

## The Religion and the Socio-cultural Life of the Limboos of Eastern Himalayas

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Religion plays a vital role in streamlining human behaviour. It helps us practise and promote cultural values, and take value-based steps in maintaining unity and social harmony. Hence it is part and parcel of life in every society.

The word ‘religion’, according to Cicero, is derived from the root ‘Ligere’, meaning ‘to string together’. Several attempts have been made by scholars to trace the origin of this word and its etymology and the conclusion is more or less the same. Even the extreme positivist like August Comte designed religion as something which binds, unites and regulates human society.

A religion is nothing but the fantastic reflection in people’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life. In the beginning of history, it was the forces of nature which were at first so reflected, and, in course of further evolution, side by side with the forces of nature, social forces began to be active—forces which present themselves to man as equally extraneous and at first equally inexplicable, dominating them with the same apparent necessity as the forces of nature themselves.

When we turn to the basic question—what is religion?—there are innumerable definitions available. Some philosophers have called it ‘a superstitious structure of incoherent metaphysical notions’. Some sociologists refer to religion ‘as the

collective expression of human values’. Followers of Karl Marx define it as the ‘Opiate of the people’ and some psychologists call it the mythical complex surrounding a projected super-ego. Thus, no single definition covers all the varied phenomena. Bertrand Russell, who cares for conceptual clarity, however, agrees that not all concepts need to be defined. He says that ‘we should incur a vicious circle if we do not admit some indefinable ideas’. In his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Russell says: Human knowledge must always be content to accept some terms as intelligible without definition, in order to have a starting-point for its definitions.

Every religion practically originates from the philosophy held by the group and a firm and deep-rooted belief in that philosophy leads to some religion. In his thought-provoking book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James perceives a variety of experiences within a particular religion and presents religion as an experience and not as a system of ideas. George Thomson, in his work, *An Essay on Religion*, expresses a similar opinion. In a nutshell, religion brings in the relation between man and his sentiment.

The present research on ‘Yumaism’ or ‘Yuma Samyo’ adumbrates the philosophy of the Limboos, an ethnic group inhabiting the hills of Eastern Himalayas of the Hindukush Himalayan region. The research

is based on the fieldwork conducted by the author during 2007-2008 in the Eastern Himalayas.

The Limboos are inhabitants of the region known as 'Limbuwana', an area extending from the western border of Arun river to the eastern border of Brahmaputra. In the Sikkim Himalayas, they are found in all the four districts. They are one of the native tribes living there along with the Lepchas and the Bhutias. They have their separate socio-cultural, linguistic and religious identity and they practise a distinct religion called Yuma Samyo or Yumaism.

### A henotheist religion

Yumaism is a henotheist religion that believes in a single almighty goddess 'Tagera Ningwaphuma', which is also popularly known as 'Yuma', while still recognizing other gods and goddesses created by Her as Her messengers or Her manifestations who helped Her in the creation of the universe, the entire living and non-living things and its preservation, sustenance and development. The basic concept of Yumaism is that the 'Tagera Ningwaphuma' created the universe with the help of Her messengers collectively known as 'Mangs'. She is present in every one of Her creation.

The oral tradition of Yumaism (mundhums) reveals that the religion has been refined and developed during the later half of the 9th century (849-65 AD) by 'Ubahang', the king of Limbuwan in the eastern Himalayas. His successors carried forward the Yumasamyo tradition: Mabohang (865-882 AD) 'Sirijunga hang of Yangwarok' (882-925 AD) followed by Yonjanga and his descendants. The tradition thus became a self-generating tradition in the region. It continues to this day through 'Phedangma' system (religious priests) in

the Limboo tribal society. The learned 'Phedangmas' again initiated its further development and scholars like Sirijunga Teyongshi Singthebe (1704-1741 AD), Lalshoresendang (1840-1926 AD), and Imansingchemjong (1904-1976 AD) accentuated the progress of the Limboo society by turning it into culturally, educationally and socially advanced tribe with clear thinking. In fact 'Mahatma Sirijunga Singthebe' is considered by the Limboos as a great social awakener, reformer and guardian of the tribe. The script used for writing the Limboo language goes by his name. It is called the Sirijunga script. The educated Limboos worship him as their saviour.

The Limboo religion does not believe in idol-worship. Although there are no temples for prayer, they make temporary altars for collective worship known as 'Mangkims'. The Limboos believe there are nine worlds (*lokam*) above the earth and nine below in this universe. The earth stands in between these worlds. For example, on the top there is Sangram Pedang or *Vaikunthalok* (heaven). It is successively followed by Sang Sang Den or *Pavitralok* (Sacred world), Mang Khoma Den or (Meditation world), Say Seywa Den or *Ujjvallok* (Bright world), Sunaningtong Den or *Satyalok* (Truth world), Munthang Khara Den or *Nyāyalok* (world of judgement), Torong Tangsang Den or *Ākāshlok* (sky world), Samyukna Den or *Ātmalok* (world of ancestors). Then, there is Iksading Khambek Den or earth. Down below there are Khambnongba Lungbnongba Yukna Den (world of soils), Muruplung Khepoplung Den (world of soils), Muguplung Theguplung Den (world of metals), Murupli Kherupli Den (*pātāl devlok*), Mujingna Kheyongna Den (world of water), Musekha Sekhana Den (world of *jaldevatā*), Tungutlung Haralung Den (world

of ocean), Sumbadone Lekwa Den (world of marshy land) and Khemadingyongsong (*Narak Lok* or hell).

These worlds are described in detail in their Toonsing Teayma mundhum, Samchomma Mundhum etc which are actually prayers. The souls of the deceased are collected from the bottom of the world and brought to the world of the ancestors by the Shamanistic priest to facilitate the final judgement of the soul without any obstruction from evil spirits.

### Collective worship

In recent years, places for collective worship known as 'Mangkhim' for almighty Goddess Tagera Ningwaphuma are constructed as permanent structures as in Martham, a sacred village in west Sikkim. There are no idols in these Mangkhims but we find nine steps constructed in the form of a pyramid. Oil lamps or candles are lit and kept on the four corners of each of the steps. They pray with 'Lasari', a brass plate with Artemisia flower twigs with silver coins, grains of rice etc kept on the top of the nine-step altar. Limboos make three rounds with the *dhoop* in hand starting from right side of the altar and pray to the Almighty facing the eastern side, standing on the western side of the altar.

The religion believes in life after death and rebirth based on present *karma*. There are a number of rituals in the life of Limboos starting from the life in womb stage to life after death. The adherents of this religion perform rituals when life starts in the womb of the mother and they continue these rituals at every stage of life and even after death by his children for the welfare of the soul of the deceased with the belief that the soul will come back to the family through his/her children. The Phedangmas or the priests perform the rituals.

There are nine types of Phedangmas. They are Muhikkum Ongshi, Phejiri Phedangma, Samboko Samba, Yebokoyeba, Yebokoyema, Yuma sam, Sammundhum, Yepmundhyum and Sidapangdang. They perform various roles in religious functions of the Limboo society. They can be identified from their attire known as 'sama'. Each Phedangma performs one ritual like curer, healer, soothsayer for domestic functions, collective worship in Mangkhims and for death rituals etc.

Thus the Limboo religion has its own myth, gods and goddesses, prayers and their own concept of life and life after death. This unique religion is practised by the Limboo community uniformly all along the Hindukush Himalayan region and they maintain their religious identity.

### Socio-cultural aspects

The Limboos live in villages situated on the slopes of hills which are generally referred to as 'Basty'. Each Basty has a number of houses known as 'Khim'. The floors as well as the walls are constructed out of brick and mud and the walls are plastered with red and white soils known as 'khamphulla' and 'khamhetlla' respectively. The roof is supported by wooden or bamboo logs known as 'sitlang'. The wooden beams are inserted through one another in a criss-cross pattern. Use of pegs is in practice and nails are avoided.

The Limboos are agriculturalists. Agricultural production, however, is insufficient because of unfavourable landscape and they resort to mixed farming to make both ends meet. They rear poultry, pigs and goats. They grow cereals, pulses, oil seeds along with horticultural cash crops such as large cardamom, ginger, potato, fruits, and vegetables. They have adopted terraced cultivation in which both

sexes participate approximately equally. They rarely employ hired labour for agriculture.

Rice is the staple food of the Limboos. Maize is also used as a substitute for rice. Maize is made into flour and meat or fish is taken with it. Beef is forbidden among the Limboos belonging to 'Kanshigotra'. But Limboos of 'Lhasa gotra' eat beef and pork which is a delicacy.

They are very friendly people and sociable. They are perfect hosts who entertain their guests without reservation. They observe a number of festivals like Manghey Sankranti, Bali hangTongnam, Tyoongsi Sirij Onga Sawan, Tapffeng etc.

The Limboos have a rich stock of folklores which help keep their distinct identity among the ethnic groups of Sikkim. Their folksongs, folk music and musical

instruments have separate identity and are used on different occasions.

As in any other society, father is the head of the family and is responsible for its upkeep. When he dies, the eldest son acts as the head of the family and is guided by the mother's advice in matters of marriage of brothers and sisters. Marriages are performed among the Limboos and the ceremony involves several rituals. They are followed by feast and drinks. Generally the boy's parents send the hind leg of the ox as a goodwill gesture. Pig, specially kept for the occasion, is used in the preparation of pork meat.

Similarly, on the death of a person a number of ceremonies are performed. All the relatives gather to mourn the death of the person. On this occasion also a grand feast is arranged to mark the end of the ceremony. ■

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### The universal truth

If there is one universal truth in all religions, I place it here — in realising God. Ideals and methods may differ, but that is the central point. There may be a thousand different radii, but they all converge to the one centre, and that is the realisation of God; something behind this world of sense, this world of eternal eating

and drinking and talking nonsense, this world of false shadows and selfishness. There is that beyond all books, beyond all creeds, beyond the vanities of this world, and it is the realisation of God within yourself. ■

—Swami Vivekananda in *The Complete Works*, Vol. I, pp. 324-25.