

Chapter 8

Summary and Conclusion

Introduction

The present study *Bhutia (Lhopo) Shamans of Sikkim: A Study in Social Change and continuity* has tried to explore the study of Bhutia (Lhopo) *bon* Shamanism; a little known indigenous religious practice having some secular overtones as well, as practiced among the Lepcha and Bhutia community of Sikkim. Shamanism as a practice is manifested through a set of unorganized religious practices or cults functioning as traditional healing practices and traditional folk religion. The indigenous Shamans such as the Bhutia (Lhopo) *bon* shamans wherever they are present in contemporary Sikkim they are forced to face the challenges coming out of the inroads made by Tibetan Buddhism as a whole and also the modern ways of life and education have added fuel to their existence. The near absence of the *bon* rituals forced the *bon* shamans and its practitioner to adapt themselves in the tunes set up by the Tibetan Buddhists and the Lamas. However, in this act of adaptation the indigenous *bon* religion and its institution is tremendously affected. It had to incorporate certain imprints of Tibetan Buddhism in terms of attire, practices, and modes of practicing ritual.

Henceforth, this study aimed to conduct a sociological research based on Bhutia Lhopo *bon* shamans of Sikkim. The study explores the current status of Bhutia (Lhopo) *bon* shamans in Chochen and its adjoining areas, their social significance and social change and continuity of *bon* shamanic practices in Sikkimese society amongst the Bhutia Lhopo community of Sikkim particularly in a village named Chochen. One of the goals of this research was to document and preserve sociological knowledge of Lhopo *bon* religion, an age old *bon* cultural tradition which is waning in Bhutia Lhopo community of Sikkim.

In order to understand its persistence and sustenance of *bon* practices in Chochen and its surrounding areas, I have tried to illustrate, the social significance of *bon* shamanic practices and also tried to explore various factors that have affected the growth of *bon* shamanic institution and tried to find why *bon* shamanic practices is in the verge of extinction among the Bhutia Lhopo community of Sikkim.

Further, in order to understand the influence of Tibetan Buddhism amongst the Bhutia (Lhopo) the relationship between lamas and shamans is studied as this study

unveils how with the coming up of the Tibetan Buddhism, the Shamanic institution is either absorbed or rejected by the organized religious structure. The study also portrays, how the perception of older and younger generation has molded up in different time and space with regards to the *bon* shamanic worldly affairs. The study also tries to access the community participation in the study area.

The present study also fills the gap of research, the research which was conducted on Lhopo *bon* shamans in the year 1994- 1996 in Tingchim in the Northern part of Sikkim. The present study also portrays the changes that have taken after two decades of research in Lhopo *bon* shamans of Sikkim.

Introducing the Field Area.

For this study, I had selected, *bon* shamans residing in Chochen and its surrounding areas and lamas of Chochen along with the Bhutia (Lhopo) community of Chochen as the universe of the present study. The area which I have chosen is 21- Nathang Machong Constituency, these areas have 7 Gram Panchayat Units and 38 wards. Though I have interviewed all the *bon* shamans found in different wards of 19 Lhatuk-Chochen Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU), which has 6 wards and among these wards I have chosen Chochen ward to comprehend my area of study as this area is Bhutia (Lhopo) dominated area with more *bon* Shamans as compared to other wards. However, due to less spread of *bon* shamans in Chochen I have interviewed all the *bon* shamans found in Chochen as well as in other wards of 19 Lhatuk-Chochen GPU. My fieldwork began in the year 2015 and by the beginning of 2019 all my fieldwork was completed and I had started writing and analyzing my field data.

Initially, I started my fieldwork from Linkey in 2015 and conducted an elementary survey. The method of choosing the area of study was Purposive Random Sampling. It is an ethnographic research based on intensive field work. I had participated in most of the *bon* rituals carried out by the *bon* shamans as well as the lamas of Chochen since 2015 to 2019. I have tried to document all the seasonal rites as well as initiation rituals performed by the *bon* shamans of Chochen.

According to Panchayat (Chochen Ward) records there are 68 households in Chochen with the total population of 337 people. According to ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme), there are 53 households who are actually residing in the area with the total population of 309 people. This research is an ethnographic research

based on intensive field work. An effort is made to study a sociological study of the *bon* rites and rituals held in the village of Chochen. An intensive field work is conducted to study a sociological study of Bhutia Lhopo *bon* religion.

Further, an un-structured interview was conducted to interview the respondents who are currently residing in the village. I interviewed 27 households along with few other members from the family who represent the older and the younger generation. The rationale behind interviewing the older and younger generation of the family was to understand their world view or their perception and attitude towards *bon* shamanic tradition. An unstructured interview was conducted and those data were categorized according to their age groups. To understand their worldview regarding the age-old tradition, their modes of treatment or their preference of treatment whom they consult during illness is taken into consideration.

My respondent especially the Chochen village community people consisted of 50% of the total households. Other respondents whom I had interviewed were all the Bhutia (Lhopo) *bon* shamans (residing in Chochen and its adjoining wards) and the lamas residing in Chochen.

Most of the people residing in Chochen consulted both Lhopo *bon* Shamans and Lamas. Lamaism and *bon* religion determine the socio- religious life of the Bhutia Lhopo community in Chochen ward no.4. After conducting the field work, I found out almost all the households except one or two households in Chochen consulted *bon* Shamans to perform various *bon* rituals.

Social and Economic Profile of the Villagers of Chochen.

Linkey (ward) the main door towards 19-Lhatuk Chochen Gram Panchayat Unit, as mentioned by the elderly lamas, the main Gumpa was in Linkey. However, because of the favorability of the landscape which looks similar to Pema Yangtse Gumpa (the main Gumpa of Nyingmapa sect of Buddhism), the Gumpa was shifted towards Machong. The social history of initial religious developments in 21-Lhatuk Chochen is illustrated as it projects the socio- cultural beliefs of the locals living in and around Chochen Village.

Chochen is a village where majority of the people residing in this village are farmer. Economically they belonged to a lower income group. They are farmers who

depended on subsistence farming. One of the reasons why *bon* shamanic practices still thrive in Chochen village is because majority of people in Chochen are agriculturists. Another reason is, economically most of the villagers belongs to lower income group and coming all the way to Gangtok for treatment will be problem for them unless they are seriously ill. Easy access, low cost and availability of local *bon* shamans in their own locality during emergency, would be another alternative to the villagers for them to consult *bon* shamans. Further as compared with Tibetan Buddhism, *bon* shamanic practices is economical. In fact, few of the respondents whom I had interviewed said that they even find, performing *bon* rituals at their abode expensive and comparing *bon* shamanic rituals with Buddhism, the latter is far more expensive than the former ritual practices.

Majority of *bon* shamans whom I had interviewed were farmers and the female *bon* shamans were housewives. *Bon* shamans in Chochen and its adjoining wards are part time ritual specialists. They are an agriculturist and depended on subsistence farming. Economically they belonged to a lower income group. Few *bon* shamans whom I had interviewed were enjoying the Bhatta (allowance) offered by the state government. In Sikkim, in order to encourage the practices and for conservation of age-old traditional religion and welfare of the practitioner an allowance is provided by the state Social and Welfare Department of Sikkim.

Social Significance of *bon* Rituals held in Chochen.

The *bon* shamanic ritual witnessed in Chochen and its surrounding areas are of prime social importance to the locals residing in the areas. The reverence and the social meaning attached to their natural surroundings cannot be overlooked. The fact that the shared belief and their world view that their rocks, water, trees etc. are sacred and needs to be appeased or propitiated for abundance, peace and prosperity of the villagers reflects the social significance of *bon* shamanic rituals in the village. The offerings of white (Kachod or fruits) or a (Machod or red offerings) is not simply an exchange of gifts or bribe or a communion between the humans and the deities but the sacrificial process functions to re-establish social equilibrium which has been disturbed or upset by communicating or communion between the sacred and the profane world through profane offering. Further, Durkheim clearly saw ritual as the means by which the individuals are brought together as a collective group. Rituals function to “strengthen

the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member". It does so not by the means of conscious act of affiliations but the experience of the collective representations as a simultaneously transcendent and immanent commonality- God above and the soul within (Bell Cathrine: 1997, 25).

Bon shamanic rites and rituals held in Chochen is a social affair. Spirit possession is one of the crucial elements of traditional bonism. It needs to be noted that the *bon* shamans and their attributes should not be taken as a mere manipulation or *bon* rituals as illusion. *Bon* religion is social and *bon* religion plays a significant role in Bhutia Lhopo household of Chochen and its surrounding areas.

Robert Merton argues that, there are two types of functions of the spirit possessions. The manifest and the latent functions. In Chochen and its adjoining areas both types of functions could be witnessed because during illness or any kind of discontentment, people of Chochen and its adjoining areas, consult *bon* shamans and try to solve their issues. Therefore, in disruptive unstable social circumstances the villager's resort to prayers and consult a *bon* shaman which brings social stability in the village. Simultaneously, spirit possessions serve as a means of status achievement. The ritual practitioner whoever is believed to have a power and are influential in the community are not only consulted but they are enjoying a certain status and prestige in society.

Further, the Sikkimese *bon* shamans are the ritual specialists whose main social function is to maintain good relations with the household and the lineages ancestral gods. Though, Buddhism was confined to the palace chapel and its surrounding areas, it was said that earlier in the villages of Sikkim each patrilineage had its own *pawo* and *nejum* (Balikci: 2008, 145). In earlier days bonism played an important role in maintaining the socio- religious life of the Sikkimese people.

However, with the gradual penetration of Tibetan Buddhism and modern means of livelihood, bonism started losing its essence. Villages in Sikkim were often visited by the lamas from Tibet or other adjoining areas of Sikkim after the Chinese invasion in 1950's which influenced the religious practices of the Sikkimese Lhopo villagers. During 1990's there were only a handful of Lhopo *bon* shamans found in Sikkim (ibid.145). Today most of the Bhutia Lhopo needs are fulfilled by the Tibetan Buddhism, they hardly have a need to consult Lhopo *bon* shamans and Bhutia Lhopo

bon shamans who in Sikkim are less in number and mostly confined to some of the remote villages in Sikkim. Due to this reason, if need arises the Bhutia (Lhopo) people often consult the shaman of other ethnic group (Lepcha, Tamang, Subba etc.) in case of illness.

Interestingly, in Chochen and its adjoining areas which lie in the eastern part of Sikkim, still we find traces of *bon* shamanic practices actively functioning in the villages. Almost all the households except one or two households perform the *bon* rituals at their house. Most of the households perform a ritual once or twice a year i.e., during Dawa Dipo (7th month of lunar calendar) or Dawa Neepo (2nd month of lunar calendar) depending on their respective lineage and during Dawa Chukchee (11th month of lunar calendar) which is either executed by *bongthing*, *pawo* or *nejum*.

During illness, *bon* shamans are consulted and in accordance to the prediction carried out with the help of rosary, beads or Nah-foh (a prediction performed with the help of wheat) a ritual is performed by the ritual specialist.

Rituals of Illness Practiced by the Villagers of Chochen.

The Sociological concept of illness gives a fair deal of ideas about how individual in a society share a common social and cultural meaning embedded in illness. According to Kapferer, illness demonically conceived is not reducible to terms independent of demonic conception.... [And] is above all a socio-cultural construct to be understood first and foremost at this level and in its own cultural and social terms (Kapferer, 1983:87) (Balikci, 2008:122). Similarly, in Chochen too, the illness needs to be understood in its own cultural and social terms. Therefore, illness in Chochen is not just comprehended at scientific level but it is also rooted or embedded in cultural and social conditions. The world-view shared by the local people through internalization or attaching subjective meaning to the objective reality where local people believing that their surrounding is inhabited by different local deities who are capable of bringing both fortune and misfortune, health and illness portrays the social and cultural connotation attached with the social well-being of the village. Further, *bon* religion and its ritual which are embedded in its cultural roots are the collective representation of the beliefs and religious practices which are symbolized in the form of deities (benevolent, malevolent or ambivalent) manifested externally during rituals which the locals believe that they are the protective deities residing in different corners of the village.

Factors Responsible for the Decline of Bhutia Lhopo Bon Traditional Institution.

In Sikkim, intrusion of different external factors has changed the status of *bon* shamanic institution. The numbers of *bon* practitioners are decreasing and *bon* institution is weakened, as in many parts of Sikkim, especially amongst the Bhutia Lhopo dominated areas we will not be able to find a single Lhopo *bon* shaman. Today in Sikkim, there are only few rural areas where we can find handful of Bhutia Lhopo *bon* shamans who are performing *bon* rites and rituals. In Sikkim the external factors like intervention of Tibetan Buddhism, introduction of modern education by British India and Christian missionary and later the spread of education supported by the durbar or Chogyals of Sikkim, introduction of different network of road connecting different villages are few vital reasons which posed threat to the practice of age-old traditions.

When Tibetan Buddhism was introduced in Sikkim, *though* Sikkim was a shamanic view of universe, advent of Guru Rimponche and later other higher lamas who came to Sikkim post -Chinese invasion in Tibet, tamed and subdued many *bon* shamanic deities by including those tamed deities in the Buddhist pantheon. And further instructed the villagers not to utter the name of the deities which had been subdued. As these subdued deities might inflict them with illness from this generation of fear as well as villagers been made to feel ashamed of pursuing their shamanic belief, I argue that the status of *bon* Shamans and their practices today is due to these implications and imposition of the soft power exerted by the Buddhist structure on *bon* shamanic institution from its inception.

Buddhism since beginning, in order to bring the Sikkimese people under the Buddhist fold, strategized and designed Buddhism in such a way which can be accepted, acknowledged and adapted by the locals without being felt that their belief is under threat. However, these strategies led to the weakening of the shamanic institution.

Other factors such as introduction of western medicine during advent of British India in Sikkim and post- merger many primary health centers in villages and introduction of modern technology, easy road connectivity and change in means of livelihood i.e., shift from agricultural practice to other semi- skilled occupation have

changed the approach of the people's outlook towards traditional belief system. Particularly in Chochen (East Sikkim) and its adjoining wards, there are *bon* shamans who are still practicing but at the same time we can see the gradual changes in the attitude and perception of the locals taking place in these areas.

Most of the household in Chochen consulted Lamas, *bongthing*, *pawo*, *nejum* as well as doctors. Depending on the severity of an illness people consulted different health specialist. Initially if they are sick, they either consult *bongthing* or *pawo* or *nejum* than they consult the doctors because they feel that if they are affected by their wrongdoings or their negligence towards their local deities then they will not be cured by going to the doctors, in fact they believe that ailment becomes more severe. Hence, they (most of the respondents or household in Chochen) consult the *bon* specialist or Lamas. As most of the villagers of Chochen are agriculturists and they belong to a low-income group, coming all the way from Chochen to Gangtok is very costly. Therefore, depending on the severity of illness they either go to Machong PHC (Primary Health Centres) or Pakyong hospital and in case of severe illness, they go to hospitals in Gangtok. However, there are few households whose children have gone outside village to study and stays in the outskirts of Gangtok town or those people who are residing in Gangtok do not consult bon shamans during illness.

Further, few households in Chochen have left because of the political conflict which happened during the election of Gram Panchayat in the village. They felt that it was not necessary to perform *bon* rituals and they started consulting higher Buddhist lamas and performing Buddhist rituals at their abode.

Most of the youths especially the school going students did not like the *bon* shamanic practices, they just attend the rituals held at their home out of compulsion imposed by their elders. They found it unconvincing, ambiguous or skeptical. Most of the respondents in early thirties and mid-thirties especially who are educated are ambiguous about the *bon* practices and said that they are more compelled to follow the *bon* rites as they are afraid that if any malevolent spirits as well as the local spirits if not appeased through rituals might inflict them with illness and misfortunes.

During illness, apart from the social and cultural implications there are reflections of socio- psycho reasons as well because most of the people in Chochen at times consult *bon* specialist out of fear or out of need and hope. Fear because if illness

is caused due to provocations or ill treatment to local guardian deities then the locals believe that ailments of individuals will become more severe. Need or hope because if a patient cannot be healed by the scientific treatment, they think why not consult the traditional healers, as the consultant's main purpose is to get their patient cured. Why not follow an alternative method which is practiced by the locals in their villages? Why not consult a specialist who is believed to have healed the other people in the villages? This also shows their thought, their worldview which is strongly influenced by their inclination towards their age-old cultural practices. However, their reliance on *bon* shamanic practices is dependent upon the existence of *bon* specialist who are already very less in numbers in Chochen.

The 53 households with 309 population approx. residing in the area mostly consults the *bongthing*, *pawo*, *nejum* along with lamas except few households due to political conflict in the village. There are few categories of people in Chochen and its adjoining wards who do not consult *pawo* or *nejum* who gets possessed and goes into trance but consults just *bongthing* (a *bon* shamans who does not go into trance and gets possessed) and lamas who are considered less dramatic.

The one important reason why Lhopo *bon* shamanic practices are still thriving and still holds the beliefs of the people in Chochen is because most of the villagers in Chochen are farmer and agriculturist and they depend on subsistence farming and do not have surplus production for sale and agriculture is their main source of livelihood. Most of the people belong to lower income group and economically they are not well-to-do for them to get their treatment done in Gangtok. So, the villagers in Chochen seek help from the local *bon* specialist and the local Public Health Centres. Another reason could be because of the connectivity or development of roads and other source of communication as Chochen had remained aloof from the main area such as Pakyong and Gangtok because of blockage of road or frequent landslide which occurred in these areas for a long time. And in 2017 Airtel network tower was installed but unfortunately that too did not function well.

Anna writes, at the end of the nineteenth century, every patrilineage in Tingchim had its own *pawo* and *nejum* while today, there are hardly a half a dozen Lhopo *pawo* and *nejum* still practicing in Sikkim. According to her, not only construction of celibate monasteries but the introduction of the cardamom cash crop in Sikkim and construction of an extensive network of roads, may be the important factors for the decline of

numbers of Lhopo *bon* shamans in Tingchim. The gradual construction of a network of roads facilitated the marketing of the cardamom and travel to important monasteries, and Tibetan Rinpoche who started taking refuge in Sikkim after the Chinese takeover of their country in 1959. And roads made it equally easy to travel to Gangtok to visit its doctors and hospital (2008, 32-33). Therefore, the important reason why *bon* shamanism still thrives in Chochen (which is just one and half hour distance from the main town Gangtok) is due to continuous landslide during monsoon season, roads often remained blocked. Villagers though produced cardamom cash crop but its production is not high and they get small amount of money by selling those products. Economically the income of villagers was not good.

Accordingly, from Table 6.1 we can draw that there is gradual shift in the modes of treatment or preference of treatment of younger generation. They are more inclined towards lamas and modern doctors.

And further, Tibetan Buddhism incorporation of few religious elements of *bon* religion in their modes of religious practices indicates the socio- cultural process of Universalization “a social process where there is an upward spread of element of village culture (Little Tradition) into Great Tradition as Mckim Marriott states it, taking place in Chochen. Therefore, we can understand that even if there will be crisis of *bon* specialist but *bon* shamanic worldview would not be totally eradicated from socio-cultural practices of Bhutia Lhopo community. But one major significant point is villagers or younger generation will be socially ignorant about their cultural practices and there is weakening of their feelings of sense of belonginess towards their community, nature and land as *bon* shamans are the main torch bearer of the Bhutia Lhopo age-old traditional cultural practices or traditional folk religion. Though few elements of *bon* religion is incorporated in Tibetan Buddhism and in Tibetan language texts, it will be professed or acknowledged only at the whims of the Buddhist Lamas.

Consequently, in his study of Mckim Marriott “Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization”, in a village named Kishan Garhi in Uttar Pradesh, when observing the religious practices of these villages, he states that, “we see evidence of accretion and of transmutation in form without rationalization of the accumulated and transformed elements” (Marriott: 1955, 218). In Chochen too, I found that the *bon* shamans along with the villagers when asked regarding the significance of performing of certain *bon* rites and rituals they give different version for performing the *bon* rites

and rituals held in their abode. There is lack of certainty or sense of confusion infusing regarding the significance of practice of certain *bon* rituals amongst the villagers of Chochen. It could be because of accretion and transmutation influenced by exposure to different religious practices witnessed by the villagers of Chochen. Witnessing of these events are leading towards dilution and weakening of age old *bon* traditions.

Conclusions

Buddhism and *bon* shamanism are two different religious entities. However now both *bon* shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism have become a way of life of the people of Chochen. Except from few households of Chochen most of the villagers still consult *bon* shamans during illness and misfortune and further, we witness upward filtration of few religious element of *bon* religion in Buddhist pantheon and as, Anna argues, that the decline of shamanism, however is not synonymous with the decline of the shamanic world view (Balikci, 2008:33). I would like to add that, even if shamanic worldview survives in Sikkim, the shamanic world view will be limited in Tibetan scripts and addition of few *bon* deities in the few household rituals held in the villages of Chochen but the essence of *bon* shamanic cultural worldview, the importance of their local space would be confined in those scripts and effigies which are made during rituals conducted by Buddhist lamas. However, the local people as well the coming generations will not be able to relate themselves with the cultural practices followed by their ancestors, the ritual which is professed in their own local dialect Lhoke.

Therefore, the inter-subjective meaning attached with their sacred landscapes where they relate themselves with their nature, locality, their land and its myth which their forefathers had perceived and cherished will become meaningless as in cases of other parts of Sikkim and further, in Tingchim and in Chochen, the villagers reflecting or practicing shamanic ritual at home are ridiculed or made to feel ashamed of following *bon* practices and left in a state of humiliation which further deteriorates and weakens the *bon* shamanic practices in Sikkim.

The generation of fear, when a higher lama subdues and tames a malevolent deity, the villagers are instructed not to utter the names of these malevolent deities because it is believed that these deities might get active and inflicts the people with illness. And particularly in Tingchim and in Chochen and in different villages in Sikkim, the villagers have been made to feel ashamed of pursuing their shamanic belief and practices (Balikci 2008:25). All these instances weaken the *bon* shamanic practices in

Sikkim. Further, due to current trends of developments it would be hard to say that, the reverence and the social importance given to their land and ancestors will not be able to withstand or sustain the test of time and space. The development that would be taking in Chochen is going to influence the practice of *bon* religion in days to come. According to the source, since December 2020, a national highway will be constructed towards Changu via Pakyong (East Sikkim) and the villagers of Chochen whose land was taken by army was highly compensated. No people got less than nine lakhs, the highest recipient in Chochen got one crore thirty lakhs.

The reason why *bon* shamans are still found in Chochen is because Chochen is a village where majority of the Bhutia Lhopo villagers are agriculturist and agriculture being the main source of livelihood and *bon* rituals are related with agricultural activities of the villagers. Economically too, they belonged from a low-income group and this village had remained isolated for many years because of road connectivity and further in 2016, Chochen was considered as the most backward village. However, now introduction of new national highway and receiving of huge compensation is going to change the source of livelihood and lifestyle of the people of Chochen and this new developments in the village will adversely affect the growth of age-old traditional cultural practices.