most importantly, hospitality events offer opportunities for 'keeping good relations' and connections, *thuenlam*. Gift-exchange, the basis for the formation of social relations according to Mauss (2002), is an important feature of *thuenlam* in Bhutan. The notion that a gift is not free but embedded in a mode of reciprocity - the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate - plays an important role in the hospitality context. Mauss (2002: 7) called these services and counter-services, which social collectivities commit to by presents and gifts, a 'system of total services' since it involves every aspect of society. Hospitality provides the basic condition for commensality and the exchange of gifts and services. In the cosmological worldview of my Bhutanese participants, similar to what Ortner described for the Sherpa, this

includes humans as well as the *lha*, the local deities, and malevolent spirits:

Hospitality also functions as the model for conducting most of the critical instrumental transactions in the society: manipulating neighbours, propitiating gods, pacifying demons, making merit, discharging (and regenerating) mutual obligations. (Ortner 1978: 63)

In the following, I will look briefly at the stages of hospitality within which *thuenlam* is managed through hosting and gift exchange. I broadly identify three phases that characterize the entire hospitality process. I chose Dzongkha terms purely for analytical purpose and to explicate underlying concepts that function in a tacit manner in Bhutanese social relations. Furthermore different regions may have different denominations; in general, such terms tend not to come up in daily conversations about hosting. The three phases are reception or *donglen* (གདོང་ལེན), treating/ managing the guest or *goemgi schongzhag* (མགྲོན་མོ་གྱི་སྐྱོང་བཞག) and farewell or *dralmoen* (བུལ་སྐོན).

Thuenlam with the Neypo

ལག་སྐྱོང་གིས་ང་མ་བརྟུང། ཁ་སྐྱོང་གིས་དོན་མ་གསལ།

La tong gi nga ma dung | kha tong gi doen masel

“Do not beat the drum with an empty hand. Do not clarify the meaning with an empty talk.”

Prior to our arrival, I was curious about how we would hand over our gifts and wanted to know more about local etiquette. I noticed that gifts in Bhutan indicate status and hierarchy. Common ways of nurturing *thuenlam* in villages are friendly visits, commensality and conviviality as well as the exchange of small gifts and services on a regular basis. Aum Sangay explained that this is part of practicing community *thuenlam*: “For example if I go to my neighbor’s house and she offers me *doma* (རྫོག་མ)

or *ara* and I give something to her, we call it *thuenlam*.”

Chodma (Bt.) suggests a gift within an equal relationship one brings when visiting others. If visiting a person of high status, the gift would be called *djangshey* (ཕྱག་མཇལ). During farewell, the host will offer a *lamju* (ལམ་འཇུག) and a *soera* (གསོལ་རས) is given by a person of higher status to one of lower status, either after a *chodma* or *djangshey* has been received or for received services by a host. Among equals, such remuneration is called *shulzhag* (བཤུལ་བཞག). Exchange between equals in the same village is an on-going expression of *thuenlam* within the village community where mutual assistance was also a matter of survival.

Aum Sangay explained that when guests come and show up with gifts, one has to assess their value and reciprocate accordingly at the end of their stay, sometimes even giving a little more than the value of the received gift. It all depends on the status and background of the giver and receiver and one does not want to be gossiped about or blamed afterwards by not having reciprocated accordingly. I will show later why it is so important to guard against gossip. Nowadays, cash is considered and accepted as a ‘gift’ and in some cases can become a burden because it has replaced in-kind remuneration. This can turn *thuenlam* practice into hardship especially for those Bhutanese returning to their villages from Thimphu. Nonola explained how these changes can become difficult for civil servants in Thimphu due to high expectations on behalf of the relatives back in the villages:

When they reach their home village, all the relatives will come with food and drink to see them. They will have to give *soera* in cash to each of the villagers visiting them. Some will invite them to their houses to eat meals and spend the night there. Again, they have to give *soera*. They have to give Nu (དངུལ་ཀྲམ) 200 or Nu 300 to each of them. One of my friends went to his village with a total amount of 35,000 Nu and when he

returned, only Nu 250 were left in his pocket!

Expectations are even higher towards relatives living abroad as many villagers assume they earn more. Earning family members are expected to contribute to all sorts of family expenses such as ritual expenses, education fees of relatives, loans for house construction and land purchase. Previously religious specialists were paid in kind, now they charge money for their services. However, cash is not something all rural households have in abundance and those who stay back in the village homes depend on earning family members. This puts high pressure on the latter living in Thimphu or abroad. I heard from many friends, that this is one reason for them not to visit, or delay visiting their villages. Hence, when it comes to hospitality and gifting, a higher earning of family members does not necessarily correlate with more power for them to challenge certain family dynamics and practices as might be the case in other contexts.

***Beyzhag* mindu: Negotiating *Thuenlam* through Gossip**

To successfully foster *thuenlam* during hospitable events requires certain social skills and manners, *beyzhag*. *Beyzhag* “denotes manners without any connotation of formalization” (Phuntsho 2004: 575), unlike *driglam namzhag* which is the result of standardization and formalization of *driglam*, which Phuntsho describes as a former “spontaneous practice and inner appreciation of etiquette as a wholesome conduct” (Phuntsho 2004: 574).

*Beyzhag*⁶ refers to everyday embodied practice of manners and behaviorism. *Beyzhag* is dynamic and offers room for negotiation, intuition and creativity for those who interact, based on ideas of what constitutes good and bad manners. *Beyzhag* is not taught at schools like *driglam namzhag* but is transmitted from generation to generation and embodied through practice within the family and the wider community. Aum Sangay explained to me:

Typical Bhutanese hospitality I learned from my grandmothers. Generosity, sharing, was very important. People visited my grandmothers with or without gifts, but they had to offer something to the guests anyway—a bag of rice, balls of cheese or snacks. They told me to welcome everyone, feed them well and be generous with the butter while cooking! Religious heads would always be given preferential treatment, - the best room, food, and seat in the house. Hosts would always eat at the end, not just as a sign of good manners but to ensure that the guests had enough. I guess generosity and kindness are the main characteristics I can think of.

Breaches against the implicit, albeit negotiated, rules of *beyzhag* are commonly met with gossip. Besnier (2009: 190) recognizes gossip as a prominent feature of sociality and conceptualizes gossip as political action. He argues that in order to understand the ‘everyday production of politics’, the focus needs to be put on sites that are “much less straightforwardly political, including interactions that are woven into the ordinariness of everyday existence” (Besnier 2009: 190). By analyzing gossip Besnier seeks “to expand traditional anthropological ways of thinking about politics as located primarily in public life” (Besnier 2009: 190).

In my research, such sites are hospitable events where transformative substances such as food and drinks are exchanged and where villagers’ political agency unfolds within small-scale informal encounters. Gossip serves as a very important levelling mechanism of power relations and as a tool to convey messages whilst ‘saving one’s face’.

My Bhutanese participants believe that gossip can lead to a drain of vital energies and negatively affect their fortune and luck, or their *wangtha* (དགའ་ཐང་) and *lungta* (ལྷ་ཉེ). In his recently published ethnography on the persistence of Bon practices and the embeddedness of associated beliefs

in Goleng village social life (Zhemgang District), the Bhutanese anthropologist Kelzang Tashi explains in detail the importance of protecting oneself from hostile influences, of which ‘pernicious gossip’ or *mikha* (མི་ཁྲ) is the most significant:

Mikha is a gendered phenomenon, with the vast majority of gossip believed to be by women. Some women are even feared, given that gossip can become spiritualized and turn malicious. Regardless of one’s faith, people deem *mikha* malicious, as it is believed to be caused by the evil intent of envious persons. (Tashi 2023: 164)

Tashi distinguishes between different types of *mikha*, of which not all need to be malicious. Malicious gossip however can turn into *kharam* (ཁ་རམ), a ‘ruinous curse’, far more dangerous than *mikha*, as it can cause physical and mental health issues as well as conflict, altercations and infidelity between couples (Tashi 2023: 165). To guard against *kharam*, the Bhumtap attach “phallic implements on the cardinal corners of houses and sometimes more prominently above doors” (Tashi 2023: 163). In severe cases where gossip is believed to have led to misfortune and sickness, people perform *mikha* rituals which shall avoid and ward off the negative influences of such gossip.

Jealousy and envy were quite frequently brought up as motivators for gossip in Shingkhari. Considering the potential effects of gossip, it seems a potent tool for women in their ‘everyday production of politics’ to challenge, test and level perceived power imbalances and to manipulate *thuenlam* of other people. Women have a central role in hospitality, the main site for seemingly endless cycles of gossip in the village as explained by Aum Sangay:

If other people come to visit us and we serve them food and drink, they might talk nicely to us, but when leaving our house and going to the next one they will talk about us there ‘this guy is doing this and that...’. And

again if the people from that house then come to our house they will again complain about another house. This is human nature and it is very rampant in Bhutan, everybody does it. Sometimes, when two households are too close and are on good terms, another household may feel jealous and their members will come and gossip with the intention to divide us.

Being a woman I had access to the chit chat, *sheytho* (འགྲོ་ཐོ) and gossip that occurs when men are absent. In one such case in Shingkhari, a neighbor who came to discuss some work with my hosts behaved disrespectfully by not understanding where to rightfully sit, by occupying a seat that inappropriately suggested more intimacy with the family, and a higher status, than was the case. Additionally, his way of speaking was considered rude as it was too blunt and ‘ambitious’. “*Beyzhag mindu* (འབྲན་བཞག་མིན་འདུག) - He doesn’t have manners”, I was told by my host, after said person had left and she gossiped about his behavior. *Beyzhag* also serves as a frame of reference to reinforce hierarchy and status in a social order where one ought to know where to sit and how to speak politely to superiors. However, *beyzhag*, as illustrated in the case above, allows room for negotiations and testing boundaries. After all, villagers do not blindly act out dictates of tradition but exercise their own judgement (Kipnis 1997).

For Aum Sangay the phrase *beyzhag mindu* refers to behavior such as filthy talk, *tsokha* (བཞོན་ཁྲ) or not knowing one’s rightful place and where to sit during gatherings, or being too ambitious and impertinent and not showing humility in one’s speech, body expression and intentions where it is due. Aum Sangay confirmed that the reprimand of such behavior is hardly open confrontation:

Our habit is that if, for example, I enter a house and unknowingly take a seat near the window, when actually my seat is near the door, the hosts and other guests will not say anything as

long as I am there but once I have left they will start gossiping about me.

Showing bad behaviour, *beyzhag mindu*, by breaching and testing implicit rules, for instance customary seating arrangements, will be ‘penalized’ by gossip. Malicious talk, *mikha*, talking behind someone’s back with the intention to disrepute or ‘reprimand’ the person, will be the most common reaction to someone who doesn’t know how to behave. In a country with a population of not even 800,000 and given the close-knit society in Bhutanese villages like Shingkhar, the message will surely reach the person concerned. Those who become too ambitious and bold, testing their role and status in the community are reined in with gossip.

Young Bhutanese like Nonola, who left the village to pursue a career in the capital and later in Australia, have to navigate between the demands of a modern society that expects them to become self-reliant, critical, and entrepreneurial citizens. On the other hand, they are expected to fulfil the expectations of their family and elders, including following customs related to etiquette, hierarchy, and respecting authority. Open confrontation does not seem to be an option according to Nonola who explained to me that “conveying bad news bluntly, speaking harshly and being too critical and opinionated to someone’s face is still not well received today, even less so when dealing with our parents and superiors⁸.”

Thuenlam is established and fostered through modes of reciprocity. Sonam explained to me that

Kadrin samni (བཀའ་དྲིན་བསམ་ནི) refers to the feeling of gratefulness to someone, both in mind and expressed in action after a received favor or help. It means showing gratitude, for example by giving a *soera* for received hospitality, mostly food and shelter, when we depart.

Within *kadrin samni*, the return favor is most commonly made within a short time period. Furthermore, he explained to me, such a return favor or expression

of thankfulness does not mean that one will forget the kindness that was shown by merely reciprocating. It does not mean the two parties are ‘squared’. Ideally, the favor/help should be remembered and kept in mind, following the logic of *thuenlam* where a relationship—once established—shall be nurtured over a prolonged period. Hence, *kadrin samni* is neither purely transactional as it involves sentiments, an emotional attachment; nor is it completely disinterested as it involves the possibility to obtain favors and assistance.

Following the logic of *kadrin samni*, gifts during *dralmoen* (བཀའ་སྐྱོན་ farewell) can be tokens of gratitude for received favors and help, “return favors” whilst they may also constitute an opening for anticipated help or favors during *donglen*. *Kadrin samni* expresses local notions of the moral obligation to reciprocate or better, being grateful and showing thankfulness. Such reciprocity would initiate or reproduce *thuenlam*. However, there is also always the possibility of non-reciprocation or ulterior motives on behalf of the people involved. The premise seems to be that if one seeks to establish *thuenlam* with another person by offering a gift, there will be a return gift of some sort which can be in kind, a favor or service, as a sign of gratitude and expression of thankfulness. However, depending on the situation, the process can also come to nothing when no return gift or favor follows.

Donglen: The Welcome Phase – From Strangers to Familiars

The reception at Sonam’s house was cordial and his family helped us unpack our horses, escorted us into the house and offered us *ara* first, then tea. Afterwards we offered our *chom*, because as the saying goes in Bumthangkha: “*yag thongpa minla tsamtek*” (‘I have come with a small gift so that I am not empty handed’).

In Shingkhar Nonola had provided a lively description of what according to him still happens during *donglen* while also addressing what makes for a good or bad host:

The host will say ‘*jön, jön*’ (འབྱོན་འབྱོན). (...) We can make out by the way the host welcomes the guests, whether it is a good host or not, we just know. If the host does not bother about the guest...that is considered a bad host. Good hosts will offer whatever they have and speak kindly, be compassionate and share their feelings by inquiring ‘what brings you here?’ and then they will invite the guests by saying ‘*jön, jön, jön la!*’ (འབྱོན་ལགས), which means ‘come, come’. Once they are in the house they will say ‘*shu, shu la!*’ (བཞུགས་ལགས) which means ‘sit, sit, have a seat!’ Then immediately they will serve *ara* and offer *jönchang* (འབྱོན་ཆང) or *dongchang* (གཞོན་ཆང) the welcome drink. After that they will offer *dongja* (གཞོན་ཇ welcome tea), and then they will talk to each other to get to know each other.

For ordinary people like us, receptions were informal with their individual shaping depending on the hosts’ abilities and personalities and the type of *thuenlam* between the parties. Being considered a guest from far away, I was given a slightly preferential treatment by seating me on a softer cushion and serving me first. We were also ushered into the altar room, *choesham* (མཚོན་འགམ), instead of the kitchen, and lined up from window to door with me sitting closest to the altar.

As mentioned before, seating arrangements offer opportunities to negotiate *thuenlam*. Ordinary guests would usually be seated in the kitchen, *thabtshang* (མའ་ཚང) according to a seating arrangement based on status⁹. I observed that usually the hosts will direct high-ranking guests to the best, the ‘highest’ place, always on a mattress, carpet or cushion called *dan* (གདན), or armchairs where available. However, guests from far away or abroad, after a very long strenuous journey, will also be treated a bit ‘higher’ upon arrival and offered a *dan*. While sitting in Sonam’s *choesham*, I remembered how Ap Tashi, my elderly host in Shingkar, had offered his take on seating arrangements in olden days:

Ya, if a lama comes they will directly escort him to the *choesham* and seat him on a thick mattress. In case of an official person, his mattress will be a little thinner than the lama’s but he will also be seated in the *choesham*. And if it is somebody like me, they will sit in the *thabtshang* near the window. That is our culture: lamas and high officials will be seated in the altar room and people like us will be near the window. Regarding those who went for *grendo*, begging for food, if it is a man then they will seat him near the window and in case of a woman they will just sit together casually. *Ya*, in olden days we had that culture of differentiating between men and women according to both religion and worldly life.

I observed that occasionally the seating ritual can lead to humorous negotiations between guests and hosts. When the guest takes a lower seat, the host will prompt them to move to a higher seat. As a rule of thumb, it is appreciated if one shows modesty and refuses the best place. Ultimately however, the guest will be ushered into the rightful seat. These practices are not written in stone and again depend on the personalities involved. My host’s neighbor in Shingkar for example, was considered quite rude for challenging the order. However, he did this frequently and despite the gossip, he seemed unimpressed with the potential consequences. Cultural behavior relating to etiquette may seem ingrained and embodied, but there is always room for challenging the status quo, no matter how subtly this might be achieved.

Sonam and Nonola were busy helping in the kitchen where our dinner was prepared, while Aum Sangay and I rested and enjoyed our beverages. After a while we handed over our gifts. This should be done either inside or outside of the house but never over the threshold as, according to local beliefs, it can turn the giver and receiver into enemies. Handing over a gift in passing over the threshold and empty vessels/



Image 6: Serving welcome *ara* during a hospitality event in Shingkar.
 © 2012 Benjamin Hörbe

containers in general is considered very inauspicious. Back in Shingkar, my host Ap Tashi, had instructed me carefully about the importance of bringing a *chom*:

If someone goes to another's place without *chom*, empty handed, it is considered impolite. That's the culture that existed also in the past. The reason for taking the *chom*: Firstly, superiors take gifts in acknowledgment of the respect that the *neypo* have for them. Secondly, as a guest, it also ensures that one is not empty-handed. A *chom* is intended as a very auspicious sign.

While receiving the gift, it is polite to show some modesty, which may include initially refusing the gift several times while saying "I have nothing to offer in return!"¹⁰

The *donglen* phase, that is the welcome phase, is especially important when it concerns strangers. I observed how guests and hosts, unbeknownst to each other, kept

inquiring about each other's social background, birthplace and village, family status and relations until they finally reached some common ground which established trust. With strangers, *mi sap* (མི་གསུང་), one has to establish *thuenlam* first in order to know what treatment is appropriate but also to be sure that the guest means no harm. Inquiring about the stranger's professional and family background is a strategy to establish such a connection. Some of my friends use to joke that if you talk to strangers long enough, you will eventually discover that you are related, maybe even close cousins.

The welcome drink, *dongchang*, deserves particular attention for this 'scanning ritual' to establish trust. It is more common in central and east Bhutan and less so in other regions. It is offered upon arrival and at least one refill is mandatory. Sometimes an 'enforcement ritual' can go on and on until the third refill before the guests' refusal is taken seriously. Alcohol, which plays an important role in Bhutanese social life,

helps in the process of loosening up as a popular proverb goes: ཚང་མར་འཕྱུལ། ལྷོ་ཡར་ཐོང། *chang ma zul | lo ya thong* ('Alcohol goes down, chat comes up'). Alcohol increases the sociability of people and the name of the alcoholic beverage corresponds with the occasion, as Dorji (2005) points out in his article on the role of alcohol in Bhutan.

Hosting strangers can be tricky, after all one doesn't know anything about the person and whether there is some danger lurking somewhere. Aum Sangay narrated one incidence that scared her:

Once when I still lived at my mother's house, this *ap* came to our place. He said that he knew my aunt's husband so I let him in. I offered everything, alcohol, food...but suddenly he cracked and went mad. I got very scared! He was shouting and talking a lot of nonsense, like a mad man. By then it was already after midnight. My husband and I went to our neighbor for help. Meanwhile the guest had left, I don't know where to, but our neighbor stayed with us that night. We locked the door and slept. During that time I was much younger and I got very afraid of him. First he spoke very well and after a while he went *chölo* (འཚོལ་ལོང་ psycho) and he also had a *patang* (དཔའ་རྟགས་ sword)!

Donglen is the initial phase to incorporate guests into the fold of the household and to assess strangers and potential danger. *Donglen* turns strangers into familiars and a good host will warmly welcome the guests with kind words, insist that they enter the house and usher them into the kitchen to their rightful place. The virtues of a good host are expressed through the three doors, mind, body, and speech.

Goemgi shongzhag: Managing Guests

ཞག་གཅིག་གི་མཚུན་མ་ལྷ་དང་འདྲ།

zhag chigi goem lha dang dra | "The guest of one night is like a god!"

The introductory phase of *donglen* fades into *goemgi shongzhag*, managing guests throughout their stay, whether only for a meal, for a night or a longer period of time. Already during the *donglen* phase, the host, mostly the *nangi aum* (ནང་གི་ཨུམ་), the woman of the house, will start preparing the first meal for the guests. Our guide turned *neypo*, Sonam, also disappeared in the kitchen and was busy helping his wife, *nangi aum* Karma to prepare our meal.

As soon as the meal was ready, Karma took a seat in front of us, surrounded by pots and kitchen utensils and started distributing the food. We ate with our hands while sitting on the floor and Karma used ladles to scoop the food onto our plates. She was very attentive and readily offered refills as soon as she deemed necessary. Prior to eating, most Bhutanese will offer a tiny portion of their meal to the *kenchosum* (དཀོན་མཆོག་གསུམ་ Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) whilst murmuring a mantra. Etiquette centers on how to sit, how to hold the bowl and how to use one's hand to eat properly. These steps are thoroughly detailed in the manual of the official etiquette *driglam namzhag* (National Library Thimphu 1999) and much more relaxed in the unofficial hospitality settings of rural homes.

Customarily, and out of courtesy, the host family will not eat together with the guests and take their meals only after the guests are done. Our *neypo* Sonam explained that this has to do with etiquette and respect:

Mostly the *nangi aum* receives the guest and serves tea or *ara*. The other family members, especially the kids, may not show themselves or they may even hide in other rooms. That is actually to show respect to the guest. Another way of showing respect is that the guests get served first and neither the host nor family members will eat with them. The host family usually eats at the end. That is because they want to serve the best portion of food to the guest whilst they can have the rest later. Most of the time however, they don't expect to eat the food that is served to the

guests. They cook simple food for themselves.

Being generous and offering the best food relative to one's capacity distinguishes a good host from a stingy one. Whenever I insisted on hearing more about bad hosts or nasty guests, my participants seemed rather skeptical and embarrassed by the thought that a host would be so rude as not to welcome guests into the house appropriately, let alone refuse to offer food. Indeed, in all my 23 years in Bhutan I remember only one incidence where a host forgot to offer me even a welcome drink whilst serving my village friend who had come along with me. My friend, who had noticed it, agreed that it seemed rude but explained that this particular host was "not right in her head" and had mental issues.

While talking about the possibility of bad hosts and guests seemed like an embarrassing affair, Aum Sangay did have some experiences with stingy hosts (Bt. *tregpa*). She reasoned it might have been because she and her friends from Bumthang were considered *grenkhan* (Bt.), beggars. To this Aum Sangay related a rather amusing encounter where unfriendly behavior infuriated an elderly Bumthap, who found a way to retaliate:

There are places in Lhuentse where people locked their doors as soon as the Bumthap were about to enter. That time we were in a group, in line to a particular house. One of us was about to enter when that host family locked the door. Again another person went and the same happened, and again a third person went and the same thing happened. Finally one *agey* (ཡོ་ཤེས།, old man) got very angry and so he went and bolted the door from the outside. He also took away the padlock! We went uphill and when we came down again that family's mother came towards us, face to face, and we told her that we had not taken the lock. 'You can check' we said and this woman started checking

our bags. I was really afraid that time because this woman was shouting!

When I asked her why she thought they were treated that way and if that host was poor, she responded:

That woman was very rich! But she didn't feel like giving. Maybe her mind was not good. She didn't know what happiness is and what she will gain when she gives to others. She doesn't know what kindness is.

Being a good host requires many social skills and considerable talent, such as knowing how to speak and express oneself, how to approach people, how to cook, as well as many organizational skills. Similarly, showing a friendly and outgoing personality and accepting food and drink as a guest signifies more than just filling one's stomach. It is about establishing trust and connection with the host. Unless one has very good reasons, not offering food to guests or refusing to accept food when insistently offered by hosts, can be an embarrassing situation as Aum Sangay pointed out: "If you reject my food offering then I may feel sad thinking that you might doubt me as a poison giver."

Households that were assumed to give poison were deprived of the most fundamental element of Bhutanese *thuenlam* practice: *goemgi shongzhag*, sharing food and drinks with others and managing guests. These families were stigmatized and marginalized socially because nobody wanted to accept food from them and their partaking in hosting events was limited. Not accepting food or eating little can also be considered a sign of depression or feeling unwell, as I experienced during my time in Shingkhari. The sheer amount of food was difficult for me to handle and it took quite an effort to explain that I was not sad or homesick but simply couldn't eat so much.



Image 6: A *lamju* for the author: dried mushrooms and roasted rice.
 © 2012 Ulrike Čokl

Dralmoen: The Farewell Phase

ལེགས་ཤོམ་སླེ་བྱོན།
leyshom bay joen – ‘Travel safely!’

We spent the next three days visiting different houses in Zhongmay following the same ritual. We brought gifts for our hosts; we were offered drinks and later food, exchanged news and had long conversations before returning to Sonam’s house, not before I handed over a *soera* in form of some cash. When the day of our departure from Zhongmay approached, all those we had visited and who had received a *chom* came to bid their farewell by offering a *lamju*, a parting gift, in return. A *lamju*, Aum Sangay had told me, is like a ‘return-gift’ for a received *chom*:

When you visit the village and you have given something to me, then, when you leave, I will also give something to you. We call that *lamju*. But in

case you have not given anything to me, then I will not come and see you off.

During long and short visits alike, where tea and snacks, lunch or a dinner is offered, the guests will give a tip to the *neypo*, called *shulzhag* if it is between equals or *soera* if it is from someone of higher status to someone of lower status. Ap Tashi, my host from Shingkar, himself of slightly higher status, had explained during one of our many conversations how this usually plays out:

After drinking alcohol and eating food they offer us a *lamju* and it isn’t nice to simply leave by *langma proksay gaimala* (Bt. ‘dusting our butt and go’). Those who have more would give Nu. 100, those who have less would give Nu. 50 and those who have even less would give Nu. 20. It also indicates

respect not to leave without *kadrin samni* and prayers and wishes to see each other again the following year without any misfortune. If the gift is given by a superior, it is considered *soera*. It is considered *tendrel* (རྟོན་འབྲེལ), an auspicious sign in anticipation of our reunion. When they give us *lamju*, we offer *soera* in return as a sign of our gratitude.

Upon departure, we were also offered a *lamchang*, a farewell drink. Our hosts wished us a happy journey “*lekshom bay joen*”, and gave us some snacks for the way. *Nangi aum* Karma explained:

When the Bumthap were about to return back home, we used to give them chilli and rice as *lamju*, and some packed lunch. In return, they used to give us some amount of *shulzhag* as sign of *thuenlam*, the good relationship between host and guest.

Now it was my turn to leave some *soera* and thank my host and guide Sonam and his wife Karma for the received hospitality. Nonola, Aum Sangay and I returned to Shingkhari by bus the preferred means of transport these days unless one has a car. Showing emotions and too much attachment publicly is not common among Bhutanese. However, when I, the *chilip* (ཕྱི་སྐོང་པ་ foreigner), listen long enough to farewell speeches about how we must have been friends in a past life and that *karma* brought us all together in this life, and will – provided we are still alive – reunite us again in the future, it always makes me feel emotional, especially with people with whom *thuenlam* is strong. The impermanence and contingencies of life are frequently addressed in farewell and welcome speeches alike. While leaving, my elderly friends will say, “If I am still alive, we will meet again”. When I return, they welcome me with, “I have only stayed alive to see you once more before I die”. In between, nowadays by social media, the message conveyed often is, “Return fast because I might be dead if you wait too long”. In the past, without road

infrastructure and when traveling meant traversing dangerous and steep territory, this was indeed a realistic outlook.

Conclusion: The Continued Importance of *Thuenlam* Practices

Thuenlam emerges in my ethnography as a quality that ought to be nurtured in all relationships. *Thuenlam* extends into both human and non-human relationships; in the cosmological realm it is necessary for the relationships with the *lha*, in order to avoid misfortune. *Thuenlam* is not an unchanging cultural essence but is embedded in time and space and, while some *thuenlam* practices are disappearing, new ones are emerging. These days many Shingkhari have left to work and study abroad, but they keep *thuenlam* with their families and the *kyelha* from their village. They make sure to participate in the annual ritual *lochoed* (ལོ་མཚན་), a household ritual where connections within the village community, with the deities and between family members, are renewed. If one cannot be present, contributing financially is another option to keep the connection.

Thuenlam is largely mediated through hospitality where ideas of karma, generosity and compassion are expressed through mind, body and speech in the form of etiquette and acts of hospitality. However, everyday manners, *beyzhag*, as opposed to the highly formalized court etiquette *driglam namzhag*, offer room for testing boundaries and negotiating one’s social and individual status quo, depending on people’s personalities and characters. This might play out within seating arrangements that are being challenged or by gossip. The rural-urban divide is palpable when it comes to changes concerning etiquette. Only in the past two decades many young Bhutanese have been brought up in Thimphu or abroad which contributes to changes of etiquette and mannerism. Children are busy with tablets and smart phones and do not ‘hide’ in the room when guests show up.

Previously establishing *thuenlam* with new hosts within the *neypo*-system could be

more difficult for those who were poor. To show up ‘empty handed’ made it difficult to establish a durable connection and for the hosts there was not much to gain in hosting *grenkhan*. This also led to sometimes humiliating situations, especially when they had to go from door to door, asking for food, a practice they referred to as ‘*gren*’. Nowadays the Bumthap live self-sufficiently and generate income from cash crops and jobs, and many receive financial support from family members who work in the capital or abroad.

The increasingly income-based economy has led to a monetarization of certain traditional practices which were previously part of a system of mutual assistance, or *lemi* (ལམ་ལེེ). Some hospitality services that were reciprocated in kind previously, nowadays have to be paid in cash, for example in the tourism domain. As Lhendup explains this has led to a coexistence of old and new *thuenlam* practices:

The most unique and important characteristic of Bhutanese hospitality is that in most cases it is shown to express genuine concern for guests in need of assistance, as an expression of compassion and concern for another human being. You must have noticed in the villages that people are more hospitable and considerate to pilgrims who are poor and far away from home. However, nowadays people have both, business and money based hospitality as well as the reciprocating hospitality from the past like practised by the Urap and Kurtoep.

Within not even a decade the outmigration of young Bhutanese for studies and economic reasons has much increased. Internet, mobile phones and social media have been picked up very fast by young and old generations alike and shape new ways and modes of keeping *thuenlam*. Like many other communities, the Shingharpa have formed various online *tshogpa* and chat groups to keep connected to their families in the village and to the wider community. In fact, social media are being used for a

variety of *thuenlam* fostering, from welfare groups that help community members during death and sickness to planning committees for annual events and rituals. Furthermore WeChat is popular for religious groups in order to receive teachings that would otherwise be hard to obtain and to appease local deities at home through family members (Rinzin 2018).

Thuenlam practices and ‘ways of doing things’ relating to hospitality and etiquette may change, however, the importance of *thuenlam* as a tacit and explicit cultural idea of relating/connecting to others in a certain way to establish mutuality and trust, remains an important prerequisite for all sorts of tangible and intangible exchanges in Bhutanese society.

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Endnotes

1. I use pseudonyms for reasons of anonymity.
2. After centuries of theocracy, 1907 marked the beginning of the monarchy with the Wangchuck dynasty consolidating as the Royal lineage. In March 2008, the first democratic elections were held and Bhutan transformed to a democratic constitutional monarchy. Currently, the head of state is the fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, who took over the throne from his father Jigme Singye Wangchuck on December 9th 2006, and was publicly enthroned on November 1st 2008. For statistics see: www.nsb.gov.bt
3. Henceforth I will mark terms in Bumthangkha with (Bt.). Bumthangkha is not a written language and I use phonetic transliterations.
4. My participants use Kurtoe synonymously for Lhuentse although it refers to one *gewog* (ཞེད་ལོག་), administrative block in Lhuentse.
5. Hierarchy and status inform the manner of hospitality events as well as the gifts offered. One's status in the hierarchy was traditionally defined by social class, wealth, and seniority. Since the abolishment of the class system by the third king in 1958, the level of education or one's rank/position in the civil service have somewhat replaced social class (Phuntsho 2013).
6. My participants used *beyzhag* when referring to everyday embodied mannerism or behaviour. They did not use the term *chazha* (བཅའ་གཞག) which they consider to be a synonym of *beyzhag*. However, the phrase *beyzhag chazha* indicates customary and normative expectations, albeit not codified like *driglam namzhag*.
7. For more details on the role of *sheytho* in Bhutanese society, see Pedey (2023).
8. While it is acceptable for superiors to openly scold subordinates, the reverse still is rather unimaginable. This reflects the lingering of traditional configurations of hierarchy and power relations and can be difficult for youth, who have to reconcile modern expectations, being critical thinking adults, with expectations by superiors and elders to be humble, well behaved and not express criticism too openly.
9. The point of reference is always the highest-ranking person present.
10. Not wanting to accept what seems a large gift could also be interpreted as a refusal to engage in a relationship where one would be obliged to reciprocate with a gift of equal or higher value. Such obligation can become a burden.

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