

## Anthropology in Practice – The Thuenlam Approach to Homestay tourism in Bhutan

Author	Abstract
<p>Dr. Ulrike Čokl, Research Associate, University College London</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p>Bhutan, <i>thuenlam</i>, hospitality, homestay, tourism</p>	<p>In this presentation, I will show how my ethnographic dissertation research informed the concept development for Bhutan Homestay, a tour operator in Bhutan that specializes on farm/homestay tourism. The main argument is that in order to integrate the new category of the paying guest into existing guest/host relationships, for the purpose of farm/homestay development, it is important to look into everyday Bhutanese hosting traditions and practices (past and present), and their relevance for Bhutanese relationship fostering. In anthropology this is referred to as Local Knowledge (LK) or Indigenous Knowledge (IK). It advocates for a shift from merely focusing on the commoditization of selected cultural practices for tourism purposes, to an approach that looks at the actual social relationships of the people who produce such practices. The method I developed for this research (which took place from 2012 to 2015) was a ‘concurrent approach’ which combined traditional ethnographic data collection with putting emerging ideas into practice whilst in the field. I termed the resulting approach to farm/homestay tourism development the ‘<i>thuenlam (mthun lam)</i>’-approach’.</p> <p>Tourism is a highly mediated phenomenon in Bhutan and this holistic approach puts the responsibility and decision making power into the hands of the local</p>

	people e.g. tour operators, tour guides, local guides, and farm/homeowners, etc. This approach also focusses on the individual connections most Bhutanese still have to family members across the country, rather than treating entire village communities as projects, neglecting personalized variations that exist in any given community of hosts.
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## 1) Introduction

The idea for *Bhutan Homestay* was conceived during my theoretical year at University College London (UCL) in the U.K. In conversations with my Bhutanese friends, they agreed that many tourists were more than willing to spend a night or two ‘hanging out’ in a village home that had not been meddled with by the tourism industry in terms of the home set up. Rather than encountering choreographed cultural performances, many guests are looking for ‘authenticity’ in their encounters. At the same time, how can a strategy be identified that benefits the hosts as much as the guests in terms of tangible and intangible exchange, integrated in existing patterns of hosting practices?

## 2) Method

The main method for my doctoral research was ethnographic fieldwork in the form of participant observation and immersion in my participants’ communities combined with multi-sited ethnography and semi-structured interviewing in different field sites.

Additionally, *Bhutan Homestay*, a Bhutan based registered tour operator, offered me the opportunity to put my emerging data into practice and to develop an approach to farm/homestay tourism for international guests.

I named my mix of methods a ‘concurrent approach’, ultimately leading to the *thuenlam mthun lam*)-approach to homestay tourism development.

## 3) Why Homestay Tourism?

In 2005, during my undergraduate field research, I was based in Shingkar village in Bumthang at approx. 3500m above sea level. For my ethnographic research I stayed in farmhouses and lived with the villagers exploring their daily lives with all their joys and struggles.

Rarely, I met the ‘lone’ tourists who found their way up to this high altitude place, straying from their pre-designed and approved itinerary. They were most

frequently encountered during the *tshechu* (*tshe bcu*), an annual religious festival with mask dances. Finding me up there, they were very interested in my research and mostly the fact that I was staying with a local family. In some cases I took them to the house and offered tea. They were fascinated and really wanted to spend a few overnights in farmhouses as well.

However, as mentioned above, they were traveling on pre-planned, cookie cutter itineraries and moving from guesthouse to guesthouse. They did not experience what Bhutanese hospitality and everyday life is all about. While this is fine with some guests, there are others who long for more immersion and the chance to interact and meet Bhutanese on a less 'regulated' basis as is often the case in official tourist settings.

I decided that for my PhD research I will investigate how Bhutanese villagers manage social relationships through the lens of traditional hospitality and hosting practices. Ultimately my aim was to understand how I could fit the tourist into existing guest/host relationships in village homes. I felt this was important for bringing the Bhutanese communities into the larger tourism fold.

#### **4) Research Premise and Topics**

At the beginning of my PhD research in 2012 I noticed the lack of qualitative research data on the diversity and expectations of tourists who visit Bhutan. Tourists are not a homogenous group of people and have diverse expectations irrespective of their wealth. Yes, some tourists only like 5-star accommodations but my experience in tourism shows that many want a night or two in a homestay, some even want all nights there and others want a balanced mix of hotels of various standards and homestays.

I also observed that within the unique Bhutanese tourism strategy at the time<sup>1</sup>, the shaping of the guest experience is largely in the hands of local stakeholders. They are the ones who have to first communicate with the clients and they need to grasp and understand the interests of potential guests to develop meaningful itineraries. However, I also could not find in-depth ethnographic data on everyday hospitality practices in Bhutan. In fact I was rather astonished about the lack of any deeper qualitative analysis of the tourist perspective, let alone the local one.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of my doctoral research the MDPR (Minimum Daily Package Rate) was still operating in the tourism industry. The MDPR provided the ideal framework for a sensitive, sustainable and integrated farm/homestay tourism approach. Within the new system where the MDPR has been removed and tourists can come to Bhutan by simply paying the mandatory SDF (Sustainable Development Fee) to the government without having to come through a tour operator, rural hosts are more vulnerable to price pushing and commercialization. It seems that within the current system the focus has shifted to competition and 'itinerary shopping' for the cheapest rate. Rather than treating a homestay experience as a privilege where families open their homes to foreign guests, homestays seem to be considered 'cheap accommodations'. This issue certainly needs more research in the future.

Hence, my primary interest for my own research became the view from everyday village lives.

When I looked at local hospitality traditions, my main context became the *neypo* (*gnas po*/host) system between Bumthang and Lhuentse. I followed old barter routes, for example from Shingkhar to Zhongmay, together with some local friends who would narrate their experiences from the past (see also Čokl 2024).

My findings highlight the importance of maintaining *thuenlam*, harmonious relations, through means of hospitable exchange, embedded in worldviews informed by, although not exclusively, Buddhist concepts such as generosity, compassion and *karma* as understood by ordinary Bhutanese in everyday life and expressed through everyday etiquette *beyzhag* (*'bad gzhang*) as opposed to the highly formalized behavioural norms of the *driglam namzhag* (*sgrig lam rnam gzhang*), Bhutan's code of etiquette.

In anthropology we call this Local Knowledge (LK). It can be tangible or intangible and in my opinion should be the main starting point when looking at how to introduce the tourists to local homes.

For this conference proceeding, I want to provide an overview of the most important key elements of my research and their relevance for homestay tourism. A deeper involvement with the topic can be found in my doctoral thesis (Čokl 2019).

## **5) Defining Local Knowledge**

Sillitoe (2006) defines local knowledge (LK) or indigenous knowledge (IK) as follows:

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is any understanding rooted in local culture. It includes all knowledge held more or less collectively by a population that informs interpretation of things. It varies between regions. It comes from a range of sources, is a dynamic mix of past "tradition" and present invention with a view to the future. (Sillitoe 2006: 1)

Sillitoe (2006) furthermore states that the distribution of Indigenous Knowledge is uneven and not one person or group knows all. There may also be some clustering of certain knowledge within populations for example by gender, age, specialist status, etc.

## 6) What is Hospitality

When asked about hospitality in Bhutan, one of my Bhutanese participants told me:

“Hospitality has always played an important role in our society and gatherings such as promotions, rituals and personal visits have been vital for community dynamism and vitality. In such gatherings new relationships are formed, old ones are renewed, and talented people are recognized and regarded in the community.”

This reminded me of Tom Selwyn's (2005) 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 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.

In her ethnography on Sherpa society Sherry Ortner (1978) conceptualizes hospitality as the “central ritual of secular social relations”. She attributes a central role to etiquette:

“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).

Ortner states that in Sherpa society “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, and discharging (and regenerating) mutual obligations” (Ortner 1978: 63).

Similarly in Bhutan, hosting events also set the stage for all sorts of transactions and exchange. My participants furthermore told me that receiving guests and treating them well with good intentions and the best one has to offer within one's means, is believed to generate merit and improve one's *karma*. It also helps establish good connections, *thuen lam* (*mthun lam*).

Within the tourism domain, Bhutanese hospitality becomes what Erve Chambers calls a ‘highly mediated phenomenon’. Thus, focusing only on the guest-host relationship is not enough. Other stakeholders who shape the relationships would be for example tour agents and tour guides as well as tourism policy makers. (Chambers 1997; 2010).

## 7) The *Neypo (gnas po)* System between Bumthang and Lhuentse

Previously there existed a vast network of host-guest relationships across Bhutan and across generations, - the *neypo (gnas po)* system. In the absence of guesthouses and markets, householders of adjacent valleys and differing ecological zones/altitudes kept links with each other for a variety of reasons: cattle migration, barter, gleanings, begging for food, religious pilgrimage and so forth. The term *neypo (gnas po)* can refer to human or non-human hosts. Both are included in my conceptualizing of the *neypo (gnas po)* system. In recent decades the *neypo* system has largely been abandoned due to infrastructure and economic development. However, as a hosting framework it still offers insights into how relationships were managed, embedded in reciprocal modes of exchange.

## 8) *Thuenam (mthun lam)* and Hospitality

When I inquired about the meaning of *thuenlam (mthun lam)*, one of my participants told me:

“We have a saying ‘there must be good relations even between China and Tibet’. It means that all have to maintain the *thuenlam (mthun lam)* spirit between all levels, standards, castes and even between neighbors and spirits. Experiencing peace and happiness in the country or in the community solely depends on how strong relationships are maintained in society. *Thuenlam (mthun lam)* is the source of harmonious living and social cohesion.”

To my participants *thuenlam (mthun lam)* means ‘friendship’ and (good) ‘connection’. They said that *thuenlam (mthun lam)* with others is an important precondition to enable cooperation and mutual assistance. Once *thuenlam (mthun lam)* is established, loyalty and trust follow.

The important key characteristics of *thuenlam (mthun lam)* as an idea and ideal include: it has a positive connotation in theory, there exist different types of *thuenlam (mthun lam)* and there are ways of establishing and managing *thuenlam (mthun lam)* practice embedded in moral codes expressed through precepts, customs and etiquette.

The mediating framework for *thuenlam* practice is largely that of hospitality. It is during hospitality settings where connections are renewed, negotiated and managed.

## 9) *The importance of gifts for hospitality*

Within everyday hospitality gifts play an important role for *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) practice.

For Marcel Mauss (2002, 1950), gift-exchange is the basis for the formation of social relations and a gift is not free but embedded in a mode of reciprocity: the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate.

Similarly, I observed in Bhutan that gift exchange within the hospitality context establishes and maintains *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) with others. There are different types of gifts and I am only mentioning a few that I think are relevant for the hospitality setting:

<b>Dzongkha Romanised</b>	<b>Bumthangkha</b>	<b>Tsuyig</b>	<b>Wylie</b>	<b>English</b>
Chom	chosma (Shingkhar) chodma(Choekhor) choenma (Tang)	ཁྱེས་མཁའ་	khyosm	General gift one brings upon arrival
Djangshey		ཕྱག་མཇལ་	phyag mjal	Upward gift (from lower status to higher status)
Soera		གསོལ་རས་	gsol ras	Parting gift from higher status to lower status, e.g. given by <b>guest to host</b> . Downward gift ('tip')
Shulzhag		བཤུལ་ བཞག་།	bshul bzhag	Parting gift between equals, given by guest to host at departure (something that you leave behind), can also be inheritance
Lamju		ལམ་འཇུག་།	lam 'jug	Farewell gift, the gift given by host to guest at departure

Furthermore, I consider the following cultural mode of reciprocity interesting for the hospitality context:

*Kadrin Samni* (bka. Drin bsam ni) refers to the feeling of gratefulness to someone, both in mind and expressed in action after a received help/favour.

Within the hospitality setting for instance, showing gratitude would include giving a **soera** (gift/tip) for received hospitality.

10) **Everyday Etiquette: *Beyzhag* ('bad gzhag)**

11) To successfully foster *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) during hospitable events requires certain social skills and good manners, *beyzhag* ('bad gzhag). *Beyzhag* ('bad gzhag) refers to everyday etiquette and behaviour. *Beyzhag* ('bad gzhag) is transmitted from generation to generation and embodied through practice within the family and the wider community.

One of my participants explained to me where she learned how to host guests:

"Typical Bhutanese hospitality and etiquette 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."

12) **The *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) -approach**

The ultimate question I asked myself was how the information on Local Knowledge surrounding hosting and hospitality that I had gathered can be a starting point for integrating the paying guest into existing guest/host relationship practices in Bhutan. This is still work in progress and gets refined as we go. Furthermore, there is plenty of room for more detailed research that would have gone beyond the scope of my doctoral research.

I developed my rudimentary *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) -approach by considering several aspects that emerged during my fieldwork:

**1. There existed a cross-valley network of guest/host relationships, the *neypo* (*gnas po*) network, including the footpaths that connected the households in different places.**

Many Bhutanese tour operators and tour guides still have connections to their ancestral villages and beyond. The *neypo* (*gnas po*) system can be used as a template to explore such connections for a new purpose: farm stay tourism and what I refer to as 'village hopping' (hiking from one village to the next instead of driving along the highway).

For Bhutan Homestay, I started with my own *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) with friends in Bumthang, Lhuentse and later Trashigang and other districts. Our relationship has become like family now. If guests from Bhutan Homestay show up, the hosts



associate them with me and this guarantees good treatment because it is our *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) that is at stake.

In principle, this approach shall also avoid the overrunning of one homestay because each tour company should nurture their own connections and take responsibility for different hosts in different regions of the country based on their *thuenlam* (*mthun lam*) with them. This should also avoid commercialization and abuse because it is not merely a transactional relationship but one of mutual trust, accountability and loyalty.

**2. There exists a rich tradition of hosting and everyday etiquette (*'bad gzhag*) with local variations.**

In terms of etiquette our Bhutanese hosts are experts. They know how to host a variety of guests of different status and the local etiquette prepares them well for tourists. They hosted me during my field research and I would wish for any tourist to experience the same care and hospitality that I enjoyed on my research trips. Within the Bhutan Homestay project we make sure to brief our hosts on possible food restrictions and needs of the guests and furthermore advise in matters of hygiene and cleanliness but other than that we leave as much to happenstance as possible. Although it might seem that tourism in Bhutan is a 'choreographed adventure' to some degree, there is always space for personalized experiences if one leaves the beaten track behind.

The main focus should be put on the tour agents being able to brief the guests on general local traditions regarding visiting someone's home. It is largely the Bhutanese stakeholders themselves who shape the guest/host encounter which puts a substantial power into their hands. Guides are crucial in this regard as they have to be able to navigate and interpret the interaction between guests and hosts who often do not understand or speak English.

**3. There are ritualized stages of hospitality each with their own cultural practice: the welcome phase, the phase of managing the guests and the farewell phase.**

These stages offer plenty of prerequisites to study on how to include the tourist. They function based on principles of hierarchy, status and seniority and that helped me to explain to my village friends where to locate the tourists.

Bhutan Homestay tries not to interfere with the local ways of hosting and we don't manage the behavior of our hosts as the charm lies in diversity. Again, the guides will have to be able to mediate between guests and hosts while there.

**4. There are cultural modes of reciprocity, for example *kadrin samni* (bka. drin bsam ni), facilitating gift exchange to manage *thuenlam* (mthun lam).**

The *chom* (*khyosm*), *soera* (*gsol ras*) and *lamju* (*lam jug*) are especially interesting for integrating tourists. The *chom* (*khyosm*) can break the ice upon arrival and the tradition to give *soera* (*gsol ras*) offers room for payment without making it seem a purely transactional affair.

The gift category *soera* (*gsol ras*), the ‘downward gift’ or ‘tip’) offers interesting room for monetary remuneration after a visit. After all we will not deny that tourism is about business and hosts will get remunerated for providing hospitality to the guests. However, why not look at traditional forms of exchange and transactions to make this more organic by involving the stakeholders and their relationship networks across the kingdom? This could increase accountability of the concerned parties.

### **13) Conclusion**

Within the Bhutan Homestay programme, I have been organizing homestay visits since the year 2005. I realized that tourism in Bhutan is a ‘highly mediated phenomenon’ (Chambers 2010) where the main focus lies on tour operators and tour guides themselves and on how they mediate and shape the tourist experience in farm/homestays. This requires a deep and respectful understanding of local cultural practices and the ability to interpret and explain them to guests. This approach is more time consuming upfront for tour agents but it supports the proclaimed values of Bhutan’s strategy of GNH: to nurture socio-cultural sustainability and to foster sustainable, competitive and inclusive growth.

Finally, while more research on the guest perspective has to be conducted, there is also the view from the village, the host perspective that needs further investigation. Whilst the occasional income from tourists helps the host families, the pleasures and importance of hosting in Bhutanese society in general should not be underestimated.

I want to conclude with the following feedback from one of our village hosts:

“As a host I get to experience others’ cultures and many new ideas. I actually really enjoy dealing with guests from different countries, and enjoy showing and sharing our culture with them. Before, it has been a bit difficult to manage my living but after setting up the homestay it helped me a lot. We sometimes receive guests who teach us so many new things that help us and our youth also. So, I would like to say if you are lonely or just enjoy having people around, being a homestay host is a great option!”

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