

Gift Giving

The Bhutanese are avid gift givers and recipients. There is a strong culture of giving and receiving gifts, which has helped community spirit of sharing and also the transaction of goods in the past. There are many varieties of gifts such as *chöm*, *lamju*, *lagta*, *sötra*, *dar*, *bulwa* and *semso* associated with the occasion and situation and a wide range of things one can give as gifts. It is customary in traditional Bhutan to share gifts, which is of value appropriate and commensurate to the person, relationship, occasion and the value of the thing received if it is a reciprocal gift.

Gift giving is a fine art in terms of both the gift given and the manner of giving, mostly passed down by the elders to younger ones through verbal instructions and examples. It is an important social skill which children learn from their parents and older relations. Gifts are given with respect and modesty and accepted with grace, gratitude and compliments. People normally do not open the gifts or examine it before the person who has given the gift, and givers do not praise or show off the gift unless there is a specific point to be noted. Gifts are also generally not labeled or signed.

Chöm: Arrival Gifts

When a person arrives in a house or village, the person has to bring gifts for the people who are living there. This is called *chöm* (ཚོམ་). For instance, when a member of family returns home or to the village after a significant period, it is customary for the person to bring gifts for the family members, relatives and neighbours. The number of people one has to bring gifts for will depend on one's social connections and relationship to the host.

Arrival *chöm* gifts for immediate family member includes clothes, shoes, crockery, jewelry and items which the individual family members can use personally. This is in addition to other things such as food and drinks which the family can use in common. The visitor would also bring many sets of food items, clothes or other thing to be given to the neighbours and relatives when they come to see the visitor. When visiting someone's house, *chöm* gifts such as boxes of tea, biscuits or other things are given for the family as a whole although one can also give specific gifts for one or two members. General gifts include biscuits, cookies, cakes, other food items, drinks,

clothes, etc. Bhutanese gifts are almost always things with practical use, such as tea and biscuits for families, Swiss knives making a good gift for housewives and long socks a good gift for men today. Souvenirs and personal curios are not popular as gifts. Cash is not given as an arrival *chöm* gift.

Except when giving gifts to immediate family members, the person who gives the arrival *chöm* gifts would present the gift politely, respectfully and modestly saying there is nothing worthy to be given. Whatever the gift is, the giver would often say it is a token merely to avoid being just empty-handed (ལག་སྤོང་མ་མེད་པ་ཅིག་). Sometimes, an immediate family member such as a mother or father would give the gift on behalf of the member who has arrived, while adding a comment about the modest value of the gift. Within close family members, personal gifts are given without requirement of modesty or any niceties.

Lamju: Parting Gifts

When a person is embarking on a journey, a farewell gift is given by friends and relatives to the person called a *lamju* (ལམ་རྒྱ). When villagers and relations hear that someone is leaving, they would come with various kinds of gifts such as food, drinks, textiles, cereals, vegetables, etc. If the person leaving is a young person going for study or an old person going on pilgrimage, relatives and friends would give cash gifts. Thus, the parting *lamju* gift is something which is useful and appropriate for the journey. As people flock to wish goodbye with *lamju* gifts, the person who is leaving receives a large collection of gifts. This can even become cumbersome for the person who is leaving as the baggage would increase considerably.

When people bring their *lamju* gift, the giver would often modestly put it as something small to avoid just being empty-handed (ལག་སྤོང་མ་མེད་པ་ཅིག་) and the recipient would reluctantly receive it saying it is not necessary to bring such a gift. Except between intimate family members, words of compliment and niceties are exchanged with the gift.

In the past, a traveller from Bumthang, for instance, would travel to places such as Mongar and Kurtö and give dried turnip leaves, herbal incense powder and sticks, dried cheese, roasted barley flour as *chöm* arrival gifts and the friends and relatives in the districts of Mongar and Kurtö would give in return *lamju* parting gifts of rice, maize, chili,

millet, fruits, yeast, etc. to the visitor from Bumthang. Government officials would bring clothes, tea, sugar, betel leaves and areca nuts as *chöm* gifts for the farmers and in return receive butter, cheese, alcohol and flour as *lamju* from the farmers. Similarly, people from Laya and Lunana visit the lowland areas in Punakha in winter with yak products such as butter, cheese and meat, blankets made of yak hair and wool, and incense. They give some of these gifts to their hosts in Punakha who reciprocate with rice or products of their area when the people of Laya and Lunana return to their highland homes.

When resident villagers bring a *lamju* gift, a person of important rank or higher income may reciprocate the *lamju* gift with a parting *sölra* gift. A *sölra* is generally a present or a reward which is given by a person to someone lower in rank than him or her. A parting *sölra* in return for a *lamju* gift or for coming to see off is almost always cash. The person who is parting must give as *sölra* cash, which is appropriate to the value of the *lamju* or to the status and situation of the person. One can give a small amount of *sölra* to children but to an adult, it is must be an amount which is appropriate for the recipient. Cash *sölra* is not given to someone who is seen as higher in rank than the giver or to someone who is considered to be better off. In such cases, the parting cash gift is handed to the spouse of the person, the mother or someone whose economic status is seen to be inferior to that of the giver.

Guests of higher status are expected to give more in value than they have received. In eastern Bhutan, people often receive and see off guests with gifts of *tshogchang*. This includes alcohol and food items. In return, the guests usually give cash *sölra* to the members who organized and contributed to the *tshogchang*.

The need for the gifts and the value of the gifts would also depend on the frequency of the travel. People who travel frequently may not bring *chöm* or give *sölra* and be given *lamju* as much as those who make such visits or travels rarely.

Lagta: Parcel Gifts

Friends and relatives send gifts to each other called *lagta* (ལག་རྒྱུ་). Bhutanese communities have a strong family ties and relatives exchange gifts whenever they find a person travelling to the areas where their relations or friends live. As most communities relied on barter and trade in the past for things which they did not grow or harvest in their locality, they have special connections made with

specific households in different valleys. A family in Bumthang, for instance, would have a family in a village in Mongar, with whom they will stay when they visit that area. The family from Mongar will enjoy the reciprocal facility. These households called *neyp* (ལྷན་པོ་) or host and people often exchanged gifts with their *neyps*. When a family or relative sends a *lagta* gift, the recipient will take care of the container or bag and return it with reciprocal gift when an opportunity arises.

Semso: Condolence Gifts

Gift is also given when there is a death in the family. If a friend or a relative lost someone in the family, the Bhutanese go to offer condolences with gifts of significant value. People often take cereals for food, alcohol to be used during funerary gatherings, butter for cooking and lighting butter lamps, drinks to be served during the funeral, textiles which may be need for the funeral and cash for expenses as funerals are very expensive. The gifts are often nicely wrapped in pieces of cloth. Some close families may take ready-made meals to be served to mourning family and the guests at the funeral. Close relatives and friends also go with gifts to offer words of condolences which are known as *khazang* (ཁ་མཚང་) or good mouth.

When friends and relatives are ill, people also take gifts, mainly of food, and go to see the ill person. Such meetings are said to give the recipient psychological support. Today, a lot of people would go to the hospital to see friends and relatives when they are ill. Gifts for such visits include cooked meals, biscuits, non-alcoholic drinks, etc.

Dar: Congratulatory Gifts

The Bhutanese people also give gifts when they congratulate a person or a family on an achievement. People bring gifts of food and cash when a house is being consecrated. The gifts are given to the master architect and the owner. When a person gets a promotion or new job, friends and families bring gifts to congratulate the person. The congratulatory gifts are often given with a silk scarf. Gifts of clothes, food and other goods are also given to the parents and the child during child birth. People also give generous gifts during weddings which have become very common in recent times.

Chajé: Salutary Gifts

When the Bhutanese go to see an important person, they often take something as token of respect and giving. People bring fruits, biscuits, drinks, textiles, etc. when they visit someone for a get together, audience or a business. These gifts can be varied compared to

congratulatory or condolence gifts. The Bhutanese normally offer a small amount of cash after prostrations when they visit a lama for audience. The lama in return gives blessings, teachings or gifts of sacred substances.

Gift giving is an important cultural practice in Bhutan. Giving and reciprocity works a very strong social cement and methods of building and maintaining social networks and relations. Although congratulatory and condolence gift giving continue to thrive, due to frequency of travel after introduction of motor roads, some of the practices such as *chöm* and *lamju* cultures are slowly declining.

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