

Relevance of Bon Tradition in Sherdukpen Society

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Abstract

Before the advent of Buddhism as a foreign religion in Tibet, Bonism or the Bon tradition was practised. An archaic or most respectably the tradition of Bon involves animistic and shamanistic practices. As mystical and alluring, it embraces the idea that all beings in the universe has soul and worships the spirits and deities of nature such as deities of the mountains, rivers, lakes, etc. Their unquestionable belief and faith made them dependant on the various deities for matters related to all aspect of life like marriage, war, harvest, health, death and welfare of the community, to name a few. Further, in an attempt to appease and mollify the deities various rituals were performed such as animal sacrifice, sorcery, fetishism, etc. This paper strives to take one through the journey of the Bon tradition that survived the persecution with the advent of Buddhism in Tibet around 7th century BC and how it manoeuvred its way to still exist and be relevant as a way of life for most people in Tibet, as well as in the West Kameng regions of Arunachal Pradesh, where amalgamation of both Bon and Lamaist tradition is seen. This paper proposes to highlight Bon and its relevance in the Sherdukpen tribe, located in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, while looking into the intricacies of Bon beliefs, rituals and its shamanistic practises.

Keywords- *Bon, shamanism, appease, Tibetan buddhism, Sherdukpen tribe, West Kameng.*

Introduction

Is Bonism or bon tradition a thing of the past? Is it still relevant with the introduction and establishment of Tibetan Buddhism that is heading towards a scientific temperament under the aegis of His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

These questions have often occurred to me, a Buddhist, belonging to a religious family where ‘pujas’ are of a daily occurrence than the number of ‘Likes’ in my Facebook posts.

While looking into the origin of ‘Pujas’ and various traditional-religious practices, I chanced upon the Bon tradition that is deeply imbibed into the Buddhist way of life.

Bonism or the Bon tradition, which is more mystical than the Lamaist tradition with shamans, meditation on mandalas, deities, astrology, and much more, is the native religion of Xizang (Tibet). It is a sect of animistic shamanism, a pantheistic cult embracing the belief that all beings in the universe have souls. It prevailed in Xizang (Tibet) before the introduction of

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Buddhism in the 7th century BC but Tibetan Buddhism had absorbed some beliefs and rituals of Bonism like the dependence on oracle, astrology, pantheism.

For instance, the selections of tulkus/living Buddhas began with oracle, astrology and the observations of mirages on holy lakes and if there were several candidates, then sometimes the service of an oracle-priest was called. On the other hand, Bonism was modified according to the model of Buddhism to become a branch of Tibetan Buddhism. The rituals and beliefs of Bonism has now become an integral part of the Tibetan culture.

At the present, although Bonism has lost its prominent position, nevertheless it still exists as a tradition enjoying equal position among the five traditions of Tibet: Mahayana, Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug. Further, it is still practised in more than 150 villages in Tibet and also in some regions of India such as Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

History of Bon Tradition

Despite various efforts to persecute Bon religion by rulers such as King Drigum Tsenpo in the 7th century B. C and King Trisong Detsen in 779 A. D, and the danger of Buddhism's popularity, Bon survived. The question remains, how did it survive the holocaust, the answer obviously resides in its history of three brothers and the three stages that it underwent.

Stages of Bonism: -

History of the three brothers- It is a myth that there were three brothers namely Dagpa, Selba and Shepa, who studied the Bon doctrines in heaven (Sridpa Yesang), under the Bon sage Bumtri Logi Chechen. After the completion of their studies they visited the God of Compassion Shenlha Okar and asked him ways to help living beings who are submerged in the misery and sorrow of suffering. Shenlha Okar advised them to act as guides to mankind in three successive ages of the world. Following his advice, the eldest brother Dagpa completed his work in the past world age, while the second brother Selba adopted the name Shenrab and became the teacher and guide of the present world age. So, the youngest brother Shepa will come to teach in the next world.

1. Original Bonism:

According to the legend of Bonism, Bonism was created by Tenpa Sherab, a contemporary of Buddha, in a mystic country known as 'Tag-gzig' somewhere in Ali (upper Zhang-Zhung). The ancient country Zhang-Zhung was populated by Turko-Mongols, according to some theory. (What is now Ali (the present West Tibet) was the Upper Zhang-Zhung, now Chamdo was the lower Zhang-Zhung, and the present North Xizang (Tibet) was the Middle Zhang-Zhung) Bonism had a stronghold of Zhang-Zhung. Bonism believed that the creation of the world started with two eggs, a white and black that broke releasing deities and humans, and parasites and demons, respectively. However, the southern Tibetan had another theory of a monkey and a female rock-demon as the common ancestors of Tibetan.

Bon had spread and many tribes practised it. It is believed that the 8th King of Yarlung Kingdom, Tze-gum (Dri-gum) accidentally cut off his 'sky-rope' and was buried in a tomb then a Bon priest performed a ritual for 'disciplining corpse' to prevent the ghost from

harming the living ones (in this case, the ghost came back to his household to have sexual-intercourse to produce a son). From then on the Bon priests were involved in constructing tombs and conducting Bon funeral rituals. In the funerals for kings, human sacrifices were used, large amount of treasures, weapons were entombed. The Bon priests were also engaged in rites for calling on good fortune to increase wealth, putting up thread structures intending to capture demons and to disperse the causes of error, and fortune-telling. They also claimed the ability to ride drums to soar to the sky to become rainbows.

2. Yungdrung Bonism:

This stage of Bon is said to have been founded by a Buddha-like figure named Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche (Teacher and Great Man of the Shen), who lived 18,000 years ago in a mythical land of Zhang Zhung near Tibet. Like the Buddha, Shenrab renounced his life as a prince to become a monk, achieved enlightenment, and taught others how to attain it. He thus converted the people from animistic Bon to Yungdrung or Eternal Bon. ('Lung' denotes the prophetic words of Tonpa Shenrab, the founder of Bon, and 'ring', his everlasting compassion)

According to most Tibetologists, the emblem Yungdrung (Nazi swastika which is the reserved Buddhist emblem) was introduced in Xizang (Tibet) along with Buddhism in the 7th century. Yungdrung Bonism adopted this emblem as the sign of Bonism as the swastika or yungdrung is a symbol of permanence and indestructibility of the wisdom of Bon, and he further, systemized the doctrines that included the ways to pray for fortune, medicine, victory in warfare, and to arrange proper funeral ritual, and magical methods to tell truth from false, and guilty from innocent, etc.

Bonism, however, was threatened when the stronghold of Zhang Zhung was crushed by the 5th king named King Trisong Detsen of Tubo dynasty who had assassinated the last king of Zhang-Zhung Lepung Gyapo. Lepung Gyapo had made Lake Thongpots his kingdom's sacred lake where he would go on pilgrimage every year on the fifteenth day of the first month. King Trisong Detsen sent a man to Zhang-Zhung to conspire with the youngest wife of the King to murder him during the annual sacrificial ritual at the lake. The assassination was accomplished and the youngest wife of King Lepung Gyapo became a concubine of King Trisong Detsen.

Despite the fall of Zhang-Zhung kingdom, Bonism persisted as many ministers were in favour of it and it further spread in Tubo dynasty. The Bonism priesthood gradually moved upward in politics, interfering with the judicial system and eventually becoming prime ministers several times in the Tubo dynasty. The kings sometimes felt threatened by them, and ordered the prohibition of Bonism.

Bon priesthood became the trustee of national politics. To prevent treacheries, the partners, king and generals etc, would have 'oath-taking' ceremonies annually which was to be done before the deities as per the Bon ritual. There were live-sacrifices in these conventions. For instance in one of the 'oath-bound' gatherings, a monkey's legs were first broken and then butchered, and then all people took turns to take oath with the fate of the monkey as a reminder of bad faith.

3. Jo-Bonism:

The 5th king of the Tubo dynasty, King Trisong Detsen, spread Buddhism in Xizang (Tibet) and was the public enemy of Bonism. However throughout the reign of Tubo dynasty even though Bonism was sometimes disfavoured by the court, it always assumed the most prominent position in Xizang (Tibet). In the meantime, Buddhism was under heavy pressure in India with the revival of Hinduism and the advent of Islam from Persia. Hinduism eventually destroyed Buddhism by proclaiming Buddha as one of the many reincarnation of the Hindu god, Krishna.

Tibetan Buddhists, led by Padmasambhava, proclaimed that the Bonist deities were minor deities of Buddhism and adopted Bonist beliefs and rituals, and permitted meat-eating. This almost led to the extinction of Bonism as Tibetan Buddhism had now absorbed it. But after the downfall of Tubo dynasty, the Bonists also claimed that the deity system of Tibetan Buddhism were similar to Bonist except for the names like Buddhism's Sakyamuni was Bon's Tenpa Shakya Tubpa and said that the Buddhist sutras were identical with Bonist sutras. In this way, Bonism also survived and its priests had become synonymous to 'Tantric magicians'.

However, there are other claims along with a fascinating story with regard to transformation of Tibet from an essentially animistic culture to a radiantly Buddhist. It is believed that Padmasambhava was instrumental in founding the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery at Samye (777-779 AD), south central Tibet when he overpowered the ancient mountain deities and converted the wrathful deities to become defenders of the new faith, i.e., Buddhism.

This created a synthesis of the Tibetan Buddhism and Bonism making their differences little ambiguous. Now their distinctive differences that previously existed were reduced to only their different emphases of beliefs and practises.

Basic Beliefs of Bonism:

As pointed out, there was no basic difference between Tibetan Buddhism and Bonism but that Bonism emphasized more than Tibetan Buddhism on the following:

- a) **Pantheism:** Bonism believed that all beings in the universe had souls and with rituals all objects would be blessed. The most obvious objects to be worshiped were mountains and lakes, where mountains and ranges were usually considered to be male deities, and the lakes as female deities.

For instance, Mt. Yarlung Shampo where the first Tibetan King is believed to have descended was the main mountain deity of Bonism and Tibet's most sacred mountain was the snow-capped Nianqing (i.e. God almighty) Tanggula Range. The sacred Mount Nianqing Tanggula was believed to be an endearing mixture of kindness and compassion, and human like characteristics of pettiness and jealousy. By his side lied a lower mountain, his son. When he saw the boy growing taller and taller, he jealously roared, "I'll see to it that you'll never tower over me" and gave him a hard slap, thus stunting the boy's growth. Further, not too far from it is the celestial lake Namtso, Tibet's largest lake, which was said to be the wife of Mt Nianqing Tanggula.

For important matters, war, harvest etc, the people would gather to pray to the mountain deities and they believed that deities and demons were living on the high mountains. So, it was dangerous to travel there and to safeguard against the demons they put heaps of stones, which were known as ‘warrior castles’ or Dpa-mkhar/Laptse or ‘a toll on the roads and passes’. This was the origin of the prayer wheels or Manis and prayer flags along the roadsides.

- b) **Smoke:** Similar to Taoists of Han people, Bonists believe that the smoke produced by pine twigs, Tibetan joss-sticks and ‘Tsamba’ (barley flour) would open the ‘sky gate’ and will carry their prayers to the deities. This belief is also shared by Tibetan Buddhists.
- c) **Ritual:** For any important events, Tibetans usually go through four steps i.e., oracle, astrology, ritual and action. For instance, if a person is sick then an oracle-priest would be called upon to determine if it was caused by some demons, an astrologist would be asked to determine if the ‘birth-stars’ of the sick person were operating normally, and if necessary some rituals would be performed. Only after this the sick person would be sent to see a doctor. Such steps are also taken for important matters like health, marriage, death, etc.

Similarly, Bon also has an oracle and shamans to prophesise and do rituals to appease the deities or demons. The Bon rites consists of offering precious stones or precious metals as ransom, and sacrificing sheep, yaks, goats or horses. Though, such blood-sacrifices are not used in Buddhist rite.

Bon and Buddhism:

Bon and Buddhism though are different religion but both have something similar to offer. Both seem entirely different yet strikingly similar. Bon is credited with giving many of its distinctive character to Buddhism. It is believed that Guru Padma Sambhava had visited the Himalayas of Arunachal Pradesh and all the places he meditated are today centres of pilgrim called Nye (pilgrim site).

Guru Padma Sambhava is known to have tamed the Bon malevolent gods and put them under a promise to protect the Buddha Dhamma and inducted them in the class of the Ney-Dag Cho-Sung (the guardian of the sacred places and the defender of Dharma). He also preached to the Bonpo priests and provided an alternative rituals and prayers to be done by the bonpo priests for the well being of all. That just as the Buddhist lama does Lhap-sang they should do Zhiwa –Shakpa; just as they do Dokpa the bonpo should do Kharem; Just as they do Sarkem bonpos should put Phan (prayer flags). (*Bonpo Sang Tsering, Lish village, 03/02/2018*).

Whenever any Buddhist prayers and rituals are carried out e.g., Dro-Cho (Goddess Tara), the outer deities are also named in the prayer so as to appease them, sarkem is done, tormas (food for the deity) are also prepared and kept outside the house. It is a way of seeking their permission to conduct the prayer in their area and further to ask them to help in removing any obstacle during the rituals. In Dok-pa (prayer to remove obstacles and anything evil), the Luit which is an image of a man is made of flour and butter. Maize grains and barley grains

(Bru=grains Nak=black) is thrown at the Luit as a way of hitting any evil eye, evil words, bad omen, obstacle, sickness etc which might befall on the person. The image of man or luit is then taken in some precise direction and kept preferably at crossroads. This also clearly shows that wherever the Buddhist rituals succeeded in propitiating the supernatural elements, symbolic sacrifice substituted the bloody sacrifices which are bon elements. While the inability to propitiate the gods led to the assimilation of both traditional practices of worship along with the Buddhist practises. Similarly, the use of sheep head that symbolises prosperity was used during Lossar (Tibetan New Year).

It is believed that sheep was sacrificed and its head was offered to God. But today it is substituted with variations like the sheep is made of butter, porcelain or plastic. Supposedly if a person is often ill and if as per the Mo (divination) he is asked to make sacrifice then instead of the sacrifice it has been beautifully replaced with a ritual called Tsedar to increase the life span of ill person. In Tsedar any animal can be set free after praying and smearing butter over their head or fishes are released into the stream or lake or river. (*Tsering Namgyal, Public Leader, Dirang*)

Buddhism is the religion but the bon practices have become a way of life. Buddhism has no doubt had a huge impact as it has not allowed Bon to exist or exert as an independent religion. This is evident from the fact that there are not many Bon temples like the Menri Monastery of Himachal Pradesh and Triten Norbutse Monastery at Nepal. But it has instead gained legitimacy from the society thereby leading to the amalgamation of both, as necessary arrangement for both traditions to survive as a unity.

In the Sherdukpen community also, we thus find both assimilation and synthesis of both the traditions of Buddhism and Bon. Also the remnants of bon have now become a part-and-parcel of their identity and culture which is unique and cannot be seen as different from Buddhism or the two cannot be explained in segregation.

Bon in Sherdukpen Community and its Relevance:

Near the borders of Bhutan lies an indigenous tribal community in the 'Land of the Rising Sun', Arunachal Pradesh, known as Sherdukpens. The Sherdukpen tribe derives its name from Sher (Shergaon) and Tukpen (old name for Rupa) and resides in West Kameng and Tawang district of the state. With a population of approximately 5,000 members, it is considered as one of the smallest tribal communities in India.

The Sherdukpens believe that their roots of origin leads to Tibet where their mythological ancestor Asu Gyaptong, a descendant of the Tibetan king Songtsan Gampo, had come to the plains of Assam along with his followers from Beyalung in Tibet and married a native Ahom princess. Hence, they have a long lineage of Tibetan ancestry and have inherited Tibetan culture and influenced by Gelugpa sect of Mahayana Buddhism.

However, besides Buddhism the Sherdukpens are also animistic and believe in the Bon tradition, which was the traditional belief among many Himalayan tribes before the influence of Buddhism. So, their daily life as well as important ceremonies like weddings and funerals revolves around religion.

The Bon way of life of Sherdukpen:

The Sherdukpen tribes of West Kameng and Tawang district follow Mahayana tradition and Nyingma tradition, respectively. The Buddhism as followed by the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh like Monpa and Sherdukpen has traces of tantric practices as remnant of the once existing bon tradition which was absorbed by Buddhism resulting in its distinctive character that we see here. This result was an effort made for Bon's survival by manoeuvring its way into lamaist tradition by way of amalgamation.

Bon tradition is known as 'Bonpa' or 'Bonpo' by the Sherdukpens and it involves performing of rituals by the Bonpo priest, 'Chizi' (in Shergaon) and 'Zizi' (in Rupa), to pay obeisance and pacify or appease the local deities. The priests in the Tukpen area (Rupa) are known as 'Zizi'. There are two types of priest: Chand Zizi and Khik Zizi. Khik Zizi priests have a special role to conduct the Khiksaba festival, which is a festival to appease the local mountain deities Sung Khit and Soro Khit. The priests are usually from Dingla or Megeji clan. While in Dingla clan the position of the priest is hereditary, Megeji priests on the other hand are chosen by the village elders. These priests are also known as 'Bun' and 'Phramin' in Tawang and Dirang region, respectively. Its practices also includes shamans called 'Yumin', believed to be a link between the divine spirits of malevolent gods and man, who goes into a trance and make prophecies with respect to a community, village or individuals, etc.

They believe in spirits, both evil and good and celebrate indigenous and non-buddhist festivals like Rep Lapchang Chhongba and Photenya festival related to agriculture, and Khiksaba which is observed to appease the forest deities and other mountain spirits. Feasting, drinking, offerings of rice, flowers, fruits, etc., and sacrifice of goats and fowls are the important events of Khiksaba festival. Such festivals are presided by local priests. (*A Festival in Sherdukpen Country Khiksaba (Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India) by Pascale Dollfus & François Jacquesson*)

Elements of Bon:

i. Oracles or Kuten:

Even before the advent of Buddhism in the 7th century in Tibet, we see the existence of oracle as a feature of the Bon tradition. Bon tradition believed in the existence of three worlds- Upper world of the Gods, Intermediate world of spirits or subtle beings, Solid world called the Earth. These three realms were not closed. Thus, allowing for an exchange between the humans with the physical environment and spirits, and with shamans and oracles as the conduit.

An oracle is a spirit, a being from a more subtle plane of existence than ours that enters and takes possession of a human medium. The Tibetan word for medium is kuten, which literally means physical basis. There can be different kutens for different oracles and once possession takes place, the oracle speaks through them, offering advice to those in need. (*Lama Sang Khandu, Khamkhar Monastery, Lish village and translator of the oracle Gechen Karma Thinly*)

ii. Shaman or Yumin:

The shamans or yumin is the highest Bonpo priest and are also known as Lhapa in Tibet, meaning 'a person having to do with gods'. It can also be translated as 'he who personifies the gods'. According to Rinchin Khandu Lama, a son of a Zizi priest, he said that a yumin could be anyone without any differentiation of gender, wealth or status in the society. Rather he would be chosen by the deities themselves. A person who is chosen as a yumin is said to behave weirdly like sometimes isolating oneself, disappearing into the woods, chanting words that makes no sense to anyone, and claiming to have been visited by deity in their dreams.

Lama further explained that one who claims to be a yumin has to prove his claim before the Panchayat, consisting of village elders, by undergoing various trials. Citing his own experience, he said that he had witnessed such a trial where a huge brass cauldron or tau was placed in front of the person concerned and the village elders asked for a fresh river-fish from Assam and to his surprise by some divine power or with the help of spirits, unknown, he was able to produce a fish which was alive and swimming in the tau.

He further said that unlike an oracle, a yumin does not have a guru but a guardian deity who appears in their dreams and teaches them the verses they chant, instruments they use, and ways to go into trance. In general, when they go into trance they lose contact with the present world and get sleepy, and then through their dreams they receive instructions, learn the procedures to carry out a request and to control their energy. Shamans are a medium for a spirit that could be of a ghost of the dead or some lesser spirits.

iii. Shamanic Trance Rituals:

For the rituals a yumin has to wear a white silk robe of Eri silk and a silver head band, and carry a machete called 'chapesar' along with a metal trident with the tips bent inwards to catch hold of evil spirits. He has to sit on the yumin's seat or throne with a Swastika symbol designed with rice on the carpet and invoke the spirits, after which he goes into a trance. He then reads the Swastika grains and makes prediction or prophesies for the well being of all humanity.

iv. Bon priests or Zizi:

The priests in the Tukpen area (Rupa) are known as Zizi. There are two types of priest: Chand Zizi and Khik Zizi. Khik Zizi priests have a special role to conduct the Khiksaba festival, which is a festival to appease the local mountain deities Sung Khit and Soro Khit. The priests are usually from Dingla or Megeji clan. While in Dingla clan the position of the priest is hereditary, Megeji priests on the other hand are chosen by the village elders.

It is believed that the various deities like the deities of the mountain or river or lakes, etc., chose a member of these clans as a medium who is then ordained as a priest. Once accepted as a zizi, he has to maintain complete cleanliness by restricting his diet like besides yak and sheep he cannot eat other meat, and onion, garlic and eggs are also restricted. The villagers also have to be careful while serving food or drinks to zizi. Utensils should be completely clean without a trace of restricted items.

Like the yumins, zizis are also imparted education including the mantras or chants by their guardian deity through their dreams. Each zizi have its own guardian deity. For instance, Deity Phu Sakradochog has its own zizi who performs prayers and rituals on chasit, the seventh day of the month, to appease the deity for the well being of his family, clan and also for the people he is a godfather to. The ritual requires rice, rice-beer (ara), pekhoing (stem of a berry for flags)/merangma (stem of a herb), and a cock. Here, the cock is used as a tsedar or for the long life of the priest and clan. The cock is bathed in water and butter is applied in its crown and wings and left to live. (*Megeji.T.D, Assistant Professor in Geography, Government College Bomdila*)

v. Deities:

The Bonpas including the Sherdukpen follow animism and believe in the existence of various deities who are seen as owners of the land, water, mountains, etc. There are different deities who are known to have their own area of influence like Kela (ke=born; la=deity) and Yula (yu=village; la= deity).

Further, there are different deities or phus (mountain deity) in the Sherdukpen society like Sakradochog, Sabokhik, Ngangbokhik, Amojomo (Female deity to protect against elephants when in the plain areas of Assam), Amokungkhar (Female deity of temple), and Lu of land and tree (Lu=Naga).

In case of a sickness, calamity, an epidemic or some communicable disease, prayers are conducted to appease the deities to curb the menace. Apart from this to know the cause and solution of the same Mo or divination is checked.

The deities worshipped are of two kinds: Benevolent and Malevolent. The deities worshipped under Bon Tradition in the West Kameng areas are of the latter type. Unlike the benevolent deities who have achieved enlightenment Eg- Palden Lhamo, Haya Griva, the Bon deities like Phu, Duit, Lu etc have not gone out of the cycle of Samsaric existence. According to Buddhist philosophy the three roots of Samsara are the three poisons- Attachment, Aversion and Ignorance and their other combinations like jealousy, tribalism, lust, anger etc. The deities of Bon are placed as belonging to the malevolent category, owing to their need to be appeased. They help and fulfil all the wishes as long as one worships them. (*Chuki. Tsering, J/T, Government Higher Secondary School, Dirang*)

vi. Divination or Mo:

Mo is a form of divination that engulfs every aspect of a Bonpas' life including the Sherdukpens as people take divine help to make important decisions like issues relating to wedding, death, birth, work and health among others.

Mo is preferably seen in the morning, and unlike the Tibetans wherein they use dice or rosary, the Bonpos use their own methods. One method is the use of rice wherein after picking rice a couple of times and putting it into a brass plate or a miniature cane basket, some predictions are made. In the other method, a brass bowl is filled with water and while chanting either the grains of rice, barley (bong) or a flower named nampeling is used in predicting. (*Lama K.Rinchin, J/T, Government Higher Secondary School*)

vii. Lu (Naga) or Lui in Sherdukpen:

Lu or Lui, as called by Sherdukpen, is a Naga deity who is the owner of a land or tree or an area. It is believed that if one disturbs the Lu by digging or dirtying the area where the Lu resides then he is bound to face the wrath of the Naga by suffering from some sickness.

Such a finding is usually determined by a Mo. To take countermeasures, praying and burning of incense is done in the area where the Lu resides.

Another solution which is also used by the Sherdukpen community is the Zizi bathing a totem (particular object or stone) that is considered to be the Lu with milk. Further, based on the availability, a stem of a medicinal herb called Merangma with purifying and healing qualities or a stem of a berry called Pekhohing is used for putting tiny square white flags or Phoah around the totem and rainbow-coloured threads are used to tie the entire area in a circular form.

viii. Taboo:

The shamans or yumin and bonpo priests or Zizi are only allowed to eat yak and sheep which are considered clean as they graze on fresh grasses. They are restricted to eat other meats, garlic, onion and eggs. Their body is expected to be kept very clean or else the deity or spirits will not enter the unclean or impure body. They are also restricted from going to places of birth and funeral.

ix. Epidemics or Rimbu and communicable disease or Rimcha:

In order to do away with epidemic or communicable disease, the deity or Phu should be appeased and to do that the Zizi makes an offering of a brass bowl filled with milk and the sacred Nampheling flower. Further, the affected area of the sick people is rubbed with either rice grains or barley and it is then thrown into the bowl while chanting the mantras. After which the bowl is emptied into a clean water body or river.

x. Exorcism or Raka Roko:

The priests are considered the last resort for exorcism of evil spirit which is also known as Raka Roko. While chanting some mantras, the priest takes a piece of Bos (a sort of ginger), chews it and spits them on the possessed person. Secondly, while chanting mantras boiled water is also thrown on the possessed person. However, it is interesting that the boiling water does not cause any burns on the person. Thirdly, a structure of a man and a stupa is made with wheat flour called Luit and Torma, respectively, and then an egg is placed on the Torma which is broken to further prophesise. This is a way of asking the spirit or ghost to leave the body and to destroy the spirit.

xi. Festivals:

Sherdukpen people celebrate Buddhist festivals similar to other Buddhist communities in the Himalayan region. The Tibetan Chaam Dances are commonly seen even among the Sherdukpen festivals. Lossar, the Tibetan New Year is also a special occasion for the Sherdukpen. Wang is also celebrated twice a year in honour of the Buddha.

Khiksaba festival- It is an indigenous non-Buddhist festival of the Sherdukpen, dedicated to appease the forest deities and other mountain spirits. Rep Lapchang is the harvest festival which is also popularly celebrated by the community. Such festivals are presided by the Zizi or local Shamans instead of the Buddhist Lamas.

The Khiksaba festival which involves elaborate rituals dedicated to the deity Sunkit Phu requires the indispensable service of the Khik-Zizi (priest) for its celebration as all the rituals are to be initiated by him. The Khik zizi priests belong to either the Dingla clan or the Megeji clan. This position is basically hereditary in nature.

The Khiksaba is celebrated for five days which is hosted by the eight major clans namely Thongdok, Middle Thongdok, Mosobi, Khrimy and Thongchi through their functional units called the Khik- spu (Clan houses). These eight clans has to send a representative as the warrior (Mok-fe-po) to protect and safeguard the people and the village throughout the festival which are known as Ton-Nyu-po, Mok-fe-po, Khik-spu, Lorjang-baidong-po, Chang-me-po, Bad-po, Sro-nam-bak and Bro-po. These warriors and the Khik zizi all play an important part in conducting the rituals.

Two weeks before the festival the entire village is cleansed and burning of woods outside the houses is prohibited as it is believed that all the deities pays visit before the festival. The first day is known as the Phot-Sali-Yiba wherein some ritual is conducted by the Khik zizi on the betel leaves brought by the Ton-nyu-po (group formed to visit the plains to barter for fresh betel leaves) which are then distributed among every household as a symbol of peace, prosperity.

On the second day, warrior or Mok-fe-po are send by the eight clans who are required to bring bamboos from the mountain top around midnight for the rituals. On their way back they have to compete to cross the river with bamboos that they have collected. These warriors on reaching the other side of the river banks start shouting “Krio” a sort of war cry. They are then dressed as nobles and go to Sri-kamcha, the most sacred place for the Sherdukpen community. The village elders also randomly selects youth to entertain through dance known as Bro-po (dancers), who are to dance throughout the festival.

On the third day, while the rituals are being initiated the people gathered there engage themselves in the Hang-ho Noba (sacred thread) dance and the sacred thread is distributed to all. After this, the entire village walks to the site of the deity La-Blong (Tree Naga), where the Lorjang-po and Baidong-po sings songs to propitiate the deity and Hang-ho Noba dance is also done. While dancing and singing the warriors surrenders everything including their cap, weapon, belt etc before the deity. After the rituals all participants along with the people visit different Khik-spu (clan houses) and they are hosted by the representatives of the concerned clan house.

On the fourth day, everyone visits Sri-kamcha (sacred place) wherein Gomchi-Chuba (Oblation or Prasad) is distributed to all household after the rituals. A community picnic marks the end of the festival. The most notable point of this festival is that it is attended by its neighbours like Assam, Jirigaon, Mandala Phudung who also make certain offerings in kind or cash before the Khiksaba.

This belief system shows not only the hierarchical stratification of society but also how all work together in unison in propitiating the deity for the well being of the entire community.

Thus, this festival not only binds the village together but also helps in strengthening socio-economic bonds with their neighbours. It is also the perfect and significant time for refreshing and passing on the tradition of Khiksaba from one generation to the other through story telling.

In spite of the fact that Buddhism now has a stronghold over the region but the belief system of Bon is still strong and consolidated and these festivals further strengthens and maintains its position. These rituals and festivals are an ancestral inheritance which is celebrated and carried forward for generations to come. This belief system is thus deeply embedded in their culture and it is their identity. (*Lama K.Rinchin, J/T, Government Higher Secondary School*); (*A Festival in Sherdukpen Country Khiksaba (Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India)* by *Pascale Dollfus & François Jacquesson*)

Cho-kor festival- Though it is a Buddhist festival, Cho-kor has traces of Bon's belief in deities and demons, and the rituals. Cho-Kor is a religious procession carried out in the villages in Rupa and at its dormitories called Blangs wherein the villagers carry scriptures and flags led by their leaders in religious robes, seated on horsebacks. The Buddhist Lamas read the scriptures and offer prayers to the Buddha in the Gonpa or monastery for the well being of the village community. All households are divided into groups called Chi-kaks to collect money for the procession.

It also contains the Bon beliefs of deities and demons. During the festival prayers are conducted using several tormas to propitiate the demons that might have followed them during their return from winter camp at Doimara.

It is also done to appease the deity (Lu) for rainfall when there is no rain or almost a drought like condition and the agriculture is hampered.

The Cho-kor is initiated by a Buddhist monk, wherein, the ku (an idol) of a deity is purified by a process called Thrui-su with mantras and holy water from the bumpa (brass/silver ware where holy water is kept). The ku is also taken in the procession to bless all the phus (mountain deity) and other sentient beings then it is taken to the mig-chu (source of water) where the Lu (Naga) resides. This is done so that the Lu blesses the village with rain and prosperity. (*Encyclopaedia of North-East India, Volume 3 By Col Ved Prakash*)

xii. Kro (Cave):

Kro is actually a cave having significance for the Buddhist as it is a place of pilgrimage. The villagers visit the Kro two days before the Cho-Kor festival which is done for the appeasement of Lu deity.

There are two to three kros (caves) in different villages but if we see it from a different perspective the nomenclature of these Kros is a recent phenomenon. Kro at Shergaon village is known as the Nyechin Drema Lakhang meaning the residence of deity Nyechin Drema

who blesses infertile couples with children. At Thongri village the kro is known as Nyechin Tare Lhamo though its local female deity's name is Kro-Omu.

Thus, giving us a legitimate reason to believe in how pacifying these deities are a part of the Bon tradition. But with the invasion of Buddhism the local deities have been assimilated to Buddhism, with new name, new significance and a little twist in the ways of worship, but the belief system remains the same.

Methodology

Both primary and secondary data were employed for the study. Secondary data was used for drawing a conceptual framework. The views of respondents were enumerated by means of questionnaire comprising of both closed and open ended questions, interactions with respondents were done by means of interviews to arrive at an analytical conclusion.

Findings

The Bon tradition has so beautifully amalgamated and synthesised with Buddhism that it is bound to exist and not lose its relevance for many years to come.

Therefore, its relevance in the Sherdukpen community as well as other communities like Monpas of Tawang and Dirang is strong and getting stronger with the recent air of traditional and religious revivalism in these communities.

However, people are still averse to the idea of Bon being a perversion of Buddhism but most are unaware or have failed to understand that Bonism exists in our everyday practices like burning of incense, using of prayer flags or 'lungta phans', calling upon priests or lamas to pray, making of tormas and luit, conducting of Lha Shoishe in Thembang village, checking 'Mo' or help from divination, astrology, asking for help from shamans and oracles are all part and parcel of the distinct elements of Bon tradition.

Many are oblivious to the fact that the 'tormas' and 'luit' that we make with dough are actually replacement for the human and animal sacrifices which were performed in the past. The belief in the various deities or 'phu' or 'Lu' like the 'Naga' and the prayers done to appease them while asking for their blessing of good health, prosperity and success are all a characteristic of animism and an example of Bon-Buddhism amalgamation.

Limitations and Scope

As per my findings, the Bon tradition can never lose its relevance in general and in the Sherdukpen society in particular as the bon practices is their identity, way of life, it is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the society. The festivals, songs, dances all bear allegiance to the fact that supernatural power exists and are propitiated.

However, there are some limitations that there is no proper documentation and imparting knowledge about it will be mostly oral. Another problem is the dwindling number of the priests due to deaths and in some villages there are no priests. The younger generations also lack interest in the tradition and prefer a salaried job to being a yumin or a zizi.

Despite these lurking dangers, there is still hope for it all to change as now there has been visible cultural revivalism in the communities of Sherdukpen and Monpas.

Due to better connectivity of roads, tourism is relatively high and in order to increase tourism many festivals are being celebrated. Further, with the advancement of scientific technology like smart phones, wifi, 4G connectivity, etc., many have been blogging and writing about the indigenous tribe and their religions like Bonism.

Though there are limitations like just a handful of work has been done on the Bon tradition and the Sherdukpens but there is also a huge scope for research like one could carry out a comparative study of various Bon cultures of the different tribes within West Kameng district like Yewang, Sherdukpens, etc., between Bons of Tawang and Sherdukpens, and between Bon and those tribes following animism like Jiri Gaon, Rahung, which still by and large remains unexplored.

Besides, a study on Miji community can also be done in the wake of the awakening of Buddhism in those regions and the increasing multi-religious institutions like those of Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism as well as Animism in the West Kameng region.

Conclusion

Bon as a religion is considered derogatory, it is seen as pagans, or someone with no religion at all. It is seen as lesser religion or even a pariah. Bon tradition has been able to stand the test of time in spite of an invasion by a foreign religion by adapting to the new religion by constantly reforming itself to meet the new and challenging environment.

This tenacious nature of Bon and the tradition surviving and functioning parallel with the existing Nyingma and Mahayana tradition proves it further that its relevance can never be deterred.

The synthesis created by Bon and Buddhism is such that now one cannot exist without the other and Bon is sure to survive all and still be relevant unless Buddhism ceases to exist.

Further, the Sherdukpen community will be incomplete if not for the Bon tradition as its festivals, rituals, oracles, shamans, exorcism and other practises are all related to Bon.

Therefore, Bon in Sherdukpen society is definitely here to stay and its relevance cannot be questioned.

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