



## **Some Elements of Animistic Beliefs among the Buddhist Tribe of Dirang in Arunachal Pradesh**

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### **Abstract**

*The Monpas of Dirang, in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, are very devout followers of Buddhism and have deep faith in Buddhist beliefs and rituals. Buddhism has been the primary religion of the people for centuries and is firmly rooted in the region. However, they also have a wide variety of local faith and belief systems, which were prevalent in the region much before the spread of Buddhism. The religion of Buddhism, with its accommodating nature, has absorbed much of the local faith in its fold over the period. However, the Monpas of Dirang still follow these beliefs in great reverence. Many of their local religious beliefs are animistic in nature, and the local priest plays a dominant role in propitiating their deities. Today the local animistic faiths of the Monpas have intricately intermingled and co-opted with Buddhism, blurring the distinction between them. However, some fundamental local beliefs, such as appeasing their natural surroundings and various forces of nature, are still prevalent among the people. Their local priests act as shamans, healers and ritual practitioners in the society; their primary objective is to protect the laypeople from the wrath of malevolent forces and foresee the village's good fortune. In this respect, the current paper explores the local animistic faith and beliefs of the people of the Dirang region, which was hitherto not studied in detail. This article analyses various rituals and practices associated with their animism faith. It has also examined the role and position of the local priest in contemporary Monpa society.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, Local Faith, Animistic, Local Priest, Forces of Nature, Ritual and Deities.*

### **Introduction**

The Monpas are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They reside in the districts of Tawang and West Kameng, located in the Western part of the state. Geographically, the whole Monpas are broadly divided into three categories viz. Tawang

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Monpa, Dirang Monpa and Kalaktang Monpa. However, the Monpas are divided into Tsangla and Dakpa/Brahmi on a linguistic basis. The Monpas of Tawangare known as Dakpa/Brahmi, while the Kalaktang and Dirang Monpa are called Tshangla and Sharchokpa. Linguistically, Kalaktang and Dirang Monpa are similar, but their language differs from Tawang Monpa. Traditionally, the Monpa region is divided into seven broad categories, i.e., *Shar Nyima Tsogsum*, *Dhakpa Tsog-yeth*, *Pangchin Dhingdruk*, *Lekpo Tsoshi*, *Shau Hro-Jangda Tso*, *Drangnang Tsoduk*, *Rongnang Tsoshi*.<sup>†</sup> The sixth and seventh divisions, i.e., *Drangnang Tsoduk* and *Rongnang Tsoshi* constitute the region of Dirang and Kalaktang Monpa.

The Monpas, for a very long time, have been devout followers of Buddhism, especially the Tibetan form of Buddhism. Buddhism mainly spread in the Mon region from Tibet. However, the seed of Buddhism was first sowed, if not propagated, by Guru Padmasambhava, popularly known as Guru Rinpoche or *Lopon Rinpoche*, by the local populace in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>‡</sup> The visit of Guru Padmasambhava to Tibet subsequently led to the establishment of the *Nyingmapa* sect in Tibet<sup>§</sup>, the earliest Tibetan Buddhism sect in Tibet and later spread to the Mon region. In the following centuries, other sects also arose in Tibet, of which the *Karmapa* branch of the *Kagyü* sect spread to the Monpa region. The *Kadamba*, or the *Geluk-pa* sect, was the last to arrive from Tibet to the Monpa region. Je-Tsongkh-pa founded the Gelug-pa sect, a renowned lama of Tibet at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century as a reformation of the earlier *Kadampa* sect.<sup>\*\*</sup> It rose to prominence in Tibet during the time of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and became the dominant sect of Tibet.<sup>††</sup>

The *Gelukpa* sect became dominant in the Monpa region, especially in Tawang, following the establishment of the Tawang Monastery in 1681 AD.<sup>‡‡</sup> Buddhism arrived relatively late in the Dirang region, most probably after the construction of Tawang Monastery sometime around 1742.<sup>§§</sup> Around this period, the *Kagyü* sect was first to spread among the Dirang Monpa. At the request of Dirang Monpa, the *Panchen Lama*, the second highest lama of Tibet after the Dalai Lama, directed *Droang Rinpoche*, a Tibetan Lama of the *Karmapa* sub-sect, to visit the region to vanquish the evil spirit and rescue the villagers from the tyranny of the various evil spirit. Later in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Kechang Doyen Tenzing* popularised Buddhism in Dirang and constructed many monasteries around Dirang.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> *Kejhang Doyen*

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†Tsewang Norbu, *The Monpas of Tawang Arunachal Pradesh*, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh: Frontier Printers & Publisher, 1970, pp. 17-18.

‡Niranjan Sarkar, *Buddhism among the Monpas and Sherdukpen*, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh: Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2006, pp. 1-3.

§L. A. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, London: W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd, 1896, p. 28.

\*\**Ibid.*, p. 58.

††*Ibid.*, p. 63

‡‡Tsewang Norbu, *op.cit.*, p. 196.

§§Niranjan Sarkar, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

\*\*\*B. Tripathy & P. D. Mize, 'Mahayana Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh- A Study of the Dirang Monpas', B. Tripathy and S. Dutta (ed), *Religious History of Arunachal Pradesh*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2008, p. 289.

Tenzing was the 6<sup>th</sup> incarnation of *Tenpei Dronme*, a disciple of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dalai Lama and the first to popularise the *Gelukpa* sect among Monpas.

Before the spread of Buddhism in the Monpa region, the Monpas had been following local animistic faith, which is quite similar to the Bon religion of Tibet. Helmut Hoffman opines that the Bon religion was widespread in inner Asia, China, East and West Turkestan, Manchuria, Mongolia and Tibetan Plateau.<sup>†††</sup> According to S. C. Das, "Bon is the ancient religion of Tibet, which was fetishism, demon worship and propitiation by means of incantation"<sup>‡‡‡</sup>. The Bon faith was the dominant religion of Tibet up-till the 7<sup>th</sup> century, i.e., before the advent of Buddhism in Tibet and characterised by animistic, devil-dancing or shamanist nature.<sup>§§§</sup> The Bon faith of Monpa is similarly a primitive animistic religion. They worship their natural surroundings and the forces of nature. The mountains, trees, lakes and rivers are believed to have been possessed by different spirits, both benevolent and malevolent. People believe they have to face the wrath of these spirits in the form of natural calamities and diseases if not appeased regularly through various rituals, offerings and sacrifices. Moreover, any disturbance or pollution of their sacred ground also results in grave consequences. Both the Buddhists and local Bonpo priests perform various rituals and sacrifices to appease these deities and ward off evil spirits. The prominent deity the Monpa worship is the Phu, or the mountain deity. They are regularly worshipped by the local priests every month and in a grand manner annually.

The spread of Buddhism in the region has not uprooted the local beliefs and rituals. Instead, many local deities like *Sherpa*, *Phuwangle* and *Jomu* are accommodated within the fold of Buddhism and worshipped through Buddhist rituals.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> The Buddhist monks perform different Buddhist rituals for these deities, carefully following the instructions given in *Lhandi karso*, a ritual manual written by *Kechang Doyen Tenzing* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which describes different methods to worship the local deities.<sup>††††</sup> There are, however, various other indigenous beliefs and rituals outside the affiliation of any Buddhist institution, which are still followed by the Monpas even though they practice Buddhism. The local priests Bonpo, Frami and Yumin have a primary role in performing various rituals and sacrifices to worship these deities.

## Methodology

Dirang is one of the three circles in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. It has many small hamlets located chiefly in and around the river valley. The Dirang Monpa comprises many sub-groups, such as *Lishpa*, *Chukpa*, *Sangtipa*, *Sengedzongpa*, and *Namshupa*, which have slight dialectic variations. The present paper, which mainly focuses

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††† Helmut Hoffman, *The Religion of Tibet*, New York Macmillan Company, New York, 1961, p. 104

‡‡‡ S. C. Das, *Tibetan-English-Sanskrit Dictionary with Sanskrit Synonyms*, Calcutta, 1902, p. 372.

§§§ L. A. Waddell, *op.cit.*, p.19

\*\*\*\* Jogendra Nath, *Cultural Heritage of Tribal Societies Vol. II: The Monpas*, Omson Publication, New Delhi, 2005, p. 75.

†††† Niranjan Sarkar, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

on the indigenous animistic faith and beliefs of the Dirang Monpa, has primarily been based on tools of enquiry such as scheduled interviews, personal interviews, telephonic interviews, and participatory methods for collecting primary data. The main study area is the villages of Dirang Basti, *Sangti*, *Lish*, and *Namshu-Thembang*. Personal and telephonic interviews were conducted with the knowledgeable and experienced persons of the villages, such as Gaon Buras, village elders and the Buddhist monks. The researcher also consulted different Local priests from different localities through personal interviews with the help of an open-end questionnaire. The participatory observation was also carried out during the priests' annual village rituals and sacrifices, such as *Lha-soi-shi*, to gain first-hand knowledge of local faith and rites. Secondary works, like books, journals, and proceedings, have also been consulted for the study.

### **Objectives**

The religion and culture, particularly the pre-Buddhist indigenous Bon faiths of the Monpas of Dirang, have remained a less explored area and need more detailed research. The present paper explicates a modest attempt to explore a less-explored part of the Monpas. In this regard, the present study has been carried out with the following broad objectives:

- a) To examine various facets of indigenous faiths and beliefs of the Monpas of Dirang.
- b) To study different rituals and sacrifices associated with these beliefs.
- c) To examine the role of village priests in local belief and t in society.

### **The Indigenous Faiths and Beliefs of the Dirang Monpa**

As discussed earlier, Buddhism spread comparatively late among the Monpas of Dirang. Before the spread of Buddhism, the Monpas of Dirang followed indigenous animistic faith similar to the Bon faith of Tibet for a long time. The pre-Buddhist Bon faith of Monpa is a primitive, shamanistic and animistic religion. Primitive because it was prevalent in the whole Monpa region before the advent of Buddhism and animism because they worship their natural surroundings and various forces of nature. The local priests, especially Yumin, are possessed by the local deities and act as shamans and healers in the village. The Bonpo priest or the shaman is vital in invoking the deities through several incantations. They also act as a medium between the human and spirit realms by possessing spirits inside their bodies called *Lhajhushi*. It is believed that the word shaman is probably derived from the ancient Bon lineage of Shen, to which Shen-Rab Miwo, the founder of Bon, also belongs. The Bon religion of Tibet from the distant past has significantly influenced the Bon religion in the Mon area. However, this faith of Monpas has some local elements which differ from many beliefs and practices in the Tibetan Bon faith and could have evolved locally. The Bon faith of Tibet underwent many changes after its interaction with Buddhism, which subsequently led to reforming and re-organising the Bon faith in line with Buddhist principles and norms. The reformed Bon, known as *Yungdrung* Bon, has a religious doctrine and iconography similar to Tibetan Buddhism. Its religious texts were comprehensively organised and compiled to compete for dominance with Buddhism.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> However, the indigenous Bon faith of

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\*\*\* A. C. Bannerjee, *Bon the Primitive Religion of Tibet*, Bulletin of Tibetology, vol. 17, No. 4, 1981, pp. 8-9.

Monpas retained its original form for a long time and is practised by the people even after the region was fully converted to Buddhism.

The follower of the indigenous Bon faith, essentially Buddhist, also believes in magic, supernatural forces, and spirits and worships various forces of nature. The entire natural environment is held sacred, personified as a deity, and accorded different names. They believe that both benevolent and malevolent spirits reside in nature and regularly appease them. Mountains, rivers, lakes, and forests are believed to be the residence of various spirits and deities like *Sadak/Zhibdak* (lord of the ground), *Yulha* (God of the region), *Lu* (Nagas), *Nyen, Tsan and Dud* (malevolent spirits) and *Phu* (mountain Gods).<sup>§§§§</sup> Local priests play a pivotal role in performing rituals and sacrifices to appease these divinities to avert any misfortunes and mishaps to the villagers. Malevolent spirits like the *Sabdak/Zhibdak, Lu, Tsan and Dud* are considered the primary causes of all the misery in human life, like sickness, diseases, death, and natural calamity in the villages. The Bonpo or Frami perform appropriate rituals, sacrifices and offerings to these deities to cure any sicknesses associated with or caused by them. All these particular malevolent spirits have different sub-types within them, and the priests have to appease them through specific rituals by invoking their names. For instance, it is believed that there are twelve different types of Lu divinities, with the major being *Lu-Gyalpo Chukpo, Lu-Gyalmo Chumo* and *Lu-Prabong*. Similarly, there are different kinds of *Sabdak* and *Zhibdak*, and the priests worship them by invoking *Sa-Lhamo* (Earth Goddess), *Lung-Lhamo* (Wind Goddess) and *Shing Lhamo* (Wood Goddess). According to the local Bonpo priests, the incantation of a particular divinity and its sub-kind is so long that it takes three days to recite them all. The hymn of the Bonpo priests contains words from different languages, with the Tibetan language making a significant portion.

*Lu* is believed to reside in stones, trees and streams. Its desecration through urination and dumping results in inflammation of the private part of the perpetrators. It requires special rituals and sacrifices to be performed by the village priests to cure them. The area occupied by the *Lu* is generally left undisturbed by the people. According to the local belief, the *Lu* or the Naga showers wealth and prosperity if appeased regularly. However, it can cause poverty and serious diseases if offended or polluted.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> The people popularly believe that if these sacred regions are disturbed or polluted by anyone, evil misfortune and grave illness will surely befall them. Suppose they are located at the sites of new house construction, the agricultural field, or near the villages. In that case, they are carefully shifted to another location by the priests after performing appropriate rituals and offerings.

The mountains are regarded as the chief deity of nature and are also locally known as *Kela* or *Phu* by the Monpas. Various mountains and hills are considered sacred, and each region has a particular *Phu* where the local inhabitants worship them. These mountain deities are believed

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§§§§ Tsewang Norbu, *op.cit.*, p. 185

\*\*\*\*\**Thinley Wangchuk*, aged about 61 years is a permanent resident of Phudung village in Sangti, Dirang Administrative circle, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held scheduled interview on March 12, 2022, at 11:45 am (Hereinafter cited or referred as TWI) (*Thinley Wangchuk Interview*).

to protect the village and the people within its vicinity from destructive forces and shower prosperity on villages and people if regularly worshipped. The *Phu* becomes a *Kela* or the protector of a person born in its proximity. *Kela* means Birth deity, and the people must pay obeisance and prayers regularly to its *Kela* to avert any debacles and tragedy in his life.<sup>††††</sup> Every region has its deity called *Yulha* (lord of the area), which includes *kela* or *phu* (mountain deity), and they have different names in different regions. In the *Lish* region of Dirang, their chief mountain deity is *Aata kispu*. It is called *Phudumpa*, *Lhachom*, and *At-Namrog* in Chug village, Thembang and Namshu village, respectively. In the village of *Khaso* and *Phudung* in the Sangti area, some of the essential mountain deities worshipped by the people are *Aata Shabjang*, *Aata Namphay*, *Aata Diphung* and *Korra*. In the village of *Nyukmadung*, the mountain deities are *Phuk Ngoipu* and *Dak-sheshi*. In the whole of the Dirang administrative circle, *Dungle Gyalpo* is considered the chief mountain deity and is worshipped by all the villages in the region. It is also known by other names, such as *Kela Tangpo* and *Jakpa Melong* and all the other *Yulha* or the local deities in the area are considered subordinate to it.<sup>†††††</sup> It is regarded as an enlightened deity and hence accorded the position of a Chief Deity. Another enlightened mountain deity worshipped by all the people of Dirang is a female deity called *Ama Jomu*. She is also an enlightened deity revered by Buddhists and the Bonpo priests. People often worship and make offerings to these deities on special occasions. They pray for the well-being of their health and protection from evil spirits and evading any misfortune or natural calamities such as drought and flood. The Priests worship the *Phu* every month with incantation and offerings known as *Kakung Torba* and on a grand scale annually called *Lhasoishi*.

### Local Rituals and Sacrifices

The local deities and spirits are mainly appeased through ritual offerings and sacrifices by people. These deities have been assimilated with time into the Buddhist fold and worshipped and appeased by both the Buddhist Lama and the Bonpa priests, following their own rituals and manuals. Many local deities were subdued by Buddhist Tantric masters in the earlier period and made the region's protector and guardian status. In the past, the Bonpo priests performed blood sacrifices to appease them but gradually gave it up due to the influence of Buddhism in many places. However, some remnants of animal sacrifices are still visible in many villages, particularly during their annual rituals. Today regular offerings of foods and drinks along with different types of *Phan* by the people and the priests are the primary mode of appeasement to these deities. Smoke prayers involving burning juniper leaves and twigs to cleanse the surrounding are also important in the rituals.

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<sup>††††</sup>*Dondu Wangey*, aged about 67 years is a permanent resident of Sappar village, Dirang Administrative circle, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held scheduled Interview on August 10, 2019, at 08:45 pm (Hereinafter cited or referred as DWI) (Dondu Wangey Wangchuk Interview).

<sup>†††††</sup>*Rinchin Tashi*, aged about 41 years is a permanent resident of Sappar village, Dirang Administrative circle, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held scheduled Interview on August 14, 2019, at 09:45 am (Hereinafter cited or referred as RTI) (Rinchin Tashi Interview).

The Monpas of Dirang frequently worship these divinities and pray for good health and well-being. People make different offerings to these divinities on special occasions, but they have to give obeisance to them regularly. They offer eatables and drinks like cakes, butter, Khabsey, local beer, and tea. These offerings are usually kept on a flat stone and wrap it with *Khatak* (traditional scarf) during some special occasions. This flat stone could be a remnant of a sacrificial altar for animal sacrifices practised in the past.<sup>§§§§§</sup> Usually, there are some special occasions like *Losar* (New Year) and other holy events during which it is tradition to make offerings and tie and plant sacred flags along the trees and land to appease the deities. In the vicinities of small streams and rivers, rows of small square flags of different colours known as *Phan* are hoisted after chanting some incantation. Offerings of rice and local beer are made along with this *phan*. Many of these Phan are inscribed with Buddhist mantras, sacred symbols and images of Buddhist gods and goddesses. A *Chuphan* is a small white Bon flag planted along the stream in a row to worship the water deity.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Besides the common populace, the local priests are required to perform rituals and appease these deities every month of the lunar calendar and on a grand scale annually.

Another method of worship by the people is making *Lut* (an effigy of evil spirits). Sometimes a tiny piece of dough is squeezed by hands called *Chanpong* to leave an impression and put along with the *Torma*. The pressed dough is said to absorb that person's negative energy. It is usually left outside at the road's intersection at night, where the negative forces or sickness will dissipate in the four directions and leave the place, making the people and their homes safe. Spirits like *Tsan*, *Dud* and *Lu* are considered malignant spirits and causes various sickness and diseases if they are not appeased regularly. Once a person gets sick, the *Frami* performs a ritual by reciting an incantation appealing to them to leave. It also involves making *Ka-Sur* and *Masur*, a flour where hot burning coal and ghee are poured and placed with the *Torma*. Lastly, the sick person's food and local liquor are added and placed outside. If the spirits of a dead person cause sickness to a person, the *Frami* perform a ritual which involves an offering of *Karchang/Nagchang* (Liquor) and *Sabrol/Zhibro* (fishes and meat) and appeals to the dead to leave. When this ritual fails to cure the sickness, the *Frami* invokes a powerful water deity called *Gyagar Pangchen Makpon*, who captures and takes away the spirit of the dead.<sup>†††††</sup>

The ordinary folk believe that natural calamities like drought, floods and various kinds of sickness are caused when different spirits and deities are disturbed or not appeased regularly. As such, the local priests play a pivotal role in performing various rituals, such as *Jukla* and *Lha-soi-shi*, to appease these deities to avoid such misfortunes and mishaps. Different categories of priests in the village are invariably known as *Bonpo* or *Frami* in the Monpa village. *Frami* is an ordinary priest who performs various rituals and sacrifices in the village. Another category of priests is called *Yumin*, similar to the Buddhist *Lhajuk Khan*. There are no

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<sup>§§§§§</sup>Neeru Nanda, *Tawang: The land of Mon*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1982, p. 113.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>DWI.

<sup>†††††</sup>RTI.

differences between these two, but the word *Frami* is less commonly used for the Bonpo priest in Tawang. However, most often, both these names are used interchangeably by them.

According to the local People, different types of sicknesses are caused by some malignant spirit that possesses and keeps their soul captive. In such a case, the local priest, mainly *Yumin*, performs an exorcism to free the soul from the spirit involving *Tse-thar*, *Sur* and *Torma*. *Tse-thar* is wrongly interpreted as a ritual by some authors.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> *Tse-thar* means 'saving a life' and is essentially a practice influenced by Buddhism where an animal's life is spared and freed. They are not allowed to be harmed by anyone in the village and are generally left to die of natural causes. *Sur* is basically flour to which hot coal and ghee are added, and the sick person inhales the smoke. Afterwards, it is placed outside near the road along with *Torma* (dough figurine) and the food taken by the sick person. In this way, it is believed that the sick person's negative force and evil aura will dissipate in the open and cure them in the process. Sometimes people get sick when they disturb or pollute the habitat of different divinities. In such cases, they need to perform specific rituals and sacrifices to appease the particular divinities to treat these diseases with the help of local priests. Sickness, such as stomach swelling, is believed to be caused by the water deity and to cure it; offerings such as fish and other eatables are made to worship it. If *Lu* causes the sickness, the Buddhist priest performs the ritual called *Lu-ka-Lusang* to cure it. The Bonpo priests perform their own incantations and rituals to cure it. The local priest or *Yumin* usually offers milk from white sheep and red cows along with wheat and ghee and pleads the *Lu* not to harm the person.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> The *sabdak* is worshipped before clearing the forests, digging lands or building houses. These activities disturb the soil, which in turn offends the *Sabdak*. Therefore, rituals have to be performed; offerings and sacrifices have to be made to appease them so they do not harm the new dweller of the house. The Buddhist priests perform a rite called *Sadak Thukdrol* to appease *Sadak* and *Yue-lha*. The Bonpo priests believe that there are different sub-categories of *Sabdak*, such as *Sa-Lhamo* (Earth Goddess), *Lung-Lhamo* (Wind Goddess) and *ShingLhamo* (Wood Goddess). The traditional Monpa house is built with wood, stones and clay, and for the construction, every divinity associated with the earth must be pleased while digging the earth, cutting trees or moving the stone. If the site of the new house is possessed by a *Lu* (deity of the watery underworld/Naga in Sanskrit), it is shifted to another place by performing an appropriate rite.

Original ancient Bon rituals encouraged animal and human sacrifices, which the people openly performed in the past.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> The practice of blood sacrifice was later given up with the influence of Buddhism in Tibet and the Mon region. However, there are few places like Rahung and Khoitam villages, where it is still practised but gradually waning. In Sangti, Namshu and Thembang villages, the remnant of blood sacrifice to appease their deities are

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<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>Tripathy B. & Mize, P. D. *op.cit.*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>*Sang Khandu*, aged about 45 years is a permanent resident of Khaso village in Sangti, Dirang Administrative circle, West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, held scheduled Interview on March 12, 2019, at 01:45 pm (Hereinafter cited or referred as SKI) (Sang Khandu Interview).

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> A. C. Bannerjee, *op.cit.*, p. 11.



still present. Earlier, In the Namshu and Thembang area, a boy from the Lish village was said to be offered annually as a tax to be sacrificed in a ritual called *Hosina* to appease the malignant spirits.<sup>††††††††</sup> Until very recently, in the Dirang region, domestic animals like sheep, cocks, fish and pigs were killed and sacrificed to appease these local Gods. But animal sacrifice is given up in most places in Dirang. Instead, ritual cake with human and animal figurines made of dough, known as the *Torma*, is widely used today as a substitution for rituals and sacrifices. The *Torma* is a kind of representation of humans and different animals like frogs, snakes and pigs made of dough. It is painted with red colours to signify blood and a small flag woven with colourful threads near it. Today in the Thembang and nearby village, some animals like cattle, goats and cock are still offered to the local deities, but instead of killing them, it is released as *Tse-thar* after the ritual. This practice is followed today mainly due to the influence of Buddhism in the region. However, during the annual *Lha-soi-shi* ritual, fish is offered to their deities by the villagers of Sangti, Namshu, Thembang and Dirang. In Sangti village, it is customary to offer a head of a deer and a fish to their mountain deities during this annual festival.

According to the local priests, the main reason for giving up animal sacrifice is due to the defeat of Bonpo and the subjugation of their deities by the Lopon Rinpoche. Narrating a legend, *Sang Khandu*, a *Frami* of the Khaso village of Sangti, says that once there was a fierce debate between one high Bonpo Lama named *Tonpa Shenrab* and the Lopon Rinpoche. *Tonpa Sherab* was defeated, and the Lopon Rinpoche then advised him to give up the animal sacrifice and abstain from eating meat, garlic and onion. He readily accepted it, and since then, the Bon priest has given up the animal sacrifice and taking of meat, onion and garlic.<sup>††††††††</sup> This legend has no authenticity as *Tonpa Shenrab*, the founder of the Bon religion, is believed to be older than the Buddha, according to a different author. However, it certainly reflects the strong influence of Buddhism on the practice of the Bon rituals and its reformation. However, in the village of *Rahung Khoitamin* the West Kameng district, the Bon priest still practices animal sacrifice today, although it is slowly waning with the impact of Buddhism and the preaching of Buddhist monks to the people.

### **The Local Priests and their Role in Rituals**

There are three different categories of local priests among the Monpas who worship the spirits and local deities. These are the *Phu-Lama/Jambeyang/Tsipa Lama*, *Bonpo or Frami*, and *Yumin*. The *Phu-Lama* or *Jambeyang* is the village priest and specialises in performing rituals, mantras and tantric incantations to worship the mountain deity and other spirits. They are also village astrologers, and through their horoscope manuals and almanac, they suggest auspicious dates and times for performing appropriate rites and rituals for birth, marriage and death ceremonies. They are also known as *Minakpa* or the lay Buddhist priests in the villages. The main difference between *Jambeyang* and the other village priests is that the former is affiliated or associated with both *Gelukpa* and the *Nyingmapa* sects of Buddhism. The *Jambeyang* priests do not follow monastic vows like the monks but marry

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<sup>††††††††</sup> Mizuno Kazuharu & Lobsang Tenpa, *Himalayan Nature and Tibetan Buddhist Culture in Arunachal Pradesh, India*, Tokyo, 2015, p. 103.  
<sup>††††††††</sup>SKI.

and live in the villages as laypeople. They master various Buddhist rituals from these two sects to become the village priests. Many people who have left the life of ordained monk from the monastery also becomes *Minakpa* and provides religious services to the villagers. They read *Pecha* or the Buddhist religious scriptures while performing rituals. In the Dirang region, most of the *Minakpa* are from the *Nyingmapa* sect.

*Frami* or *Bonpo* is the Bon priest, who is just an ordinary village priest. The term *Bonpo* which broadly refers to the Bon religion is also used to denote the priest, especially in the Dirang region. In Tawang, the local priests are mainly called *Frami*, and the usage of the term *Bonpo* for the priest is minimal. On the other hand, both *Bonpo* and *Frami* are interchangeably used in the Dirang area. There is no rigid classification between the *Bonpo/Frami* and *Yumin*; their names and roles may differ between Tawang and Dirang regions and different villages. One crucial difference between them in Dirang is that the *Yumin* is possessed by the deities and acts as the village's shaman and healer. The *Yumin* is a special kind of priest who, apart from performing rituals and sacrifices, is also believed to possess magical power to heal various sicknesses and diseases. The *Bonpo/Frami* makes offerings and worships the mountain deity once every month, while *Yumin* does it once a year. The Bon priests mainly worship different *Phu* at their residences and make an offering at home. Novice *Bonpo's* apprentice is called *Gethuk*, and they learn from the master different kinds of rituals and sacrifices for many years and usually succeed him on his death. The apprentice who wishes to become a *Bonpo* has to go deep into the forests and recite the chant regularly to memorise it. When reciting the chants, he has to burn incense or offer smoke prayers constantly to the *Phu* because they invoke and call upon all the *phu* and other divinities in their chant. Therefore, if they call upon the deities without burning the incense or smoke prayers, it generally offends them, and the *Bonpo* may suffer from headaches and nausea. Normally, it takes him two or three years to master all the rituals and sacrifices. The assistant of a *Frami* is called *Tshangmi*, who assists and takes part in important rituals and sacrifices in the villages.

A *Yumin* is also more or less similar to the *Frami*. However, in Dirang, their main difference is that a deity possesses some *Yumin*. They are identical to the *Ku-ten*, a term which means 'bodily vehicle' in Buddhism, where a protector deity possesses a person momentarily. The Monpa term for *Ku-ten* is *Lha-jhucan* which literally means 'echo of god', to whom the deities are summoned to possess him occasionally.<sup>§§§§§§§§</sup> *Nechung* is the most important *Ku-ten* in Tibet, possessed by a protector deity called *Pehar*, and is also a personal oracle of the Dalai Lama. Among the Monpa, many *Lha-jhucans* are possessed by various protector deities. However, unlike the Buddhist *Lha-jhucan*, the *Yumin* is said to be possessed by deities throughout his life. Therefore, they are like the village shaman/oracle who acts as a medium between the people and the deities. They are believed to have healing powers and cure various diseases caused by different spirits from different realms. Thus, he also acts as a local physician or the healer of the villages. Unlike the *Frami*, the *Yumin* has no apprentice or

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§§§§§§§§ Gian Giuseppe Filippone, *Oracles and Shamans in Arunachal Pradesh*, Central Asiatic Journal, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2008, pp. 13-14. Accessed from JSTOR on Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2019, at 18:50 UTC.

students to whom they can pass down their profession. The local deities usually choose the next *Yumin*, and often the son or near male relative is chosen. One of the most critical roles of the *Yumin* is to perform the ritual and sacrifices during the grand annual festivals called *Lha-soi-shi*. In Dirang and Namshu villages, the ritual is only performed by a *Yumin* belonging to a particular lineage. In the Namshu village, only a person from the *Dungtotpa* lineage can become the *Yumin* of the village and perform the annual ritual. In the Sangti village, the *Phaichupa* Lineage performs the *Lha-soi-shi* ritual.

However, both the *Yumin* and the *Frami* have to follow a very strict lifestyle and diet throughout their lives. They abstain from consuming meat, garlic and onion because their pungent smell pollutes and offends the deities when they chant sacred rituals. If they consume them, they may fall gravely ill or die and lose their healing power. Moreover, other ordinary people are also prohibited from consuming these things when they visit the holy *Phu* as it angers them. In the case of the *Yumin*, they also lose the shamanic power to interact with the spirits or the local deities when they consume the above items. According to the different *Yumin* of the Dirang villages, they believe that their spirits choose or are passed on to the next generation of kin today with extreme difficulty. The main reason they point out is the change in people's lifestyle and food habits. People today eat different foods such as meat, onion and garlic, which the local priests say are forbidden. In addition, the unhygienic living style and desecration or pollution of the sacred places associated with the deities and spirits are also a reason.

## **Conclusion**

The animistic Bon faith is the earliest faith of the Monpas of Dirang, which the people practised before the advent of Buddhism. This Pre-Buddhist animistic faith had adherents in the Himalayan region, including the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh. This faith believes in the spirits in the mountain, trees, and streams and involves worshipping them with the help of the local priest or the shaman. Buddhism later spread to Tibet and the Himalayan region and became the dominant religion. There was a bitter conflict between Bon and Buddhism in Tibet in its early days. Gradually both underwent assimilation and have been co-existing together harmoniously. The influence of Buddhism and its principle has a significant impact on society. Today the difference between the Bon and Buddhism in the Monpa society is entirely blurred. Gradually, many people rely less on the local priests and their rituals. The Buddhist monk also prays to the local deities, and the local priests adhere to Buddhist principles and norms. The interaction between the local faith and Buddhism has evolved into composite religion among the Monpas, which they follow with complete reverence.

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