

Bon Among The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh

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The Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh is the home of a number of tribes with diverse socio-political-cultural and religious institutions, as a result of which scholars consider it a paradise for the study of tribal history and culture. Among the tribes of the state, at least a dozen profess Buddhism, both Theravada and Mahayana. Tribes like the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Nahs, Membas, Khambas, Meyors and Zhakrings are followers of Mahayana Buddhism. More specifically, as a result of longstanding influences from Tibet, they follow the Tibetan form of Buddhism. Of these tribes, the Monpas are the largest Buddhist group in the state; the famous Tawang monastery is the heart and soul of Monpa Buddhism.

The Monpas are a large tribal community, numbering 27,812 persons in 1971.¹ They live in the Kameng frontier regions, adjoining Tibet and Bhutan. They inhabit a large area comprising the Dirang circle north of Bomdila, the Kalaktang circle in the south-western part of West Kameng district, and the entire Tawang district. As per their settlement, the Monpas are called Tawang Monpas or Northern Monpas, Dirang Monpas or central Monpas, and Kalaktang Monpas or Southern Monpas. A study of the history of their migration reveals that they came to their present settlements in various batches at different times, from Tibet as well as eastern Bhutan.² Of all the tribes of Arunachal (apart from the Khamits, who use the Tai script) only the Monpas have a script of their own, known as Bodic.

It is generally believed among the Monpas that Guru Padmasambhava, locally known as Lupon Rimpoche, was instrumental in popularizing the Tibetan form of Buddhism among the people sometime in the seventh century C.E.³ The popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the area is testified in the social, cultural, and religious institutions of the Monpas and in their day-to-day activities. Although the Monpas are Buddhist, they also believe in various non-Buddhist spirits and deities, indeed, the religion of the Monpas retains remnants of the old Bon tradition.

Bon Religion

It is generally agreed that before the advent of Buddhism, the dominant religion of Tibet was Bon.⁴ According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, the meaning of the word 'Bon' still remains unknown⁵, this is corroborated by Waddell.⁶ H. Hoffman mentions that origin of the word Bon is lost in the past and it is not readily definable, but in all probability once referred to the conjuring of the gods by magic formulas.⁷ Reflecting Buddhist views, S.C. Das writes that "Bon is the ancient religion of Tibet, which was fetishism, demon worship and propitiation by means of incantation"⁸ Buddhist sources, however, describe Bon in a biased manner as a debased and primitive form of nature worship, confined to magic and sorcery to gain control over the elemental entities.

In contrast to Buddhism, Bon is mainly concerned with the creation and maintenance of the universe. Bonpos pay little heed to the pursuit of salvation through the practice of austerities, but, rather, seek magical power through union with divinities manifested in mountains, trees, lakes and rivers. It is believed by the followers of Bon that nine cosmic deities (Se and the Deyge) created the world—a world in which birth, death, marriage and sickness all have their place. If the worshipper can attune himself with these gods through various ritual ceremonies and by thorough understanding of these ceremonies, he will be in a position to fulfill whatever is demanded of him by the cosmic order; overseeing the cosmic order is the supreme divine principle of Bon, referred to as Yeshen (ye gshen). Three phases of the religion have been identified in Tibet: Jol ('jol, or Emergent) Bon, Kyar ('khyar, or Deviant) Bon and Gyur (bsgyur, or Transformed) Bon.⁹

Bon Among the Monpas

In Pre-Buddhist times, the Monpas believed in a variety of deities or spirits that were said to control their life and prosperity. The Bonpu priest of the present day seeks to obtain the favour of spirits or deities through reciting prayers and mantras, making offerings, and sacrificing birds and animals at a selected place. The Bonpu priest performs the worship on behalf of the person who seeks the blessing of the supernatural power, and accepts cash or some other payment from the sponsor. Though there is no particular caste assigned to performing pujas, not everyone is capable of performing them, as the art of puja

has to be learned from monks. Exorcism also is practiced, to avert evil. Thus, the religion of the Monpas retains remnants of old Bon traditions.

Close to many a Monpa village, there is a sanctuary, usually consisting of several flat stones or a stone structure used for the burning of incense, where rites in honour of local deities are performed. The priests of this cult are called Bun in the Tawang region and Phramin in the Dirang area. They have no connection with lamas, monks, or the Buddhist gumpa; they worship the local deities with animal sacrifices, and also offer eggs, meat, fish, rice and beer to various spirits and local gods.¹⁰

Besides these priests, there also are shamanic figures known as Yu-min, who are subject to possession by gods and spirits and who prophesize while in trance. Both men and women can become Yu-min, but it is not possible to combine the function of a lama with that of a Bon shaman. Phramin and Yu-min are believed to be able to see the souls of the departed and know where they go. In this respect, their function is similar to that of the priests (Nyubu) of the Nishis, another community of Arunachal Pradesh, and it is not unlikely that the Bon cult represents an archaic local religion, which was overlaid by Buddhism. Furer-Haimendorf has mentioned that until three generations ago, the village of Lisa which has now two Buddhist gompas, had only Bon priests and neither lamas nor any Buddhist shrine,¹¹ Bon also is practised by the Kalaktang Monpas, among whom the priest performing deity-worship is known as Bonpa.

If we study the religious practices of the Monpas, we find distinct similarities between their practices and those of the Bon religion of the Tibetans. The religious rites of these communities have been chiefly concerned with taming a host of supernatural beings for curing illness and warding off natural calamities and epidemics. The supernatural beings residing in mountains and other natural surroundings are propitiated through exorcism, sorcery, enchantments, and animal sacrifices. To observe the various facets of these rites and rituals, and to enable us to compare them with Bon religious practices, certain case studies at the village level have been conducted in the Monpa areas. These case studies take into account the religious practices extant in these areas, and may help us to reconstruct the religious practices observed by the people of this area before the advent of Buddhism.

Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Rituals of the Refingjees¹²

Rahung is a village inhabited by Eastern Monpas. The term "rah" means rice, while the term "ung" means field. Therefore, it may be assumed that a village having a rice-field came to be known as Rahung. The people of this village are called Refingjee by their neighbours. They are divided into three clans: Shermu, Nampu and Ngoimu. However, their priests belong to none of these clans, as they are said to be descendants of the priest who had first migrated to this village long ago.

The Refingjees believe in a host of supernatural beings, primarily the spirits living either on the top of the neighbouring mountain or in the nearby stream. These include Mani-Manjang Lioh-Dhundi, Jari-Jakar, Joh-Rengna, Jongtu Kusurn Dema, Tashi Thungling, Choskar Amu, Borung Dukang, Jumtokchi Dema, Zcingbee, Khentong-Rongtong, Loh-Thanthan, Lahza, Adang, Sar Regorena, Jagar- Singree, and many others. For performing rituals associated with these deities, services of the traditional priests are employed. The priests identify the spirit to be propitiated, either by spirit-possession or divination, then exorcise the particular spirit and propitiate it with an animal sacrifice. These procedures are used for curing illness or warding off epidemics and natural calamities.

The chief priest of the Refingjees is called the Chhobjeedok, who supervises and performs all rites and rituals connected with the spirit-religion of the villagers. The first Chhobjeedok of Rahung was from Jirigaon village. Since then the post has been occupied by his descendants. For religious observances, the Chhobjeedok is accompanied on each and every occasion by the Molo-Akho. The term "Molo" means spirit and "Akho" means headman. Hence, the Molo-Akho means the headman of spirits. He may be so called because whenever in trance a Molo-Akho is said to be in spirit possession. Though the presence of the Molo-Akho is essential on every ritual occasion, he is not supposed either to preside over any ritual performance or to assist the Chhobjeedok in propitiation. However, after the death of the existing Chhobjeedok, it is the duty of the Molo-Akho to train the son of the departed priest for assuming the post of Chhobjeedok. Two assistants, known as Changmi, assist the Chhobjeedok in religious observances. Ordinary priests are known as Rom-Chhobjee; they discharge the duty of curing people from illness by enchanting, exorcising and propitiating particular spirits through animal sacrifice and other rituals.

Individual illness and epidemics, as well as natural calamities, are considered to be caused by the fury of particular spirits. For identification

of the spirit responsible and the means of their propitiation, the priest either seeks the help of the Molo-Akho or reads the omens by observing a chicken liver. Then, depending on the circumstances of the case, the priest will sacrifice sheep, cattle, yak, or chickens. Blood of the sacrificed animals is offered to the concerned spirit and the liver of the victim is observed to see whether the particular spirit has been appeased or not.

The festivals of the Refingjees, of which the Loh-Sheba, Chhedung, Sumothong and Jolow are the most important, are also connected with the propitiation of these spirits residing on mountains and in nearby streams. Various rites and rituals are performed by the priests on occasion of different festivals, of which animal sacrifice is the most significant.

The Loh-Seheba festival is celebrated for a week, generally in the month of January. This festival is also known as Mani-Manjang, after the name of the guardian deity of the Refingjees, who resides in the nearby mountain. It is celebrated in an open place where an altar is erected with the help of scaffolding of split bamboos. The altar is decorated specially with large fishes. Offerings of corn, maize, beer, etc., are made to Mani-Majang. In addition, a sheep is sacrificed to propitiate the deity. Apart from the annual Loh-Seheba, every five years the Refingjees celebrate Chhedung, another festival in honor of Mani-Manjang. The rites and rituals observed for this festival are similar to those for Loh-Seheba, but on a larger scale. Indeed, the elaborate sacrifices required for Chhedung are so expensive that it seldom is celebrated any more.

The Sumothong is yet another festival of the Refingjees. It is generally celebrated in the month of February, so as to drive away the malevolent spirits of their natural surroundings, which may cause accidents, epidemics, and loss of animal and human lives. On the occasion of this festival, enchanting of mantras and sacred dances are performed. The Sumothong procession is led by the Chhobjeedok, who enchants the mantras. He is followed by naked males who cover their faces with wooden masks and paint their bodies with a black herbal resin. The group rushes to each and every house of the village and seeks to drive away the spirits by displaying rhythmic movements.

Yet another important festival of the Refingjees is the Jolow. It entails a special set of rituals to be observed by the individual household. It lasts for one day only and there is no fixed time for its observance. Individual households seek the services of the Chhobjeedok for performing the relevant rituals, which involve his invoking the various spirits and

propitiating them so as to ensure the well being and welfare of the members of the household.

Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Rituals of the Dichijees¹³

Jerigaon (erstwhile Bhoot) village is also inhabited by Eastern Monpas. Jerigaon is situated atop a flat hill along the Bomdila-Nafra road. People of Jerigaon are called Dichijee by their neighbours. The Dichijees are divided into eight clans, the Sunickjee, Namthungjee, Tadung, Yamnojee, Rinchinadu, Jardo, Khitanjee and Refingjee. It is said that the people migrating to this village from R. h'ung village constitute the Refingjee clan

The Dichijees also have firm faith in a host of supernatural beings or spirits, whose abodes are in the nearby mountains. Important among these are Tang, Sarjudi, Sar Chandung, Sawah, Chukpu, Norgie, Lecha, Manjothung, Khambu, and Thangley. These spirits are propitiated for protection and welfare of the people of the village

Their invocation and propitiation is performed by the traditional priests through a set of rites and rituals. Senior priests, who are in a special category, are called Asu Chhajee or Blu Chhajee. Generally, a qualified man of the Rinchinadu clan serves as the Asu Chhajee; the post is hereditary in nature. Every new Asu Chajee is groomed by the existing Asu Chhajee. On the occasion of religious observance, after observing omens, the Chhajee selects the Subah, or assistants, for the performance of rituals. After selection, the Subah has to stay with the Asu Chhajee for at least a fortnight, and can resume his normal duties only when the rituals are over. Ordinary priests are known as Romu Chhajee; he can serve as the medium for any departed soul and, in a state of spirit possession, is capable of curing the illnesses of individual people by propitiation of the particular spirits. However, a Romu Chhajee never can perform the rituals on festive occasions concerned with the welfare of the village community.

For curing illness, the Romu Chhajee examines omens to ascertain the identity of the spirit whose wrath has brought the disease. Later he performs the sacrifices of particular animals required for the propitiation of that particular spirit. If anybody suffers from illness owing to the impact of black magic, a special set of rituals are performed by the Romu Chhajee. Such rituals are called 'Kharam'. For this, enchanting of mantras is

followed by offering of a ritual egg to undo the effect of the black magic. At last the ritual egg is shot at by an arrow.

Festivals and rituals of the Dichijees are celebrated in honour of the spirits or gods of the mountains. There are various such festivals and rituals, including La Sahphu, Sudoh Aphu, Ase Thephu, Bay Haphu, and Yang Shree Chhengphu.

The Lah Sahphu festival is celebrated for three important spirits living on nearby mountaintops : Tang, Sarjudi and Sar Chandung. This festival is celebrated in January, and lasts for a week. It is also called the Fish Festival, since altars for rituals of this festival are decorated with large fish. During the festival, a sheep is sacrificed and incantations are sung, with the aim of ensuring the prosperity and sound health of the people and a bumper harvest in their fields. In addition to the above-mentioned rituals, a humped bull is decorated, worshipped, and then set free. This ritual bull signifies the abode of the mountain gods Tang, Sarjudi, and Sar Chandung.

Another festival of the Dichijees is Sudoh-Aphu. It is celebrated for a single day in October every year. In this festival, the sacrifice of a yak is performed to appease the mountain god, Sudoh Aphu, and to assure a prosperous life for the members of the village community.

Along with the above mentioned festivals the Dichijees also perform the Ase Thephu, Bay Haphu, and Yang Shree Chhengphu rituals to drive away, respectively, the malevolent spirits believed to be the causes of diseases and destruction, accidental fires, and loss of wealth. In the Ase Thephu ritual, young people of the village go to the forest in the early morning on the dates prescribed by the priest and hunt monkeys. They take off the hides of monkeys and come back to the village around midnight with hides and four types of leaves. They remain naked all along, but keep their bodies painted with black resin. They rush to each and every house and strike the bodies of sleeping people with those leaves. At last, they rush to the outskirts of the village and hang the hides in all directions. Through this ritual, evil spirits causing diseases and destruction are driven away. In the Bay Haphu ritual, two persons of the village go naked, carrying baskets of bamboo. They collect burning firewood from each and every household and throw it far away from the village to protect the village from fire accidents. The Yang Shree Chhengphu ritual is observed just before the harvesting of maize to maintain the fortunes of the people.

Practices Among the Khunjees and Khitamjees¹⁴

Such religious observances are followed not only in the Rahung and Jerigaon villages, but also in other Eastern Monpa villages, such as Khoina and Khoitam. The names of their gods and spirits of the mountain and stream, as well as the terms for priests, festivals, and rituals vary from village to village. However, functionally, their practices resemble those of the Rahung and Jerigaon—and of the Bon religion.

Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Rituals of the Dirang Monpas¹⁵

Among the Dirang or Central Monpas we find a type of religion called Bonpuism. The Dirang follow the religious observances of Tibetan Buddhism simultaneously with the rituals connected with Bonpuism. Bonpuism centres on a set of rituals performed by a traditional priest called the Bonpu. From our field studies in Sangti and Khaso villages, it is evident that the Bonpu performs rituals connected with the spirits of the mountains and streams, as well as of the soil. Sometimes, a Bonpu may cure a seriously ill patient through the Breyiban ritual, which is performed in the home.

Rituals of Bonpuism can be learnt by the new priest (Bonpu) from any existing Bonpu, who is also called Framin. Another category of priests is the Yumin or Lajukkhanu. While the Bonpus act like ordinary priests, the Yumin have miraculous powers. When in trance a Yumin becomes an emissary of gods and spirits. The Yumin performs esoteric rites and rituals to cure illness and to seek the welfare of the village community.

As per the beliefs of the Monpas, every person has a soul (yong) and it has to be with body in order to keep the person healthy and prosperous. When a person's soul is arrested by some spirit, he or she falls ill. Hence, to bring back the soul back to the body, the Framin and Yumin perform rituals of invoking the spirit, enchant mantras to appease it, and make propitiatory offerings of cock (*chefher*), the type of food taken by the diseased person (*sur*) and figurines made from the dough of barley and butter (*torma*).

There also is a communal ritual, the Jukla, which is performed in the village by the Framin in order to avoid natural calamities and epidemics.

The Monpas of Sangti and Khaso villages also celebrate two important Bonpu festivals. Lha Soikhan and Kakung Torkhan. At these festivals, the main priest or Mang Bonpu, performs various rituals to appease the spirits residing in mountain, stream, and soil, and to seek their blessings for the village community. However, no animal sacrifice is performed in these villages. Instead, dough figurines (torma) are offered to the spirits. Substitution of animal sacrifice by offering of the torma has certainly been influenced by Buddhism.

Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Rituals in Other Monpa Areas

The pantheon of traditional gods or supernatural beings has been investigated by scholars in other villages of the Monpas and also of the Sherdukpens in the present fawang and West Kameng districts.¹⁶ Even after the introduction of Buddhism to these areas, lay people had a lurking fear in their minds that whenever there was a calamity such as a failure of crops or rain, or disease and death, it was due to these gods' wrath at not being worshipped.² Hence, in many cases the old mode of propitiation of these gods continued along with the observance of the Buddhist rituals. Even though many of these gods were adopted by Buddhism as local defenders of the faith and their worship permitted in connection with Buddhist ritual, a few of these gods remained unrecognized by the new faith, and people had to revert to the old modes of ritual to be at peace with them. A description of some such gods and rituals has been given in the preceding pages. However, to complete the narrative, examples of gods from other areas of the Monpas are given here. As in the previous cases, rituals are performed for propitiation of gods of the natural surroundings of the particular habitats.¹⁸

Monpas of the Lhou areas perform Bon rituals annually, but without animal sacrifice.¹⁹ On the other hand a few Bonpos, who are still there, perform Bon rituals with all the Buddhist pantheon, sacrificing animals as usual.²⁰ In fact, in the Monpa areas Buddhist monks seem to have made some compromises with the priests of the Bon faith. As a result, deities like Ningem Chan, the guardian deity of Tawang, were adopted into the Buddhist pantheon.²¹ On the other hand, the deities residing in the mountains of the Monpa area were worshipped by the Kalaktang Monpas according to the traditional mode of rituals. Such mountain gods as Sherphu of Domkho village, Phuwangle and Jomu of Morshin village

and Braiah of Sangalem village could not be accommodated into the Buddhist pantheon.²² That led Kechang Doyen Tanjing to write in the eighteenth century a sacerdotal book, the *Lhandi Kharso*, describing the worship of these deities in the ancient style.²³

To recapitulate, the Monpas believe in an ancient tradition that was very similar to Tibetan Bon. With the advent of Buddhism in the Monpa area, the forces of change were set in motion in their religious sphere. In this area Buddhism made a unique compromise with the local faiths of the people. Instead of seeking to completely wipe out the indigenous beliefs and practices, an attempt was made by the Buddhist monks and monastic institutions to coalesce and syncretise or even allow the two cultural traditions to co-exist.

Notes and References

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11. C.V. Furer-Haimendorf, *Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh* (New Delhi, 1982) p. 146.
12. The account of the indigenous religious beliefs and rituals of the Refingjees, inhabitants of the Rahung village, is based on interviews with traditional priests and laymen of the village, including Sri Nima

Sangey, Sri Kuncho Tashi, Sri Chetten Khanda and Sri Sangkhandu. The interviews were conducted during 3rd - 5th January 2003 by the authors.

13. The narrative of the indigenous religious beliefs and rituals of the Dichijeas inhabitants of Jerigaon, is based on the interview of the priests like Sri Mukchung Lama Rinchinadu, Sri Langna Rinchinadu and a few old laities which was conducted from 6th to 8th January, 2003.
14. Similarities of religious beliefs and rituals of the Khunujees and Khitamjees, inhabitants of Khoina and Khoitam villages respectively were observed during the interview of the villagers like Sri Thimok Dungen, Sri Leiki Chanadok, Sri Wang Tsering Rokpu and others. These interviews were conducted from 9th to 12th January, 2003.
15. The information on Bonpuism of the Dirang Monpas is based on the interviews conducted in the Sangi and Khaso villages from 1 to 15 January 2003.
16. S. Dutta (ed), *Studies in the History Economy and Culture of Arunachal Pradesh*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 438-39, pp. 444-56.
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18. This fact has been observed by the authors during their field studies of the concerned areas.
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