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## **THE CHANGING *PHEDANGMA* LANDSCAPE IN SIKKIM**

Shamanism has a variety of definitions usually used today in a variety of contexts. Flaherty (1992) reveals, the term shaman entered English from 'Other Cultures'. It has been originated from the Tungus language of Siberia. But the terminologies that usually is being applied to Himalayan ritual specialist vary among scholars, and often time the concept of shaman is not agreed upon. A classical definition of a shaman is provided by Eliade (2004[1951]), who basically argues for a narrow usage of the concept shaman, whereby a central characteristic is that the shaman conducts soul journeys in order to reach other worldly realms through a state of trance.

In addition, Hultkrantz (1973:66) asks where the term originates outside the North-East Asian areas, whether it is appropriate to apply the concept of shaman in Himalayan region or not. The terminologies are place-bound. The same word might have different meaning in other society. Thus, Hultkrantz states that such terminologies can lose the adequate meaning if they have similar phenomena elsewhere in the world. Also the term loses its comparative usefulness function. The concept of comparative usefulness is also embraced by Samuel (1993). Likewise, 'spirit possession' is another concept which is frequently used. Jones (1996[1976]:1) argues that the concept of shaman can be applied to an individual who conducts soul journey and also who goes through a specific type of spirit possession, which he further refers as tutelary possession. Since, Jones specifies a specific type of spirit possession, he provides a narrow approach and defines spirit possession as: "an altered state of consciousness on the part of an individual as a result of what is perceived or believed to be the incorporation of an alien form with important and spiritual attributes, for instance; the spirit of a superhuman form such as a witch, sorcerer, God, Goddesses, or other religious deity and divinity. Vitebasky (1993) has portrayed the Sora of Odisha which predominantly use Shamanism to act their everyday lives with their ancestral dead.

Another characteristic of this specific spirit is a periodic and specific possession but the place where the possession takes place is unspecific and is determined by a situation. The ritual specialist does not depend on a special

location to get possessed by the spirit for instance, a temple, Monastery or prayer auditorium, etc. The limboo ritual specialist *Phedangma* can fall under the category of shaman since, soul journey; spirit possession and tutelary possession constitute the central elements.

The term shaman seems to be enclosed in anthropology. Therefore, despite confusing the term in context to Himalayan region the authors have chosen to use the term *Phedangma* as amongst the Native Himalayans- the tribal Limboo community shamans are particularly known as *Phedangma* in general.

### Different types of Ritual Specialists

The – ma suffix of *Phedangma* usually indicates a female, but it is believed that only a male can become a *Phedangma*. Elaborating on this, Jash Raj Subba (2012) has listed nine types of ritual specialists, while only *Phedangma*, *Samba*, *Yeba* and *Yema* were encountered during fieldwork. They are generally considered as incarnations, which mean their specific vocations are inherited, along with their ancestor's *guru* (tutelary deities), from whom the ritual specialist receives power and guides them at the time of undertaking journeys to other worldly realms. Generally, it is believed that *guru* of *Phedangma*, *Samba*, *Yeba* and *Yema* is inherited through patrilineal lineages, while the *Yema* inherit their *guru* through the maternal side of the family. Many a times, several generations can pass without any individuals becoming a ritual specialist, but whoever is ritual specialists claimed to have inherited their vocation from either a parent or grandparent. According to Sagant (1996[1976]:87) Similar to other ritual specialists in the Himalayan regions, the limboo shamans use *sama* ritual paraphernalia. Jones (1976:34) states the Common features are the characteristics feathers in their headdress, which resembles a *wasang* (turban) which is believed to protect them from spirits attack. Though the shamans are clearly structured in accordance with their ideal tasks, it was generally agreed upon that swapping occurred in cases where the ideal type of *Phedangma* is not available. Such swapping was, however, not conceived as ideal.



Different Ritual Specialists dancing their own *Phedangma lang/ Samba lang/ Yeba lang/ Yema lang* dance

### ***Phedangma and Samba***

Both the *Phedangma* and *Samba* are associated with household and agricultural rituals. Ideally, *Phedangma* and *Samba* also carry out birth rituals, marriage rituals, *Mangenna* and *Nahangma* for the prosperity of the lineage and clan and in cases of natural deaths.

According to the informants *Phedangma* are systematized hierarchically by their antiquity, placing the *Phedangma* on top. It is believed that the *Phedangma* are the direct creation of Goddess *Tagera Ningwa Phuma*, which is also noted by Jones (1976:32). Even though the *Phedangma* and *samba* were generally described similarly, most of the informants underlined that the *Samba* is an expert in *mundhum* (oral literature).<sup>1</sup>

### ***Yeba and Yema***

In simple terms *Yeba* and *Yema* are often termed as *Yea* or *Ya*. They deal with harmful deities that takes place from *sogha* (un-natural deaths), *nahen* (jealousy) and are believed to be able to cause illnesses and disorder to the household members. Some of the people perceive the ritual specialists roles as distinct and *Yeba* and *Yema* could not perform the household rituals because they usually deals with dangerous deities.

According to the ritual specialists and the community people, there are no differences between a *Yeba* and a *Yema* in terms of their equipment and roles.

### ***Attire of Phedangma***

*Phedangma* wears white *Daura suruwal* (Traditional menswear) during their religious ritual or simply wears their everyday casual dress and *paga* (small white plain cotton cloth which is wrapped around head as headgear). The important gear of *Phedangma* is *phengbo* (a garland of a *rudraksa* beads) with an additional two to four numbers of *sirpong* (small brass bells) at the lower end of *phengbo*. Likewise, *laphija mudenphe* (long sword) and *yathala* (brass plate) are the only costumes required by a *Phedangma*.

### ***Attire of Samba***

The *Samba* usually wears white *Daura suruwal* while conducting big rituals, but while conducting small rituals they wear their everyday dress. Their essential attires are white *daura suruwal*, *phengbo*, *sanka* (*rudraksa* beads as bandoleers as in between *rudraksh* as small shell is placed in between),

*laphija, yathala, paga*. A piece of cloth is worn on chest from both sides, connecting in X-shape. A small white bag with an X-shape design, containing red colour cloth is hung from each shoulder on the side of the waist. We can see modification in *Samba* attire in villages for instances, in headgear feather of rooster, eagle, pheasant could be seen in villages which is additional attire added having influence from *Yeba/Yema* and in waist placing of *Phiwadang* (horn of *chengra*) in one side and leopard's skull while on other side placing of tusk of boar is common looks among *Samba*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Attire of Yeba/Yema**

*Yeba* and *Yema* are known to wear long white robes pleated and decorated with two wide red horizontal bands, one at the level of thigh while the other at the calves or simple white long robes. And *yaaboto yalokek* (white shirt) during the ritual. Their entire essential attires are *Phengbo* (*rudraksa* beads in addition with *sirpong*, tiger claws, wild boar canine teeth, snake vertebrae, etc), *yapho* ( wide belt of red cotton cloth worn around the waist: one end falling along the front of the robe down to the feet), *yejeyphey* ( headgear made in circular support with circular sections analogous to a crown consisting a cotton cloth covered with different colours for instance, green, red and yellow cloth on which cosie shells are sewn). *Wasang* (varieties of feathers are inserted for instances, those of porcupine quills, rooster, buzzard, eagle, vulture, etc), *Aplak* (two *rudraksh* necklaces are worn as bandoleers, one on the left and the other on the right arranged in rows and cross rows at the end of each necklaces, decorated with tigers teeth, wild-hog tusk etc), *yapongey* (consisting of a leather waist belt from the skin of a buck, bear or a tiger, and on the belt a continuous row of hand bells is sewn, small globular bells of brass and other bells hang all along the belt attached to small leather strips, *yethala* (beaten with short rectangular baton).

### **Lifestyle of Phedangma**

In recent times, the lifestyle of *Phedangma* has undergone change. Initially *Phedangma* would not be respected by the people of the community, though he was an important figure within the community. He was a person who used to work rigorously in the field just like others and since he would remain aloof from others, he was seen by the people as a drunker who would always drink in order to maintain his state of trance. *Phedangma* were also not taken seriously in the social circle since they often used foul terms. But this all changed with the passage of time. They became more aware of the contemporary needs of the society so they gave up on consuming alcohol, since they had to maintain social cohesion. They were also careful about the use of foul language in public some even gave up using language as it would be inappropriate and abusive in today's scenario.

*Phedangma* still plays an integral part in the Limboo community, but due to modernization and education, *Phedangma* today are not the same as they were before. The *Phedangma* are educated and a lot aware of what needs to be done for the benefit of the community as a whole. *Phedangma* today wear the proper attire of a Limboo *Phedangma* while performing any ritual even if it is a small ritual, this was not the case before. Most of the *Phedangma* have left meat and alcohol consumption and have turned into a vegetarian. They have also started laying much emphasis on the use of fruits and flowers instead of blood sacrifices.

But with the changes that came about they are facing many drawbacks. The greatest drawback is that age old practices, the use of meat and alcohol offering, which was once important in the Limboo culture and ritual that initially gave meaning and identity to their culture have undergone massive changes, giving a different identity to Limboos. Likewise, *Phedangma* today do not use meat and alcohol in ritual offering and this change according to belief makes it hard for them to mediate and negotiates with the spirits and their ancestors, particularly the evil spirit, thus causing difficulty for them.

To pin point it is evident in tales of creation of *Phedangma* which clearly shows a picture of the creation of pleasing Gods by offering fruits, flowers, alcohol, meat etc. The tale goes as; over a century back, there were two men named *khalbaley* and *Jaljitey*. *Khalbaley* was chemjong and *Jaljitey* was *Mabohang*. *Mabohang* was also the minister of *Budo Nil Kantha* who was the king of the Rai community. They made a thread out of cotton and made a net. Then they went to the beach to catch fish, on the onward path they met one young girl who was actually *Tagera Ningwa Phuma* (Limboo Goddess). *Khalbaley* saw her and exclaimed what a beautiful girl she was and tried to call her. At that time she entered into *Jaljitey* soul and said that I am not girl. I am the creator of mortal life on earth. After saying this she disappeared and they went back to gather fish, they gathered lots of fish and after that they offered those fish to *Yuma*.

It is usually believed that *Yuma* visited lots of place wondering whether human being recognizes her or not. She has been visiting, giving blessing to human beings. Wandering for years *Yuma* reached a place named *Gorkha* there she became an evil spirit and troubled human beings. Later, when the inhabitant of *Gorkha* asked why you are troubling, she said she is troubling them because they did not recognize her. Being a creator of everything that is sustaining in the world she was sad seeing people not recognizing her. Knowing this the inhabitants of *Gorkha* worshipped her offering flowers and yams.

*Yuma* roaming around reached the country of *Kirat*. The king of *kirati* had an ego. One day when the *kirati* king was roaming in his garden he saw a beautiful lady in his garden. On seeing her he sent *Jaljitey* to tempt her and

keep before her a proposal of marriage to which she agreed. After marrying *Yuma*, the *Kirati* king and his entire family sent her to work in field. When she took out her sickle it turned on the opposite side. When they went on the next day, they saw that the fields were already prepared and the tools were placed on the opposite side, so they returned. Again, when they went the next day to inseminate crops they saw that the crops had already grown and ripened. They were surprised to see this and asked *khalbaley* and *Jaljitey* to ask *Yuma* about it. They prayed saying “we did not recognize you” and again *Yuma* entered into *Jaljitey*'s body and said “I am the creator of the crops whenever you humans harvest crops just offer me a bit and it's enough. And in this way, the offerings to the *Yuma* started. Rai *Raja* not only offered those crops but also offered alcohol and meat.

Again, the story goes that when they were going for hunting. They did not pray to *Yuma* so she decided to unleash troubles upon them, she started knitting a thread. The needle she used was made of gold and silver. She sat and knitted in a place named *Phaktep* in Nepal. *Khalbaley* and *Jaljitey* hunted a deer but *Yuma* hit the deer and spread a mat to sit. The deer disappeared. *Khalbaley* and *Jaljitey* tried to find the deer but they failed. The dog came and found it by its smell. Following the dog *Khalbaley* and *Jaljitey* into the place where *Yuma* was knitting loom, *Khalbaley* said “A beautiful lady is knitting loom” but *Jaljitey* doubted and gathered the leaves forest and offered flowers and prays. Again the soul of *Yuma* entered into *Jaljitey*'s body and gave them all the detail about their meetings in stream in *Gorkha* village, Rai *Rajas* place etc. and told the reason behind their trouble. Then they offered the meat of the deer to *Yuma*. She then blessed them and gave them a gold coin. She asked them to keep the coin with them always and pray to her anytime anywhere. ‘Whenever you offer something to me’ keep adding more coins to it and the coin will increase more”. *Yuma* also said that wherever the coin would circulate, her priest will come out there. The coin was an indirect form which could create *Phedangma* so little did they know that the money was a blessing in disguise. One day they started spending those coins in their times of need and the coins kept on circulating among the people. Anyone who received coins was incarnated as *Phedangma*. It is said that *Tagera Ningwa Phuma* have created *Phedangma* and it was her blessing which could incarnate *Phedangma*.

### **Change in the ritual practices**

The ritual has undertaken several changes. *Theesok* (millet beer) and meat which were the central elements in rituals have been altered into fruits and flowers. In olden times, the deities were pleased by offering made by sacrificing rooster and other animals even when it is evident in myth that how the entire process of offering meat, flowers and *theesok* has been started among the *Limboos*. Somehow, offering of the alcoholic beverages to the deities

in few religious rituals could be seen but offering of rooster and animals are more or less avoided. Today, meat and *theesok* are served only in wedding rituals. The ritual changes are grounded in economical conditions offering expensive goods like meat and alcohol was a financial burden for many of the households. Hence, economic perspectives also appear to be important, and are mentioned as one of the reasons why the “*Phedangma* tradition” is changing. The ritual plays a central role in identifying Limboos as these practices are linked to the Limboo identity.

According to Suk Prashad Mangyung, the former member of *Yakthung Sapsak Chumbo* Sikkim, they have struggled a lot to abandon the offering of meat and use of alcohol during rituals. In order to bring changes they have threatened the community members in this regard saying that if they still continue using the meat and alcohol during rituals then they will not get help and support in any circumstances. In cases, the old age people didn't agree upon changes coming up and continued with the earlier system. Often times old age people said if there will be restriction in consuming meat and alcohol and found vegetarianism then they will give only 20-30 rupees as a condolence while the former member said that it's their wish to give whatever amount they prefer to give but then if they face with the same problem they will also get the same amount. In addition, to practical help the household member needs financial support which is given in a systematic manner as reciprocity which in turn comes back when the giver pass through such situation the receiver must give probably the equal amount.

He further mentioned that once in a village a person had died where the member of household denied in bringing change and to continue with the ritual offering with meat and alcohol also serving plenty of alcohol and meat to the guests. In doing so, none came to attend the funeral either *Phedangma* denied to lead a ritual, hence, a *Phedangma* was called from another village where he said how could I come to your village to lead the ritual in death ceremony? There is *Phedangma* in your village in presence of them why you wanted to replace me? He totally denied their proposal. Helplessly, going back to village, he agreed in bringing changes in ritual and to conduct death ceremonies substituting into a vegetarian. With this incident, people stopped using meat and alcohol during rituals as it was not compatible with modern lifestyles applied by elite segments in process to purify the Limboo ritual.

Jash Raj Subba (2005) argued that in replacing meat and alcohol as well as a blood offering of animals into fruits and flowers which shows the tendency of purifying Limboo ritual. However, in villages the informants regarded both alcohol and meat as a central element in the ritual which further shows the community people including ritual specialist are facing problems with changes brought up by elite segment as offering to the deities have started since time immemorial and it is also believed that pleasing deities and spirits

by offering is common which people have followed since the ancestral time, so as to negotiate with them replacing those offering into fruits and flowers is like deceiving which further harms people. Everything in this worldly realm is based on a belief system, people started pleasing deities and evil spirits with animal sacrifices since the system started and it is the duty of people to please them with a system which human kind have started for the betterment of human. Bringing changes all of a sudden in the offering are like trying to replace human's food into animal fodder.

In this regard, a *Phedangma* during *Chasok Tongnam* (annual harvest festival) rightly remarks that to bring changes in ritual is like turning it into *Sakali* to *Nakali*. For instance; a *Phedangma* who have been using alcohol and meat long time back but these days they are substituting it with fruits and flowers which he calls as *nakali*. So, he says that what they have practiced since age-old times cannot be changed all of a sudden. It would hamper their culture and heritage in a severe way. He also added that, for instance; if *Phedangma* are by birth vegetarian and every ritual offering are in use of fruits and flowers since beginning then only it can further refer to *sakali*. Therefore, he rightfully said that this age-old culture should be preserved and no new things should be adopted without knowing its roots.

### **Dynamics in the practices of *Phedangma***

Today, the importance of the ritual and the importance of *Phedangma* are getting extinct in some places due to the carelessness of *Phedangma* where they do not take their task seriously themselves thereby leading to the loss of "*Phedangma* tradition". Some of the community people are also getting involved in new "reinvented religion" where they are replacing the role of *Phedangma* by and prefer to use *Suingneem* (alternative shaman) in conducting rituals, which further leads in the decline of the role of *Phedangma*. Most importantly, the *Phedangma* are declining in numbers due to the changes the community people have brought in the rituals which have become the foremost factor in the declining number of *Phedangma* and also community people not taking *Phedangma* practices seriously. Syncretism seems to be a useful concept in the analysis of *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre*, which is described as syncretise as it is believed to contain a component from other religions. Further it can also be said that not only due to persons perception, but various cultural syncretism and influence from other religions like Hinduism Buddhism and Christianity the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos are bringing changes in their "traditional" religion and getting syncretised with other religions.

The Limboos have for long followed their own 'traditional' practices, but they are facing problems in transmitting their traditional culture to the younger generation with the change of time. A community sheds all its traditional practices and adapts to the new ones which then puts them in a



dilemma about their own cultural traditions. Sometimes the culture of the dominant population affects the culture of the Limboos resulting in loss of the original culture.

Without piling upon stories in regard to the original version of '*Phedangma* tradition', the community has moulded and remoulded the traditions by bringing changes in ritual which has altered the ritual practices as well as traditional practices that has led to the loss of what *Phedangma* were once in turn altering their whole practice system. *Phedangma* are having problems because of the mixed practice and alternation in ritual practices. The new type of religious practices, especially the ones revived by the elites create difficulties for the illegers as well as for the *Phedangma*. Elite segments revive the practices which make villagers and the *Phedangma* difficulties. Changes have taken place in order to make the different identity or to create the different identity and new practice is not accepted by the villagers. It can be added, but could not be replaced with the 'old tradition'. Changes have taken place in cases where the people have totally changed their religion not on reinventing the same "traditional" religion.

### **Changes in Limboo Culture due to Hinduism**

Limboos have always known that Hinduism was not their original religion, but also know that Hinduism was the dominant religion for a tribal like Limboos. Among Limboos however, there is no criterion for Hinduism as they have all been on the receiving end. They practice what has been taught or what they have been practicing. In the past, they owed Hinduism to fit in their culture. While in recent times, Limboos are owing *Yumaism* as to be their religion, rather than identifying themselves to be a Hindu. They do not want to be identified as Hindus as they have their own distinct culture and religion. They have not just been transformed from Hinduism to their 'traditional' religion - today recognized as *Yumaism*, but they are also making efforts to transform *Yumaism* to identify Limboo religion. Despite, the introduction of Hinduism into the Limboo landscape was the key to an easy acceptance of Hinduism in Sikkim. Since then, Limboos have been found to be practicing both their 'traditional religion' and Hinduism where the *Pandits* of Hinduism and the *Phedangma* perform rituals side by side and the religious practices are characterized by syncretism. The *Pandit* and *Phedangma* do not contradict each other, but co-exist as religious, cultural, and ritual specialist due to division of labour in their roles. But there is an unspoken tension between the intertwined religions as Limboos have realized that they have accommodated Hinduism in their 'traditional' religion and the various Hindu festivals and rituals are actually on their way to erode Limboo identity. Nonetheless, Hinduism was the common denominator for the majority of the population and its dominance all over Sikkim especially tribal group of Limboo, can be seen.

### **Are *Phedangma* the ‘Custodian’ of Limboo Culture and Tradition?**

Most of the people were seen participating in the death rituals as compared to the other rituals, but still the *Phedangma* were seen controlling the ritual situation. The lack of will among the community people to get involved in rituals may be a reason why utmost of the community people expressed the Limboos ritual tradition as baffling since the community people did not have the knowledge about their own culture and tradition.

*Mundhum*, is taught to the *Phedangma* by the senior *Phedangma* which is then used to carry out ritual tasks. It is also a *Phedangma* who can actually make the *Mundhum* potentially powerful. A *Mundhum* can be yielded outside a ritual context, but here the myth will be an account of the folk tales about the creation of the universe. The authority and ritual cognizance of the *Phedangma* themselves is displayed by the recurrent act where the informants were ostensibly unfamiliar with the de facto contents of the *Mundhum*.

The *Mundhum* are not scripturalized and do not ‘institutionalize’ religious dimension with script-based norms. *Mundhum* is regarded as powerful when a *Phedangma* freely flows from the mouth. The *Mundhum* of the *Phedangma* have played a central role in the Limboo ritual traditions for a long time, the *Phedangma* themselves are pivotal components in ritual contexts. But the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos have clearly debated the positions of *Phedangma* as a ‘custodian’ of Limboo culture and tradition.

### **Yumaism Limboos vs. Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre Limboos**

In this shared identity, however, it is very likely that one becomes dominant and the other submissive in different contexts. The question is whether the religious identity surpass the ethnic identity vis-a-vis the *Yumaism Limboo*.

*Yumaism Limboo* vs. *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos will always be there because in recent days, the sole attitude of *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos prevented *Yumaism Limboo* from continuing many of their “old cultural practices” especially ‘*Phedangma* tradition’. *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos were blamed for ignoring Limboo culture, forgetting Limboo language and considering themselves too advanced to interact with the *Yumaism* counterparts. On the other hand, *Yumaism* Limboos managed to integrate Limboo culture with Hinduism and kept up with the “traditional” practices. In that, *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos have not always felt secure about their ethnic identity because *Yumaism* Limboos would always question their devotedness.

Today, *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* has somehow come to actualization that their religious identity has much to do with their ethnic identity. They are making a conscious attempt to acknowledge and reaffirm their ethnic identity and *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos of Darap town are showing effective participation in community affairs both within and outside their religious globe. *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre Limboo* is pronouncing their own scripturized book on behalf of their religion, surer of both their religious and cultural identity. There is an acceptance of *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos ignorant role to the 'traditional' religion and culture and are willing to fit different ideas. Involved with centre affairs, *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* has blurred the Limboo identity but today it is showing tendency about their role in the promotion of their identities. When enquired around the village if they were *Yumaism* Limboos or *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos, the wordplay was only bamboozlement as everybody admitted, 'We are Limboos first'.

#### **Limboos Religious Identity to Limboos Ethnic Identity**

In the contemporary stage, the flinty dichotomy between the teachings of *Yuma Mang Meditaion Committe Centre* on one hand and 'Phedangma tradition' and Hinduism on the other among Limboos is responsible for dividing the Limboo community. The religious division between Hinduism and *Yumaism* is a manifesting discussed topic. But what is not familiar is the factuality in the Darap town phenomenon, which have become a generalize conception and subsequently built upon it to deed the same.

In due time, the gap started widening as *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* Limboos got caught up with Centre activities and their lifestyle. They stopped participating in the Limboo activities leading to a clear separation from the *Yumaism* Limboos. But these religious boundaries were socially constructed. It subsisted to set limits that mark social groups off from each other and provided an overlay that separates disunited categories in the mind. But in recent times, because of the boundary crossing behaviour between the *Yumaism* and *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* that have disregard religion as a hindrance for their common purpose. Both *Yumaism* and *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* had segregated their religious cloaks as they urge to pray on their own way to God *Tagera Ningwa Phuma*. On one hand, the religious identities were being obfuscated while on the other hand they acknowledged the religious cleavage within the community, trying to balance the requirements of the community. There is thus, an infinite process of construction and reconstruction of the Limboo identity which seems to be taking the form of a secular identity.

### **Limboo Religious Movement in Sikkim**

There are also other leading factors seeking to change aspects of Limboo belief system. The *Satya Hangma* movement and the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Center* in Darap town also claim to be Limboo religion and have followers in both Sikkim and its adjoining parts<sup>3</sup> including Nepal. Historically, the revivalism idea of *Satya Hangma* seems to have influenced the concept of *Yumaism* and is promoting changes today. The *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* is clearly contesting the association's version of *Yumaism* by providing their own version of it. The members and the members of the Limboo community especially tended to regard the Centre as very confusing and controversial. While the Limboo ritual tradition is "traditionally" based on *Mundhum*, *Yuma Mang Committee Centre* has scripturalized *Mundhum*. The centre claims a 27 years old woman to be *Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang*, who is believed to be the worldly incarnation of Goddess *Tagera Ningwa Phuma*. The woman is often perceived as the most important deity to the followers of *Yuma Mang Committee Centre*. The centre has reinvented the role and persistence of the Limboo shamanic priest *Phedangma* by introducing only one ritual specialist that is *Suingneem*. The centre is the leading movement in Sikkim. Both the *Satya Hangma* and *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* seem to have admixture of all the religious concept of Hinduism, Sai Dharma, Buddhism and also partly Christianity.

During our conversation with one of the *Suingneem* of *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Center* in Darap town, the authors were shown the book *Ninghingse Saywa Mundhum on Yumaism* which he had received during his training to become a *Suingneem* – a ritual specialist specific to the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Center*. *Ninghingse Saywa Mundhum on Yumaism* was wrapped in a white cloth and the *Suingneem* handled it with care. The format of the book is horizontal, similar to Tibetan manuscripts, even though it was an ordinary printed book. Most of the text was written in Limboo, but some pages were also in English, which provides us with interesting perspectives regarding the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* position in relation to the '*Phedangma* tradition'.

The opening section of the book is written in the first person narrative where *Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang* addresses directly stating that the *Mundhum* presented in the book are not her own creations, but has been given to her by *Tagera Ningwa Phuma* through meditation. It is also stated that the original tradition passed down by *Tagera Ningwa Phuma* through the '*Phedangma* tradition' was pure and undiluted. After hundreds of decades, however, the oral literature began to focus on blood sacrifices in order to please deities and bring peace and prosperity to the households. The bloodshed was wrong, thought *Tagera Ningwa Phuma*, and she therefore granted *Yuma Mang* with her name: *Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang* in order to review and procreate the scriptures of the godly world in a textual form. Next, the book points to a

subject that the Limboo *Phedangma* are gradually ceasing to exist. Therefore, *Tagera Ningwa Phuma* has, as the book says, ‘trans-migrated’ the *Mundhum* from the ‘worlds of *Mundhum*’ on to the devotees of *Yumaism*. According to *Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang’s* communication with *Tagera Ningwa Mhuma* the existing *Mangheem* and the existing knowledge of *Mundhum* must be purified, and in order to strengthen the religion in a uniform manner, it is necessary to advocate meditation and establish cylindrical shaped mediation centres. Here we see that the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* also criticizes the community *Yumaism* and seeks to reinvent *Mundhum* and the *Mangheem*. The book claims that, if these components are purified, it will bring unity, peace, and prosperity among the adherents and will wash away evil thoughts and actions. Since the ‘*Phedangma* tradition’ is vanishing, the *suingneem* have been sent by *Tagera Ningwaphuma* to replace the *Phedangma*, *Samba*, *Yeba*, and *Yema* in order to bring further development of *Yumaism*.

Jash Raj Subba and the associations also seek to create an internalized faith; the Limboos can believe in and belong to, as well as purifying the ‘Limboo religion’. Similar to what is written in the *Ninghingse Saywa Mundhum on Yumaism*, Jash Raj Subba has also voiced some criticism towards the ritual specialists’ authoritative positions and towards ritual blood sacrifices. While *Yumaism* does not seem to be fully ascribed to Limboos residing in rural areas, the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* attempts and acts in terms of changing and reinventing the Limboo ritual practices. These practices are expressed much more explicitly and they have realized and incorporated the reinvented *Mundhum* and the *Mangheem* as a religious institution into their teachings. Most of the community people discussed about the controversy on *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* and stated that the center was totally false and wrong. The great authority when it comes to defining Limboo culture was clearly demonstrated when a former member expressed his thoughts on why he believed the center is false: “We have not recognized her. The apex body of the nation have not recognized her as Yuma. We do not believe in her.”, he said rather puzzled when the controversial topic was brought up. His statement demonstrates that his disregard of the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* is not necessarily grounded in the different practices the center promotes, but rather that the *Centre* challenges the associations’ definition of *Yumaism* and continues their activities despite the fact that the national organization has not recognized them. In essence the *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* refuses to acknowledge the authority of the Limboo apex association.

*Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* is probably playing crucial roles in the religious change we see in contemporary Sikkim. Due to the above given reason the followers of the center and association members are trying to bring changes in the practices of religious rituals. In addition, this center is on a bid to revive the *Phedangma* by organizing trainings to be *Suingneem* by

doing a meditation and by the scripturization of the Mundhum in a book. The 'New tradition' refers to '*Suingneem* tradition'. The new system of replacing *Phedangma* into *Suingneem* is a challenging matter and is a severe factor with regard to decline of *Phedangma*.<sup>4</sup>

### **Change and Continuity in *Phedangma* tradition**

The *Suingneem* is a rising process coming up in Darap town which is located in West Sikkim. *Suingneem* has come up as an alternative belief system where people are trained and taught the ways of *Phedangma* so that the age old practices may not be forgotten.

One of the reasons for the increase of *Suingneem* is because the Limboos want a distinct identity that is shown in their cultural and religious practices. Limboos do not want a syncretized culture or any influence from outside as that would interfere in their cultural identity. Limboos do not want the influence from the dominant religion of Hinduism and most importantly Christianity since converting to any of these would seize their identity forever.

The rapid decline among the *Phedangma* have also fuelled the increase of *Suingneem* as without *Phedangma* the Limboos cannot perform any cultural or religious ceremonies. So to stop the degradation of their practices they came up with *Suingneem* as means of continuation of their traditions. But the concrete reason of creating *Suingneem* did not seem reaffirming as the '*Phedangma* tradition' instead brought a whole lot of changes seizing not only '*Phedangma* tradition' but *Phedangma* as well. Emotions run high, seeing Limboos themselves losing their identity and belief system running after purifying 'old tradition' and claiming themselves "civilized" by bringing changes in their culture and tradition. Even though there are flaws in the recent phenomenon of the *Suingneem* being introduced to the Limboo culture, people do accept this change since they believe it is the way towards 'civilization.'

If *Phedangma* will vanish this way then surely it will very soon just be a story which the old generation will narrate it without any evidences.. Along with the changes coming up some of the Limboo still do follow the use of *Phedangma* as it is in the core of their cultural belief systems. Some even oppose the *Suingneem* that are currently on the rise from West Sikkim claiming them to be artificial and not being authentic and also having *Om Nanda* influence. Majority are clinging to the fact that their identity and culture are endangered with the rapid decline in the *Phedangma* while skeletons are left with the only option to support the rise of *Suingneem* though it has brought about a major change in culture. Along with *Suingneem* the '*Phedangma* tradition' is also going hand in hand there is the constant longing for a true belief on preserving *Phedangma* and their traditions.

### Conclusion

It is widely believed that the Limboo community is identified as Hinduised community, it is stated by the experts that many of the sub-groups within this community acquired some Hindu cultural traits from their close acquaintance with the higher social groups of Nepali community. Nevertheless, the Limboo community is daunting the process of recreating and reconstructing their identity. The cultural leaders of the Limboo community have pinned down certain crucial cultural locations to forge a new identity. The transition is difficult for many people belonging to this community. Some of them do not even realize as to why they have to reform and revise their past self and age-old cultural belief. The new move has tilled enthusiasm and positive spirit to welcome the change. Most of them realize that it would be a change for the betterment.

*Phedangma* is a key player of all spheres of Limboo cosmology. They are the specialist who holds the stories of Limboo people. In this context, they are not only known to be a ritual specialist or healer but custodian of Limboo traditions. The declining scenario of *Phedangma* is a blow to the Limboo traditional religion. *Phedangma* cannot be made but has to be destined. However with the modern perspective of the people the use of *Phedangma* is diminishing and the values are fading though it is still struggling to survive and thrive. The introduction of the new Limboo religion has added to the decline of the Traditionalist ritual specialist – *Phedangma*. This has both effected the Limboo community both in a negative and positive way. It has also intensified the preservation of this age-old tradition. The Limboos are not only getting conscious about the contemporary issues that need to be focused on but the *Phedangma* themselves also have realized about the ongoing issues and they are trying their best as much as they can do for the preservation of what they have and to revive what they had earlier that have blurred with the passage of time.

The Limboo community like any other community are dwindling between the phases of change in their 'age-old' cultural practices and the preservation of the tradition of the use of *Phedangma* and continue as the tradition itself is at the core of the culture of the Limboos and also their unique identity. *Phedangma* themselves have undergone many changes in their lifestyle, in their ritual and religious practices in the Limboo culture as a whole. The evolution in their culture has also brought about the new practice of the *Suingneem* which challenges the '*Phedangma* tradition' yet brings the sense of safeguarding the practices of the Limboos and help in keeping their identity intact. The changes were ineluctable and it is the continuous gestalts of religion that continually interact with each other which further have reshaped the Limboo traditions as well. With the decreasing number of *Phedangma* and growing number of *Suingneem* the Limboo themselves and *Phedangma* as well are responsible for the ongoing cause. The religious divide

of the community is a greatest problem as Limboos are seen to be fragmented because of cleavages brought up within the same single community religion. So far, Limboos have been successful in recognizing the different religious traditions followed by them and in creating a distinct identity from Hindu. But, the gap in same religion by reinventing 'traditional' religion and substituting *Phedangma* to *Suingneem* has blurred the Limboo identity once again by bringing confusion to the larger extent. For the integration of the Limboos there is the much needed one-ness of Limboos to be conspicuous in and around the world wide phenomenon and initiatives in preserving 'Phedangma tradition'

#### NOTES

1. *Mundhum* is an oral literature chanted by the *Phedangma*. It is a typical religious oral narrative of Limboos that keeps their rituals and rites alive. The *Phedangma* and *Mundhum* are interlinked with each other as all the Limboo Culture is shaped by *Mundhum* and *Mundhum* is shaped by *Phedangma*. The existence of *Mundhum* entirely depends on *Phedangma* without *Phedangma* there will be no *Mundhum* and without *Mundhum* the Culture would have a severe effect as all the core aspects of Culture is related with *Mundhum*.
2. In a typical Limboo language the menswear *daura suruwal* is also known as *lappeda sumba*. *Lappeda* (a kind of shirt to be folded left on top of right and tied on two points or have readymade inbuilt bottom as well. *Sumba* (trouser) which falls below the knee and above the ankle.
3. *Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Centre* is the new growing religious movement in Sikkim which has brought cleavage within the same religion by reinventing the role of Limboo shamanic priest *Phedangma* by introducing only one ritual specialist *Suingneem*.
4. Traditional Limboo religion is defined as *Yumaism*, which has not defined as the world religions, but has remained in original socio-cultural environment, as Limboos have an attempt to view Limboo religion as not just the way things used to be, but as a localized version of it today.

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