

## CHAPTER: III

### RELIGIOUS LIFE

The primitive religion of the Monpas was called *Bon*<sup>64</sup>. Helmut Hoffman, in his book states that the *Bon* religion was widespread in inner Asia, China, East and West Turkestan, Manchuria, Mongolia and the Tibetan Plateau<sup>65</sup>. “*Bon*” is an ancient Tibetan term and is identical in meaning with Tibetan word “*bzla*”, means to recite *mantras* or magic formula<sup>66</sup>. However, the meaning of the ‘*Bon*’ still remains unknown<sup>67</sup>. B. L. Bansal, is of the opinion that *Bon* religion was founded by Shenrab<sup>68</sup>. It was originated in the land of ‘Om mo lung ring’- a part of Tag Zigs which is identified as Iran<sup>69</sup>. According to Professor A. C. Banerjee, Shenrab was born in ‘Om mo lung ring’ valley of Zhang-Zhung country, identified with Guge, one of the three districts of Ngari province of Tibet, while Bansal believe that he was born in Central Tibet at a place called Am-sho-on -which however still lacks identification<sup>70</sup>. A. C. Banerjee writes that opinions differ as to the time, place and life of Shenrab. Some followers of *Bon* religion believe that, he appeared some 1055 years before Buddha, while others claim that he was a contemporary of Buddha<sup>71</sup>. He possessed supreme power to control the spirits and reveal miracles. He had divine knowledge and could also predict the upcoming dangers. He preached in his own way the practice of the gods which afterwards became the *Bon*

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<sup>64</sup> It was the old religion of Tibet as well.

<sup>65</sup> Helmut Hoffman, *The Religions of Tibet*, Edward Fitzgerald, trans., edn 2, P.15

<sup>66</sup> Namkhai Norbu, “*Bon and Bonpos*”, *Tibetan Review*, P.8

<sup>67</sup> Ankul Chandra Banerjee, *Aspects of Buddhist Culture from Tibetan sources*, P.1

<sup>68</sup> B. L. Bansal, henceforth Bansal, *Bon its Encounter with Buddhism*, P.55

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, P.51

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>71</sup> Ankul Chandra Banerjee, op., cit, Pp.2-3

religion<sup>72</sup>. The *Bon* canon is in two parts - the *Kyangyur* and *Tangyur*. The *Kyangur* contains the teachings of its founder Shenrab, and the *Tangyur* are the commentaries of *Kyangyur*, the rules of the order, rituals, and narratives and works connected with arts, logic, medicine, and poetry<sup>73</sup>.

The followers of *Bon* religion practiced animal sacrifice and worshipped the forces of nature. However, the *Bon* religion now got merged with the Buddhist beliefs and practices. Even today people believe in supernatural powers like various good and evil spirits and gods guarding their immediate surroundings, namely *Tsen* and *Gyap* (mountain gods), *Sada* (earthly supernatural being), *Yul Zida* (divinity of region), *Lu* (serpent deities that are the guardian of treasure), *Dud* (demons). They believe that *Tsen* and *Gyap* appear as savage huntsmen, red in colour, wearing helmets and armour and riding light red horses over the mountains, and if a man happens to cross their path while he is moving in mountains, he is overtaken by a deadly disease. *Lu* are the serpent deities that live in lakes, rocks and guard the treasures (gems and jewels) hidden there. *Nyans* are believed to live on trees and rocks. If anyone cut down the trees or walks on the rocks they get annoyed and spread sickness or cause death of the person. Plague is a scourge attributed to the *Nyan* in particular. *Sada* and *Yul Zida* are considered as masters of earth and could exist anywhere<sup>74</sup>. These supernatural powers were and are still considered to be powerful and they have great influence on the lives of the people. They in course of time became gods who have to be propitiated to avert harm and worshipped to secure help<sup>75</sup>. For various diseases, natural calamities, epidemics,

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, P.3

<sup>73</sup> Bansal, op. cit., P.68

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, Pp. 38-39

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, P.2

death, miseries, illness and misfortunes the Monpas blame the evil spirits. Hence, they try to please the spirits and gods by offering prayers and goods with assistance of the priest called *Bonpo*. However, today there are only a few *Bonpos* left. So, the Monpas mostly take help from a Buddhist priest.

The priest of *Bon* religion is known as *Bonpo*. With the gradual spread of Buddhism, the *Bonpos* however, have lost their earlier popularity and influence among the Monpas. The *Bonpos* were expert in controlling nature through their knowledge of the ways of pleasing the spirits. They performed the worship by offering *prasada* consisted of meat, fish, eggs, rice, liquor, animal sacrifice etc., to various spirits and gods of their immediate surroundings. According to Bansal "...a *Bon po* in the pre-Buddhist times was the one who invoked, i.e., a particular type of priest among several others"<sup>76</sup>.

Besides *Bonpos*, other shamans are *Yumins*, (West Kameng) or *Yumits* (Tawang) who play a significant role in the society. *Yumin* is a person who can interact with the gods and spirits. Both male and female *yumins* can be seen. The *Bonpos* act like the ordinary priest while the *Yumin* has miraculous power<sup>77</sup>. They are holy spirits and are known to cure illness by performing miracles and very often, for the welfare of the society, they perform esoteric rites and rituals. Now-a-days *Yumins* are generally found settled in and around the region of Dirang.

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, P.36

<sup>77</sup> B. Tripathy and S. Duta, in B. Tripathy and S. Duta's (ed) *Religious history of Arunachal Pradesh*, Bon cult among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh P.282

## **Beliefs and Practices of *Bon* Religion:**

The centres of *Bon* religion were confined to the houses of individuals of the *Bon* faith and in a place called *Flak-sheng-mang*, an open place surrounded by trees from all sides. Interestingly, it was not held in any temple premises. Each village had their own *Flak-sheng-mang*. The main festival observed by the followers of *Bon* religion was *Fla*. Once in a year, they observed this festival in *Flak-sheng-mang* by offering *prasada*, prayer flags, performing ritual dances and horse racing. During the *Fla* festival barren women desiring children seek the blessings of the gods and spirits. Human sacrifice was also prevalent during *Fla* festival as gathered from oral sources. According to tradition<sup>78</sup> being influenced by Buddhism, later on, human sacrifice was replaced by animal sacrifice and instead of human flesh, the flesh of dead animals were offered to the *Bon* gods. This festival was observed in many villages like Sangti, Lhou, Khrimu, Mukto, Jangda, Rho etc., till recently. However, most of the Buddhist Monpas have now discontinued the observance of the *Fla* festival. Instead the Monpas of Lhou today perform *Lhapsang*, a Buddhist *puja*, annually to please the local deity called *Dableh* (protector) on the same day of *Fla* festival. They believe that their god *Dableh* would protect them from any unseen harm that might come to them from the stopping of the practice of the *Fla* festival.

Every year the Monpa people observe another *puja* earlier prevalent in *Bon* religion called *phot* at *Flak-sheng-mang*. This *puja* is usually carried before cultivation by which offerings are made to gods and spirits guarding their immediate surroundings for reaping a good harvest. They also try to maintain a

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Late *tsorgen* Pem Gombu of Lhou, 85yrs on 23-03-2010 and 30-03-2010

harmonious relation between the people and supernatural beings. For the purpose, once a year, on a fixed day, the women-folk carry baskets full of *prasadas* on their back, containing *zursum*, triangular shaped dough made of flour boiled in water, popcorn, rice, liquor and a new unstitched traditional cloth. After offering the *prasadas* they return back to their homes and let the priest to do *puja* throughout the day. In the afternoon, the women and children with colourful prayer flags, tied to bamboo sticks, come again to hoist these in *Flak-sheng-mang* and joins the priest in the *puja*. At the end of *puja* they collect the *prasadas* and return back to their respective home.

The Monpas also performs *tse-phot* (*tse-water* and *phot-prasada*) to please the supernatural powers of their immediate surroundings. It is conducted by a group of households or sometimes by individual families in their houses. A *Bonpo* is invited for performing the *puja*. Early in the morning, water is carried from the water point and poured in a big pot where the *Bonpo* adds milk and flower, while reciting *mantras* throughout the day. Then in the evening, the holy water is sprinkled in holy places like trees and rocks, wherein resides the spirits and Gods.

The Monpas still believe in the existence of supernatural powers and spirits all around them. They never spit or tread on such places where spirits exists for the fear of spirits becoming enraged and causing harm to them. Whenever people fall sick they consult the village priests to find out the cause of their illness, who generally, suggests them to propitiate these spirits by installing prayer flags and offering *prasadas*. Apart from installing prayer flags, to wrath off the spirits, they even prepare millet or wheat flour's figurine of *dud* (demon), *luth* (evils), etc., and throw it away. The Monpas also try to avoid burning of onion, garlic, hair, plastic

etc., in fire that would annoy the Gods of their immediate surroundings. Pre-Buddhist *Bon* is not totally routed out from the Monpa society. Among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh, some distinctive rituals are followed which is not seen among other followers of Buddhism. Possibly, what emerged as Monpa culture is a mixture of *Bon* faith and Buddhism.

### **Advent of Buddhism among the Monpas:**

The Monpas today are followers of the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. Buddhism arrived in the Monpa land in 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E., from Tibet<sup>79</sup>, and soon the Monpas have converted themselves to the Buddhist faith<sup>80</sup>. The seed of Buddhism rooted in Tibet during the reign of Sron Tsan Gampo (630-698 C.E.)<sup>81</sup>, the 32<sup>nd</sup> king of Tibet. He had married two princesses - one from Nepal and another from China, and they were staunch followers of Buddhism. His first wife was Bhrikuti, daughter of a Buddhist king, Amsuvarman of Nepal, and the second one was Wencheng, daughter of Emperor of Taitsung of the Tang dynasty of China<sup>82</sup>. The king was influenced by their devotion towards Buddhism and under their advice he sent messengers to India, Nepal and China to collect Buddhists texts and to invite Buddhist scholars. Thus, Sron Tsan Gampo planted the seeds of Buddhism in Tibet under the influence of his two wives. Today the followers of Buddhism endorse Sron Tsan Gampo as an incarnation of the most popular of the celestial Buddhists, Avalokiteshvara (*Chenerzi*) and his two wives are endorsed as incarnations of Avalokiteshvara's consorts. They are known as White Tara and Green Tara-the Saviour, or Goddess of Mercy. The Chinese princess Wencheng is recognized as

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<sup>79</sup> However, till 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Buddhism was unknown to the Tibetans.

<sup>80</sup> Niranjana Sarkar, *Buddhism among the Monpas and Sherdukpens*, p.1.

<sup>81</sup> A. C. Banerjee, op. cit., P.33

<sup>82</sup> L. A. Waddell, henceforth Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, p.20

“The White Tara” and the Nepalese princess “Bhrikuti, as “The Green Tara”. At the death of Sron Tsan Gampo, about 650 C.E., Buddhism made little headway against the old religion, *Bon*<sup>83</sup>.

In the reign of Tri-Sron Detson (740-97)<sup>84</sup> the 36<sup>th</sup> king and son of another Chinese princess, Buddhism further spread and flourished in Tibet. With a strong belief in Buddhism, he sent messengers to India in search of renowned Buddhist scholars. He invited Santarakshita, the famous Indian Buddhist teacher to come to Tibet and teach the Dharma. Arriving in Tibet he began to preach the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. However, due to bitter opposition from the adherents of *Bon* faith he could not spread Buddhist faith in Tibet. Santarakshita therefore, advised the king to invite Guru Padmasambhava, of the Nalanda University to help (Santarakshita) him in spreading Buddhism. Guru Padmasambhava, who was also a clever member of Tantrik Yogacharya School quickly responded to the invitation and arrived in Tibet in 747 C.E.<sup>85</sup>. According to Waddell, “Arriving in Tibet in 747 C.E., he vanquished all the chief devils of the land, sprang most of them on consenting to become defenders of his religion, while on his part guaranteed that in return for such services they would be duly worshipped and fed”<sup>86</sup>. Guru Padmasambhava, thereupon, defeated all those who were opposed to Buddhism and established the Tantric form of Mahayana Buddhism which was then popular in India. He is, therefore, regarded as the main propagator of Buddhism in Tibet. His image and portrait are placed in all the Buddhist temples in Tibet.

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<sup>83</sup> A. C. Banerjee, op. Cit., Pp.19-25

<sup>84</sup> Bansal, op.cit., P.110

<sup>85</sup> A. C. Banerjee, op. Cit., Pp.27

<sup>86</sup> Waddell, op.cit., Pp.26-27

After establishing Buddhism in Tibet, Guru Padmasambhava marched towards south and reached the land inhabited by the Monpa and sowed the seed of Buddhism among them<sup>87</sup>. He is known as Lupon Rimpoche (the precious guru) or Lupon Pema Jungne (the lotus-born guru) by the Monpas<sup>88</sup>. Imitating Tibet, his image and portrait are placed in all the Buddhist temples of Monpa region as well. Legends have it that he possessed immense magical powers with which he restrained most of the demons, evil spirits and supernatural powers. There are places where he has left his imprints by his visit in the Monpa region. He visited several places and his impressions are preserved till now in seven places visited by him namely, Taktsang, Jiktsang, Bangachang, Kimnash, Dhram Bumgey, Bigha and Gomefuh.

It is believed that Lupon Rimpoche first visited a place in Pangchen area and meditated there. He was accompanied by a tiger and the place came to be known as Taktsang (*tak*-tiger and *tsang*-lair). The walls of the cave of his retreat are adorned with stone images which are believed to be divinely created. The foot prints of Lupon Rimpoche and his horse as well as holes where he planted his staff are visible even today. Later on, Lama Rinchin Wangchuk constructed a temple at the said site which is popularly known as Taktsang Gompa. The second site is known as Jiktsang (*jik*-Leopard and *tsang*-lair), as a leopard guarded the Lupon Rimpoche when he was in deep meditation. A temple called Sarong Gompa was constructed at this site. There are also holy marks on a rock which suggests that the master had rested placing his Holy Book in front. There are impressions on the said rock of the hands, back and book of Lupon Rimpoche. Bangachang is the third site which has

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with *Lama* Langa Tsering of Tawang Monastery, 74 years of age, on 21-03-2010.

<sup>88</sup> He is also known by the same name to the Tibetans.

his impressions. Amongst the many lakes in Bangachang, there is a lake called Yum Dorgepham where sometimes reflections of burning lamps and shadow of a silver pot are visible. Later, here too a temple called Bangachang Gompa was constructed. Kinnash is the fourth site situated on a hill in eastern side of Jang village. There too Lupon visited and mediated and left impressions of his foot and hands. Later Kinnash Gompa was constructed in this site by Karmapa lama Hrangchung Dorjee III. The fifth site is Terma Bumgan which is situated in the village of Paidar, south of Tawang. Lupon has left his foot-prints and impressions of his hat, hands and skull-bowl on the rocks. The Terma Bumgan Gompa has been constructed on this site. The sixth site is Bigha, south of Tawang. Here too he left marks of his feet, hands, knees, hat, staff, skull-bowl and hoof marks of his horse. The Bigha Gompa was constructed here. Gomefuh is the seventh site which is located on the right bank of Tawangchu River (South of Tawang). He is said to have visited the area and meditated in a big cave for many days. The demons tried to disturb him in different forms. It is said that a big serpent crawled into the cave to break his concentration; whereupon he levitated himself from his meditating position from the floor. His head is said to have struck the roof of the cave and became a hole. This hole is the only opening through which light enters into the cave. He then killed the serpent. An impression resembling the track of a serpent is still visible on the floor of the cave. There are also impressions on the rock where he is said to have meditated<sup>89</sup>. Till today, one can see the impressions of his hat, hands, skull-bowl and foot-prints left on the rocks. These rocks are called *nash* meaning holy mark and people from far-flung areas come to visit these holy marks

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<sup>89</sup>Ashok Biswal, *Mystic Monpas of Tawang Himalaya*, Pp.90-92

to pay their homage. Then the Lopon is said to have marched towards West Kameng and there in nine places inhabited by the Sherdukpen people, he left behind his imprints.

### **The Sects of Mahayana Buddhism:**

In the eleventh century,<sup>90</sup> Dipankara Sri-Jnana, a native of Bengal and a learned Buddhist scholar of Vikramshila University arrived in Tibet. Dipankara became popularly known as Atisa in Tibet. After arriving in Tibet, he rectified and systemized the then degenerate form of Tibetan Buddhism with his chief disciple Brom-ston. Gradually, in the later part of the eleventh century C.E., a reformatory movement took place among the followers of Buddhism in Tibet which led to the rise of different sects and sub-sects of Mahayana Buddhism, namely, *Nyingmapa*, *Kahdampa*, *Kargyupa* and *Sakyapa*.

*Nyingmapa* means “old ones”, is the most ancient sect which is acknowledged to be immediate followers of Guru Padmasambhava. The scriptures of *Nyingmapas* dates back to within two centuries of Guru Padmasambhava’s time<sup>91</sup>. The *Kahdampa* sect was the new reformed sect that arose from the teachings and tantric practises of Atisa and his chief disciple Brom-ston. The *Kargyupa* and *Sakyapa* sects are considered as semi-reformed sects inspired by Atisa’s reformatory activities. In the latter half of the eleventh century C.E., Lama Marpa, a Tibetan Lama of Lha Brog, visited India for religious training. After returning to Tibet, Lama Marpa and his pupil Mila-ra-pa founded the *Kargyupa* sect, meaning “a follower of the successive orders”, under the special instruction of

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<sup>90</sup> 1038 by Waddell, p.54 and 1042 by Bansal, p.133.

<sup>91</sup>Waddell, op. cit., P.29

his Indian teacher Naropa of Nalanda University. It has again four sub-sects, namely the *Karmapa*, *Dikungpa*, *Talungpa* and *Dukpa*<sup>92</sup>. Of these *Karmapa* sect spread in the Monpa region. The Sakyapa sect, which means “grey earth”, was founded in 1071/1073 C.E.,<sup>93</sup> by Khom Konchok Gyalpo, by building a monastery in the grey land of Upper Tsang of Tibet. It has now two reformed sub-sects namely, *Norpa* and *Jonanpa*<sup>94</sup>. The *Gelugpa* sect was founded at the beginning of the fifteenth century as a regeneration of the Kahdampa sect by Tsonkapa Lama (1357-1419 C.E)<sup>95</sup> of Amdo province which is now within the borders of China. He is also known as Lozandakpa or Je-Rimpoche<sup>96</sup>. *Gelugpa* means “followers of the way of virtue” which later became the most dominant religion of Tibet.

Among the different sects of Buddhism, mentioned above, the three sects *Karmapa*, *Nyingmapa* and *Gelugpa* are prominent among the Monpas.

### ***Karmapa Sect:***

In the middle of the twelfth century C.E., *Karmapa* sub-sect was founded by Karmapa Rongchung Dorjee (1109-1192) also known as Du-sum Kyenpo<sup>97</sup>. Tradition tells that Rongchung Dorjee came from Tibet to the Monpa region and built the Kimnash Gompa at Jang which is one of the oldest *gompa* in the Monpa region<sup>98</sup>. He thereby started spreading *Karmapa* sect of Buddhism among the Monpas there. However, today Kimnash Gompa is affiliated to Tawang monastery

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<sup>92</sup> Waddell op. cit., Pp.64-67

<sup>93</sup> 1071 by Waddell, p.69 and 1073 by A. C. Banerjee, p.71.

<sup>94</sup> Waddell, op. cit., P.69-70

<sup>95</sup> Bansal, op. cit., P.148

<sup>96</sup> Waddell op., cit, P.58

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, P.67

<sup>98</sup> Niranjana Sarkar, *Buddhism among the Monpas and Sherdukpas*, P.2

under *Gelugpa* sect. At present, there is only one monastery of the *Karmapa* sect in the entire Tawang district at Jang which was established in 2004.

***Nyingmapa* Sect:**

Tradition tells that Guru Padmasambhava during his visit to Monpa land had predicted the construction of three Buddhist temples at Tsosum, presently known as Tawang. To fulfil his prediction a *Nyingmapa lama* named Sherbum came from Bhutan to Tsosum. He was the third among the five sons of Pemalingapa, a great Buddhist scholar of Bhutan. Sherbum laid the foundation of three *Nyingmapa* temples at Tawang. These are *Urgyelling*, *Sangelling* and *Tsorgelling Gompas*, collectively known as *Lingsum* which means three stones near Tawang township<sup>99</sup>. It is difficult to trace out the year of construction of these *gompas* but it is believed that these *gompas* were constructed before the construction of the *Kimnas gompa* of *Karmapa* sect at Jang in the twelfth century C.E. With the construction of these three temples the *Nyingmapa* sect spread in the region.

***Gelugpa* Sect and Tawang Monastery<sup>100</sup>:**

As per prevailing traditional accounts, the history of the *Gelugpa* sect in the Monpa region starts with Thangston Gyalpo (1385-1462), a *Gelugpa lama* from Tibet. He is said to be a fellow-disciple and associate of the first Dalai Lama, Gendun-Drub (1391-1475). He was one of the popular engineers of Tibet. He is credited for building eight iron-chain suspension bridges over the great river of Central Tibet, the Yaru Tsangpo; and some of these bridges survive till today<sup>101</sup>. It

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<sup>99</sup> S. Dutta and B. Tripathy, *NEIHA Twenty- third session, Agartala*, Early Nyingmapa Monasteries of Tawang , P.195

<sup>100</sup> Plate No. 3 (b)

<sup>101</sup> Waddell, op.cit., P.385

is believed that he came to Chankhargor in Tsosum and mediated in a cave there. Chankhargor is near the Karling village which is about seven miles to the south of present Tawang township. Being an engineer, he constructed an iron chain suspension bridge called Chaksam<sup>102</sup> which is still in existence connecting the Mukto area and the Kitpi area of Tawang<sup>103</sup>. Near the village of Kraling in Tawang a hamlet named Berkhar is situated. The owner of the hamlet is Berkhar Targe. It is said that Tsongston Gyalpo gave his begging-bowl full of liquor to the Berkhar Targe and assured him that if he keeps the bowl carefully, then seven intelligent and courageous sons would be born to him. Berkhar Targe kept the bowl carefully and accordingly seven intelligent and courageous sons were born. So, his household came to be known as *Poudun* (*pou-* intelligent and *dun-*seven). Among the seven sons, Tenpei Dornme, the second son went to Sera monastery in Tibet and there he met the second Dalai Lama, Gedun Gyatso (1475-1543 C.E.). After some years, on the advice of the second Dalai Lama, he marched back towards the Monpa region and constructed temples and monasteries, and devoted himself in widening the *Gelugpa* sect till his death at the age of 99. However, *Gelugpa* sect is said to have flourished by a series of his reincarnation in the Monpa region. Among all his incarnations, Lorde Gyatso-the fourth incarnation's contribution towards *Gelugpa* sect in the region is most recognized and well known. He was born in *Poudun* earlier hallowed by Tenpei Dornme. Lorde Gyatso had his education in Tashi Lumpo, Sera and Gyume monasteries of Lhasa respectively. Tradition tells that, when he was at Sera he heard the news that the *Gelugpa* sect in Bhutan was

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<sup>102</sup> Plate No. 3 (c)

<sup>103</sup> Niranjan Sarkar, *Tawang Monastery*, Pp.2-3

attacked by the *Dukpas*<sup>104</sup>. He then, sought advice from the fifth Dalai Lama, Nawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682)<sup>105</sup>, who placed before him, a plan of constructing a new monastery as a centre of *Gelugpa* at Tsosum. He therefore, came to Galden Tseling monastery which was situated in Mera village at Bhutan border and stayed there for some years. Here he came to be known as Mera Lama, after the name of the village. The *Dukpas* continued with their plundering activities and even threatened to kill him, whereupon he came to Tsosum where a temple of *Karmapa* sect called Gangardung Gompa and a *Nyingmapa* temple called Thechpa Gompa already existed. Even the *lamas* of these two sects opposed Mera lama's plan of constructing a monastery. The people of Tsosum were also in favour of these two sects. He, therefore, went to Lhasa with heavy heart and reported Dalai Lama about his failure of building a *Gelugpa* monastery. At these Dalai Lama issued a mandate to the people of Tsosum to help him. Mera Lama thereupon came to Tsosum to look for a suitable place for the construction of the monastery. One day while he was in search of a suitable site he came upon a cave located on a hill. Leaving his horse, he went inside the cave but when he came out, he found that his horse had strayed away from his master. He started following the hoof mark and came to a place known as Tana Mandae Khang, where once stood the palace of one of the Tawang king Kala Wangpo. He selected that place as the suitable site for his monastery. In recognition of the part played by his horse, he named the place Tawang, '*Ta*' meaning horse and '*Wang*' meaning chosen or the place chosen by the horse<sup>106</sup>. The Monpa people of Tawang eagerly helped Mera Lama in the construction of the monastery. He therefore, with the assistance of the local people

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<sup>104</sup> One of the sub sects of the *Kargyupa*

<sup>105</sup> Niranjana Sarkar, op.cit., P.5

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, Pp.7-8

established the Tawang monastery, one of the most interesting and impressive religious centre of the Buddhist in 1681 C.E. The full name of Tawang monastery is Galden Namgye Lhaste, which means a celestial paradise of the divine (*Galden-Paradise; Namgye-celestial; Lhaste-divine*). With the establishment of the Tawang monastery, *Gelugpa* sect gained supremacy over other sects<sup>107</sup>. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama is considered as the spiritual and temporal head of the Monpas and Tibetans in general and of the *Gelugpa* sect in particular.

After the construction of the monastery, Mera Lama went back to Lhasa and reported to the fifth Dalai Lama about his success. He requested Dalai Lama to issue rules and regulations for the upkeep of the monks. The Dalai Lama provided him with manuals, called *Chai* and *Chebamarna* which contained rules of conduct for the resident *lamas*, deputed a learned and pious monk as the abbot and two monastic officials as the *niertsang* (steward/ supervisor) of the monastery and also gave him a painting of goddess Panden Lhamo, main deity of Tawang Monastery to be kept in the monastery<sup>108</sup>.

The religious and social life of the Monpas is associated with Tawang monastery. After the construction of the monastery, the Monpas of Tawang decided that every family, having three or more sons, have to send the middle son known as *busum-barma* of as a monk to the monastery<sup>109</sup>. The family which fails to send their middle son out of three or more as a monk to the monastery is liable to fines called *shakpa*. However, the people of Rho and Jangda have to send one of their sons as a monk to Gonpa Tse Gompa in Tibet if they had five or more sons. This situation continued till the Chinese occupation of Tibet (1959). For the Mago and

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<sup>107</sup> Niranjana Sarkar, *Buddhism among the Monpas and Sherdukpas*, P.14

<sup>108</sup> Niranjana Sarkar, *Tawang Monastery*, Pp.7-9

<sup>109</sup> Neeru Nanda op. cit., P.70

Thingbu people it was not compulsory to send their son as a monk to any monastery<sup>110</sup>. The monks constructed their residence around the monastery. The parents of the novice also had to find a senior monk as his tutor. After finding a tutor the parents pay a ceremonial scarf and some amount as per their capacity and bestows the whole responsibility of their ward to the senior monk. The novice, then, starts living in senior monk's (tutor's) residence along with other novices as a family. This practice prevails even today.

The Tawang monastery also has the supervising right over the administration of the several *gompas*, erected in various places. Amongst them, Tsangpo *gompa* and Urgelling *gompa* within Tawang town, Kimnash *gompa* of Jang, Thongmin *gompa* of Khrimu, Arya Dung *gompa* and Brakar *gompa* of Lhou, Khromtin *gompa* which lies below Gashela peak, Zharmang *gompa* which lies below Khromtin, Kharung *gompa* of Mukto and Manzing *gompa* near Bhutan border also falls under the vigilance and supervision of the Tawang Monastery. For every three years, one *lama* (priest) each, of the Tawang Monastery is appointed to these *gompas* by the authorities of the Tawang Monastery. These *lamas* are wholly responsible for the maintenance and up keeping of the *gompa* allotted to him for the purpose<sup>111</sup>. Traditionally, these *lamas* hold a very powerful position in their respective areas. They had even judicial power to announce corporal punishments to the offenders.

Earlier, for the upkeep of the monastery, the Monpas had decided to help Mera Lama by donating land, grain and firewood. Initially, every year they donated grain and firewood according to their own wish. Later on it became a compulsory

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<sup>110</sup> Interview with Shri Lobsang a senior citizen of Thingbu, 69 yrs of age, on 23rd Feb 2011

<sup>111</sup> S. Dutta, S and B. Tripathy, *Sources of the history of Arunachal Pradesh*, p.206

practice and was considered as a tax towards the monastery called *khrei* (tax). The monastery collects taxes twice a year - in summer and in autumn. According to Niranjan Sarkar, “the landed property of each family was measured at that time in terms of *khreikang*, a local unit of land measurement”<sup>112</sup>. Each family had to pay for 1 *khreikang* 20 *bres* of buck-wheat in *Dawa Ngapa* (June-July) 20 *bres* of finger millet in *Dawa Gupa* (October-November). However, after the marriage of the sons and division of property among them, the *khrei* is also divided and shared by all of them. Till today, *Khrei* is prevalent among the people of Tawang but the price of the taxation is reduced and 1 *khreikang* landed families pays 5 *bres* of buck-wheat and 5 *bres* finger millet<sup>113</sup>.

The Monpas of West Kameng also paid taxes to the Tawang monastery. As per traditional accounts the Talung *dzong* situated in Sanglem village of Kalaktang and Dirang *dzong* situated in Dirang proper were under the charge of Tawang Monastery. Each *dzong* of Talung and Dirang was under the charge of two senior monks for a term of three years and they were known as *dzongpons* (officers). Their main duty was to collect tax (*khrei*) from the villagers and to settle local dispute. The taxes collected by the *dzongpons* from their respective *dzongs* were used during *Monlam Chenmoh*, (New Year ceremony) and *Dungyur* or *Torgya* festival of Tawang Monastery. In addition to two *dzongpons*, the monastery also appointed a *lama* for a term of three years to Talung *gompa*. His duty was to look after the affairs of the *gompa* and to conduct *pujas*. He had an independent charge from the *dzongpons*.

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<sup>112</sup> Niranjan Sarkar, *Tawang Monastery*, P.17

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Dawa Derma, a senior citizen of Lumla village, 65 years of age, on 02-05-2010

In the context of Kalaktang Monpas, D. K. Dutta, writes that the Monpas of Kalaktang region had to pay tribute in kinds to the Tawang monastery through Talung *dzongpons*. Once they were so oppressed by the monastic officials that many of them left their village and migrated to Bhutan. After this incident, it is no longer compulsory for them to pay monastic tribute<sup>114</sup>. In Dirang too, the people resented the monastic order. There was a clash between the monks and twelve leading householders of Dirang when the monks tried to construct a *dzong*. The leaders of Dirang opposed it as they wanted to live an independent life and were not ready to be under subordination. So they opposed the construction of *dzong* that resulted into an armed clash and twelve leaders were killed. Then the monks built a *dzong* and established their administration. A long prayer wheel *mane* was constructed by the people of Dirang in the name of the deceased leaders which exist till today.

The Monpa people have gradually submitted to the monastic order of the Tawang monastery and it was only because of this reason that the monastery could collect taxes from the local people. Nevertheless, in case of other monasteries and temples, there are no such taxes nor any rules or compulsions, which force them to embrace the religious and hermit life of a monk. The Monpas however, have the tradition of sending their wards to monasteries and nunneries to become nuns and monks at very early age.

These traditional accounts give a glimpse of the spread of Buddhism among the Monpas under the aegis of Tibet. There is no doubt that the Monpas were under the Tibetan authority for a long period of time which continued upto 1950. In this

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<sup>114</sup> D. K. Dutta, op. cit., P.3

context Tashi Lama in his book has suggested that Tawang formed a part of Tsona dzong of Tibet and the monks of the Tawang monastery were closely connected to Drepung monastery in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and were a major force in Tibetan politics<sup>115</sup>.

### ***Lamas:***

Beside monks of the monasteries there are a number of village *lamas* who perform *pujas* and other religious activities in the villages. The *lamas* used to go every individual's house and perform *pujas* as when they are called by the villagers and thereby earn their livelihood. They do not follow the life of a hermit and even marry with the girl of their choice. Neither do they wear a monk dress. Most of them are actual monks who left the monasteries on various grounds but there are some others who have become a *lama* by self learning of the religious texts and religious activities.

In every village, a particular *lama* known as *Faij* or *Jambey Yang* plays a vital role in the socio-religious life of the Monpas. When the *lama* performs the rituals of the dead, he is known as *Faij*, otherwise he is considered as *Jambey Yang* (god of wisdom). When he performs rituals related to marriage ceremony, the god of wisdom, known as *Jambey Yang*, is believed to be with him; so the *lama* himself is regarded as *Jambey Yang*. One has to consult with him on each of the three great epochs of life such as birth, marriage and death. He is also invited by the villagers to perform *pujas* at their houses to do away with ill-fortunes. The post of *Jambey Yang* is hereditary.

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<sup>115</sup> Tashi Lama, op. cit., P.4

## Religious Symbols:

The *gompas*<sup>116</sup> have special significance as it is one of the most sanctified places among the Monpas. The *gompas* are under the charge of the *lamas*. A number of monasteries and *gompas* can be noticed in the Monpa areas, the biggest being the Tawang monastery. Besides these *gompas* a few *ani gompas* (nunneries) can be seen in the region.

Other distinguishing religious structures in the Monpa area are stupas called *chorten*<sup>117</sup>, a domical structure erected with brick or stone masonry. Relics of some revered *lamas*, sacred images, religious texts and precious objects are sealed inside the structure. *Chortens* are white in colour. The people, move round the *chorten* to wash away the sins committed through the medium of body, speech and mind<sup>118</sup>. Largest *chorten* in the Monpa region is Gorzam *chorten* situated at Zemethang in Tawang district.

In the Monpa area, besides the legendary 17<sup>th</sup> century Tawang monastery one can notice a number of *kakalinga* which occupy a dominant place in the people's mind. *Kakalinga* is an entrance gate with two stone walls on either side of the path. The roof is made of wooden ceilings, decorated with the paintings of Buddhists divinities and saints. It is generally constructed at the entrance of a village and a belief exists that it resists the entrance of evil spirits and demons into the village.

*Mane* means prayer-wheels, made of wooden or steel cylindrical barrel that are fixed with a wooden beam passing through its middle and forming its axis.

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<sup>116</sup> Plate No. 3(d)

<sup>117</sup> Plate No. 4 (a)

<sup>118</sup> J. N. Chowdhary, *Arunachal Panorama*, P.478

There are a number of prayer-wheel *manes* and stone-wall *manes*<sup>119</sup>. People usually recite the *mantra* by spinning this prayer wheel *mane* with their right hand. The Monpa people generally recite the popular Buddhist *mantra* ‘*Om mani padme hum*’ (hail to the jewel in the lotus). Although there are countless *mantras*, ‘*Om mani padme hum*’ is the most recited among the Monpas. This *mantra* is known to purify one’s negative emotions, ease suffering for all beings and protect from negative influence and illnesses.

*Sangbum* is a small structure of stone, built in the front of the temples and houses. Juniper twigs are burnt in it as incense in the morning and evening regularly and also during religious ceremonies.

The prayer flags called *phans* constitute an important part of the Monpa religious life. These are the religious symbols which are believed to have originated with the *Bon* religion. The Monpas believe that prayer flags carry the prayer to far flung areas and bring prosperity to the people. The more prayer flags are waved in the region, the more prosperity it is believed to bring. Hence, the prayer flags are often found strung along mountain ridges and windy areas.

There are different types of prayer flags. The tallest flags are known as *darshing* and the smallest one are called *lung-ta phans*. Religious *mantras* are printed in some of the prayer flags. The prayer flags are of five important colours namely, green, red, blue, white, and yellow. Sometimes prayer flags are cut into small pieces and stitched in a long rope and hung from one tree to another. It is called *chephan*. Other than prayer flag of local hand-made paper, colour papers from market are also used by them which are tied to bamboo sticks or to the

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<sup>119</sup> H. M, Bareh, op. cit., P.30

branches of trees. *Mantras* and sacred symbols such as wind horse, eight auspicious symbols etc., are printed on prayer flags that are believed to shower blessings. Funeral ceremonies are also observed by installing prayer flags in the name of the deceased. Prayer flags are also installed on the roof of the houses. Every Monpa house carries a prayer flag on the roof.

### **Buddhist Religious Calendar:**

The Monpas are following Tibetan lunar calendar having the Chinese time reckoning system, based upon the twelve year and sixty year cycles of Jupiter. The twelve years are named after twelve different animals. Below is the list of the names of the twelve animals in serial order:

Table: 7

Monpa term	Bothi script	English
<i>Jiwa</i>	མི་	Mouse
<i>Lang</i>	ལྷ་	Ox
<i>Tak</i>	ཐུག་	Tiger
<i>Yos</i>	ཡོ་	Hare
<i>Bruk</i>	བྱུང་	Dragon
<i>Druil</i>	ལྷ་ལྷ་	serpent
<i>Ta</i>	ཏ་	Horse
<i>Luk</i>	ལུ་	Sheep
<i>Triu</i>	ཏྲུ་	Monkey
<i>Jha</i>	ཇ་	Bird
<i>Khi</i>	ཁྲི་	Dog
<i>Pha</i>	ཕ་	Pig

The Monpas define each year by combining one of the five elements, known as *kham*, namely, Wood, Fire, Earth, Iron and Water. They further combine these five elements with one of the twelve animals. Thus, each year is ruled by one of the five elements with a pair of one of the twelve animals and the years are known as - Iron-Monkey Year, Earth-Bird Year etc. The twelve animals are five times repeated. However, one element rules for two years in a row, followed by the next element. For example, the year 2000 was an Iron-Dragon Year, year 2001; an Iron-Snake Year, year 2002; Water-Horse Year, year 2003; Water-Sheep Year and so forth. The term for year is *lo*, and when associated to the name of the animal, it is called *jha lo*, meaning ‘bird year’, *khi lo* ‘dog year’ and so on. The present year 2013 is Water Snake Year and a child born in 2013 will have Snake as his *lo or zodiac sign* and Water as his element (*kham*)<sup>120</sup>. These twelve years with twelve different animals is called “*Los Kor Chung Ngyi*”.

**Table: 8**

**The following table represents five elements:**

English	Bhoti Script	Monpa term
Fire	མེ	<i>Meh</i>
Earth	ས	<i>Sa</i>
Iron	ལྷགས་	<i>Chak</i>
Water	ལྷུ	<i>Chu</i>
Wood	ཞིང་	<i>Sheng</i>

<sup>120</sup> Interview with *lama* Rinchin Phuntso of Jangda village, 67 years of age on 18-04-2012

The first month starts with the rise of full moon in mid-February or March and other months follow in sequence. The months are known as *Dawa* and following are the twelve months or *Dawa*:

**Table: 9**  
**The twelve Months or *Dawa***

Months of lunar Calendar	English Months
<i>Dawa Dangpo</i>	February-March
<i>Dawa Ngyipa</i>	March-April
<i>Dawa Sumpa</i>	April-May
<i>Dawa Zipa</i>	May-June
<i>Dawa Ngapa</i>	June-July
<i>Dawa Drukpa</i>	July-August
<i>Dawa Dunpa</i>	August-September
<i>Dawa Gyepa</i>	September-October
<i>Dawa Gupa</i>	October-November
<i>Dawa Chupa</i>	November-December
<i>Dawa Chukchipa</i>	December-January
<i>Dawa Chungnyipa</i>	January-February

The Monpa people, therefore, follow the lunar calendar which normally consists of three hundred sixty days. They count the first twenty days of each month as *tses*, like *tses thi*, *tses nai*, and so on, next seven days as *nyish*, like *nyish thi*, *nyish nai*, and so on, and the rest three days, they count it as *gaitong*, *guitong* and *tongchin*. For the Monpas, *tses gaith* (eighth), *tses che* (tenth), *tses chelanga* (fifteenth) and *tongchin* are holy days and they try to avoid any work that may bring harm to other human beings or animals on these days. The village elders in a group recite the *mantras* with a rosary that contains 108 beads for the growth of compassion peace and wisdom. In addition to these, people mostly try to avoid non-vegetarian food on these days and install prayer flags. The Monpa Buddhist also observes certain restrictions on the day which they consider unholy,

sometimes these unholy or unpure days covers the whole year. These unholy days and year are known as *Lhona*, *Dhana*, *Zhona* and *Duichona*. On *Lhona* which falls for one year, *Dhana* which falls for one month, *Zhona* which falls for one day and *Duichona* which falls for two hours; people try to avoid any social and cultural ceremonies like marriage, building of houses, property division etc. Again, if the death of a person occurs during this period, then instead of the white funeral cloth, the body is wrapped up in black and carried to the cremation ground for performance of the last rituals<sup>121</sup>.

The week is divided into seven days called *za*. Each day of the week bears the name of the sun, moon, and the five planets namely, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn. Again each day of the week are associated with four elements, such as Sunday and Tuesday with Fire, Monday and Wednesday with Water, Thursday with Air and Friday and Saturday with Earth.

**Table: 10**  
**The days of the week**

English weeks	Monpa <i>Za</i>	Celestial Body	Its symbol
Sunday	<i>Nima</i>	Sun	A Sun
Monday	<i>Daa</i>	Moon	Crescent moon
Tuesday	<i>Mig-mar</i>	Mars	<i>A red eye</i>
Wednesday	<i>Lhag-pa</i>	Mercury	<i>A hand</i>
Thursday	<i>Phur-pa</i>	Jupiter	<i>A thunder bolt</i>
Friday	<i>Passang</i>	Venus	<i>A garter</i>
Saturday	<i>Pem-pa</i>	Saturn	<i>A bundle</i>

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<sup>121</sup> Interview with village *lama*, Sonam who is *Faij* of Jang, 35 years, on 28th, 29th and 30th December 2010

## **Beliefs and Practices:**

Every *gompas* have a guardian called *sungma* of their own, like *Pandan Lhamo* the guardian of Tawang Monastery. The Monpas take protection (*hreep*), under a particular temple, so that the temple guardian, *sungma*, would protect them from unseen harms and epidemics and grant them with a long life. They even try to associate their name with the name of the *sungma* of that temple. For instance, *Gom* is the *sungma* of Pamtse Gompa of Dungzeee, Jang village, and those who come under the protection of Pamtse Gompa add *Gom* or *Gombu* to their name. For example, Tashi, the name of a person will be called as Tashi Gom or Tashi Gombu. In the same way, *hreep* of Kimnas Gompa of Jang village add Choikyong with their name as the name of the *sungma* is Choikyong. During *Ganden Ngamchoet* festival, those who have come under the *hreep* of Kimnash Gompa goes to the Kimnash Gompa on that day and stay there for the whole night lighting butter lamps in memory of their revered Tsongkpha Lama.

Like other Buddhists, the Monpas are also seen always wearing a thread called *hrungma* around their neck irrespective of their gender. This is the holy thread with or without pendant that is given by the *lamas* and the *Rimpoches* during a religious ceremony called *wang*. They believe that this holy thread can protect them from any potential danger. There are different kinds of *hrungma*: *phurda hrungma* for longer life, *shin hrung* to protect from evil spirits etc. They also wear small square shape *hrungma* that contains mystic hymns; able to do away with misfortune. Most of the young children are seen wearing holy threads with lockets having pictures of Lord Buddha, the Dalai Lama, temple of Bodh Gaya, etc. It is also typical of the Monpas to prepare a long and colourful *hrungma* by joining several *hrungmas* for the new born

baby which is kept near the child. The long *hrungma* is generally worn by the baby to protect him from the evil spirits, whenever the parents take the baby out of the house.

Every Monpa household has a special chapel where the image of Lord Buddha, the Dalai Lama and other deities are placed. Early in the morning a member of the family offers bowls of water called *yonchap* (*yon*-metal bowl; *chap*-water) on the altar and removes it in the afternoon. In the morning they offer the water from east to west as they believe Guru Padmashambhava appears with sun rise and removes the water in the afternoon from the west to east. Niranjana Sarkar writes “... practice of offering *yonchap* is believed to have been introduced in Tibet by Dipankara Sri Jana. He gave the commandment that the water in Tibet was formed by the confluence of many streams and so the simple offering of this water to the divinities would itself be an act of religious merit. Even the poor can make this offering as it involves no expenditure”<sup>122</sup>. They light butter lamp in the evening regularly in the family chapel.

There is another religious ceremony performed by the Monpas is called *serkim* which is done to please the supernatural powers of their immediate surroundings. If any family member has to travel some distinct places or if any family member goes out to perform an important task, the rest of the family calls a *lama* for the purpose and perform *serkim*. In this ceremony a mixture of rice, corn and tea or liquor is offered to the deity by the *lama*. Besides these, they conduct a number of rituals at their houses like *sang*, *dopk*, *zinche*, *chos boom*, *kangur*, *dorchos*, etc. For organizing *zinche* and reading of *chos boom* and *kangur* require lot of resource and time. Therefore, these *pujas* are conducted by the well to do families. The Monpas also conduct *torgya puja*<sup>123</sup> at villages to ward off the evils from village.

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<sup>122</sup> Niranjana Sarkar, op. cit.,P.84

<sup>123</sup> Plate No. 4 (b)

Any painting or image, statue of deities associated with Buddha Dharma is meaningless unless it is purified through *ramnai*, which means to infuse life into the statue or to make it powerful. Therefore, immediately after buying a new image or statue of a deity they approach to a *lama* for *ramnai*. During *ramnai* gems and other precious stone are also kept inside a statue.

*Nyung-ne* is another religious practice done to purify one's negative *karma* and build up merit and wisdom through meditation and fasting. As per traditional accounts, this practice was started by Gelongma Palmo, Bhikkuni Lakshmi, a princess in the land of Udyana. She had become a nun, but as she suffered from leprosy, she was forced to live in the forest. Once in her dream, she was advised by king Indrabodhi of Udyana to recite the *mantras* of one thousand armed *Chenrezing*, Avalokiteshvara-the Bodhisattva of compassion who is known for his power in the purification of negative *karma*. She then recited the *mantras* and practiced the purification ritual or *nyung-ne* for twelve years in front of the image of Avalokiteshvara. Suddenly, one day she had the vision of Avalokiteshvara. After this divine vision, she was cured from leprosy. Among the Monpas *nyung-ne* is organized by the well-to-do families in village temples or in their family chapel. The nuns and monks also organize it in their respective *gompas*. *Nyung-ne* practice involves visualization of deity, accompanied by prayers such as prostrations (*sha*), and recitation of *mantras*. This worship is done in sets of eight, locally termed as *tser gieth*. One set consists of two days; the first day is called *zorpa* that includes one meal at noon and plenty of water and tea till they fall asleep at night. On the first day, prayer starts before dawn and ends late in the night. The second day is called *gukpa* which is observed with complete fast with such austerity that the person tries not to swallow even his saliva and one has to maintain pin drop silence,

except for the recitation of the *mantras* which concludes early in the morning. Next morning, they are offered a bowl of *thukpa* and the one who wants to end their session are free to go to their houses and the new ones join the following sessions. However most of the participants remain back and they, along with new comers start with the new session.

The participants during these days abstain from eating food like onion, raddish, garlic, eggs, meat, fish which are non-vegetarian in nature. They are bound to eat vegetarian food. They also have to follow eight vows- follow *ahimsha*, truthfulness, abstain from drinking of alcohol, abstain from stealing, abstain from indulging in physical relation, and abstain from indulging in any sort amusement like dancing, singing, makeup or ornaments, no meals after noon, and no use of high and luxurious seats or beds. If they forbid any of the vows or commit the mistakes of talking with their inmates in the *gukpa*, they are bound to continue with the act of praying by prostrating for a hundred times. It is also believed that practice of even one set of *nyung-ne* may reduce negative *karma* and can help one to attain rebirth in the higher realms of existence.

*Nuigeath* is another religious act performed by the Monpas for earning merit. The Monpas have a tradition of offering money on eighth, tenth and fifteenth of every month to the monks and nuns and also to those people engaged in reading the scriptures.

***Taboos:***

The religious life of the Monpas is restricted by certain taboos and superstitious beliefs. The unwritten laws or taboos of the Monpas provide certain restrictions in the society. It forms the most significant part of rituals, worship, offerings, sacrifices, etc.

Various kinds of taboos are found to be connected with the events of life and death, disease, illness and distress. It is considered to be a taboo to touch or fell the tree, grown locally, called *woor-sheng* (*woor* means different kinds of itches, *sheng* means tree). If someone touches or cuts down the *woor-sheng* tree, they would suffer from skin rashes like itching, swelling etc. There are some sacred places where one should maintain purity and spitting in those places is strictly restricted as it may cause different sorts of illness and wounds in their body. When someone goes out of house, it is not considered wise to sweep the room immediately. It is believed that *yang* (wealth) of house would get reduced or the person may meet with an accident. It is also a taboo for the members of a house to start journey in two different distant places by two members of a house on the same day itself. Starting journey by two members in different places is called *leki* and the Monpas believe that it may lead to an accident causing hurt to the members concerned.

### **Rituals related to Death:**

After the death of a person, generally, two men from the village go to bring the village *lama*, *Faij*. The *Faij* then comes to the deceased person's home and reads out his book *Chetang* and fixes the time to carry the dead body out of the house for performance of the last rites. On the seventh day following the death of a person, a *lama* called *Manpe lama* along with the old persons of the village performs recitation of *Mane* (*mantra*), for the benefit of the departed soul. Again, in the next seventh day, the family members and the villagers carry prayer flags to their village temple. On the twenty-first day, the family members conduct a *puja* at home. In this way, *puja* continues for the following days till the forty-ninth day, when a big religious *puja* called *zha zip che zir gu* is performed for the benefit of the departed soul. Then at the

completion of the first year, after the death of a person, the family of the dead observe a *puja* called *lomche* where religious texts is read. However, rich families while performing a *lomche*, perform the *puja* on a bigger scale called *tongche*, meaning one thousand, where each items for the *puja* like *tormas* (a kind of edible made of buck wheat), *ghee* lamps, incenses, flowers, religious texts etc., are to be of thousand in number. The Monpas also erect *Mane* and *Chorten* in the name of deceased person<sup>124</sup>.

### **The Philosophy of Life and Death:**

The Monpas believe in the existence of soul which continues to exist even after the death and disposal of the body. At the time of death, the soul leaves only the body. They believe that the soul of the deceased do not leave the area for almost two weeks and continues to live in the locality with friends and family. They also believe that soul has to go either to the heaven, *sangey*, or hell, *nyeiba*, according to one's deed. Those who incurred evil by harming others during their life time never get a chance to visit heaven whereas those who sacrificed their life for the cause of others are likely to go to heaven. They believe in a heaven of bliss or the kingdom of gods. *Sangey* or heaven is regarded as the home of the dead and the abode of peace and happiness. No pressure or hardship is bestowed upon the soul of the deceased. Lha Karpo, white god of virtue, shows the path of heaven to the soul of peace loving persons, high merit and free from sin. Hell, *nyeiba* is the abode of the soul of the Sinners who are punished by the *Shin Cheigyeap*, similar to *yamraaj* in Hindu mythology. In hell, one faces life full of pain and suffering. However, the spirits could be recovered from hell by their families by paying redemption i.e., installing prayer flags and by the process of gaining merit (*gewa*) for the benefit of the deceased.

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<sup>124</sup> J. N. Chowdhary, op. cit., P.51

The Monpa people like any of their other Buddhist counterparts also believe in re-birth, i.e., transmigration of the soul. The various forms of rebirth are represented by paintings on the walls of temples and monasteries called 'the wheel of life'. Accordingly, a man may be born in the realm of the gods (Sanskrit *Deva*), men (Sanskrit *Manav*), titans (Sanskrit *Asura*), beasts (Sanskrit *Danava*), tantalized ghosts (*vidags*, imaginary monsters who remain in extreme hunger and thirst, Sanskrit *Preta*) and hell (Sanskrit *Naraka*). Existence in the first two (god and men) worlds is considered superior or good, and in the rest four inferior or bad<sup>125</sup>. It is believed that rebirth in one of these six realms will be determined according to one's action of *karma* in the present life. If the activities of a person in his present life are morally bad, it will lead to the reduction of *punya* that automatically results in rebirth in one of the lower realms of existence. However, if a person is morally good, the store of merit is further built up resulting in rebirth in higher forms of existence. Therefore, the Monpas try to build up their store of merit by performing good deeds.

In the Monpa tribal society, after the Dalai Lama, *Rimpoches* have highest position as spiritual *gurus*. Most of the *Rimpoches* are reincarnated *lamas* who take birth repeatedly, inherit the property of their previous life and reside in the same temple with his belongings. His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and 19<sup>th</sup> Karmapa Lama are the greatest example of reincarnation of the soul. Reincarnation is called *yangtse* meaning rebirth of the deceased *Rimpoche*. Sometimes identification of a *yangtse* or incarnation becomes very difficult. Some years after the death of a *Rimpoche*, inquiry is conducted to find out about his new incarnation. For the purpose, a *lama*, who is considered as having the Holy Spirit inside him, is dressed like a god and is made to

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<sup>125</sup> Emil Schlagintweit, *Buddhism in Tibet*, Pp.91-92

wear a very heavy hat. As soon as he puts the hat on, the Spirits of the gods enters his body and gives detail information regarding the birth of the deceased *Rimpoche* and his whereabouts. The Holy Spirit speaks in a very different language which seems to be the language of the gods. Most of the time, he gives hints of the whereabouts of the deceased *Rimpoche* rebirth. The assistant of the Holy Spirit *lama* understands the indications. As soon as the gods leaves the body of the Holy Spirit *lama*, the people surrounding him rush to open his hat, delaying of which may cause his death. As per indications and directions given by the Holy Spirit *lama*, his followers set out for search of the new born *Rimpoche* and after finding him, he is subjected to undergo several tests to verify the authenticity of the child *Rimpoche*. Generally, in the tests the young *Rimpoche* is asked to select certain things like *phreng* (rosary), *chen* (tea cup), *greep* (ceremonial bell), etc from a bunch of all such similar items. Then the young *Rimpoche* is bestowed with the responsibility and position of his previous life.

### **Religious Festivals:**

The Monpas observe a number of religious festivals, prominent among them are *Torgya*, *Ganden Ngamchoet*, *Saka Dawa*, *Dukpa Tse-shi* and *Lhabab Duechen*.

*Torgya* is a three days monastic dance festival held in the Tawang Monastery that signifies the destruction of harmful forces and evil spirits. Prosperity for the people is the general motto of this festival. The festival falls in the twenty-eighth day of the eleventh-*Dawa Chukchipa* (Dec-Jan) of lunar calendar. This *Torgya* festival is known as *Dungyur* when it is celebrated on a wider scale in every three years. Both the *Dungyur* and *Torgya* festivals are celebrated at the Tawang Monastery with traditional gaiety and zeal. Immediately after the end of the dances in the evening, the *torgya* is taken out in procession by monks in full warrior costumes towards south western side

outside the monastery and throw the *torma* in the ceremonial pyre. A large crowd from far and near visits the Tawang monastery during this festival. On both sides of the roads of the monastery, traders can be seen selling local food items as well as cloths and other items.

***Chotpa:***

However during *Torgya*, the villagers of Jang, Lhou, Khinmey and some other villages celebrate this festival in their own respective *gompas*. Locally in these villages, this festival is known as *Chotpa*. As the Monpa villages are geographically divided into several units, every year the villagers of one unit have the tradition of celebrating *Chotpa* in their respective *gompas*. During these days, the villagers construct small bamboo huts near the *gompas* and stay there with their families and necessary belongings. They celebrate these three days of *Chotpa* with the accompaniment of songs, dances and drinks.

***Saka Dawa:***

Buddha *Purnima* is known as *Saka Dawa*, which is fixed by the full-moon day of *Vaishaka Purnima* and it falls in the fourth month-*Dawa Zipa* (May-June). This day is considered as thrice blessed, as on this day Gautam Buddha was born at Lumbini, attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya and also entered into *nirvana* at Kushinagar. Therefore, this whole month is considered as the most fortunate and sacred month. The Monpas try to lead a vegetarian life throughout this month and devotees spent their days in praying and in other welfare activities. They try to abstain from doing any untoward activities and even avoid tilling of the soil as the insects living under soil might die.

***Zipa Sangdui:***

This festival is connected with the death anniversary of Mera Lama, founder of Tawang monastery. As per prevailing religious accounts Mera Lama died on the 15<sup>th</sup> and cremated on the 19<sup>th</sup> of the fourth month-*Dawa Zipa*. Therefore, from 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> of the fourth month *Sangdui* is observed as death anniversary of Mera Lama. The Monpa people observe *Sangdui* by lighting candles in the temples and the monks read *Sangdui*, a religious text.

***Tseb-Chu:***

On the tenth day of the fifth month-*Dawa Ngyipa* (June-July) Guru Padmasambhava was born. To celebrate his birth anniversary, *tseb-chu* is observed. This day is also known as Lupon's *duichen*. The villagers perform a *puja* called *sang* in the village temple where every household offer *prasada* and the following day the villagers assembles together and enjoy drinking beer and liquor.

***Dukpa Tse-zhe:***

*Dukpa Tse-zhe* falls on the fourth of the sixth month-*Dawa Dukpa* (July-Aug.) which coincides with the preaching of the four noble truths at Sarnath by Gautam Buddha to his five disciples. In Tawang Monastery, the monks recite *Namgema* text and offer a thousand water-bowls called *yonchap*, along with thousand butter lamps, incense-sticks etc., which are offered to lord Buddha.

***Sher Jhoom:***

*Sher Jhoom* is an important ritual performed by the Monpa people. Its main purpose is to drive away ghosts and evil spirits from village. This two days religious ceremony is celebrated on the sixth month called *Dawa Drukpa*. On the first day, in the village temple a village *lama* mostly *Faij* recites passage from the *Thokhor-rolpa* text.

In the evening, one male member from every house of the village has to gather at the community hall of the village for conducting the *Sher Jhoom*. The whole village participation is required in this ceremony, the absence of which leads to fine. From there, along with the *lama* they march throughout the village with bamboo torches and pine-dust (*som*) in their hands. In this ceremony, the men folk, almost naked, smear ashes and coal on their bodies and faces and make wild noises to frighten and ward off evil spirits from the village. They go from door to door of each house in the village along with the village *lama* who throws pine dust on the flames of the torches with chants to ward off evil spirits from the houses. The Monpa people consider themselves blessed when the *lama* throws pine dust on the torches towards their direction. After visiting every house, a pyre is lit in which the *lama* throws a big *torma* and *torgya*, so that the evil spirits would not gather the courage to re-enter the village by crossing the area where the *torgya* is burnt.

The following day, all the villagers get together at a particular place. Each house compulsorily has to provide a certain amount of beer and homemade liquor for the religious celebration. It is a type of social gathering where everybody including the children enjoys in feasting and drinking. In some villages, the *Bon* priest also participates who recites *Bon* chants and prepares a figurine of a goat (*raah*). In the afternoon, a man acts as goatherd (*raithpa*) and covers himself with a *gongchung*, a type of locally made raincoat of wool especially for the cattle herders, and cuts the figurine of goat into pieces and throws away the head. The *Bonpa* then observes the first right leg of the goat and predicts the future fate of the village concerning matters like child health, disaster, calamity etc. Then the first right leg of the figurine is distributed among the villagers as *prasada*. However, the *Bonpos* performs his rituals

in a house near the village temple while the *lama* performs in the village temple. The *lama* also recites chants and in the evening throws away a big *torgya*. Each household prepares *prasada* called *zursum* which they carry to their cultivable fields. These *zursums* are then planted along with chillies on protruding branches of a tree called *Jhoomkhar* as a protection against evil eye. They plant the *Jhoomkhar* in the fields and put *zursum* and chillies on every corner of the branch so as to protect their field from any unseen harm caused by evil spirits.

However, in Dirang, *Kangyur* text is read by the village *lamas* in the ninth month of *Dawa Gupa*. After completion of reading of the text, the village *lamas* themselves go door to door at night reciting *mantras* in full costume to fend off the evil spirits from the village. Each household has to offer meat, fish and beer to the *lamas*.

***Lhabab Duechen:***

It falls on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the *Dawa Gupa* i.e., October-November. *Lhabab* means coming of gods and *Duechen* means day. It is believed that on this day Gods namely Lha Wangchuk, Khyabjugk and Tsangpa Gyakljin descend from heaven to earth to listen to the teachings of Buddha. According to another version, *Lhabab Duechen* is reincarnation of Buddha in his Shakyamuni form. Therefore, the Monpas consider this day as God's day and they visit the temples with *prasadas* and offer prayers and light candles.

***Choskor:***

*Choskor* (*chos*-religious texts and *kor*-ritual circumambulation) is observed either in the month of *Dawa Gyepa* or *Dawa Dunpa*. It is a religious procession carried out by villagers with the holy images and scriptures on their back. The presiding *lama* along with some of the village boys dressed as *arp* (army), *mem-dhakpa* (gunmen),

*azara* (Indian ascetics), and two *kiengpa* dancers in monkey masks also accompany the procession. This festival is observed for better yielding of crops and prosperity of the village. The *lamas* and monks group together at the village temple and read out the religious texts- *Bum, Kangyur, Tengyur*. Observing this festival requires huge amount of resource and the whole expenditure is borne by the villagers<sup>126</sup>.

### ***Ganden Ngamchoet:***

*Ganden Ngamchoet* commemorates the death of Je Lama-Tsongkha-Pa, the founder of *Gelugpa* sect. To mourn his death, butter lamps are lighted throughout the day and night. He passed away on twenty-fifth day of the tenth month-*Dawa Chupa* (Nov-Dec) and every year his anniversary is observed. The *lamas* recite *Droiechoh, Manla, Dokesang* or *Gyetong* texts in the temples as well as in the family chapels. In certain villages the people even stay whole night in village temples lighting butter lamps.

### **Monastic Dances:**

Well trained monks in a magnificent dress and masks on their face, perform various dances on the 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> month of *Dawa Chukchipa* (December-January) and the 1<sup>st</sup> of *Dawa Chungnyipa* i.e., during three day celebration of *torgya* or *dungur* Festival in Twang monastery. The dances are *Pha-Cham, Jam-Cham, Grei- Chham, Lou-Chham, Jha Pho Mo, Ara-Khankyo, Kya-Cham, Durdag-Cham, Lhamo Tsoikor Chham, Los-Kor-chungi Chham, Gellong-Cham, Chham-Chin, Chang kuilu, Choyeng, Lenang cham* and *Dud cham*<sup>127</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> Tsewang Norbu, op. cit., Pp.99-102

<sup>127</sup> Interview with *lama* Naah, a monk dancer of Tawang monastery, 32 years of age on 15<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2011

***Geipu and Geimu Dance:***

This dance is performed by the monks of Tawang monastery on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of month of *Dawa Chupa*, once in every three year i.e., fifteen days before the commencement of Dungur festival. The story relates to a Tibetan king named Geipu Otashi and his queen Geimu. A person named Aapa was charmed by the beauty of Geimu and seduced her. When the king Geipu came to know about it, he cut off the nose of his queen. The queen in distress went to a monk who healed her nose but there too, she was involved in illicit relation with the monk. The king Geipu in the meantime ordered for the capture of Aapa. Aapa realizing the consequences, now tried to get back his freedom by offering his cows, fowls, goats, sheep etc., as fee for his release but the king did not agree. At last, however, when a ceremonial scarf (*khada*) was offered along with some rupees, to the king Geipu; he decided to release Aapa.

***Pha-Cham or Boar Dance:***

This dance is performed before dawn in every morning of the three days of *Torgya* festival only by the main dancer known as *champon*, in monk's costume with a boar's mask. It is believed that before the human race wakes up, a boar with his tusks clears the dance arena. He further seeks permission for dance and protection from the deity called Acholu who lives under the earth so that other dancers would dance without any harm. This dance is accompanied by drum beats.

***Zam-Cham:***

This dance is performed by two participants, a senior dancer called Gocham Ganmah and a junior dancer called Gocham Zonmah with angry expression masks. They hold a tiny flag in their right hands and skull called *bandaa* in their left hands. This dance aimed to frighten the evil spirits away from the dance arena, so that the

ground could be fully utilized for a series of dances. This dance is performed after *Pha-Cham*.

***Grei-Chham:***

This dance depicts how evil forces were subjugated under religious power. This dance is performed by twelve dancers wearing frightening masks. These dancers are the faithful disciples of a *Gelong*, high *lama* of the Buddhist. They perform their dance by holding swords in their right hands and skull called *bandah* in their left symbolizing the destruction of all evil forces who opposed religious advancement in the region.

***Lou-Chham:***

To chase the evil spirits, this dance is again performed by two dancers called Gocham Gomah and Gocham Zonmah.

***Jha Pho Mo:***

In this dance, two dancers, a male and a female wear bird's costumes and dance together. Jha chekang and Mlengchung are two hunters who are depicted through dance as they try to kill the birds. However, after the capture of the birds, the hunters set them free, showing compassion towards animals as the main theme of the dance.

***Chham-Chin:***

This dance is performed by twelve dancers with ferocious masks on their foreheads, in full warrior costumes to ward off the evils and demons from the path of faith. This dance depicts how the monks with the help of Guru Padmasambhava subdued a powerful demon who tried to harm the religious activities.

***Kya Cham:***

The main aim of this dance is to entertain the audience. *Kya* means non-tribal and this dance illustrates the communication between the hill people with that of

plains. It shows how the Monpas communicate with the people of plains mostly with Assam for trade. The dancers communicate with each other through physical gestures and postures.

***Los-Kor-chungi Chham:***

This is the dance of the characters of twelve cyclic animals of the horoscope. The twelve dancers wear twelve different masks that of mouse, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, sheep, horse, sheep, monkey, bird, dog and pig which gives a picture of how a year revolves around the twelve characters or zodiac signs of the horoscope.

***Deer Dance:***

Deer dance is performed to show how a deer was caught and then released out of mercy. Once a man named Aapa went to the jungle for hunting with his dog. He met two persons with same name - Mlengchung in the jungle. After some time, a deer came out of the jungle chased by the dog. Aapa caught the deer and wanted to kill the deer for its meat. But he released the deer on the request of the two persons, who taught him that it would be a sin to kill the animal. This dance emphasizes the moral lesson that one should be compassionate to the animals.

***Lhamo zokor Chham:***

This dance is performed by a group of twelve dancers who wear ferocious masks in magnificent dresses, representing the retinue of Pandan Lhamo, the main guardian deity of Tawang Monastery. A masked dancer dressed as Pandan Lhamo comes out from the main temple dancing solemnly escorted by her attendants. The main aim of this dance is to receive the blessings of Pandan Lhamo.

***Durdag-Cham:***

This dance is performed by two male and two female dancers wearing human skeleton robes with long claws hanging down. This dance depicts how after death of a person, the human soul is being received in hell by devils. This is the most fearful dance which creates a scene of horror among the audience.

***Gelong-Cham:***

A group of twelve dancers in monk costumes perform this dance. It depicts the attainment of *gelong*, a high monastic degree of education received, with the attainment of which, they become qualified to spread the knowledge of religion to others.

Beside these dances performed in the Tawang Monastery, a number of other religious dances are also performed in other monasteries of Bomdila Gompa and Khyinmey Gompa.