Chapter V
The Beliefs and Practices

The religion is an important and inseparable part of human society. It became a basis of human society because many social obligations are attached with religious belief system. In order to live in a society, a person must observe certain restrictions laid down by the religious institution he belongs to and belief system. The people of the same society generally shared similarity in their socio-cultural lives, with recognisable set of belief system. Discussing origin of the different faith among the early societies Emile Durkheim once wrote that, "Different clans treat each other as enemies because they are of different blood."^370^ In historical period, a community shared many similarities that had cultivated the sense of oneness and gradual developing into single belief system to maintain social norms and orders of the society.

In the contemporary society, it may be observed that an old belief system is still prevailing among the pristine societies as D.D. Kosambi rightly observes that; "The fossilized and stratified remnants of primitive observances, combined with caste and religion, hold a particular group together."^371^ It is worthwhile to mention Emile Durkheim while discussing separation of community because of religion as he described; "Religion is unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that is to say,


things set apart and forbidden belief and practices which unite one single
moral community called church.” 372 In a common man parlance, religion
could be seen as deepest of human kind emotion and intuition, no space for
reasons, only the concern of unseen beings and unsolved things exist beyond
visible world. About origin of these other worldly beings, it is stated that
humankind had once peopled the world with supernatural beings. 373 These
unseen beings, among the worldly animals and inanimate organisms are
known as gods and goddesses and humankind believed that these deities have
a supreme supernatural in the form of blessing and curse in this universe. The
faith is an occult power and existence of supreme power above humankind
power, which created the universe and people trust that these unseen beings
will fulfill their prayers. As such, religion meant propitiation or conciliation of
powers superior to man. 374 When a humankind believed in a particular god
and began to practice connected with ritual and worshiping of particular
deity, then the faith of that society comes to be known as religion.

According to Gordon Marshall, religion is a, “set of beliefs, symbols
and practices, which are based on the idea of the sacred and which unites
believers into a socio-religious community.” 375 Similarly, in tribal societies the
pristine roots of their belief systems are still alive although, modernity has
affected their indigenous religious institutions. Gradually, historical belief
systems and observances practised by a particular society became an
inseparable social institution of humankind faith in the existence of a

372 Emile Durkheim, op.cit., p. 168.
373 Ibid., p.171.
particular god and goddess. After institutionalisation of religion, it is being knitted inseparably with other social elements of a society. While observing institutionalisation of belief system C. Greetz wrote; “religion is a set of symbols as part of cultural system.”376 As such, with the passage of time when a society changes due to impact of modernity it also brings changes in religious institution. Sometimes, these changes affected the pristine religious practices of a society and resulting of eroding the principle tenets. The present societies of the world is facing a lots of religion related wearisome situation in which the humankind thrives hard to practice a religion based on reasons. Today religion becomes one of the most important parts of a person’s life; it would be acceptable to say that it became identity of a person. Nowadays, the humankind seems to be intoxicated with religious flavour, as for some people it became the source of fight, while for others it became the way to find peace in life.

Number of religious practitioners and writers come up with their ideologies to let the people accept religion as a personal choice and not to create noises in a society because of religious differences. Regarding difficulties to inculcate scientific perceptions among the people Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty also noted that; “Philosophers and theologians may set up their logical criteria, but a logical answer to an emotional question is difficult both to construct and to accept.”377 As religion is totally based on emotion, it seems that the attempts to inculcate logical perceptions among the people are

377 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, op.cit., P.5.
an impractical approach. It is observed that these days in spite of sincere attempt to articulate these ideas it became difficult to induce these perceptions among the people who belong to different religious ideologies. In order to maintain peace and harmony the ideological differences among religious institution of the world, it is to understand that a religion is a personal choice. As humankind created tenets and philosophies of religion, whereas religion did not create the humankind, so any religion should not overshadow the essence of humanity. As we know, Arunachal Pradesh is a home of number of tribes having their own distinct culture and history. In religious aspects each tribe practices and maintain their own indigenous religious institutions with varying degree of tenets and philosophies. The tribes like the Nyishi, the Tagin, the Galo, the Adi, and the Apatani believed in their indigenous religion institutions named variously under the banner of the Donyi Poloism. Other tribes like the Khampti, the Singpho and the Tikak Tangsas worshipped the Theravada Buddhism while the Monpa, the Memba, the Kamba, the Meyor, the Sherdukpen and the Nah follow the Mahayana Buddhism.

Regarding practice of the Theravada Buddhism M.Neog writes in these lines; “The Theravada Buddhism of Burma* spread into Assam with the advent of the tribes like Khampti, Singpho, Dowaniya, Phakiyal, Turung and Aiton from Hukang Valley.” ³⁷⁸ While the Nocte followed the old form of Vaishnavite religion although it is facing a relegated situation due to spread of Christianity in the areas. The Tangsa practices an indigenous belief system

called the RangFra (the Supreme Deity). However, some of the Tangsa clan follows the Buddhism regarding which Yan Tikhak writes, “the Tikhak Tangsa follows Theravada Buddhism.”

They were Buddhist since very early period but it is observed that nowadays most of them are adopting Christianity and very few are still following the Buddhism. A majority of tribes in the state are the nature worshippers and believed in indigenous religious institutions. However, these tribes are experiencing a wave of transformations and changes in their socio-religious outlook in the contemporary situations. The fundamental agent of changes within the tribes is the modern education, improved means of communication and transportation; with concomitant influx of an alien religion in the society. In the context of the Singpho, it would seem that they underwent a vast change in their religious life with the passage of time. They believed in indigenous religion of their own since early days, which has been overshadowed by embracing of the Buddhism in the course of time.

The Traditional Rituals

The Singpho are follower of the Theravada Buddhism besides their practices of indigenous religion, although the Buddhism has overshadowed the indigenous religion to a considerable degree in these days. Despite of overwhelming inclined to an alien religion, the tribe did not completely give up the practice of indigenous religion. They belief in a number of spirits

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hovering all around whom they term as nhats and their indigenous religion is called Nhatgan. The term is composed of two words; ‘nhat’ means the ‘spirit’ and the ‘gan’ means the ‘protector’, thereby denotes the worshipping of a spirit of the protector. About the pristine belief system of the tribe A.C.Bhagawati describes that; “religion is any set of attitudes, beliefs and practices pertaining to supernatural powers, whether that powers be god, spirits, ghosts and demons.” The spirit nhatgan is believed to be the protector spirit of both malevolent and benevolent power. In order to get blessing from these spirits they are to propitiate by rituals. They are propitiated at definite interval of time with suitable offerings. In the early days, the Singpho used to sacrifice animals like buffalo, cow, pig and elephant in order to appease spirits and ancestral spirits. About the animal sacrifice in the rituals J.B.Neufville once wrote that; “they sacrifice buffaloes, hogs and cocks and the skull of the buffaloes are hung up in their houses.” However, after embracing of the Buddhism there is a tremendous impact on traditional rituals of the people. As a result, these days small animals like fowl, pig, goat, etc., are sacrificed in the rituals in place of large animals like buffalo, cow and elephant. It is observed, at present a very few priests are available in the Singpho society. They perform a number of rituals to get blessing and protection from the benevolent nhats. These rituals activities include appeasement of the malevolent nhats who create miseries and misfortunes in one’s life.

380 Tapan Kumar M. Barua, op.cit., p.73.
382 Tapan Kumar M. Barua, op.cit., p. 78.
The spirit of deceased ancestors is also being worshipped by way of performing pacifying ritual with the help of traditional priest. The fundamental objectives of traditional rituals are to maintain peace and prosperity in the society. Like every traditional society, the Singpho also practised a certain internalized indigenous religion along with institutionalised Buddhist religion. The cult of sacrifices is the fundamental of traditional rituals in the village. In the early days before conversion into the Buddhism, the Singpho used to performed a number of rituals connected to everyday activities but after their conversion these rituals have been virtually reduced to a few in members. One of the important traditional rituals, which are still performed by the community, is the ningche ritual which is basically to propitiate spirits living in the sky or in the air. It is believed that invisible spirits create sudden problems in order to make their presence being realized. The ningche ritual cannot perform according to one's wish rather it is performed when any unnatural things happened to a family. Generally, after examining omen and finding the demand of a spirit, the ningche ritual is performed with sacrifice of animals. This ritual is usually sponsored by a particular family and is being performed for well being of the whole community in the village. With the passage of time, the ningche ritual became a family affair although the ritual pattern is still maintained in the original form. Besides, the ningche ritual the people still maintained the worshipping of ancestral spirit that they considered as family spirit. This ritual is generally performed by the family of a deceased person to propitiate the spirit after identification by the priest, which is causing problem with family.

384 Tapan Kumar M. Barua, op.cit., p.79.
The ancestral worshipping among the Singpho is known as cu nhat ritual. The word ‘cu’ means ‘family’ and ‘nhat’ means ‘spirit’ which denotes a spirit belongs to a family. The Singlap nat is an ancestral spirit who makes mankind suffers from continuous fever. During a ritual, the priest placed a reed plant after chanting hymns whereby family members are to walk across a plant while simultaneously the priest read hymns in order to find out the wishes of spirits. During worshipping of singlap nat (ancestral spirit), fowl or dog is sacrificed but the family members do not eat the flesh as they considered it inauspicious ritual and animals are considered to be sacrificed only for the spirit. When all rituals formalities are over animals are being sacrificed to pacify the spirit to ward off from future miseries. Thus, whenever needed an individual family performs a sacrificial ritual in order to propitiate their ancestral spirits. Concerning of this traditions current among the tribe one of the informants narrated about ancestral spirit in the following words:

My maternal grandmother committed a suicide, so her spirit began to create a lots of problem with my family. Therefore, my family had to perform cu nhat ritual in order to appease her spirit. During normal time, everything seems to be all right but during some special occasion when we prepare meat, laopani (local drink) and create much noises at house then her spirit become active. We belief that she does not have ill intention towards us rather she only wants to get her share of eatable things. However, sometimes suddenly many unforeseen incidents happened to my family. After the priest find out the exact wish of spirit; accordingly an appropriate ritual is to perform in order to propitiate spirit.

It is believed that ancestors are also interested in humankind affairs and try to interfere in day to day activities especially during festive occasions with intent to finish their unfinished work in this world. Every house has a special door

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385 Tapan Kumar M.Barua, op.cit., p. 89.
386 MNSI, op.cit.
for use of spirits of a deceased ancestor if they wish to re-visit the family.\textsuperscript{387} The ancestral spirits do not have ghastly intention towards their family rather they create misfortunes just to make their presence being felt, so that they could get some consumable items in forms of sacrificial offerings. Apart from performing of propitiation rituals for their ancestors, the Singpho also perform a general ritual for overall well being of the family and common people. Being a traditional society like other tribes of the state, they are also inclined towards certain belief system, which is not based on scientific rationale about the concept of \textit{evil-eyed} people. They belief in certain particular clan possessed an \textit{evil-eyed} quality. As traditions of the tribe maintained that there are certain clans in the society who practiced an \textit{evil-eyed} effect whom the people called \textit{tini} and when they cause physical harm to others then it is called \textit{phiti}. It is believed that such member of a particular clan has the power to create physical problems to others on flimsy ground. There is a matrimonial restriction being observed to this particular \textit{tini} clan.\textsuperscript{388} It is said that these \textit{evil-eyed} people do not create problems intentionally to any person on personal grudge rather it happens naturally when an \textit{evil-eyed} person is attracted towards any commodities belonging to others. This attraction towards material objects causes a physical harm in turn to anyone irrespective of age, sex and status. The people belong to \textit{tini} clan is considered to possess esoteric power which enable them to cause harm to other people. Besides a customary practice, the tribe belief in a scientific reason for being an \textit{evil-eyed} person.\textsuperscript{389} It is believed that these \textit{evil-eyed} people are usually belong to a poor family and

\textsuperscript{387} L.A.Waddell, \textit{op.cit.}, p.42.  
\textsuperscript{388} IGSI, \textit{op.cit.}  
\textsuperscript{389} JKSI, \textit{op.cit.}
they need even a barest necessity essential to eke out their livelihood. They often desperate to own the things that they do not have and so they are always filled with deep desire of possession beyond their capacity.

It is said that such person with vengeance if cursed or spelled something then their words are converted into harmful action. It is stated that even if a person from tini clan becomes affluent and could afford every luxury things they might not rid of their esoteric power. Even if a tini become rich and educated, the other clans do not prefer to have matrimonial relations with tini family.\textsuperscript{390} As such, the community also believed that these evil-eyed people of their society are having esoteric power but they do not harm anyone intentionally. Regarding the physical problem caused by a tini, one of the competent authorities on tribe’s traditions narrated that:

One day my school colleague suddenly had a severe stomach pain so we run to medical and gave her medicine but her condition remains the same. Then I realized that it was not a medical problem so I called a person who knows chanting how to ward off evil-eyed effect from the body. Then he collected some stuff like meat, cigarette, rice and salt, and throw them away by chanting the hymns. As soon as the chanting was over she became normal as if nothing happened to her.\textsuperscript{391}

Whenever a person faced problems with effect of an evil-eyed people then the priest is invited in order to cure the problems inside the body. After the priest finds out specific evil-eyed people who is responsible for causing sudden physical harm to an individual, then morang nhat ritual is performed to dispel evil from an ailing person. Besides performing of ancestral spirit ritual a morang nhat ritual is also performed to ward off from a problems caused by evil-eyed people.\textsuperscript{392} This is an important ritual of the tribe, which is considered

\textsuperscript{390} SNSL \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{391} JKS\textit{I, op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{392} MNSL \textit{op.cit.}
by performing such ritual they could ward off themselves from the unforeseen effect from *evil-eyed* people. Generally, the people believe that there is some scientific bases for being a person to be called as an *evil-eyed* person. These *evil-eyed* person cannot afford to even a thing which they curiously wanted so they grudge in their mind because of which creates certain negative energy towards other. As a result, some people become a victim of this negative energy. There are numbers of measures to protect oneself from evil effect of these people among tribes of the state. About the measures to protect oneself from effect of *evil-eyed* people, one of the old Galo lady narrated that:

The most common measure to protect ourselves from the *evil-eyed* people is not to eat in front of them without giving them. We should encounter them boldly and should not be afraid of them then it is believed that *evil-eyed* effect would not harm us.393

The people who believed in *evil-eyed* concept they also belief in numbers of measures and follow many restriction to keep oneself away from the effect of these people. The Singpho also believed that to protect oneself from the *evil-eyed* people one should not to eat in front of them without giving them. Similarly, like many other tribes of the state, the Singpho believed in the concept of other world. As they would maintain that after death of a person, a spirit is to make a long journey to reach other world. In order to make the path of a spirit clear, easy and make their journey successful, the Singpho performed a ritual called *suwanka* so that a spirit could reach to a land of spirits safely and could live there happily. About the concept of a land of spirits among the Singpho, Colonel Woodthorpe wrote in these lines:

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393 Debi Kato, 80 years, Libu Bene Village, Kamba Circle, West Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh, interviewed on December 28, 2013.
A spirit (deoda) points out the road and conducts the spirit of the dead person to a river, where he bathes it. The spirits of the ancestors then come and take it to their abodes.  

It is believed that a spirit will never be able to reach the destiny and will remains wondering on their way forever if a suwanka ritual is not performed properly. A family member of a deceased person sponsored the rituals but all the villagers used to participate in the ritual. As people belief that a spirit wants to say adieu to humankind world and find difficult to leave their family for good. Thus, they need help from their family so that they could find the way to other world. It is also believed that a spirit has the same life as they had in the humankind world. Regarding the concept of continuation of life in the other world Edmund Leach writes that; “The commoners of the nhat world are the deceased ancestors of the commoners of the human; autocrats of the nhat world are the deceased human chiefs.”

The tribe belief that as it happens in the humankind world there are chiefs, aristocrats, commoners and slaves in the spirit world too, thus, after death also a spirit is to continue the same life they lived in this world. However, it is an established maxim among the people that after the death soul wonders around in the world till a proper ritual is performed to send them to land of spirit. These souls become dangerous for humankind due to which it become necessary for the family of a deceased soul to conduct proper ritual as soon as possible. Hence, the suwanka ritual is performed by invoking hymns initiating spirits of other ancestors to help the spirit of a deceased person so that the soul could continue to live the same life in the land of spirit. Besides, these rituals the

394 Colonel Woodthorpe, op. cit., p. 31.
Singpho believed in black magic and supernatural power. It is observed that these days black magic is not seen very often, moreover after adoption of the Buddhism this practice is exceedingly being discouraged in the society.

The traditions maintained that in the days of yore black magician used to capture souls and controlled the powers of such captured souls. The black magician acquired their magical power from these captured souls and could create miseries to other people in the village. Many early societies of humankind belief in black magic and super naturalism in their socio-religious world view. As someone has aptly said that magic is older than religion among the tribal world. Due to impact of modernity, these practices become less appealing to the Singpho, although certain section of clan is still belief in it and continue to practice black magic. Apart from this kind of belief system, the Singpho also practices an agrarian subsistence economy and used to perform numbers of ritual related to agriculture. The sole purpose of this ritual is to appease the deities of agriculture for bumper harvesting of crops. The *inka nhat* deity is believed to blessed the agricultural crops prosper. The mainstay of traditional economy of the tribe was agriculture, so they were very particular about appeasement of the deities related to agriculture and animal husbandry. Even in the present days the tribe is particular about ritual and ceremonies related to agriculture and animal husbandry. In the early days they observed numbers of ritual associated with agriculture but these days they perform only one important agricultural ritual ceremony called *tua*. The *tua* ceremony means the rituals performed by the tribe to appease the deities

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397 Tapan Kumar M.Barua, *op.cit.*, p.92.
of agriculture. While writing about the ritual of agriculture deities Tapan Kumar M. Barua observes that:

_Singpho believed that it is in the power of the spirits to give good and bad crops; it is not surprising to find that they take resort to protect their crops by ritual acts._398

Accordingly, there are number of ceremonies and rituals which are being performed in connection to agriculture, crops, harvesting and clearing of jungle in the village. Still today the people performed a few important rituals before ploughing the field and threshing grains as a part of agriculture ritual. The _insam nat_ ceremony is performed before beginning of ploughing the field whom the Singpho considered as owner of the agricultural field. Besides this there are other ritual being performed before the threshing of grains whom the Singpho called _swon nhat_ and _sithun nhat_ and are considered as protector of crops. In village, the Singpho Chief or other wealthy people of different clan performed rituals for their family and for whole community for good harvest and production. The _manglup_ ceremony is a ritual performed when a member of wealthy family died.399 During the ceremony, all adult men and women participate and bring gift for the family. At night dance is performed and any one can participated in dance but no remuneration is given to dancers. The most important part of a ceremony is burial of belongings of a dead person.400 It would seem that the Singpho generally perform a numbers of traditional rituals for different deities for different purposes. But all the rituals are similar cult of sacrifice by offering animals at _ngadan_ (altar) erected at a particular

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398 _Ibid., p.9._
400 Tapan Kumar M. Barua _op.cit_, p.115.
location. Regarding sacrifice in the rituals among pre-colonial community of India Romila Thapar writes that:

*The area where the sacrifice takes place is demarcated as sacred; the priest communicating with the god is sacred in the sacrificial context as also is the sacrificial animal and the mundane animal now consecrated as the sacrificial victim. Outside of a sacred place immolation is murder.*

In every ritual irrespective of purpose and deity for whom the offering is being made a *ngadang* (sacrificial altar) is erected after the priest chants the hymns. Like other tribes of the state both the altar and consecrated animal are treated with sacred as these are part of ritual which is done for the well being of a family or for whole community. In every ritual, offering is done differently according to findings of a priest through omen. These days also rituals are conducted in similar way in all ceremonies. However, it is observed that after embracing of the Buddhism, the tribe changed a lot in the sphere of traditional ritual and ceremonies.

**Role of the Dumsa (Priest)**

The traditional priest is known as *dumsa*, who is the most important religious functionary in the society and whose presence is inevitable in all the rituals and religious ceremony. When a *dumsa* performs any ritual they are assisted by an assistant priest known as *gunjang*, many of whom later on become *dumsa*. However, there is no obligation for a *gunjang* to become a priest. Some of the *gunjang* themselves leave the profession of priesthood although they know chants and hymns. These days people do not like to live as a priest life because of restrictions and taboos one is to maintain and

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402 MDSI, *op.cit.*
follow. There is no institution for giving training to be a *dumsa* rather if a person is endowed with quality to become a *dumsa* one could naturally get interested in hymns and learn it easily. A very few people who are destined to be a *dumsa* can easily learn the hymns which the common people could not understand.\(^{403}\) In the Singpho society there is no written records on hymns therefore a person who would become a *dumsa* learn the hymns and chants orally by carefully listening the hymns when a *dumsa* chanted it during rituals and ceremonies. All the rituals hymns are transmitted to a next generation by word of mouth and assistant *dumsa* learned the hymns through regularly assisting the head *dumsa*. While writing about the Brahanical methods of transmitting hymns orally A.L.Basham rightly put it in these words:

*The hymns composed by their priests in their new home were carefully handed down by word of mouth, and early in the 1*\(^{st}\) *century B.C. were collected and arranged. Even when the art of writing was widely known in India the hymns were rarely written, but, thanks to the brilliant feats of memory of many generations.*\(^{404}\)

The institution of priesthood among the Singpho do not have any formal training process for a person to become a priest. As such, the office of a priest is not a hereditary but one could become a priest who possessed a required qualifications and knowledge. The first *dumsa*, according to legend was appointed by *Mathum Mathwa* (supreme *Nhat*).\(^{405}\) The tradition maintained that as humankind were suffering a lots so the supreme benevolent *Nhat Mathum Matwa* send a *dumsa* who knows the knowledge of chanting to cleanse all the sufferings. It is said that this *dumsa* gave the knowledge of chanting to humankind. It is believed, a *dumsa* possessed some supernatural power to

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\(^{403}\) MDSI, *op.cit.*


\(^{405}\) Tapan Kumar M.Barua, *op.cit.* p.135.
pronounce hymns precisely to find out which spirit is to be offered ritual and what kind of sacrifice is required. Being able to find out the abstract wishes of a spirit the *dumsa* negotiates between humankind and gods, and is able to cure illness and other miseries faced by any member of the community.

By virtue of their religious role and function, the *dumsa* is being respected by people and place their social position different from other people in the society. The major task of a *dumsa* is to help others to get rid of their miseries which could not be done by everyone. As such the people needs them because of their spiritual powers and considered them the most important person in the society. After conversion into the Buddhism, the Singpho follow the Buddhist way of life but still *dumsa* occupies an important place in the society. Even today, a *dumsa* is the leading figure in the matter of traditional ceremonies, festival, marriage ceremony and family rituals. The *dumsa* is to inaugurate all ritual ceremonies by chanting the required hymns and pray. During the occasions like marriage ceremony and family rituals, a *dumsa* narrates origin and migration of clan and family of a person who conducts the ceremony. While performing the religious rituals and social ceremonies a *dumsa* reads out origin and migration of each clan elaborately to reaffirm social identities of the people. Thus, by narrating origin and migration of a clan *dumsa* transmits the oral history to the people by chanting hymns. In this way, besides religious works *dumsa* helps the people to know about their past through reciting the hymns. The *dumsa* are being respected by the community for their knowledge and power to dispel evils and miseries from fellow members of the community. The *dumsa*'s primary task is to diagnose the cause
and cure the disease accordingly.\textsuperscript{406} The people belief that \textit{dumsa} with their knowledge of spiritual could act as intermediary between mankind and deities on this earth.

Therefore, T.K.M.Barua has rightly puts it; "...\textit{dumsa} plays the intermediary role between men and invisible and malignant beings who are supposed to be the author of human miseries and misfortune."\textsuperscript{407} Being possessed of an esoteric power \textit{dumsa} could propitiate a spirits through prayers, chantings and offerings. The \textit{dumsa} are the important religious functionary in the society with high morality and integrity towards the welfare of the people. They always ready to help needy people and selflessly dedicate to the service of god and humankind. It is observed that the Singpho also believed in another religious functionary besides \textit{dumsa} whom they called \textit{mitoi}. The people do not consider \textit{dumsa} as magician but \textit{mitoi} is considered as magician. According to traditions, the \textit{mithai} or (\textit{mitoi}) is a magician endowed with supernatural power.\textsuperscript{408} However, both \textit{dumsa} and \textit{mitoi} are religious functionaries of the society possessed with certain distinct supernatural power respectively and able to recite hymns during the rituals. These two religious functionaries are having their own way to apply their religious knowledge although purpose is the same to control the unforeseen and natural calamities in the society. \textit{Mitoi} used the methods of commanding and challenging way to appease a spirit which causes miseries to a person, while \textit{dumsa} used hymns to propitiate a spirit. The religious life of both \textit{mitoi} and \textit{dumsa} are very stringent.

\textsuperscript{406} Tapan Kumar M. Barua, \textit{op.cit.}, p.133.
\textsuperscript{407} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{408} Ibid., p.134.
and bound to observe many social taboos and restrictions in the society. They are to avoid from open social and cultural activities other then assigned religious tasks in the village. Along with many social restrictions *dumsa* and *mitoi* are to observe certain restriction in their daily personal life.

They are not allowed to tell a lie as it is believed that if they indulge in an unethical thing then their supernatural power would desert their bodies. Relating to personal restrictions of a *dumsa* Juri Mahanta observes that; “He must not eat meat or share food with others from the same plate. He must abstain from sexual intercourse at least for two days before presiding over a ceremony.” The degree of restrictions and taboos are slightly different from one another. As *mitoi* is to live an extremely restricted life, while *dumsa* is to live less restrictions and taboos in the society. It is believed that if a *mitoi* could not follow these restrictions then he is to face a numbers of unforeseen miseries and even he might lose his life. One of the leading *dumsa* of the tribe narrated about social life of a *dumsa* in these words:

The *dumsa* is to live a stricter life than other members in the society. He should not tell a lie and should not show an undue favour to a particular family. He must not indulge in anti-social and immoral activities. The *dumsa* must maintain his dignity and image before the lays. He is to ready for all the time to go to his fellow community member whenever they needed. He should never feel reluctant to go away from his family to help others in his help. The *dumsa* should never feel the quality of a *dumsa* so that he could disspel miseries and sufferings from others lives.

The strict life of *mitoi* is one of the sole factors that the institution of *mitoi* becomes a thing of the past as no one is willing to live ascetic life of *mitoi*. It would seem that there are very few *dumsa* in the society who practices the

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409 MDSI, *op.cit.*
410 Juri Mahanta, *op.cit.* P.46.
411 MDSI, *op.cit.*
religious function. It is observed that throughout the whole district there is only one expert *dumsa* in the Bordumsa Circle. These days in Singpho area Mirim Du is the only expert *dumsa* available for the religious works for the community. Mirim Du is the most sought after *dumsa* in the area and hence people from different villages come to invite him whenever they need a *dumsa.*

Besides him there are also few other priest in the areas but they are not expert like him. It was found that the people including *dumsa* themselves believed that in the near future the practice of *dumsa* may vanished from the society.

In order to minimise the duration of Chanting, the *dumsa* generally chant in short in these days, otherwise it would take day-long to complete a ritual if *dumsa* follows the traditional way of chanting. Talking about the fast disappearance of *dumsa* all the informants maintained that the Buddhism is the main reason for gradual vanishing of *dumsa*hood in Singpho area. The fast disappearing of institution of the *dumsa* in the society is their inclinations towards the Buddhism and the people themselves are not interested to continue their traditional religious practices nowadays. As such the numbers of *dumsa* is declining day by day from the society and is facing relegated into oblivion with the embracing of the Buddhism by the tribe.

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412 LiJa Kho, age around 85 years, Wagun II village, Bordumsa Circle, Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh, interviewed on June 22, 2012.

413 SNSI, op.cit.

414 MDSI, op.cit.

415 K.G.Singpho, Narinda Bhikku, P.Kanmai and Pisi Gam Singpho, Rajesh Singpho, Siom Gam Singpho, Lakhum La Singpho, Manje Nong Singpho, Innem Gam Singpho et.al were being interviewed.
The Buddhism and Singpho Society

The Singpho being the migrants from Myanmar are the follower of the Theravada Sect of the Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh. Etymologically, the word Theravada is derived from the Pali word ‘Therav’ and in Sanskrit ‘Sthiravada’, both stands for the meaning ‘unmoved’ or ‘stand still’. According to the Buddhist philosophy the Theravada Buddhism stands for those believers who did not move away from original teachings of the Lord Buddha. There is a general understanding that the Singpho embraced the Buddhism after they migrated to Assam and got influenced by the Khampti in their religious life. Although, most of the Singpho might have been influenced from the Khampti Buddhism after their migration from Myanmar, but the Singpho belief that many of them were already the Buddhist before they migrated to Assam. In connection to this claim the people who have a good grasp of their history maintained that the Umbon clan of the tribe was the Buddhist before they migrated to Assam from Myanmar. The two brother Umbondu and Umbontang were the followers of the Buddhist who migrated from Myanmar to Assam in the middle of the 18th century.\textsuperscript{416} The Umbon brothers like Umbon Du, Umbon Dui and Umbon Tang brought Wooden Buddha image from Myanmar along with them when they moved to Assam. Regarding whereabout of the Wooden Buddha image one of the local informant Narinda Bhikku asserted that; “The Wooden Buddha image brought by Umbon brothers is now in Pangsun Kumsai near Udaipur in Assam.”\textsuperscript{417} In Myanmar since from the past the practice of

\textsuperscript{416} Depotang Yupang, *Buddhism Among the Singphos*, RESARUN, Vo.32, Published by the Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 2006, p.46.

\textsuperscript{417} NBRVML, \textit{op.cit.}
different sects of the Buddhism was present besides the indigenous Nhat worshipping among the Singpho before migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley. As such the Buddhism in Myanmar was a new form of blended with many indigenous belief systems. Regarding peaceful co-existence of the Buddhist and the Nhat belief system in Myanmar Swapna Bhattacharya Chackraborti puts it in these lines:

*Therefore, one can see in Myanmar parallel existence of Pali orthodoxy and Nat worship or for example, strict monastic principles and lax practices or the Vinayadhara monks and the Arannyaavasi monks. All existed side by side without any conflict.*

The history of the Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar has begun during the reign of Myanmarese king *Aniruddha* (1044 to 1077). It is said that during his reign Myanmar was politically united and established an empire of the pagan religion which was called *Ari Sect*. Before the king *Aniruddha* came to power Myanmar especially in the upper region was religiously dominated by a sect called *Tantricism* which belongs to the Mahayana Buddhism. It is believed, the king *Aniruddha*, after conquering the *Mon* kingdom had appointed a *Mon* monk named *Shin Arahan* and assigned him with a task to convert the Myanmarese into the Theravada Buddhist sect. Being succeeded in his religious conversion policy, king *Aniruddha* established the Theravada Buddhism as the official religion of *pagan* empire. This historic event happened in 11th century A.D. in Myanmar substantiated the arguments that many Singpho were the Buddhist before they migrated to Assam from the upper Myanmar. Regarding the religion of Singpho in Assam J.B.Neufville writes that:

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The ostensible worship is that of Gautama, whose temple and priests are found in all their principal villages and have evidently, as also by their own account, been borrowed from the Shams and Khamtis.*419

After settling in the present homestead in Arunachal Pradesh during the late 18th century, the Singpho followed the Buddhism in theory but practically they were practising their indigenous belief system. They were the Buddhist for namesake rather than more inclined to their indigenous belief system.420 Hence, the Buddhism among the Singpho was admixture of Nhat worshiping due to which they were not able to follow the Buddhism in the early days in its pure form. This blending of the Buddhism with indigenous belief system among the Singpho was observed by J.B. Neufville in these words; “The religion of the Singpho appears to be a strange mixture of all the various idolatries and superstitions of the nations with whom they have intercourse and have no fixed principles common to the whole tribe.”421 The tribe beliefs that since 1970s an apparent change occurred in the practice of the Buddhism among the people as most of them embraced the Buddhism in place of their indigenous religion. The religious practices of the Singpho during 1960’s one of the Singpho intellectuals Siong Gam Singpho narrates his experience in these words:

When I was a boy of about 7 years old the Singpho were the Buddhist for only namesake, we used to sacrifice animals and conduct traditional rituals very often. During those days the Buddhist influence on the socio-cultural life of the people was very less. The monks’ participation in the socio-cultural life was also very rare moreover they were few in numbers. But in the next decade there was a dramatic change in the religious life of the Singpho and they came under the complete influence of the Buddhism.422

419 J.B. Neufville, op.cit., p.342.
420 PNSI, op.cit.
421 J.B. Neufville, op.cit., p.431.
* Khamtii means the ‘Khampti’ tribe.
422 SGSI, op.cit.
In any society, the process of change in religious life happened due to numbers of circumstantial factors. Similarly, the Singpho society also experienced many ups and downs, and reasons to embrace the Buddhism. One of the fundamental factors for conversion to the Buddhism was consistent visit of the Buddhist Gurus during 1970s in the Singpho villages of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The Buddhist preachers constantly inspired the people and convinced them to accept the Buddhism in place of their indigenous religion. Since the last part of the 19th century the Buddhist missionary activities begun at Singpho area and most renowned Myanmarese Buddhist scholar PeinDuin Chow Chrado visited the area in 1882 which was considered as historic event in spreading the Buddhism among the Singpho.

About the historic visit of PeinDuin Chow Chrado Tana Showren writes that; “The Singpho who virtually embraced Buddhism only after the visit of the famous religious head of Burma, Rev. PeinDuin Chow Chrado in 1882 to Singpho area.” Although there was a number of Buddhist missionary visited the Singpho area, but he was the most popular who could inspired a large number of people to adopt Buddhism. He was considered as most influential Buddhist missionary who practically popularized the Buddhist ideology and contributed spreading of the Buddhism among the Singpho. He was instrumental in construction of two ordination temples at Chowkham in Arunachal Pradesh and at Borphakey village Margerita in present day Assam. It is said that Kumko Nong was the first Singpho of Arunachal Pradesh who was converted to the Buddhism by PeinDuin Chow Chrado in the year 1882.

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Kunko Nong was the then Chief of the Singpho village of Kagam, now located in present day Miao Sub-Division under Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh whom a Wooden Buddha Statue was gifted for conversion. This statue is kept in the monastery of Kagam village for public homage nowadays. The early British records on the tribe shows the mingling of traditional belief system and the Buddhism in the area. Walter Hamilton once observes that; “Their religion is Buddhism intermixed with many remains of their primitive superstitions; in fact they appear to be a sort of Buddhist Rajput, addicted with war.” During last part of the 19th century, the Singpho experienced influence of the Buddhism but they remain inclined towards their indigenous belief system. Therefore, during those days the people were following a religion which was blended with the Buddhism and indigenous religion.

The notable contribution made by Pein Duin Chow Chrado towards the Singpho community was convincing of the people about ill-effect of animal sacrifice and successfully introduced many Buddhist festivals in the area. He propagated the Buddhism among the Singpho of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam with his missionary zeal. The tribe believed that after his visit animal sacrifices in rituals like ox, buffalo and elephant was gradually given up by the people in the village. Attribution of an economic factor for adopting to the Buddhism among the Singpho, Narinda Bhikku, the head monk of Ratnagiri Vihar monastery explained that:

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424 Pisi Gam Singpho, Political Leader, 58 years, Miao town, Miao Subdivision, Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh, interviewed on June 15, 2011. B.R.Publishing
426 Debortang Yupang, *op.cit.*, p.46.
From the economic perspective, the people were agriculturist thus they gradually realized the abortiveness of animal sacrifices as they need cow, ox, buffalo and elephant to cultivate their field. Other livestock like fowls, goat, pig and duck were also being used for consumption and for selling. By sacrificing these animals for the sake of pacification of *nlats* they were facing adverse affect in their economic life. Moreover, the rituals were complicated and very costly affairs which everybody could not afford. In this situation Buddhism became the first choice for the tribe to fulfil their spiritual needs.\(^{427}\)

Being realized the benefits and importance of the Buddhism for peace and harmony in the society led to construction of many monasteries in the Singpho areas. Every village has a monastery (*kyang*) while the *Venuban Buddhist* monastery is the oldest in Singpho area.\(^{428}\) In these days, monastery system has become an indispensable part of the Singpho villages where all socio-cultural activities of people are centred around at these monasteries. Nowadays, after completely converted to the Buddhism, all Singpho houses are having a small Buddha temple called *pangna fra* often built at west direction as they would keep their head in this direction while sleeping.

These days monastery plays a very important role in socio-cultural life of the Singpho society. They celebrate the Buddhist religion festivals and ceremonies based on lunar calendar of Buddhism.\(^{429}\) Like institution of priesthood, the institution of monkhood is free for all who wanted to become a monk. Even a person belongs to other Buddhist sect could also serve as monk if one possessed a required quality and ready to follow rules and regulations of the monastery. In fact, monastery played the role of educational institution before introduction of modern education among the Singpho. Till today it imparts the Buddhist teachings, spiritual education and other secular subjects like medicine, literature, astrology, arts and craft in the village. The monastery

\(^{427}\) NBRVMI, *op.cit.*
\(^{428}\) Tana Showren, *op.cit.* p.105.
\(^{429}\) *Ibid.*
authorities whom the Singpho called Chao Mun and head monk is called Bante
enclosed the spiritual life of people by propagating the Buddhist teachings
and principles in the society. It is the moral duty of monastery authorities to
maintain a social harmony in the society and render religious services to
people. Although the Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism shares
certain religious philosophical differences, but there is no restriction among
the people to follow any sect of the Buddhism. About the qualifications to
become a monk for the Theravada Buddhist monastery, Bante Ratna Deepa
explained that; “A Mahayanist monk may follow the Theravada Buddhism
and could become a monk. Similarly a Theravada Buddhist monk could
become a monk in Mahayana Buddhist monastery.”

The monks are highly revered by the people who look for their valuable advice and divination
relating to overall well being of followers and religious rites.

These days most of religious ceremonies and rituals of the community
is connected to the Buddhism. As a result, all religious ceremonies and rituals
are solemnised within the monastery leading to gradual control of the
monastic authority over the people, while indigenous dumsa (priest) are
relegated to oblivion. However, they maintain a great reverence for the
Buddhist monks along with dumsaivas (priest). Although people adopted
Buddhism they still invite the dumsa to inaugurate some ritual ceremonies like
marriage, funeral and traditional festival. During the marriage ceremony the
dumsa chant the hymns related with bride’s and groom’s family whereas the

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430 Ratna Deepa, 40 year, Head monk, Theravada Buddhist Monastery, Itanagar, Arunachal
431 Pradesh, interviewed on May 26, 2012.
431 Somesh Chowdhury, op.cit. p.131.
Buddhist monks also visit to bless the newlywed couple. Still these days the celebration of the traditional festival Shapawng Yawng Manou Poi could not be started till the dumsa chant the proper hymn and prayer. The celebration of the festival could not start without the chanting of a dumsa however, the monks also visited the celebration ground to bless the people. Nevertheless, it would seem that perhaps after some decades the indigenous religion of the tribe might disappear totally and assimilate to the Buddhism tenets. Besides religious role, the monastic authorities also hold certain social responsibility towards the people relating to peace and harmony in the society. In order to avoid any religious orthodoxy among the people a monk preached the Buddhist tenets of Middle Path in a way to discourage any immoral activities among the lay. During the field study, it was informed by one ex-monk Lisula Singpho who narrated his experience in these words:

I was a monk in Choukham Monastery. In the year 1953, a Buddhist monk named Shunna Bhikku visited the monastery, so I went to Myanmar with him for the study of Buddhist scripture. But later on when I returned from Myanmar I decided to leave the monkhood and settled down in Pisi village to have a normal life.432

The Buddhism never puts any kind of obligation and never tries to expand numbers of the followers. Hence, we may observe there are very few monasteries built in the state.433 The monastic system follows the Middle Path, neither too strict nor too loose, so a monk is to follow the rules of monastery strictly but if they desire to start a normal life, they may leave the monkhood at anytime. It is also observed that the Theravada monastic authorities in the

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432 Lisula Singpho, village elder, 83 years, Pisi village, Miao Sub-Division, Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh, interviewed on September 5, 2011.
433 Ratna Deepa, op.cit., 26th May 2012.
area did not follow any hard and fast rule in monkhood and never stopped them to live as they wish to live. The Singpho were one of the earliest tribe of Arunachal Pradesh who came into contact with the colonial administration and was exposed to western culture. It is to be noted here that the Christian missionaries began to visit the Singpho- Khampti areas just after the Anglo-Burmese War in 1826 but the Singpho were not influenced by activities of the Christian missionaries. It would seem that the British probably did not desire to create any social discontentment among the tribe by proselytise them forcefully. As the Singpho territory was important for the British from commercial point of view after discovery of tea plant in the area in 1823. Whereas, the British had their own reasons why the Singpho could not be converted to the Christianity. It is said that during those days the Singpho were highly addicted to opium and those outsiders who want to pass through their villages were to present some amount of opium to a chief. This practice was unacceptable to the Christian which was contradicting to teachings of the Bible. Thus, the Christian missionaries could not compromise to present opium to the Singpho Chief in order to spread the Christianity. About the presentation of opium to the Singpho Chief J. Errol Gray has reported in these words:

Stayed at Khagam whole day; had an interview with the two headmen of the village, and gave each of them a present of ½ s seer of opium giving also the kotokis of the place ¼ seers each... The two headmen, Lachong Chowkhen and Kumku Nong appeared satisfied with their presents, and promised to help me as far as was in their power.434

434 J. Errol Gray, op.cit., p.2.
In those days the Singpho Chiefs and other influential persons of a village asked for gift from the people who wanted to pass through their villages. Being addicted to opium most of them prepared opium or money as gift so most of the British official present them with opium in order to create friendly relations with influential individual. The Bishi* Chief became friendly after J.Eroll Gray presented ½ a seer of opium in order to pass his village.435 If they do not impress upon a Singpho especially to a chief then it was not possible for anyone to get through their villages. Moreover, the chiefs would not allow them to even stay in any village and they would restrain the villagers to sell their rice, fowls, eggs and vegetables to those who do not present any gift to a chief. It was obvious for the people to get influence by the Buddhism more than the Christianity as the Singpho co-existed with the Buddhist sects from the past. The teaching of Bible was totally a new and contradict to indigenous socio-religious life of the people.

As we know that the Buddhist missionaries never tried to proselytise the people forcefully nor they put strict impositions upon newly converts to shun their traditions and customs. However, the Christian missionaries strictly asked the new converts to discard their old practices while teaching the tenets of Bible. In this way, the Christian missionaries felt difficulties in converting the Singpho from indigenous to Christian and thus they could not work much in the Singpho territory. Influence of the Buddhism among the Singpho in the last part of 19th century two British administrators Colonel R.G.Woodthorpe and Major C.R.Magregor reported that:

*Bishi means Bisa.
Woodthorpe and I visited the Bapu’s (priest) house, and inspected the Khampti School. Though the majority of the inhabitants of this village were Singphos, yet there was a Buddhist temple and school, which the Singpho chief Sam Nong (usually called Ningro Samon) had greatly assisted in building. We found about dozen boys being taught by the yellow-robed priest, who showed us over the temple. The priest informed us that the paper they used for writing on was made out of a creeper called gieh. We also noticed a peculiar shaped hand punkah (fan), which was used during prayer. In the early morning, the Bapu and one of his disciples walk through the village, beating a gong and calling people to prayer.436

Number of factors could be attributed why the Singpho embraced the Buddhism rather than the Christianity. It is stated that after the visit of the Buddhist scholar Pienduinchow Chrdow in 1882 the Singpho overwhelmingly converted to the Buddhism. He ordained many Singpho and Khampti to become a monk in the areas, and other prominent disciples included Kondangya Mahathera, Viriya Mahathera and Nemingda Mahathera.437 He was instrumental in introducing the Buddhist festival, rituals, ordination and monastic life among the Singpho. After his visit every villages began to construct a monastery and people began to follow the Buddhism widely. Since then the people gradually gave up their indigenous religion and willingly converted to the Buddhism as way of life.

**Festivals**

Since from the past, the Singpho society celebrated a number of festivals as an external manifestation of their beliefs and practices. It is said that before they got converted to the Buddhism they used to celebrate number of traditional festivals and rituals associated with day to day activities which cost them heavily because of expensive sacrifial offerings. But increasing

437 Debotang Yupang, op.cit. p.48.
influence of the Buddhism by the end of 19th century resulted gradual acculturization of traditional festivals into the Buddhist festival. However, they did not discard all the festivals and continue to celebrate one of the most important traditional festivals known as Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi. During the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi festival people from across border also participate in the celebration. The Singpho who are living in Myanmar, Thailand, and Japan also participate to celebrate the occasion.

The venue of festival changes every year in which the Singpho from all over the country and from across the border also participate despite of geographical separation. As such, this festive occasion could be regarded as medium of bridging the gap among the Singpho settled in different districts, states and countries. In the early days during celebration of the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi animals like buffalo, ox and elephant were sacrificed at ngadan (altar). In the long run the Singpho discontinued to sacrifice animals and prefer to celebrate festival under the Buddhism influence. However, in the year 1985 the Singpho revived the celebration of their indigenous festival, Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi with modified manner. According to tribe, it was the preservation of indigenous religion consciousness movement in the state that inspired them to preserve their culture and tradition with revival zeal.

The maxim of movement was lose of culture is lose of identity which inspired the Singpho to revive their old culture and tradition; and continue to celebrate festival in modified pattern. Since 1985 the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi festival is revived and celebrated among the Singpho with religious
fervour. Nowadays Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi festival is celebrated from 13th to 16th February every year and animal sacrifice is discontinued for good. Every year festival venue is changed within the Singpho area under the decision of the Committee. At celebration ground only the cooked meat are allowed to bring for community feast. Earlier at celebration ground animal like buffalo and ox were sacrificed. According to traditions current among the people it is believed that before existence of humankind in this world a certain man like figure came down from the heaven and exploded into two parts. Out of this explosion six brothers came out and they were named as Gam, Nong, La, Du, Tang and Yawng. It is maintained that among them one died instantly after the explosion and the last brother Yawng was believed to have fore fathered present day the Singpho community. To remember their forefather, the Singpho celebrate the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi every year. The word ‘manau’ means ‘dance’ which is believed to have originated from a bird. They believed that when birds from the whole world gathered at a banyan tree to enjoy the fruit where they have a discussion. In this discussion, a khungrang (hornbill) suggested that they should enjoy the fruit by celebrating a feast. Since then the bird from all over the world gathered together to celebrate the manau festival of dance.

As such, this festival is known as festival of dance and therefore the hornbill is considered as sacred bird in Singpho cultural life. One of the local informant explained about meaning of the Shapawng yawng Manau Poi, stated

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438 IGSI, op.cit.
439 P.Kanmai, 43 years, teacher and social activist, Miao town, Miao Sub-division, Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh, interviewed on June 11, 2011.
that; "The stage during the celebration is known as manau shadung. It is constructed in such a manner which represents a hornbill and mythical six brothers." However, festival begins with construction of ngadang (altar) at the appointed ground. The people regard the altar as symbol of the festival. The stage constructed during celebration of the Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi is having six pillars which are erected in such a way that two pillars cross each other and one stand between it. A pillar which lays below all the six pillars are constructed in such a manner that it looks like a hornbill while one side of the pillar is made like a head and other end looks like tail. Before starting construction of stage, the people began to dance at festival ground. During installation of shading the dance of unity (gidhing gumdin manan) is performed by the community. The six pillars symbolize six brothers of the Singpho ancestors who were born before humankind came into existence namely; Gam, Nong, La, Du, Tang and Yawng. As traditions maintained that youngest brother, Yawng was the ancestor of the Singpho and this festival is dedicated to him. The pillar that looks like a hornbill symbolizes a hornbill who first gave an idea to celebrate a dance festival among the birds of the world. All the pillars are tastefully decorated in different colours while stage is also decorated with large gong (metal plate) and other traditional musical instruments.

According to myth current among the tribe birds were the first to initiate the festival of dance (manau). About the belief Gamja Singpho writes, "Traditionally the birds were the first to initiate the celebration of manau

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441 LLSI, op.cit.
442 Tana Showren, op.cit., p.106.
(dance) before human beings learnt." Number of dances are performed during celebration however the ten varieties of dances are considered to be the important for the festival. Some of these dances are sut manau (share prosperity), ju manau (depicting suffering), padan manau (victory dance), kunran manau (during separation from parental house), nau-sot manu (general enjoyment dance) and tu tep manau (butterfly dance). While observing socio-cultural importance of the Singpho dances D.K.Dutta puts it as; "The cultural life of the Singpho are enriched by their folk songs and dances." As it is observed that dancing is the main activity in celebration of the Shapawung Yaung Manau Poi festival because of which it is commonly known as festival of dance. Besides indigenous festival, the Singpho celebrate all the important Buddhist festivals and ritual that are considered sacred and related to the Lord Buddha. The important Buddhist festival like the Sangken, the Buddha Jayanti and the Varshavash are related to life history of the Lord Buddha. These festivals are generally celebrated with the monastery authorities in the village and monks lead the followers in celebration of festivals and perform the rituals. Among all festivals, the Sangken is considered as most important and popular festival of the Theravada Buddhism sect. The people celebrate the Sangken by splashing water upon one another and hence this festival is known as festival of water among the community. This is a religious festival and on fourth day of celebration is considered to be a beginning of New Year for the tribe. So the Sangken is the New Year-cum-agricultural festival for them.

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444 Gamja Singpho, op.cit., p.10.
446 D.K.Dutta, op.cit. p.31.
During celebration, all the Buddha image of monastery are kept outside at a sacred place called *frakhuing* for seventy-two hours.

The *frakhuing* is a small altar having roofed in dragon shape is located in front of the monastery and is considered as sacred among worshippers in the villages. Regarding splashing of water one monk narrated that; "It is believed that by splashing water upon one another we cleanse ourselves spiritually."\(^{447}\) It is also maintained that, by splashing water upon one another the people cleanse themselves spiritually and all sins are said to have absolved. Therefore, the Buddha image is also kept outside so that these could also be cleaned with water. The other important festival is the *Buddha Jayanti* which is known as *Poi Puthi Kham* in Singpho language which means observance of precept of the *Lord Buddha*. Generally, the *Buddha Jayanti* is celebrated as commemoration of the *Lord Buddha's* birth anniversary and attainment of enlightenment and death. It is celebrated during the full moon day in the month of May every year with religious fervour and gaiety. The *Varshavash* which is known as *Poi Kando* in Singpho language may be categorized as ritual practice not exactly a festival because it is observed by the monks as period of meditation. The monks observe the *Varshavash* during rainy season, which starts from the month of July to September or sometime up to second week of October. During rainy season monks faces difficulty in moving from place to place so they prefer to stay indoors at a particular monastery, observe rigorous meditation and concentrate themselves in religious activities like scripture reading.

\(^{447}\) Lenkat Songteng (Assajee Sharman), 24 years, Monk, Bordumsa Buddhist monastery, interviewed on September 7, 2011.
As monks observe meditation which required deep concentration and peaceful atmosphere, so the monastery authorities do not allow people to conduct any festivity especially in nearby area of monastery. The festive atmosphere might distract the monks from meditation.\footnote{NBRVML, \textit{op.cit.}} As such, the Singpho do not organise marriage ceremony from July to September, which might cause distraction to monk. Moreover, lay followers from different places also participate in this meditation, which becomes a sort of congregational gathering at monastery during this period. The junior monks lead congregation by preaching teachings of the \textit{Lord Buddha} and performs rituals with mass prayer. The novices are given chances to lead congregation as monastic training.\footnote{Ibid.} This congregational gathering inculcates a sense of spirituality and feeling of oneness among the followers. In fact, the \textit{Varshavash} ritual is performed by monastery for spiritual growth and development of followers. Contrary to religious celebration, the Singpho also observe a secular festival called \textit{Waok Sitang}. It is the Buddhist festival but not a religious like the \textit{Sangken} and \textit{Varshavash} rather it is celebrated in non-religious manner. During celebration of the \textit{Waok Sitang} people enjoy themselves in activities like drinking local beer, dancing and eating in the localities. This does not create any misunderstanding between the lay followers and the monastic authority. Rather monks also participate in celebration but being religious person they do not indulge in any unreligious activities. As monks conduct the prayers in the beginning of celebration and give blessing to followers and leave the
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\textsuperscript{448} NBRVMI, \textit{op.cit.}  
\textsuperscript{449} \textit{Ibid.}
celebration ground at the earliest convenient. Celebration of festival without religious content, Narinda Bhikku who is a monastery member explained that:

The monastic authorities do not have any objection with celebration of festival in unreligious way but being a monk we keep ourselves away from unreligious festivity.\textsuperscript{450}

Like followers of the Theravada Buddhism sect, the Singpho also observed another Buddhist ritual called \textit{paritta}. Generally, individual used to performs this ritual in a ritualistic manner for the well-being of family. During performing of this ritual, a monk chants the hymns for the family by seeking blessing from the \textit{Lord Buddha} to ward off from any natural calamities and miseries in life. Nowadays people prefer to seek blessing of monks in family ritual also.\textsuperscript{451} The \textit{paritta} ritual is not like other ritual and festival where whole community participate rather it is performed in a particular house with limited gathering. Besides the Buddhist festivals and rituals, the Singpho also celebrate another festival called \textit{Poi Pee Mau} which is considered as Tai New Year.

The Tai community of Arunachal Pradesh comprised those people or tribe who migrated from Myanmar and Thailand are follower of the Theravada Buddhism sect.\textsuperscript{452} The Tai community residing both in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh practice the same socio-religious festivals and rituals at their respective places. The \textit{Poi Pee Mau} is celebrated in the month of November or December and is considered as biggest festival among the Tai community. It is generally celebrated in collaboration with all the apex

\textsuperscript{450} NBRVML, \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{451} Imphum La Singpho, 84 year, Gaon Bura, Wagun II village, Bordumsa Cirkle, Changlang District, Arunahcal Pradesh, interviewed on September 9, 2011.

\textsuperscript{452} RSL, \textit{op.cit.}
organizations of the Tai Community like the Tai Khampti Society, the Khampti Singpho Council and the Tai Khampti Development Society of the state. It is a well-known philosophy that the Buddhism teaches the principles of love and compassionate with peace and harmony to humankind. The practical and simple teachings of the Lord Buddha appealed people from different society irrespective of rich and poor. So the Singpho of Arunachal Pradesh also embraced the Buddhism because as their religion of simple and practicable teachings of the Lord Buddha. The humble and dedicated services of monks also inspired the lay followers to embrace a Buddhist way of life. As a result, people from different countries are adopting the Buddhism and are spreading throughout the world.

**Disposal of Death**

The tradition of Singpho maintained that in the past the dead body was buried or cremated outside the villages. In the early days when the Singpho were not converted to the Buddhism, a *dumsa* (priest) used to perform funeral rituals in the village. The *dumsa* finds out the actual cause of death of a person and then he performs the last rites of a deceased. The custom observed in the funeral varies according to nature and manner of death.\(^{453}\) If a person dies of an accident or unnatural death, it is buried outside the village and babies are usually buried under a tree. If a person dies of a violent, a buffalo is sacrificed to propitiate the deities.\(^{454}\) Since early days, a funeral rite of the Singpho Chief was different from other common people. If a chief dies then their death body

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was not buried or cremated immediately rather it was kept open for many days till their relatives arrived and pay the last homage.

Difference in funeral rite between the chief and other commoners, J.B. Neufville noted that; “Those of the lower classes is being buried almost immediately, while the chiefs are generally kept in state for two or more years.” After placing the mortal remains in the coffin, it is restored back to house and all the belongings are kept around the coffin. It is observed that nowadays this elaborate process of burial ritual is no longer practised among the Singpho although funeral rites of a chief is done in grand manner compare to a common people. According to available oral traditions maintained by the tribe believed that before the Singpho settled at present homestead they were settled at a place called Dinggang Dan, which is the present day Vijaynagar area of Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh. At present Vijaynagar is one of the thirteen circles of the Changlang District that comes under Miao Sub-Division. At present many Singpho are settled in Vijaynagar area however, these days the Lisu tribe outnumbered the Singpho settlers. The Singpho believed that in the early days when they settled in Dinggang Dan practiced a kind of megalithic burial custom for disposing of a mortal remains. Stone pillars were said to have erected around the grave that was known as lupshadaw (big stone erected in burial place). Pisi Gam Singpho describes about the old megalithic burial practice in these words; “The chief’s grave had a unique features; it was covered by thin slab mounted on the stone pillars. These burials are still found in and around the Vijaynagar and Gandhigram

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455 John M'Cosh, op. cit., p 342.
area." When a chief dies then ten *lup shadow* was erected while a commoner dies then also the *lup shadow* is erected but less in number.

The entire burial place used to have *lup shadows* that are in even number and no grave stone pillars are erected in odd numbers. It is seem that these days the burial practice system is gradually discouraged among the Singpho and now the tribe prefer to consign to flame of a mortal remains. However, the burial of death body is still practised in the interior village even these days. These changes in disposal of dead may be due to rapid transformation in social and cultural outlook and emergence of urbanisation, which resulted in wanting of more land for settlement. These days the death body is either buried or cremated but at towns, it is usually consign to flame at a particular place. Traditionally, the Singpho used to bury the death body and construct a small hut at grave that is known as *changhang*. It is also observed that there are very few important rituals associated with funeral rites. The most important funeral rite is the *dumyo*, a dance performed during funeral ceremony. The *dumyo* is performed during funeral ceremony of an old and respected person as a symbol of respects from their fellow community members. Neither there is any particular clan to perform the dance nor there any restriction to anyone. Such funeral dance is partaken by any person provided those who know how to dance it. One of the most important customary ceremonies related to funeral rites of death is *po-sa-dai* meaning the ceremony performed on the seventh day of the death of a person. It is believed

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457 LLSI, *op.cit.*
458 MNSI, *op.cit.*
that on a seventh day of a deceased person, a soul comes back to home to take their belongings. The po-sa-dai is performed in order to pacify a departed souls and appease them to returned back to land of death.\textsuperscript{459} Earlier these rituals were done by traditional priest but these days the monastery authority performs these rituals including po-sa-dai.

Generally speaking, the Singpho are largely inclined to the Buddhist way of life rather than their indigenous life style after their conversion to the Buddhism. Consequently, there is a glaring effect on the social and cultural outlook of the people leading to gradual eroding of institution of priesthood in the society. About conversion to the Buddhism, it is asserted by the people that; within a decade or two the institution of priesthood may completely vanished from the Singpho society.\textsuperscript{460} Nowadays influence of the Buddhism is experienced in every socio-religious activities of the tribe and completely adopted the Buddhist way of life. As a result, traditional institution is relegated to oblivion and within a few decades, even a worshipping of Nhat would also be disappeared from the society for good.

\textsuperscript{459} IGSI, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{460} MDSI, op.cit.