

Tshogchang



Tshogchang (ཚྭག་ཇང་) is a traditional drink served by Bhutanese communities to welcome guests. A popular custom in the eastern parts of Bhutan, *tshogchang* literally means the *chang* or alcohol for *tshog* or dinner. The term *tshogchang* is also used to refer to the alcohol served during the *tshog* feast which is offered as part of tantric religious ceremony.

Alcohol forms an important part of ceremonial food and drinks in Bhutan. In a traditional eastern Bhutanese village setting, it is customary for the ladies of the village gather to welcome a guest in the village. When an important guest has arrived, the ladies carry *tshogchang*, which normally consists of a jar of *ara* and some items for food. The jar, known as *ara palang* (ཨ་པཎ་) is a vessel made of either wood, bamboo or horns. The most common *palang* vessels are made of wood through woodturning and decorated with stripes of metal designs. It has a hole on the top to pour the alcohol in and a spout to pour it out. A decorative string is attached to the vessels using rings for carrying it around. *Ara palang* containers are also made of large bamboo. On each side, the bamboo stem measuring around 1-2 feet is cut right after the nodes. Holes are made on the top node to pour alcohol in and out. The stem is enclosed in a woven decorative cover. Large horns of bisons were also used to store and serve alcohol in the past.

The alcohol commonly used for *tshogchang* is *ara*, the spirit distilled from fermented grains. The women arrive carrying jars of *ara* and various materials for food including eggs, red chillies, rice, broken corn, etc. Occasionally, *singchang* drink may be also offered as *tshogchang*. After arriving in the house of the host, the ladies then place the *ara* and food items before the guest. The host will then serve the drink to the guest. The alcohol is either served as it is or heated with scrambled eggs or fried corn. In most communities, the host and ladies will insist that the guest have some drink even when the guest is a teetotaler. After the guest has been served, others who are present are served. The ladies also join in to drink and the session would continue until all alcohol is served. The materials for food is normally kept by the guest, and he either uses them during his stay at the host family or takes them with him when he leaves.

Tshogchang sessions are often accompanied by conversations, jokes, songs and dances, and often go on for many hours. It is an opportunity for people to get together and also create a connection or *thunlam* (མཐུན་ལམ) with the guest. When the drinking session is over, the guest must give some cash presents or *soelra* (གསོལ་རུ) to the members who brought the *tshogchang*. The amount depends on what the guest can afford, but should be at least equivalent to the value of the offering. *Tshogchang* drinks are also presented during archery matches, when village women flock to the archery range, where men play the game. They will station themselves near the archery range and as the archers come and take their seats, the women will present the *tshogchang* to the archers.

In many communities, the villagers bring *tshogchang* twice: once when the guest has arrived and once again to bid farewell to the guest if the guest has stayed for some days. When people bring *tshogchang* to see off, they often accompany the person leaving for several miles, stopping after short periods to have sessions of drinks. This tradition of offering *tshogchang* to visitors to the village is now commonly staged also in the official receptions of receiving state officials on tours of the villages. The culture is also spreading to other parts of Bhutan from the core areas of eastern Bhutan.

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