

Lochoed: Hospitality and Ritual in Bhutan

Author	Abstract
<p>Dr. Ulrike Cokl, Visiting Professor, Norbulung Rigter College</p> <p>Keywords: <i>lochoed, thuenlam, neypo, hospitality, nangi aum</i></p>	<p>During my many years in Bhutan, I participated and observed numerous hospitable events and realized the importance of exchanging food, drinks, gifts, and services for relationship fostering. Hospitality with all its tangible and intangible features seems to permeate every aspect of social life. Hence for my doctoral research (2012-2015), I decided to investigate the role of hospitality and hosting for creating, managing and negotiating <i>thuenlam</i> (mthun lam, harmonious relations) in Bhutanese rural communities (Čokl 2019)¹. My regional context comprised the seasonal migrations between the two valleys of Bumthang county and Lhuentse county in Central/East Bhutan. I termed this comprehensive system of exchange and hosting that existed before the establishment of road networks the <i>neypo</i> (gnas po, host) system. One annual event in particular was repeatedly mentioned by my participants in the course of describing the role of hospitality for community cohesion and social relationship fostering: <i>lochoed</i> (lo mchod, annual ritual). Hence, in this article I want to present a brief ethnographic account of <i>lochoed</i> as celebrated in my friend's family household in Bumthang from the perspective of my participants and based on my own observations on the mediating role of hospitality for <i>thuenlam</i> with fellow humans, the society at large and with the local (protector) deities.</p>

¹ A more in-depth treatment of the topics presented here can be found in my PhD thesis (Čokl 2019) and a recently published article (Čokl 2023).

Defining Hospitality?

Selwyn (2000) provides a good starting point for a general definition of the basic function of hospitality as a mediating framework to establish or to promote an already established relationship through acts of hospitality within moral frameworks. He states that acts of hospitality refer to exchanges of goods and services (material and symbolic) between those who give hospitality (hosts) and those who receive it (guests). I add to this that 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).

Indeed, in Bhutanese society, hospitality is an important framework for managing social relationships of all sorts. It is associated with commensality but also with various types of exchange and ideas surrounding reciprocity as well as status and hierarchy expressed through local etiquette. Most importantly, hospitality events offer opportunities for *thuenlam* with others.

Thuenlam is important in a material and affective sense, out of necessity, such as survival, but also in the striving for harmony based on affectionate relationships with fellow humans and local deities. Gift-exchange, the basis for the formation of social relations according to Mauss (2002), is an important feature of hospitality in Bhutan and widely practiced². In short, hospitality continues to provide the basic condition for commensality and the exchange of gifts and services in various settings. Furthermore, in the cosmological world view of many Bhutanese, similar to what Ortner (1978) described for the Sherpa, hospitality not only mediates between the *mi* (mi, humans) but furthermore extends to the *lha* (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)

Ortner conceptualizes hospitality as a political arena where the host creates the necessary basic structure for certain interactions between guests, which have largely to do with status. Status interaction within hospitality always begins with the seating process (‘seating and joking’) which reflects the lack of formal political institutions in Sherpa society. Giving and receiving hospitality are central acts of sociality in Sherpa culture and the hospitality context is important for reproducing communal solidarity and identity (Ortner 1978).

² For reasons of scope I will not elaborate on this aspect of hospitality here but refer to my previous work (Cokl 2019, 2023)

Similarly, my observation in Bhutan³ reveals that status played and still plays an important role in Bhutanese hospitality as is reflected in its entire practice. In the hierarchical configurations of a society where survival depended on good community relations and mutual assistance it was important to maintain good relations, *thuenlam*, with a variety of people of different backgrounds and status in the village and beyond.

My Bumthap friend Dendup⁴, a middle aged ex-civil servant turned business man, nicely summed up the importance of hospitality for *thuenlam*, the practice where relations are established, fostered and negotiated:

Hospitality has always played an important role in our society and the gatherings such as promotions, rituals, personal visits and so forth, 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.

To conclude, hospitality mediates the social relationships among human beings and with the local deities with whom *thuenlam* has to be kept. This shall guarantee the well-being and fortune of households and the community and society at large. In the following I will provide a short ethnographic account into how this unfolds within the *lochoed* of my friend's household in Ura village.

Hospitality, *lochoed* and *thuenlam*

Lochoed is performed during the first harvest in order to appease the local deities. But it is not only to make the deities happy; it is also a unique annual programme for the villagers. To make the *lochoed* more ceremonial, they [the householders who perform *lochoed*] call all the villagers together, to nurture *thuenlam* among the families and the neighbours.

My friend Tshering, an elderly guest house owner in Bumthang, captures the important role *lochoed* as a means to promote *thuenlam* and consequently to keep the 'cosmic balance', as my participants and I coined it during casual conversations, ensuring the well-being, health and fortune of the entire *gung* (*gung*, household), *za-tsang* (*bza'* *tsang*, family), and *midhey* (*mi sde*), the community and society at large.

Lochoed, sometimes also referred to as *choesung* (*chos srung*) offers a rich source to study the various aspects of *thuenlam* practice mediated through the hospitality framework. It deals with the necessity of keeping *thuenlam* with local deities and with fellow humans alike, through acts of hospitality, such as gift offerings, sharing food and drink and other blessed substances, embedded in socio-cultural ideas about hierarchy and status, seniority and cooperation. It also enacts beliefs of 'economies of fortune' or 'cosmoeconomies' (Da Col 2012)

³ For my doctoral research I spent four years in Bhutan applying a mixed method of multi-sited ethnography and participant observation whilst implementing emerging ideas in a homestay development project. I developed the '*thuenlam*-approach' for a homestay tourism at Bhutan Homestay, a small tour operator in Bhutan (www.bhutanhomestay.com).

⁴ For reasons of anonymity, I use pseudonyms. Therefore the names of my interviewees and participants have been altered for the purpose of this paper.

where the wellbeing and health of people can be affected by supernatural forces⁵. *Lochoed* furthermore offers many opportunities to study the materialities involved in hospitality events including (blessed) food, drink and other transformed substances as well as mundane and religious paraphernalia. For the Bumthap, one important reason to trek to Lhuentse in the past was to obtain the special food items that were required to make *lochoed* and *losar* (lo gsar, New Year) special events. This includes chili and rice, yeast and fruits and other items such as high Alpine incense, needed for the fumigations.

My friend Tshering explained to me that the *lochoed* season usually begins after harvest, in the winter months, when people have time for rituals and pilgrimage. Nowadays dates have to be coordinated with family members who live far away as their presence during the ritual is considered obligatory. The exact day will be fixed after consultation with an astrologer. In the following Tshering provides some insights into how the local deities are invited:

We usually start *lochoed* after the first harvest, in the 10th month of the year, an auspicious time because it is also the birthdate of *Guru Rinpoche* and thus the time we celebrate our *tshechu* [tshes bcu]. After *tshechu* we usually start our *lochoed*. During *lochoed* we call all the *lha* in the village and on the mountains, and throughout the country, and they have their own particular place on the altar in form of *torma* (gtor ma). We do not invite the lower unwanted spirits, we don't bother about those. We only invite those with whom we have kept good relations for generations. We have a list of deities for each household, so that you cannot miss one. For each deity we have a description, three to four pages of description of that particular deity [in the *pecha*, the scriptures]. This has been there since generations.

Each household performs the annual *lochoed* with the help of the (local) *lama* (bla ma), *gelong* (dge slong, monks), and *gomchen* (sgom chen, lay ritual practitioners). In the following I will describe in a narrative ethnographic style how, through the hospitality framework, the *thuenlam* practice unfolds in the *choesham* (altar room), where the *lha* are hosted and simultaneously in the *thabtshang* (kitchen), where the villagers are hosted.

Lochoed and Thuenlam

I often hear the invitation “please come for my annual ritual!” from Bhutanese friends and villagers, and immediately images come to mind of buckets full of *ara* (a rag, local moonshine), *changkoe* (chang bskol, fermented alcohol), rice, different types of curries, butter milk, butter tea, and sweet tea making rounds among the guests sitting on the floor in Bhutanese houses, the room filled with laughter, banter and a busy atmosphere.

During *lochoed* the kitchen and altar-room become buzzing places filled with the mixed odors of incense, butter lamps and a variety of food. The house reverberates with the captivating sounds of religious musical instruments such as the *dungchen* (dung chen, long horns) and the *gyaling* (rgya gling, oboes). Meanwhile in the kitchen, the *nangi aum* (nang gi am, lady of the house) and

⁵ For the many aspects of *thuenlam* practice also enacted during *lochoed*, see my PhD thesis (Čokl 2019)

some helpful neighbors laugh, banter and chat while tirelessly preparing food for the stream of guests arriving for lunch. The kitchen is the place in the household where the family and guests gather. In winter it is also the warmest room because the fire in the wood-fired stove will be kept going continuously. There is always a kettle of hot water ready to prepare tea, in case unexpected guests arrive. Meanwhile the scene is underlined by the sound of prayer recitations in the nearby *choesham*. *Lochoed* embodies many socio-cultural aspects: gift offerings and reciprocity, politeness and etiquette, commensality and sociality, traditional food and drink, and community cohesion and cooperation.

The following account is the result of numerous interviews and my own observations of numerous *lochoed* over the past 24 years. Here, I will describe *lochoed* predominantly based on my experiences in my friend's household in Ura.

In our frequent conversations, *lopon* Tashi, who used to be a monk in his youth, outlined twelve steps⁶ that he considered characteristic features of the ritual performed during *lochoed* in the *choesham*. He mentioned that it seems similar to a hosting sequence in the mundane setting. Hence, as an analytical tool, I developed three generic classifications with their particular twelve sub-steps⁷. The term guest in the following refers to the *lha* (in the *choesham*) as well as to the villagers who are invited to attend the *lochoed*:

- 1) *Donglen* (gdong len), reception: This phase includes preparing for the guests and inviting and welcoming them; seating the guests;
- 2) *Goemgi Shongshag* (mgyonm gyi skyong bzhas) 'managing the guest': This phase includes the hosting and entertaining of guests and offering to them.
- 3) *Dralmoen* (bral smon), farewell: This phase includes sending away the guests and bidding them farewell.

Before describing *lochoed* in my friend's house, I will shortly outline the entire ritual sequence of *lochoed* as performed in the *choesham*, based on the information of *lopon* Tashi.

Ritual Structure in the *Choesham*

Donglen: Preparing/inviting/seating the guests

Step 1) *lhabsang* (*lha bsangs*): In this step, the entire household will first be purified ('cleansed') by burning incense. This step differs slightly in the *kargyu* (*bka' brgyud*) rituals where *thruesol* (*khrus gsol*), a ritual ablution, is added – the sprinkling of holy water onto the reflection of the altar in a mirror.

Step 2) *ngoentoed* (*mngon bstod*): Now, the local deities, *lha*, are ritually informed about the occasion and the purpose for their invitation to this event.

⁶ These twelve steps, albeit confirmed by other participants, may vary in different settings and households.

⁷ I am aware of this somewhat artificial distinction which I use for a purely analytical purpose. In practice there will be a variety of terms depending on regional vernacular and peculiarities.

Step 3) chendren (spyan 'dren): The religious specialists hierarchically invite the *lha* by invoking them one by one, according to their ranks in a hierarchy of higher and lower deities. During this step the household members and the guests will enter the *choesham* and prostrate. On the altar, the deities are represented in form of *torma*, little dough and butter sculptures for ritual purpose.

Step 4) jinbeb (byin bebs): The monks ritually invite the deities to take a seat according to their ranks.

Goemgi Shongshag: offering/entertaining the guests

Step 5) choepa (mchod pa): The deities are being praised with offerings that will please them; gifts will be any items such as food, flowers, and incense. The various offerings are displayed on the altar.

Step 6) toepa (bstod pa): The deities are being praised with words to please them.

Step 7) kangwa (bskang ba): The deities are being praised and blessed further with words.

Step 8) tsog (tsogs): The blessed food items which have been arranged on and around the altar are offered first to the deities, then to the human guests.

Step 9) lhagma (slhag ma): The leftover blessed food, which had been previously put aside by the monks, is now distributed to the hungry ghosts and low-level spirits who have not been part of the ritual itself but are included in the all-encompassing food distribution.

Dralmoen phase: sending away the guests, bidding farewell

Step 10) torshag (gtor gshags): Thanks and gratitude is being offered to the deities and they are ritually bid farewell, sent away.

Step 11) ngodup langwa (dngos grub blang ba): Now the household members will receive their blessings in the *choesham*.

Step 12) tashi moenlam (bkra shis smon lam): This is the step for auspicious prayers – the blessings will be shared with household members and all sentient beings.

Additional step: yangku (gyang khug): After completion of the twelve steps, some households, but not all, conclude with a *yangku* ritual that aims at containing the 'living essence of prosperity' (Choden 2008) and wealth in the household. Expensive items (e.g. money and textiles), and foodstuff, symbolizing wealth, will be collected and offered at the altar. Money will be piled up in form of a tree. After the *yangku* ritual is completed all the doors in the house will be closed to ensure that wealth and prosperity will not escape. At this point, nobody shall take anything out of the house for a while, so as to contain the essence of fortune and prosperity.

Lochoed: Thuenlam with the Lha and Midhey

Tshering and most of my participants kept emphasizing the importance of *lochoed* for community cohesion:

It is a social event. So, in a rich family's *lochoed*, we call all the households, all the villagers and neighbours to come. But in other cases, if the *lochoed* is conducted by a poor [ordinary] neighbour, they invite one person from each

household. So *lochoed* is to nurture relationships among the families and also make the local deities happy.

Lochoed is important for both, keeping good relations with the supernatural and the mundane spheres. Hence, *lochoed* is an annual household ritual where family members renew their *thuenlam*, with the local birth deities, *kyelha* (skyes lha), and with the community, *midhey*. Based on the idea that the natural environment is not empty but inhabited by a range of numinous beings (Hirsch 1995; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995), some well-meaning and some vicious, the place of birth links a person to specific regional deities. Household and community rituals create a sense of belonging and consolidate community membership. The relationship with the local deities, especially the *kyelha*, has to be kept in balance in order to avoid negative consequences such as sickness and misfortune.

My elderly village friend Sangay mentioned another interesting aspect: *Lochoed* offers the opportunity to express *jinpa* (sbyin pa, generosity):

Sangay: It is very important that we perform *lochoed* once a year. In order to stay healthy and happy we have to offer to the local deities and another reason is that I have to give to others and to poor people. We call it *jinpa* [sbyin pa] sharing with everyone. *Jinpa* during *lochoed* means sharing with others, giving to others, so I will call all the villagers and give *ara*, tea, special rice and food which we do not get every day, and I have to give meat. If we do good to others, naturally it will be good for us.

Author: So *lochoed* is not only to keep the relations with the deities but also with the humans, so it applies to both?

Sangay: Yes, if we perform rituals then the deities will guide us, help us and even the people will be cooperative with us and will be frank [friendly] in the village.

During *lochoed*, householders will provide the best they can within the limits of their resources. This display of *jinpa* shall create happiness for all involved and generates merit for the hosts.

Donglen

Long before the time of *lochoed* approaches, the *nangi aum* will start fermenting *changkoe* and distilling *ara*. She will consult an astrologer to find an auspicious date to perform *lochoed*, and she will look for monks and gomchen, and request the village lama to perform the ritual. Ideally, I was told, there should be a minimum of eight monks to use the following religious instruments: conch shell, a pair of oboes and long horns, cymbals and the big round drums, beaten with curved drumsticks. In practice, however, pragmatism often sets the tone, and the number of monks might vary. Previously, payment to the *gomchen* and lama was in kind but these days a certain amount of cash is expected. Food, and lodging if necessary, will be provided during the course of the ritual.

Previously, I was told, preparations for *lochoed* used to span over an entire year, including gathering the necessary food items on barter trips to adjacent valleys. Within the yearly cattle and barter migrations to lower grazing grounds, the *Bumthap* would obtain rice and chili which they did not cultivate themselves. Nowadays such essentials can be bought in the shops and often will be sent by relatives who live in Thimphu.

The days before *lochoed* are busy with purifying and cleaning the house, and on the day of the ritual itself the chores may start as early as 4-4:30am. Soon, neighbors from the village will arrive to help the *nangi aum*, and bring with them milk, butter and cheese as a contribution to the ritual, an expression of *thuenlam*. The family will reciprocate such neighborly help during their fellow villagers' *lochoed*. Some chores will already have been completed the previous days and weeks, for example preparing alcohol and making butter lamps and *torma*. *Tsog* will be prepared and arranged on the altar, in my friend's house made of flour, sugar, oil and water, rolled into biscuits of elaborate shapes and then fried in plenty of oil.

The *nangi aum* has to offer the best food she has to her guests and supplies will be carefully sourced. Some dishes will have been prepared in advance to be ready on the day of the ritual. Items comprise copious meat, such as dried pork, *sikam* (bsil skam); or *pa*, large chunks of any meat, cooked with radish, *loma* and chili; *juma* (rgyu ma), homemade sausages with plenty of *thingay* (thing nge), Sichuan pepper; and dried beef hide, *ko* (kow), soaked and later fried with spices and chili. Vegetables are washed, cut and prepared with chili and cheese; some will also be used for soups. Cheese will be fried with butter, and butter tea will be prepared. Different types of alcohol are ready for receiving the guests. *Singchang* (sring chang) and *changkhoe* for example are two types of fermented alcohol made from wheat, rice and millet. Especially *changkhoe* made from millet is considered delicious and is fried with butter before serving. *Ara* is in stock for the guests and prepared with butter and egg to be served hot. *Doma* (rdog ma) and *pani* (pa ne), betel nut and leaves, will be distributed to the guests upon arrival. In the kitchen men and women are tirelessly cooking for the grand lunch reception.

Meanwhile in the *choesham*, the first phase of the ritual begins with the *lhabsang* ceremony, the burning of incense and sprinkling holy water to ritually purify the household. *Ngoentoed* is the step where the deities are ritually informed of the reasons why they are being called. During *chendren* the deities are invited to join the *lochoed* and the household members will prostrate. The *lha* are invoked one by one, according to a hierarchy of higher- and lower ranking deities. As pointed out before, the lowest and malignant spirits are not invited. During the step of *jinbeb*, the lama offers the deities to be seated according to their status. The lama, monks and lay monks recite from ritual scriptures, *pecha*, that are specific to each household and usually kept in a safe place in the *choesham*.

Similarly, the *nangi aum* or any other family member will go from house to house, to invite the villagers to her *lochoed*. One member of each household is sufficient to renew *thuenlam*, as otherwise the capacity would go beyond their means. Whilst the relationship with the *lha* is renewed in the *choesham*, the same happens with the guests from the village and afar. At about midday people will start arriving at the door, and they will be invited to enter with welcoming words and gestures. Everybody knows where to sit according to local etiquette and status.

Goemgi Shongshag

The second phase in the *choesham* starts with *choepa* where beautiful offerings, such as incense, flowers and food, are presented to placate the *lha*. These offerings are on display on the altar. During *toepa* and *kangwa* the deities are praised with words and blessings to make them feel happy and welcome. During the *tshog*, the now blessed food is offered to the deities and then distributed among the human guests. The monks will keep some pieces aside for *lhagma*, where the leftovers will be “thrown away” for the deities of the lowest ranks, hungry ghosts and other low spirits.

Meanwhile in the kitchen Bhutanese hospitality unfolds to its finest. First, *doma* and *pani* will be distributed as an initial gesture of friendship. Delicious *changkoe*, *ara* and *suja*, butter tea, will be poured into the *phop* (phorp), little cups the guests pull out from their *go* (go) and *kira* (dkyi ra), the male and female attire respectively. Now the host and helpers will start making rounds with buckets of delicious food. The guests of higher status will get preferential treatment. By any means, the lama and his monks will be served lunch first before the other guests, mostly in the *choesham*, sometimes in the kitchen. The *nangi aum* and her helpers tirelessly make rounds to re-fill the cups and plates. For high ranking guests and the lama the host will choose the fattest *sikam*, to be put on top of the plate. The size and amount of the *sikam*, indicates the wealth of the host and status of the guest. If guests of higher status show up to someone's *lochoed*, it is considered *tendrel* (rten 'brel, auspicious). Their high status and presumed high *wangtha* (dbang thang, fortune) and *lungta* (rlung rta, luck) in this life is ascribed to the merit they have accumulated in a previous life which will ‘rub off’ to the hosts.

Dralmoen

In the last phase during *torshag*, gratitude is expressed to the deities and they are sent away with soothing words. During *ngoedup langwa*, the householders and guests will receive blessings, and finally auspicious prayers and merit will be shared with all sentient beings during *trashy moenlam*. At the end of *lochoed*, a flag will be attached on the roof of the house to certify that the ritual has been successfully completed.

High in spirits and with a full belly the guests will bid farewell to the hosts. Guests from outside the village mostly leave a *soera* (gsol ras), a tip, as a sign of gratitude and *tendrel*. The atmosphere is enhanced by happy chatter, gossip and teasing, also induced by the alcohol that had been served during the welcoming phase. Those who came to help the family will eat last. Whatever food cannot be finished will be wrapped and taken home by the guests for the rest of their families. However, nobody leaves without being offered – and often forced – to take a *lamchang* (lam chang), the farewell drink.

As the evening approaches some guests may well end up staying back, singing and dancing, happily enjoying each other's company after days of hard work. *Thuenlam*, the connection and relationship, between the *za-tsang*, the *lha* and *midhey*, has been renewed, merit has been generated and shared with all sentient beings, and a contribution to the well-being of the community and all creation has been made.

Conclusion

Lochoed is an annual hosting ritual that can vary by scale and duration, depending on the wealth and status of the family. As my friend Tshering explained:

“*Lochoed* is particularly meant to appease the deities. However, in a more elaborate ceremony, rich people invite many monks, and after completion of *lochoed* they will move on to reading the Holy Scriptures Kanjur, which are 108 volumes. This will take another one and a half days, and might involve up to 60 or 70 monks. They might also simply continue with their *lochoed* for 3 days, inviting people from different neighborhoods.”

As outlined in this article, *lochoed* is as much a religious ritual as a social event. Family member come from far to join the re-bonding with their birth deities. The framework to mediate these relationships is that of hospitality.

I have roughly identified three phases of hospitality during *lochoed*, each consisting of several steps which find expression in both, the mundane and religious context: The first phase of reception comprises activities related to preparing for, inviting and receiving the guests; the second phase includes activities of hosting, offering and entertaining the guests; and the final stage revolves around closure and bidding farewell to the spiritual and human guests. Focusing on the hospitality aspect, I briefly described the *thuenlam* renewal in the *choesham* with the deities and the *thabtshang* with the humans.

Finally, I would like to briefly address an issue that used to come up mainly when talking to participants in Thimphu and Bhutanese abroad: the problem of high expectations on behalf of their family and friends in the villages when it comes to gifts and monetary contributions, especially during festivals and rituals. Family members who live elsewhere are expected to contribute substantially to the expenditures. These days, cash-gifts have become more common, but the financial implications can be overwhelming. Expectations by family and community members in the villages regarding the amount of *chom* (khyosm), *soera* and other contributions can be high, especially for civil servants who live and work in Thimphu and who are stereotyped as being richer as they earn money. For Bhutanese returning to their villages it is more difficult, they tell me, as the people there will not understand that they are not rich despite living in Thimphu or studying abroad.

For now, the significance of *lochoed* for *thuenlam* remains unabated among my participants in all the communities I visited in Bumthang and Lhuentse alike. *Lochoed* is the time of the year to visit relatives in the villages and one's ancestral household because it re-establishes *thuenlam* with family, the *lha* and community.

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