Thuenlam, Hospitality and the Neypo System: Cultural Hospitality Practices, Tourism and the Economy of Relationships in Bhutan

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Abstract

This PhD thesis is the first in-depth ethnography on the role of everyday hospitality practices for maintaining harmonious relations, thuenlam, in Bhutan, from the perspective of villagers. The aim is to provide the prerequisites necessary to integrate paying guests, tourists, into existing local guest/host relations, building on local practices and indigenous categories. Bhutanese society is characterized by principles of hierarchy, status and seniority, which is reflected in different types of thuenlam maintained with humans and the lha, deities, alike. Hospitality is the mediating framework of such relationships, expressed through local etiquette and manners, beyzhag, underpinned by ideas on what makes for a good host and guest. Small to large scale ceremonial and non-ceremonial, mundane and religious hospitality events serve to renew thuenlam with the local deities and the wider community alike. They also provide the setting for a variety of exchange of substances, services and gifts, embedded in moral worldviews that emphasize Buddhist notions of generosity and compassion whilst everyday practice is marked by a tension between mutuality and self-interest. // The author looks at these phenomena within the context of the neypo (host) system between Bumthang and Lhuentse. The neypo-system refers to a cross-valley network of guest/host relationships that used to be in place before road infrastructure development took place. “Traditional highways”, footpaths, connected a network of hosts across different ecological zones throughout the little kingdom and beyond. Such neypo-connections lasted over generations and some continue today. // The method developed for this research is a “concurrent approach” which combines traditional ethnographic data collection with putting emerging ideas into practice whilst in the field. The resulting approach to farm/homestay tourism development has been termed the “thuenlam approach”. Finally, this thesis offers a proposal and outlook on how to integrate the “paying” guest, the tourist, into existing guest/host relationships in Bhutan.