

6 Clear mountains, blurred horizons

Limbu perception of their physical world

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Introduction

No one who has ever written on the Limbu community has considered their perception of physical environment important enough. The early British writers, including Eden Vansittart (1915: 108–9), E. T. Dalton (1872: 102), H. H. Risley ([1891] 1981: 18–19), C. A. Campbell (1845: 75–8), and John Morris (1985), have written on the history, language, clan organization, religion, and *rites de passage* of Limbus but they literally wrote nothing on the Limbus' relationship with their environment. Among the more recent publications on them, in the Nepali or English language, are dictionaries, books and articles on their relationship with Bahuns (Nepali Hill Brahmins) or on their history and culture (Chemjong 1960; Caplan 1970; Upreti 1976; Senior 1977; Limbu 1989), or language (Subba 2002). Compared to the Limbus of East Nepal, nothing has been written by the British administrators on the Limbus of Darjeeling and Sikkim: the former perhaps because they were considered as one of the Nepali castes and the latter because they lived away from the Indo-Tibetan trade route resulting in their ignorance about the early existence of Limbus in present-day West Sikkim.

The Lepchas and Bhutias, the other two communities native to Sikkim, called them Chong (also spelt as Tsong) and were thus fully aware of the Limbus, and had even enacted a blood 'treaty' with the latter called *Lhomentsongsum*¹ at a place called Kabi Lungchok in North Sikkim in the second half of the seventeenth century. Sometime after Sikkim became the 22nd state of India, *Lhomentsongsum* became *Lhomen* (Bhutia and Lepcha) for all practical purposes, as the political distance between Bhutia-Lepchas and Limbus widened. The former two communities were recognized as Scheduled Tribes and their seats in the state assembly were reserved whereas the lone Limbu seat was de-reserved and they failed to get constitutional recognition as a Scheduled Tribe until December 2002.

Every Western writer on the Limbus has described them as a 'tribe'. Once a community is so labelled, its relationship with nature is taken for granted. The tribes are conceived almost everywhere as people with a symbiotic relationship with nature. Such is the dominant perception at least in Indian

anthropology. Although this could be true for a large number of tribes in India, there are significant variations among tribes in respect of their relationship with forest/nature across regions and even within a region. The tribes today occupy different levels of development, pursue different vocations, and hold absolute political power in some states of Northeast India. Yet, while their way of life has changed, often very drastically, anthropological constructions of them have not.

A corollary of such perception is the widespread belief that tribes are repositories of traditional or indigenous knowledge, especially regarding management of natural resources. There is much evidence in Northeast India to show that they have remarkable traditional wisdom relating to the management of natural resources (see, for example, Agarwal and Narain 1999; Aier and Changkija 2003: 333–79). This evidence relates to management of natural resources by various communities living in the region on the basis of their traditional knowledge, although at times such knowledge has been essentialized, if not romanticized as well. Such knowledge actually depends on the degree of engagement a culture has with natural resources and not whether one belongs to a tribe, and can vary significantly even within a family. For instance, my mother, who collected fodder or firewood from a nearby forest every morning until she was quite old, had far more extensive knowledge about plants than my father, who taught in a school in Bhutan. Once a person's engagement with forests is over, his or her knowledge of the forest inevitably erodes, and it does not seem to continue with each subsequent generation as many other aspects of culture like language, food habit, and dress often do. The very presence of a large number of rituals among tribes everywhere to seek blessings of the supernatural powers for a bumper harvest and good health of people and cattle in the coming year indicates how vulnerable they must have been to the vagaries of nature or how inadequate their wisdom to ensure good harvest and health for themselves.

Many Limbus are reasonably knowledgeable about the management of land, forest and water, although they, like other communities living in the middle hills of East Nepal and West Sikkim, have failed to protect their forests from being denuded or their wells and springs from drying up. It appears that they underwent a major shift from shifting to settled or terraced mode of cultivation after the political unification of Nepal in the 1770s, and such a process continued in some parts of these Himalayas until quite recently. Not only were the areas of shifting cultivation in Nepal brought under settled agriculture, even primary forests were reclaimed for agricultural cultivation to meet the food needs of the population that was growing rapidly due to the arrival of high-caste migrants from the western part of Nepal. Similar changes took place in the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim. There was a marked emphasis in Darjeeling on tea and cinchona plantations, construction of roads and bungalows, etc. Land was also reclaimed for agricultural purposes but that was more or less confined to the Kalimpong subdivision of the district bordering Bhutan. In the absence of concepts like sacred forests,

community forests or clan forests, which exist in some parts of Northeast India, nothing stopped the Limbus from clearing the forests, not even the powerful forest deity, Tampungma.² With the decline in shifting cultivation, at least from the latter half of the nineteenth century, their knowledge related to this age-old agricultural practice also began to erode. It appears that Limbus combined this mode of cultivation with pastoralism and trade for a very long period in their history.

In this chapter, I argue, with the help of ethnographic materials based on the Limbus of the eastern Himalaya, that Limbu perception of the physical environment is intermeshed with their social and spiritual worlds.³

Who are the Limbus?

I have answered this question in my earlier writings without any hesitation (see Subba 1990, 1999a:180–9; 1999b). It was actually quite a simple question for me then. But now, as I ask myself this question again, I am acutely aware of the difficulties involved in defining who the Limbus are. This is perhaps due to the fact that the community started championing certain symbols of its identity in different parts of the eastern Himalayas from 1990, following the restoration of democracy in Nepal. When I first began my fieldwork on the Limbus of East Nepal in the winter of 1992, they were all obsessed with the need to showcase something of their own culture and tradition as members of other *janajāti*⁴ communities were doing. There was neither time nor inclination to debate the various symbols of Limbu identity then. But now a rethinking has begun. One factor necessitating such a rethinking has been the lack of clear boundaries, particularly between Limbus on the one hand and Rais, Yakkhas,⁵ and Lepchas on the other. How Limbus relate to these communities is important because they have been neighbours for ages. Let me dwell on this point briefly.

First, the various British authors mentioned above have rightly pointed out that Limbus have traditionally intermarried not only with the Rais and Yakkhas living west of the Arun river but also with the Lepchas living to its east. Such intermarriages are not really considered as ‘inter-marriages’ in the sense of a marriage between a Magar and a Gurung, and have led to blurring of the boundaries, among these communities, and indeed there is a great deal of similarity in their ways of living. There is, equally, a great deal of compatibility even in ritual and spiritual matters among them, given that a Limbu priest can officiate in a Rai or Yakkha ritual and vice versa. Of these four groups, the influence of Hinduism is most visible among Rais, who, being located west of the Arun, were exposed more and earlier than Limbus or Lepchas living east of this river. The spread of Hinduism in Nepal and the Sikkim Himalaya has been from the west to the east, and that of Buddhism from the north to the south. The long malarial *tarāi* [flat land connecting the plains with the hills] made it impossible for the Hindus to move from south to north.

Second, because they live under similar ecological conditions in the middle hills, the material culture of the Limbus is similar to that of the Rais, Yakkhas and Lepchas in terms of settlement pattern, house types, and food habits. For instance, pork is not only an important item of gift in marriage but is also an equally important sacrificial item for all these communities in East Nepal and Sikkim. So is fermented millet and rice-beer, which are also essential to welcome guests and show respect to the elderly. The practice of offering fermented millet in a bamboo container, which is sipped with the help of a slim bamboo pipe, is seen in the marriage and funeral ceremonies of all these communities. Even the vessels for cooking and storing, worshipping of the main pillar at home or the deities of hearth and cowshed are quite similar. No one can really tell on the basis of such cultural practices whether they belong to a Limbu, Rai, Lepcha or a Yakkha. They all offer a little bit of new crops to the fire or to the spirits wandering around before they start to eat the same themselves. The Lepchas of Sikkim are, however, quite clearly distinguishable from their counterparts in Illam district of East Nepal by their dress and religious practices (Gorer 1984: Chapter 7).

Third, animism as it is practised by Limbus is based on a body of oral traditions they call *mundhum*. Actually, variations in its pronunciation like *muddum*, *mundhum*, and *muddhum* are quite common throughout eastern Nepal and it is indeed difficult to associate a particular pronunciation with a particular ethnic group. One of the best accounts of *muddum*, as it exists among the Mewahang Rais of East Nepal, is by Martin Gaenszle (1993). In this article, he describes how this repository of oral traditions has changed through interaction with written traditions alienating the people from their own past.

These oral traditions are basically accounts of the origin of various flora, fauna, clans, routes of migration, and procedures of conducting *rites de passage*. Recitation or interpretation of a particular *mundhum* by a shaman while performing a ritual is sometimes contested. Elderly persons assembled on such occasions listen to the deliberations of the shaman carefully, and are quick to point out a mistake or remind the shaman of a certain detail left out by him. A shaman rarely objects to such interventions, although at times serious arguments follow between him (rarely her) and elderly persons either after the ritual is over or when the shaman halts the ritual for a break to sip his *tongba*.⁶ The use of fowls, pigeons, pigs, eggs, flowers, grains, water, etc. as sacrificial items is also common among these animistic communities, although there are sects cutting across ethnic boundaries that are purely vegetarian and non-alcoholic. Absence of a permanent place of worship is also notable among the followers of this religion, suggesting a common past characterized by pastoralism and shifting cultivation. Animism is, in fact, not just a religion for them: it is also an interactive relationship with their physical environment and with the world of gods, goddesses, spirits, and ghosts whose response to the deeds and intents of the people is almost instant. The supernatural beings reward as well as punish people, help them find lost jewellery

or people, and identify the particular 'being' responsible for a sickness or calamity. They bring great crisis when they are angry and yet are forgiving when pardon is asked for with appropriate sacrifice and ritual. They are also compromising with a given situation and accept a fowl instead of a goat, an egg in lieu of a fowl, a leg in place of one whole animal, etc.

Fourth, in terms of physical characteristics it is equally impossible to separate Limbus from Yakkhas, Rais and Lepchas, and one finds a wide range of physiological variations among them, even among Limbus. But there is a stereotypical Limbu face in the minds of people, and when a Limbu does not bear those features, he or she is often a subject of gossip or ridicule. I have heard small children who did not look like a Limbu being asked about their 'real' (read biological) father, who only their mother would know.

Fifth, even when one considers women's ornaments, tattoos and dress it is not possible to make a distinction between a Limbu and a Yakkha woman, or between a Yakkha and a Rai woman. Quite frequently a woman in a Yakkha family is actually a Limbu and a woman in a Limbu family a Lepcha before marriage.

Finally, Limbus share certain clans like Youngmu, Sitling, Lucksom and Mangmu with Lepchas. These clans are considered Lepcha if they are in Lepcha country and Limbu if they are in a Limbu area. They have similar taboos and totems, similar concepts of gods and goddesses reigning over their forests, rivers, mountains, agricultural fields, cow sheds, central pillar of their houses, lightening, hails, and so on. As a matter of fact, if they live in the same village they can understand the dialects spoken by each other fairly well. This is also true of Rais belonging to various dialectical groups living in the same village: the much-hyped mutual unintelligibility of Rai dialects needs unpacking at the earliest.

The identity of Limbus, as of many other Tibeto-Burman language-speaking communities in the eastern Himalaya, has become a very complex issue today, not only due to differences in the way Limbus construct their past but also due to the influences of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian religions during the past two centuries. In other words, it is difficult today to define Limbus in terms of any objective criteria, just as it is perhaps with regard to other, analogous communities. Despite the effort of every community to maintain a measure of internal homogeneity, the external forces that undermine the forces of homogeneity are apparently far more successful in creating greater heterogeneity among them. The people, however, have some idea – no matter how vague – about what it means to be a Limbu, although such a stereotyped concept is primordial in the sense that they are based on language, religion, and culture rather than a subjective identification. But with increasing heterogeneity, the only acceptable basis for defining them may soon be some subjective criterion: they are Limbus because they believe themselves to be so and/or they are recognized by others to be so.

Economic history of the Limbus

There are several indications to show that Limbus were once pastoralists and they probably took their cattle to higher altitudes in summer and came down to the middle hills during winter. One of the clearest indications of this is their categorization of the seasons into two: *songmang* and *thangmang*. The former refers to a movement towards lower altitudes and the latter indicates a movement in the opposite direction. These opposite movements – descending and ascending – are characterized by many changes in climate, flora, fauna, and corresponding restrictions or relaxations of the rules on what people can do or eat. The starting of the two seasons is characterized by sacrifice of chickens in the name of Nahangma, the goddess of power. Apparently, they had quite an intimate knowledge of Tibet, perhaps because Tibetans came down during winter to pay tribute to Limbu chiefs or landlords (Sagant 1996: 423). The other indication is that there are several references to the high altitude flora and fauna in their *mundhums*, including the yak (*Bos frontalis*), which is not normally found in the middle hills where they have been living for the past several centuries. The bushy tail of a yak is considered auspicious and is kept as a precious item in almost every Limbu house. The name Yakthungba, which they use to refer to themselves, also means ‘yak herders’, which indicates that they were probably yak herders at some earlier time in their history.

Pastoralism is not practised any more, certainly not on the scale and in the manner of the past, although domestication of animals and birds, particularly for the purpose of traction, milk, sale or sacrifice is quite common. There is hardly any Limbu household without some fowls, one or two pigs, a couple of goats or sheep, and cows, oxen or buffaloes among the larger animals. The richer or larger households often have a large number of such animals, which are left free to graze on agricultural fields after harvest in winter or are taken to nearby forests for grazing. Where some vegetables are grown in the winter, such areas are temporarily fenced with bamboo splits, which the animals sometimes break to eat the crops. Such incidents may lead to serious altercations between the owners of the cattle and the vegetable gardens, but are settled with a token fine and some bottles of liquor, which is soon distributed among the adults gathered for the purpose of settling the disputes.

Until recently, Limbus traded raw wool from domesticated sheep, coarse blankets woven from it, long and sturdy hair of pigs, bear bile, glass beads, aluminium/brass/zinc utensils and cattle. Such traders moved in groups of two or four, for three was considered as inauspicious number. They carried long *khukuris*⁷ to protect themselves from dacoits (*dakaiti*, bandit) when they passed through uninhabited mountains or deep forests. They carried their own rations and rarely accepted hospitality of any stranger, lest they were drugged and looted. Several such men earlier visited the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim selling utensils and buying back old and unusable utensils at a

lower cost. A few still do so in winter. They also visited these hills to transport oranges from orchards located in remote villages to the nearest market until the orchards were destroyed by disease.

Further, there are indications to show that Limbus were once shifting cultivators. This is first indicated by the fact that they had communal land-ownership called *kipat* until the middle of the twentieth century (Caplan 1970). In fact, shifting cultivation and communal ownership are closely associated even in the hill areas of India's Northeast, where privatization of landed property is now taking place as rapidly as the decline in the acreage under shifting cultivation. Even the decline in the Limbu practice of shifting cultivation coincided with the introduction of permanent or terrace cultivation by the Bahuns and Chhetris from the west in the aftermath of the political unification of Nepal. According to one travelogue (Das [1902] 1970: 3), shifting cultivation was practised by Limbus until the end of nineteenth century, although the rotation cycle had come down to three years. Further, worship of the forest deity *Tampungma* indicates their heavy reliance on forest in the past. The forest deity is believed to look like an old woman with grey hair carrying a basket and a small sickle. Limbus consider this deity to be very important for their overall prosperity. That they might have once been shifting cultivators is also indicated by the fact that they rarely have a permanent place of worship. They create an altar for worship at any clean place by slightly raising the platform and decorating it with plants like bamboos and plantain trees. For certain rituals the decoration of the place of worship is extremely elaborate but everything is dismantled at the end of the ritual and thrown into a stream or left at a clean place. No trace of the ritual performed or the articles used remains. The next time they have to perform such a ritual they find some other place, although sometimes there are restrictions related to the orientation from the house for performing a ritual.

In fact, both pastoralism and shifting cultivation give rise to a non-sedentary life, which is reflected in the deities they worship, the rituals they perform, the places of worship, the materials used for all this, etc. Such a life also depends on collecting food from forests and rivers rather than storing it for the lean season. Although Limbus have been sedentary for over two centuries now, the traces of their non-sedentary life can still be seen. Even today, a Limbu will leave his village and go to another on the slightest pretext.

Their physical environment

The physical environment in the eastern Himalaya has been steadily degraded in every respect. The forests have vanished, wells and streams are dry during winter, and the soil has suffered erosion. The herbs that Limbus have used for treating diarrhoea, headache, nausea, skin diseases, etc. are no longer available nor do they easily get the plants they used for their rituals. Their crops fail frequently and are subject to the depredation of wild birds and animals. Landslides are frequent and sometimes hazardous to humans and cattle.

Almost everywhere in East Nepal, West Sikkim and Darjeeling, Limbus are predominantly settled in rural areas of the middle hills at altitudes varying from about 3000 to 6000 feet (approximately 915 to 1830 metres) above sea level. The climate is temperate and the vegetation predominantly tropical. If the soil is fertile, depending on the altitude, slope and aspect of the hill, they can grow many varieties of crops, both for domestic consumption and for sale in the market. Marketing crops is an opportunity rarely available to most Limbus in East Nepal and West Sikkim due to the distance between their villages and the nearest market. Therefore, they generally grow maize as a summer crop and paddy and black lentil as winter crops in the irrigated fields that are normally limited to 1500 metres above sea level. In the winter the high altitude dwellers – Sherpas and Bhutias – come down to the middle hills and exchange their crops with Limbus, Rais and Yakkhas.

In the dry fields, which may or may not be terraced, they grow either maize, black lentil or millet. Inter-cropping with beans, chillies, yam, pumpkin, tapioca, turmeric, sweet potatoes, arrowroots, etc. is common, which also indicates a shifting cultivation past. Although shifting cultivation is no longer practised, the cropping pattern is similar to what it was under that system. Almost every available piece of land is used for growing some crop, leaving little room for trees. Even the bamboo groves that grew everywhere in the past are no longer easily seen. Limbus do not encourage the cultivation of bamboos because the land around bamboo groves becomes infertile.

Yet they have an intimate relationship with bamboo. They need it for constructing their houses, cow sheds, pig sties, etc.; fencing their kitchen gardens, providing support to inclining plantain trees, as handles of various agricultural implements including the axe, for making baskets to carry as well as to store grains, as pipes for drawing water from long distances, harvesting fruits and crops from tall trees, among other uses. They also need a particular variety of it for making *tongba* (see note 6). They need green bamboo for carrying a corpse to the cremation or burial ground. Its leaves are a favourite for cattle as fodder; its shoots make good curry and pickle; its roots provide very good hockey sticks, tops, and other playthings; when dry it burns very well and also helps to burn the less dry firewood. Limbus do not use green bamboo to cook rice, as many tribes in India's North-east do occasionally, but make various kinds of handles and weapons out of it, most importantly bows and arrows, and handles for *khukuri*, spears, and sickles. Best of all, bamboo does not flower and create famine by contributing to the extraordinary growth of the rat population, as it does in Mizoram, one of the states of Northeast India. But Limbus believe that they should not take shelter in a bamboo grove at night. Doing so is believed to be hazardous because ghosts and spirits are attracted to such groves in search of victims.

The other important plant is the plantain. Traditionally, most Limbus rarely eat any fruits except during festivals like *Dasai*⁸ and *Tihar*,⁹ which were boycotted in the 1990s by many Limbus who claimed that they are actually Hindu festivals whereas the Limbus are not Hindus (see Subba 1999b). They

sell ripe bananas in the market but not more than a couple of times in a year. They do not eat the tendermost part of the banana trunk like many other people in India do. They have dishes based on the banana flower, but only on special occasions such as marriages and festivals. But they always keep a plantain grove near their kitchen garden. The reasons are many. First, the banana leaves are used for sacrificial purposes. They make small containers, lids, and plates out of banana leaves on which they offer meat, eggs, rice, coins, etc. at the time of sacrifices. They also erect the banana trees at the temporary altar they make for various rituals. The banana leaves are used as an inner covering in aluminium pots when they boil such things as millet, tapioca, sweet potatoes and yams; the leaves provide excellent air pressure and the articles are boiled evenly and faster than when not covered with such leaves. When banana leaves are not available, fig leaves are used, which are equally effective, but not as acceptable as banana leaves for ritual purposes.

Not much fauna remains today. With the forests gone there are hardly any wild animals left. Even the monkeys that were once a big nuisance to crops have vanished along with the forest. Half a century ago the situation was quite different. There were primary forests along riverbanks or gorges where bears, leopards, monkeys, boar, and deer were available to hunt. Porcupines and wild fowl were also easily available. But today there are virtually no wild animals even where there is re-afforestation, as the new forest consists of monocultures that are fast growing but with little or no social or ecological value. These trees are meant for industrial use and they do not sustain wild animals or birds. The disappearance of birds from their physical surrounding has had a very significant impact on agricultural production as well. With no birds, no butterflies, no bees, and no beetles around, pollination is badly affected. The crops grow very well with the help of chemical fertilizers but the yield is often disappointing. The spraying of DDT powder, which is done not only as malaria-control measure but also to get rid of the insects afflicting the crops, has also caused the disappearance of the pollinators.

Rats are some of the smallest creatures Limbus interact with. The rats not only eat the stored grain, but they often change the course of irrigation and even cause the terraces to break by digging holes through which water gushes out. Unlike some of the tribes of North-east India, Limbus do not eat rats, not for any taboo or totem but perhaps because they are a proud people. They may borrow but will not beg. They might be poor but they are rarely prepared to plead with high caste authorities to extend benefits to them. Limbu women are even more notoriously proud. 'Why would Limbus marry so many Lepcha women?' I was asked in 1992 by an old Limbu in Yangnam, Panchthar district of East Nepal, when he came to know that my wife is a Lepcha. Before I could find a sensible reply, he answered himself saying, 'Because Limbu women are very proud and dominant.' This old Limbu whose own wife was a Limbu, also had a theory to explain why the Yakkhas lost their identity. According to him it was because they married too many Limbu women. Such a proud people have an interesting relationship with rats.

Although Limbus often use traps and poison to kill rats, they also believe that to have rats at home is a sign of a wealthy person. If there are no rats at home that means there is nothing to eat; the family is poor. In other words, although a nuisance in the terraces, the rats are also a symbol of prestige. Further, when a child's tooth falls or is extracted it is offered to the rats in the house saying that they take the tooth and give a new tooth, strong like that of a rat, in return.

Limbu perception of their physical environment

This issue has been extensively addressed in the previous section. My theoretical position, as stated already, is that the concept of their physical environment is inseparable from their social and spiritual worlds. Similarly, Aggarwal and Russell also show (in Chapters 5 and 3, respectively, in this volume), with reference to Kumaun and a Yakkha village in East Nepal, how the sacred and the profane worlds of people overlap.

In order to demonstrate my point, I first list some environment-related concepts in the Limbu language. Although all Limbus can speak Nepali, I exclude the Nepali concepts from the purview of discussion here on the ground that it is a quite recently acquired language. Use of Nepali words would also make the Limbu perception indistinguishable from Nepali perceptions. Some of the Limbu words related to environment, directly or indirectly, are as follows:

Limbu	English
<i>Cha sot</i>	the offering of the first fruits of harvest to the household goddess, Yuma
<i>Dung dunge</i>	god of the Samba clan; the daughter inherits the god's worship from her mother and propitiates him with the sacrifice of an uncastrated goat
<i>Hang pha</i>	a species of bamboo used for making <i>tongba</i> or the container in which fermented millet is poured and sipped with the help of a bamboo pipe
<i>Hang sitlang</i>	the main post of the house where Oama, or the household deity, resides and brings luck and prosperity to the household
<i>Keba</i>	the tiger spirit that eats the liver and heart of its victim
<i>Kebo</i>	the spirit of the womb responsible for difficult childbirth
<i>Kham</i>	land, soil, earth
<i>Khamplep</i>	earth, soil
<i>Khim/Him</i>	house
<i>Lam sakma</i>	closing of the path of the forest spirit by the shaman after driving it away from one's body or house
<i>Lekwa</i>	clay, mud

<i>Lising pha</i>	a sturdy variety of bamboo common in the middle hills, appropriate for construction of houses
<i>Lok pha</i>	a variety of bamboo used for making hunting instruments
<i>Makhyu</i>	bear
<i>Maki</i>	maize
<i>Mendohi kokenamba</i>	god of the soil who is paid for the burial land
<i>Miyong Shire</i>	spirit of the wild cat that is fond of eating the livers and hearts of its victims
<i>Mutlama</i>	a variety of bamboo
<i>Nahangma</i>	a female deity that resides on the top of snow-clad mountains, who is worshipped for regaining power (<i>Na</i> meaning 'hereafter', 'otherworldly', <i>hang</i> meaning 'power', and <i>ma</i> meaning 'woman'). She is considered a warrior goddess and is offered a sacrifice of chicken twice every year, during the descending and ascending seasons called <i>songmang</i> and <i>thangmang</i>
<i>Nam</i>	sun
<i>Nam get</i>	rising sun, east
<i>Nam tha</i>	setting sun, west
<i>Nam yoba</i>	lavender, useful for purification rites
<i>Ningma phuma</i>	the creator of the world, the omni-present, male god
<i>Pha</i>	bamboo
<i>Pha yet</i>	a bamboo winnower
<i>Phung sam</i>	'tree', 'flower' or external soul
<i>Pitkekomba</i>	a cattle-herder, who grazes cows and buffaloes
<i>Pung punge</i>	spirit of springs and waterfalls
<i>Saba sam</i>	monkey spirit whose path must be closed before making any sacrifice at home
<i>Samyok lung thim</i>	the evergreen grass and stone used for purification ritual
<i>Sijongwa</i>	pure (rain) water used for certain rituals
<i>Sing</i>	tree
<i>Songmang thangmang</i>	declining season, rising season
<i>Sung khimba</i>	an aromatic plant used for treating malaria
<i>Tampung</i>	forest
<i>Toksongpa</i>	god of ridges or mountains
<i>Wabung</i>	source of a river
<i>Warok</i>	lake
<i>Warokma</i>	goddess of water
<i>Ya</i>	rice
<i>Yakhe</i>	yam
<i>Yumikma</i>	the lake of souls

(Sagant 1996, glossary)

From the above select list of environment-related Limbu words, one can draw the following tentative conclusions. First, the variety of bamboos mentioned in their language indicates that they were once a pastoral community, a point I have tried to make earlier in this chapter, as they were familiar with bamboos that grow in the high mountains as well as those that grow in the middle hills. Second, the physical environment is not just physical but also spiritual, as various gods, goddesses, spirits, and deities reside in the forests, streams, waterfalls, mountains, animals, and most importantly human beings as well. Human beings do not apparently occupy any superior position in relation to the physical and spiritual worlds; rather their health, prosperity, etc. are dependent on the pleasure of the supernatural beings. Third, even the houses are not free from the deities like Yuma and Kapoba (literally grandmother and old man) and the main pillar of the house is sacred like the hearth and the granary are. Fourth, the above glossary clearly shows that animism is their religion, although it is common between the Hindu and Buddhist Nepalis to share some of the characteristics of animism. Finally, they do not have a single word for the environment.

I think the concept of animism, as it is practised by Limbus in the eastern Himalaya, calls for some discussion at this juncture because it not only promises to unravel the overlap between the human, the sacred and the physical worlds among Limbus, but it might also hold the key to understanding how they conceive of their physical environment. Animism forms the sub-stratum of Limbu beliefs even as Hinduism and Christianity heavily influence many of them. As a matter of fact, this is also true of most tribes of Northeast India who have taken to Christianity.

I begin the discussion on Limbu animism by quoting some early British writers who, I think, are fairly accurate in their description of the Limbu religion. C. A. Campbell, one of the earliest to write on the Limbu religion, says that they are neither Hindus nor Buddhists and it is indeed difficult to give a name to the religion they practise. He writes that Limbus believe in an all-powerful god but do not build temples. To quote him:

The usual form of worship consists in making small offerings of grain, vegetables, and sugarcane, and in sacrificing cows, buffaloes, pigs, fowls, sheep, and goats, to one, or any and all of the gods, and in eating the flesh afterwards, or as it is pithily expressed by themselves in dedicating 'the life breath to the gods, the flesh to ourselves'. The usual places of sacrifices are merely marked by the erection of bamboo poles, to which rags previously consecrated, by having been offered up, are tied; these are generally placed for convenience at the road sides, and a cairn of stones collected at their base.

(Campbell 1845: 77)

Edward Dalton, who wrote less than 30 years later, draws the section on Limbu religion almost entirely from Campbell. Similarly Eden Vansittart,

who wrote in the early twentieth century, relies on the authority of Herbert Risley and Sarat Chandra Das. While the latter's classification of Limbu priests is widely quoted by subsequent writers, this is not a correct representation. Das's main flaw is that he has confused the various sacred/medical specialists whom Limbus consult for various purposes with Limbu priests themselves. To me, Risley provides a more accurate and exhaustive account of Limbu animism and argues at length that it is not really shamanism. He is at the most willing to concede it only the status of elementary shamanism. He writes:

[T]he Limbu religion may be defined as a rather elementary form of Shamanistic animism, in which the Bijua and Phedangma play the part of Shaman, the former operating on the demons, and the latter having for his department the gods. Finally, we may perhaps hazard the conjecture that the original religion of the Limbus is closely akin to the Pon or ancient religion of Tibet. In both we find the forces of nature and the spirits of departed men exalted into objects of worship. In both systems temples and images are unknown, while propitiatory offerings occupy a prominent place. To complete the parallel, neither recognize(s) a definite priestly order, while both encourage resort to Shamans or medicine men to ward off the malign influences which surround the human race.

(Risley [1891] 1981: 19)

Let me make a few comments on Risley before continuing. First, the division of labour for Bijua and Phedangma is not correct even historically. These shamans are called in to ward off any crisis that a Limbu thinks is connected to the supernatural world. Second, the relationship between Bon or Pon and Limbu animism is interesting and worth exploring a little further, which I do a little later, but what he says about spirits of departed men is certainly mistaken. They are (and were) propitiated with offering only if a Phedangma's divination shows that such a spirit is still wandering around unhappy and unfulfilled and is the cause of sickness of someone in the family. It is, however, true that there is no temple and no worship of idols in Limbu animism, although of late they have constructed one temple in Sikkim, which was a matter of much debate among Limbus for some time.

The similarity between Pon, which is a pre-Buddhist religion of the Tibetans and Bhutias (Tulku 1991), and Limbu animism is striking. This is quite clear from the following list of overlapping concepts, although the Limbu and Tibetan words may not be same or even similar (key: L for Limbu and T for Tibetan):

External (tree/flower) soul:	<i>Phung sam</i> (L)	<i>bla-gnas or bla-sing</i> (T)
Lake of souls:	<i>Yumikma</i> (L)	<i>bla mtsho</i> (T)
To 'hold the head high':	<i>Sam phongma</i> (L)	<i>dbu-'phangs mtho</i> or <i>dbu-rmog</i> (T)

Slave:	<i>Yog</i> (L)	<i>g'yog-po</i> (T)
Gods of the land/soil:	<i>Okwanama</i> (L)	<i>gzhi-bdag, sa-bdag</i> (T)
Power, king:	<i>Hang</i> (L)	<i>dbang</i> (T)
Carcass of pig (necessary for marriage):	<i>Khokpa</i> (L)	<i>khog-pa</i> (T)
God of women:	<i>Manguenna</i> (L)	<i>mo-lha</i> (T)
Most important soul of man that resides on top of the head:	<i>Mukuma sam</i> (L)	<i>dbang</i> (T)
Internal pollution as a result of internal quarrels:	<i>Mangde, Nahen</i> (L)	<i>nang-dme</i> (T)
Household deity that dwells on the central post or fireplace:	<i>Oama</i> (L)	<i>nang-lha, thab-lha</i> (T)
Pig:	<i>Phak</i> (L)	<i>Phak</i> (T)
Lifting of the head:	<i>Sam phangma</i> (L)	<i>dbu'phangs mtho</i> (T)
High, up:	<i>Tho</i> (L)	<i>mtho</i> (T)

(Sagant 1996, glossary)

I deal here briefly with *Sam phongma* (to 'hold the head high') to describe a dimension of Limbu culture that links them quite clearly with the pre-Buddhist culture of Tibet, which also was animistic. This also seems to have some connection with the exaggerated sense of pride the Limbus have about which I have briefly commented above. This is normally a problem only with the male head of a household. When he falls sick and there is no apparent reason for his or her sickness and divination by a Phedangma does not lead to any useful revelation, a ritual to 'lift the head up' is performed. The indications of a man whose head has, so to say, 'fallen' are generally as follows. He remains quiet and withdrawn, does not eat normally, does not sleep normally, has no apparent bodily ailment, and there is no brightness in the face. There are various causes of such a state of social or psychological morbidity. For example, he may have been insulted, assaulted, or abused by someone junior in kinship relationship; he may have failed to fulfil a promise made publicly or privately; a younger sibling or cousin may have married earlier than he; or he may have suffered the exposure of adultery by his wife. All this indicates some kind of dent in the person's ego, pride, or conscience. A ritual to 'raise his head' must be performed as early as possible, failing which he may even die. And this ritual is certainly one of the most important rituals Limbus perform, and has a striking similarity to the ritual Lohorung Rais perform in order to raise the *saya* or 'ancestral substance'; it is 'one of the links between an individual and the world of the ancestors'. It is also seen as 'the principle of warlike strength' (see Hardman 1981: 162-5).

No wonder then the first chapter of Philippe Sagant's *The Dozing Shaman: The Limbus of Eastern Nepal* is entitled 'With Head Held High'. Actually, as

Sagant rightly points out (Sagant 1996: 15), the word used by Limbus is 'soul' and not 'head', but since they believe the soul rests in the head, the above expression is not inappropriate. Like the Tamangs, Rais, and other Himalayan communities, Limbus have a concept of multiple souls resting in different parts of the body, particularly the head, both the right and left shoulders, the armpits, the chest, etc. (ibid.: 18–19). They also have a concept of *Phung-sam* or 'flower-soul', which is the 'vegetal other', called 'vegetal double' by Sagant (ibid.: 20–1). Whereas the various body souls are considered as seats of power/energy, the flower-soul is considered as the seat of life and indicates the present as well as future of the person it represents. Marriage auguries are made on the basis of flower-souls and divinations about future are often based on it. In the *tongsing* ceremony, which may last from one to three nights, and which is performed by every lineage group once every three years to renew the life force of its members, the entire ritual is focused on such soul. The Limbus believe that if the flower or the 'vegetal other' of a person who is sick, which is kept in a vase (usually made of brass or zinc), withers away while the shaman is performing the ritual, the person it represents will not survive either.

Sagant (ibid.: 19–20) also points out that blood is an extremely important medium for 'raising the head' as it also is for cleansing an offence. Blood is the revitalizer of the soul as well as the body. And whether the raising of someone's head will be done with the blood of chicken, goat, pig, or buffalo depends on the economic and political status of the person whose 'head' has 'fallen'. How hard he beats his chest or thumps his feet as a part of the 'raising of the head' also depends on the status of the person concerned.

The Limbus also have the practice of planting a banana tree on the grave of a stillborn child and cutting the tree before it starts flowering in order to symbolically relieve the mother from the torments caused by the soul of such a child (ibid.: 20).

Conclusion

The previous sections show how the social world of Limbus is imperceptibly blended with the physical and the spiritual worlds in which they live. In fact, there are several concepts like soul, god, deity, spirit, ghost, energy, and power that are used interchangeably and no clear boundaries are ever drawn between them. The spiritual beings can be both benevolent and malevolent depending on whether they are happy or not. But identification of the sex of the supernatural being responsible for someone's ailment is important to ensure that the animals or birds to be sacrificed are from the right sex (for a male deity will need to be propitiated with a male bird or animal only). The supernatural beings are believed to be visible to a Phedangma or to some individuals with the knowledge of communicating with them, but will not be visible to ordinary human beings. Furthermore, these supernatural beings

need a medium to reveal themselves to the living. Such a medium could be both inanimate, like rocks, utensils, blowing pipe, wind, winnower, or animate like trees, bamboos, birds and animals. Most importantly, supernatural beings are everywhere – inside the house, in the main post, in the hearth, in the threshold, in the granary, or outside the house, in the spring, in the cow shed, in the kitchen garden, etc. But some such spirits are to be offered sacrifices only outside the house and some only inside the house, some only with blood and some without blood, some with the promise of blood and some without such a promise, some above the house and some below it, and so on. Such knowledge of the spiritual world is not confined to Phedangmas; most elderly Limbus know it.

It is obvious from the above that the Limbu conception of their physical world is interlinked with their spiritual and social worlds. Whereas Limbus may lack the scientific knowledge of interdependence between the various elements of physical environment and thereby cause great harm to it they certainly know how such elements are linked with various elements in the spiritual and social worlds. For, in their worldview, they are not just elements of nature but also elements inhabited and nurtured by spiritual beings whose domain very well extends to human beings as well, both while living and after death.

Such an intermeshed worldview is under threat of extinction today. As elsewhere in African and Latin American countries, the sacred specialists have become extremely rare and those whom Limbus think are experts in matters of their religion are even rarer. One needs to travel much further distances today to find a Phedangma and one should indeed consider oneself lucky if he is found at home at the end of a long journey. The Limbus of the eastern Himalayas are concerned about this crisis but there is little they can do to salvage themselves from such a situation. One cannot become a Phedangma the way one can become a doctor or engineer; he has to be born with such a destiny.¹⁰ So, at least, they believe.

If Phedangmas have become rare today, certain plants that are vital to their rituals and dances have vanished completely due to rampant deforestation all over the region. The wild animals and birds have vanished with the forest and so have the thick bamboo groves that might once have sheltered wandering ghosts and spirits. Some Limbus are, however, surprised that there has been no adverse impact on their life even when they have stopped making sacrifices to so many gods and spirits as their forefathers did. No one organizes a three-night long *tongsing* any more, not because no one can afford it, but no living Phedangma is expert enough to conduct it. Several households belonging to the Samba clan have no he-goats reared for sacrifice in the name of their clan-deity called *Dungdunge*.¹¹ Where have so many of their gods and spirits vanished? How long will their worldviews last? No one has an answer, nor perhaps can there be one. Perhaps one day the Limbus might come together and perform a ritual to 'raise their head' again.

Notes

- 1 *Lhomentsongsum* is a 'treaty' between three (*sum* in Limbu language) communities: the Lhopas or Bhutias, Membas/Monpas or Lepchas, and Tsongs/Chongs or Limbus. These three communities had taken an oath to live as one family with the Lhopa or Bhutia as the father, Memba or Lepcha as mother, and Tsong or Limbu as son. This was accomplished by the first Tibetan king in Sikkim, Phuntsog Namgyal, to neutralize the imminent resistance to his rule in the newly consolidated kingdom called Sikkim, which is a corrupt version of the Limbu word *Sukhim*, meaning 'new house'. The Bhutias called it Denzong and the Lepchas, Mayel Lyang. The Limbus had fought against the Tibetan ruler prior to the consecration of this 'treaty'. See Sinha (1975) and Subba (1990: 40–5).
- 2 Tampungma is one of the most important Limbu deities. This deity is particularly important because Limbus believe that the souls of all adults must pass through the forest to reach the 'lake of souls,' the ultimate destination for the souls of the dead. See Sagant (1996: Chapter 13).
- 3 Despite strong reservations expressed by Ben Campbell, in Chapter 10 in this volume, against what he calls 'ethnically circumscribed worldviews for understanding environmental relations' (p. 187), I would think that engaging in such a worldview is neither dated nor inferior to an approach focused on 'subjectivities' that Campbell advocates as a better alternative. While I agree with him on the abuse of cultural approaches in environmental studies, I opt for a more informed cultural understanding rather than abandoning the cultural approach without giving it a fair chance to prove itself. After all, as Butz and Eyles argue (1997: 8), environment is, in the ultimate analysis, culturally constituted.
- 4 *Janajāti* refers to ethnic groups like the Rai, Limbu, Yakha, Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa, Tharu, and Sunuwar. Since 1990, the members of these communities have launched a full-scale movement in Nepal to revive their language, religion and culture, which were suppressed under the statist agenda of promoting the Nepali language, Hindu religion, and Hindu culture in Nepal.
- 5 Andrew Russell, in Chapter 3 in this volume, discusses the 'Yakha' perception of environment, arguing that one must understand the social and cultural contexts which give substance to their perceptions.
- 6 *Tongba* refers to the bamboo container in which fermented millet or wheat is poured, allowed to soak with hot water, and sipped with the help of a bamboo pipe with a small slit at the bottom so that when one sips only the alcoholic content comes up. Almost every Limbu, as much as Rais, Yakkhas and Lepchas, keeps several such containers in the kitchen. During marriage and funeral ceremonies, young men fetch such containers in large numbers from the forest so that every adult guest gets one each. For regular use, many Limbu keep *tongba* made of wood with the edges decorated with aluminium braces. A young boy can sip an adult's *tongba* without getting scolded but never gets one for himself. In this sense it symbolically differentiates the adults from the adolescents. There is, however, no particular age at which one begins to get one and an indulging grandmother might allow even a minor to sip her *tongba*.
- 7 *Khukuri*, often wrongly spelt as *Khukri* or *Kukri*, is a slightly curved knife with the edge inside and the broad end outside. It has various sizes, lengths and shapes. This is considered an extremely handy instrument in forests as well as in war.
- 8 *Dasai* is one of the largest Nepali festivals that occurs during October on the eve of *Vijayadaśami* of the larger Hindu society. During the festival the sons and daughters who have been away because of jobs or marriage return to their natal home seek the blessings of their parents and grand-parents. The sons and daughters are also expected to bring their spouses and children to seek the blessings of their parents-in-law or grandparents. It continues for three days during which

- period there is a lot of feasting in every house and the young children go around the houses of their senior relatives seeking the blessings of the elderly and enjoying the ceremonial food. The houses are nicely daubed, whitewashed or painted and there is thorough cleaning of both inside and outside of the house. This is not done only if a senior member of the lineage or family has expired during the year.
- 9 *Tihār* takes place about a fortnight later. This is an equally important festival of Nepalis in which groups of young men and women go from house to house singing songs, narrating mythological stories, and blessing the members of the household. In return they are offered food and drinks. The houses are especially decorated during this festival with paper flowers, real flowers, banana trees, etc. One of the highlights of this festival is worshipping of birds and animals like crow, dog, cow and ox on different days. One of these nights is a new moon night in which they light oil lamps and candles to welcome Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth. On the last day the brothers seek the blessings of their sisters who in turn receive gifts or cash from them. Limbus abstain from celebrating this festival only if there is death of an adult at home or in the lineage group. However, after 1990s many of them have given up celebrating both *Dasai* and *Tihār* on the ground that they are actually Hindu festivals. For more details on this, see Subba (1999b).
- 10 Phedangma, or the Limbu priest, has become a rare institution today. The decline of this institution and its total disappearance from some parts of the eastern Himalayas have, as Limbus rightly argue, nothing to do with clientele. Although Limbus have been influenced by Hinduism and many have converted to Christianity, there is no dearth of Limbus who would seek the services of a Phedangma. Limbus believe that the most important reason for this crisis is that one has to be born with signs of becoming a Phedangma, and such children are simply not being born.
- 11 *Dungdunge* is the reigning deity of the Samba clan, but interestingly it moves through the female line, from mother to daughter. When a Phedangma identifies the cause of a Samba clan member's sickness to be the anger of his/her clan deity, a he-goat is reared without castrating it in the name of this deity and a ritual is performed when the goat grows to some size. The meat of this animal is distributed among the clan members after the ritual is over. Failure to please this deity can lead to serious illness and even death of a clan member.