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**RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THE
SINGPHOS OF DUMSA VILLAGE UNDER CHANGLANG
DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH**

Abstract

There are numerous religions in this world: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In all religions, people go through the same stages in life, such as, adolescence, adulthood, marriage and death. However, in these states of life, not all religions have the same rituals and practices that they perform to celebrate these events. Every religion has a different belief but our main goal is the same. Rituals and ceremonies are practiced to show dedication and faith to a religion.

North East India is the homeland of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures and speaking different languages and dialects. There are different tribal people in the state Arunachal Pradesh of North east India such as Khamti, Nocte, Singpho, Wangcho, etc. and all of them have different beliefs and practices with regard to their life cycle rituals. The present paper is such an attempt to bring out the religious beliefs and practices among the singphos of Dumsa village under changlang district in Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: *Singpho, Religious Beliefs, Changken poy, Chukhand, Deo puja, Som-yang, Ningsap, Shapawang yawng manau poi and Sangken*

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Introduction

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices found in every culture and in every society, that formulizes the conception of the relation between man and his environment. Religion suggests a system of authority, which enables one to know what is right or what is wrong. It helps in reducing fear and anxieties of individuals. It also controls the behaviour of individuals. There are various studies on religious beliefs and practices among different tribal people in India such as Ramya (2012); Kaman (2013); Begum et. al. (2017); Srikanth et. al. (2017).

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There are different tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh such as Khamti, Nocte, Singpho, Wangcho, etc. and all of them have different beliefs and practices with regard to their life cycle rituals. The present paper is such an attempt to bring out the religious beliefs and practices among the singphos of Dumsa village under changlang district in Arunachal Pradesh. The village consists of 61 households and the total population is 297 out of which 152 males and 145 females. Standard anthropological methods have been used to collect the relevant data.

The Singphos

The singpho tribe is one of the major scheduled tribe with distinct socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Arunachal Pradesh. They belong to mongoloid stock. They are mainly distributed in the Changlang and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh.

There is no written history of their own. After the Indian Independence the geographical location of the Singphos got scattered and as a result a section of the community settled in Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh and the rest stayed in the foothills of the Patkai range under Tinsukia districts of Assam.

According to census report 1991, the total population of singphos in Arunachal Pradesh is 3575 (cited in Daimary 2014). The singphos as mentioned by Dr P.C. Dutta, live in twenty four villages scattered in Changlang and Lohit district (Dutta 1990). The word singpho means 'man'. They are divided into number clans, each under a chief or gam (Nair 1985). Their language belongs to the Tibeto Burman family of languages. Their religion is a peculiar blend of Buddhism and their traditional religion. The singphos are a colourful tribe and very rich in oral folklore. The most colourful and enjoyable festival of the singphos is *Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi*.

Religious practices under Buddhism

The Singphos under study have their own rituals relating to their life cycles. They are Buddhist by religion but they still follow animism. Some of the important rituals and practices that are observed by these people are as follows:

Changken poy

The Singphos have largely converted into Buddhists during the latter two centuries, from 1800 till present date. Every Singpho family keeps an idol of Lord Buddha inside a wooden box, front covered by a glass in their houses. They offer regular prayers to this idol in the morning and evening by lighting incense sticks and splitting flowers on it. They usually celebrate the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha on the full moon day of the month of April every

year and keep themselves away from regular household activities on that day. They regard the anniversary celebration or an auspicious event of their life and visit the *Gompa* (Buddha Temple) on that day to offer prayers to Lord Buddha for universal peace and amity. Buddha Purnima celebration is known as *Changken poy* in their local language. The fixing of Buddha's miniature statue on the ground for worshipping is another spectacular event of the *Changken poy*. From the day of *Changken poy* celebration they count the beginning of a new year. In the changing prospect of the society changes have also occurred in their traditional life style. Presently they appreciate the concept of one God and accordingly worship a single God instead of many. Their customs and traditions, process of thinking and other activities have got a systematic and harmonious form.

Conversion from sormon to jokee

For the people Maha Guru (*vante*) of the village is the most respectful person who serves to Lord Buddha. Some parents give their children to Maha Guru to teach them religious knowledge. The little children who live with the Maha Guru are known as *Sormon* or *Josang*. And when boys come to become *Sormon* from home, then a *Sipikhra* (daily use cloths and utensils) is given to them. The Maha Guru teaches them religious knowledge and how to read and write every day. When the *Sormons* become an adult and attain at the age of 20 then they are converted to *Jokee* (Guru). In the campus of the village temple, there is a statue made of dragon and snake situated in middle of the pond and a *pacca chang* in the corner of the pond. When the *Sormon* become 20 years and a knowledgeable person then the Maha Guru invites a few Gurus to perform the puja in that particular pond. They placed the idol of Buddha on the dragon statue. Then the Gurus pray on the *chang* for a whole day and night and while praying the water of the pond dry up slowly and slowly. Generally the pond remains full of water throughout the year. The number of Gurus may be 7, 9 or 11 who perform the puja. When the water dry up the Gurus take the *Sormon* to the *chang* and few Maha Guru perform some rituals and convert him into *Jokee* (Guru).

Some religious beliefs

Singpho people also believe in donation. They donate to support them and in making the life of their children better and more meaningful. Some people donate *kolpatoro* (flower bookie) in the temple for good luck in their life. They tie *thangkhone* and *kolpatoro* in the *tithis* (religious day). *Thangkhone* are used for decoration of the temple. Some people donate books in the temple for well wishes from God. The names of few donated books are -

1. *Suddha Nirban*- To be immortal.
2. *Suksila Khan*- To be educated life after life.
3. *Damakud*- To learn religion.

4. *Damawaowd*- To get mercy from sin.
5. *Pete Kat*- To get relieve from sadness and disease.
6. *Chamfaku*- To remove illness from the body, etc.

The Maha Guru hides his face with help of *Libet* while giving some teaching to the people to avoid eye contact from women so that they may not get distracted. The people never sit like the vante during the time of praying. There is a belief that if they do so then this show that they don't give respect to him so they sit in a different way.

Family level religious beliefs and practices

Pregnancy

The Singpho believe that a woman become pregnant not only due to sexual contact alone, but also due to the blessings of God almighty. A barren woman is considered as unlucky and referred as not getting the blessings of God. There is not much restriction on the part of pregnant women during the period of pregnancy. She can do all the work as usual till the fifth month, after which she is of course not allowed to do any hard work and lift any heavy articles or load. They are restricted not to kill living things both by the husband and wife, and not to cross any rope of the cow, goat, etc. They are also not allowed to stitch clothes. There are not much restrictions of food during pregnancy but after the fifth month, she is not allowed to eat any food items with bitter taste and much of chillies. Honey is also a restricted item during this period, as well as after child birth. A few old ladies of the village come to tie a white rope on the both hands for the welfare of the expectant mother as well as the child in the womb so that evil spirit may not harm her womb.

Child birth

A delivery is conducted by the female members only. No man or children are allowed to go near the expectant mother. After the birth has taken place, on the 7th day they inform their household deity (*Natkun*) and cut the baby's hair and give them a name. The cut out hairs are offer to the *Natkun* and say him whether the baby is a boy or a girl and his/her name. Names are given by looking *panjika* by the vante (Maha Guru). They give the name according to the baby's date of birth, day and time. Some of them give the baby's name by themselves. There is a belief that if the Maha Guru sees and gives the name of their babies then it is good for their entire life. They invite the old people and mention the name for the process of purification. When the umbilical cord is removed then they keep it and later they put it on the baby's neck, so that fever can't harm him easily.

When the baby is about 8 to 9 months and started to smile, then they see the time and feed him food by inviting the old people who have husband, wife and children.

In the old custom they put clothes to the children at the age of 5 or 6 years woven by the old women in which thread are cut by them from the cotton. When a child is send to school then they see *panjika* and sent them to school.

Customs of naming

The people have peculiar custom of keeping the name of their child. They keep two or three names- of a person, one of which signifies the sex and other of birth in the family. The following table shows the customs of naming-

Number of child	Male Name	Female Name
1st child	<i>Gam</i>	<i>Ko</i>
2nd child	<i>Nong</i>	<i>Lu</i>
3rd child	<i>La</i>	<i>Roi</i>
4th child	<i>Du</i>	<i>Thu</i>
5th child	<i>Tang</i>	<i>Kai</i>
6th child	<i>Iyong</i>	<i>Kha</i>
7th child	<i>Kha</i>	<i>Pi</i>
8th child	<i>Siroi</i>	<i>Yun</i>
9th child	<i>King</i>	<i>Tim</i>
10th child	<i>Gam Thang</i>	<i>Kothang</i>

This above names represents the order of birth in the family and the sex. To this name they add the name of the family which signifies the family to which the person belongs. For example, the male child of the *Wakhet* family will be named in order of birth as *Wakhet Gam*, *Wakhet Nong*, and *Wakhet La* and so on.

Their names are kept by their parents and sometimes priest. They believe that if the names are kept by the priest then the child will become a very knowledgeable person and they will not face any trouble in their entire life. The name which is kept ceremoniously is the personal name of a person, which is generally not disclosed. This name is kept after the name of some deceased person of the family of the fore fathers names are repeated. The third name is the spirit name that is not known by others except the parents and the priest who keep the name. The girls even after their marriage to a separate family do not change the name. For example, if a *Wakhet Ko* is married to *Dumsa Gam*, the girls will remain as *Wakhet Ko* and will not change the family name after the name of her husband's family.

Chukhand

The *Chukhand* puja is performed by only three clans i.e. *Minglu*, *Kotha* and *Wakhet*. Earlier this puja was performed by the ancestors to get strength to their body and to win the battles. This puja is used to be done with a cock. They kill the cock and clean every inner parts of the cock and again put it

inside the cock and stitched it by bamboo (*Tangal*) and boiled it. People can't eat the meat of cock and this is offered only to the God. They make a plate by using leaves (*kopat*) which is overlapped to each other by two leaves and they keep the boiled cock on it. They also put rice, water and rice beer in the bamboo tubes. This puja is done only once in a year. The guest can't eat or sleep where the puja is carried out. If they do so they will be killed by showing them bad dreams.

Deo puja

In the month of May (*sawan*), before the paddy field is ploughed a ritual named as *Deo puja* is observed as a traditional custom. In the ritual they offer rice, vegetables and a red and a white roaster cock is scarified in a small *chang* house, which is called *Boom gindo*. *Boom* means house and *gindo* means puja. The *boom gindo* is basically prepared for this ritual in the midst of paddy field.

Som-yang

Before tasting the newly harvested rice they perform a ritual which is called *Som-Yang* in which they prepare the newly harvested rice and the preparation starts at around 2 am in the morning in which all the members of the family help in the preparation. All the materials such as cookers, bowl, salt etc., must be newly used. Then the newly cooked food is offered in the Buddhist temple before it is tasted. Then the family members invite the neighbours and share their newly cooked rice with them and then the family members are allowed to eat the newly cooked rice.

Ningsap (Indra puja)

Indra puja is observed by every clan except the *Singkhet* clan. This puja is also performed when thunder falls in a tree. They take a piece of wood from that tree and go to check the *panjika*. Then the Puja is done under the tree and they cut a pig and do the rituals. They consider it as a big puja. There is a belief that if they do the puja properly then they will become rich and if any fever take place it will be cured. The people of *Wakhet* clan do this puja after every three years and they prepare a feast with rice and fish.

Natkun (household deity)

Natkun puja is observed by every clan but in their own ways and it is done before marriage. Some of them are as follows-

Dumsa clan

If in the *panjika* it is said that they have to sacrifice a hen or pig whatever it is asked by the God they have to give accordingly. In this clan they sacrifice a pig and they poke it and killed him. They invite specialized persons for cutting

and cooking the meat. Three persons are needed with the priest to perform the puja. General people can't do this work. Only the experts can do this who knows how to cut the pig from head to the tail. The people who will cut and cook the meat are invited with a *tupula* which consist of money, rice etc. whatever they like and eat and inform him to come to their home to perform the puja. The way of cutting the meat is in different style than the meat cut by the general people. The food items are separately cooked and *tupula vat* (Steamed rice) is used to serve the God. If the puja is done with a hen then they will distribute the food items into three parts and if the puja is done with a pig then they will distribute the food items into 6 or 7 parts.

Singkheth clan

The *Natkun* observed by all the *Singkheth* clan is same. They use egg laying hen and its colour should be red, reddish white and legs should not be yellow or black colour. The Singpho people believe that the *Natkun* of this clan is very dangerous. They pray early in the morning and separate food is made for God and for the people. The puja is done by the priest. They kill the hen by squeezing the neck and then burn and cut it. Each part (lungs, liver, etc.) from the hen is cleaned by a well-known man. They pack the pieces with *kopat* leaves and put into the boiling water and cook. They don't give oil, onion, salt, chilly etc. After boiling they pick out the pack from the water and serve this with rice, meat and ginger. After separating the food for deity (*Deo*) they inform the priest and the remaining foods are taken for home to serve the people. The priest then offers the food items outside in a *chang* and performs the puja. By doing this they pray to their ancestor and they believe that if they don't follow the tradition then they will fall sick. They believe that if a crow eats the food which is placed on the *chang* then they think that their puja is success.

Wakheth clan

As like the other clans they also invite separate people for cutting and cooking. They use hen in this puja. First of all they clean the hen and boil it. They don't use oil, garlic and onion. They keep traditional dresses of both male and female at the worshipping place. After offering the food for deity (*Deo*) the remaining foods are served to the people.

Some practices while constructing new house

Before constructing a new house they will look into the *panjika* about the land and after that they bury three numbers of rice seed by putting inside a piece of *Goyal bah* (Bamboo) and they place the rice seeds pointed to each other in Y shaped. They have to bury it after the birds return to their nest and they have to open it early in the morning before the birds fly. They put a stick on the buried place as a symbol so that people may know that someone has

done some ritual and they will go away from that place. They have to pick up the buried bamboo slowly without moving. It is believed that if the rice seeds are pointed to each other in Y shaped then the land is good and if the rice seeds are separated from each other then it is believed that the land is not good.

If someone built a new house then they pray to *Natkun*. They invite a priest to take the *Natkun* from the old house to the new house. They give place to the *Natkun* by giving rice and call him to stay in their house. While constructing the house they give flowers, rice, incense sticks, coins and keep these items where the first pillar is being constructed and they make a small hornbill there and pray.

Death and disposal

Whenever someone dies in their village, then they shot a blank fire to inform all the villagers in that particular household. After the arrival of the villagers they start their rituals. They usually keep the dead body for three days. They practice both burial and cremation method of disposal which depends upon the nature of death. The places where the dead bodies are buried or cremated are known as *Sanghiyeng*. Burial is done generally in the case of accidental death, child death and also the death that takes place at the young age because they fear much for such nature of death and are considered as most horrible. In such cases the persons who go for the disposal put thorns on the way on their return just to ward off the evil spirit. It is disposed of just after death and not kept inside the house for a long time. On the other hand, cremation is done only with old person because they believe that they have enjoyed their life to the full extent. So, they are kept inside the house usually for three days. All the villagers enjoy the death ceremony by playing gongs (*bau*), singing and dancing till the dead body remains inside the house. There is no such restriction of eating from the day of demise. But, they don't use sour items; throw out some of the food items like bamboo shoot, pumpkin, etc. till the body remains inside the house. A rough coffin called *Tuoo* is made with some soft wood, where the dead body is kept first. The death ceremony lasted for seven days in the name of the death person. On the 7th day of death a ceremony called *Som* is performed for the well being of the deceased. On this day it is believed, the soul of the deceased come to the house just to take the articles offered in his name. This is performed in all death cases whether natural or unnatural. They invite the Maha Gurus to perform the ceremony (*Som*) and offer them articles like utensils, clothing, etc. given from the house of the deceased. On that day a feast is arranged with rice, rice beer and meat of pig and chicken and the whole villagers are entertained. No other ceremony is observed afterwards.

Community level religious practices

Namsang

This puja is done once in a year for the welfare of the village and to get good amount of harvest. In this puja donations are collected from every household and the puja is performed with a cock in their paddy field. Everyone from each household goes to attend the puja on the particular day that they have selected. After the completion of puja they have to follow some restrictions, before night they close the village road with a rope and put a signboard so that none will cross the road until the road has opened in the next morning. They give a particular time so that everyone can know about the road being open. There should not be any noise in the village during that time. Even in the time of cooking they cannot make sound from the vessels and utensils. In the morning until the priest go and open the road they can't come outside from their homes. If they wake up early then they have to stay inside their house.

Nawasang

This puja is done once in a year at the end of June till the month of October. Sometimes it may continue till the month of November. It is performed for three months in the *Gompa* (Buddha temple) and in every week they pray in the *Gompa* as per the Buddhist calendar. There is no specific day for the puja. After the completion of the puja, the villagers are free to perform any other religious functions or marriage ceremonies in the village.

Beliefs associated with festival:

Shapawang yawng manau poi

This is an annual dance festival of Singphos. *Shapawang Yawng* is the forefather of Singphos. The word *Poi* means festival and *Manau* means dance. Thus *Shapawang Yawng Manau Poi* stands for dance festival in honour of *Shapawang Yawng*. The festival is usually celebrated in between 12th to 15th February. However the 14th February is often a common day of celebration.

The festival is primarily organized to show the varied and rich culture, customs and exotic flora and fauna of vast Arunachal Pradesh. It also fosters social relation and social communication which leads to unity among the people. The Singphos believe that they are the descendants of *Shapawang Yawng* who first born on this Earth. He called himself as Singpho.

In this festival ethnic dance was performed to the rhythm of the drumbeats traditionally known as *Gongs* and *Thongs*. The festival was solemnized for the first time in Miao, Arunachal Pradesh in 1985. Since then it has been observed as an annual basis by the Singphos of Assam & Arunachal Pradesh which is supported by *Shapawang Yawng Manau Poi* festival

celebration committee. To celebrate this festival, initially they erect a traditional platform house in a *Shadung* or around ten feet long bamboo post in odd pairs. Sometimes seven or nine in numbers are fixed on the ground in front of this special house built for the festival.

The main intention of performing this festival is an effort to preserve, protect and promote the old cultural heritage of this small tribal population and to deviate the substance addiction of the youth to valuable efforts.

Sangken

The Sangken festival is celebrated by the Buddhist religious people. The Singphos of Arunachal Pradesh are mostly Buddhist and so, they celebrate the *Sangken* festival as the traditional New Year's Day from 13th to 15th April. *Sangken* generally falls in the month of *Nuean Ha*. This festival is also regarded as the festival of water; it is believed that sprinkling water shows a sign of respect and a cleansing ritual to welcome the New Year.

During the entire festival the people refrain from all forms of manual work, intoxicating drinks, gambling, and killing of animals and on the first day of the festival the beating of drums and gong echoes near and far. There is a ritual to bath the idol of Buddha by using three buckets of water and on the final day the idol is installed back in the main temple.

There is also a belief that if they put water on lord Buddha's book which is placed inside the Sanken tied with a rope then they will be attached to education in their life after life and they will get rid off from all of their sins and harmful effects of different *grahas*. They pray to god to get the opportunity to put water on the idol of Buddha every year so that they can get *nirban*, the place where there is no death, no old age, nor hot or cold climate. They also pray under the banyan tree to get more strength and even the ghost may feel afraid of them. They believe that it is the largest tree out of all other trees and they even pour water on it to get knowledge.

Conclusion

The singphos under study have their own religious beliefs and practices both in family level as well as in community level. Most of the family level religious practices are animism which are traditionally maintained by the people. However in community level they are seen to follow the Buddhist religious beliefs and practices. But they still continue their traditional ritual *Namsang and Shapawang Yawng Manau Poi* festival in community level. The singphos were brought up by nature and essentially their religion and religious festivals were linked to nature. They have faith and belief on different deities and thought that certain deities were responsible for the occurrence of different natural phenomenon. Due to their belief in many deities they have the tradition of observing festivals and rituals to worship them. Customs of animal and fowl

sacrifice for the appeasement of the deities also eager in their society. Presently they appreciate the concept of one god and accordingly worship a single god instead of many and their customs and traditions, process of thinking and other activities have got a systematic and harmonious form. Thus it has been observed that their religion is a peculiar blend of Buddhism and their traditional religion.

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