

## Chapter 5

### Relationship between Lamas and Shamans

Sikkim from its inception was based on a Shamanic view of universe, where ancestors and protectors resided in its high mountains and deities of all kinds populated its country side (Balikci, 2008:3). Anna argues that from its inception Sikkim remained a Buddhist kingdom where the shamanic world view remained unchallenged by the missionary lamas. However, contrary to her argument though missionary Lamas incorporated the local deity in Buddhist rendition. For example, in order to convert the Animist Lepcha into Buddhist, their deity Kangchen Dzonga was added into Buddhist rendition by the Nyigma Lama Lhatsun Chenpo Namkha Jigme (Balikci, 2008:23) and diluted their religious belief system. It should be noted that in several Himalayan Buddhist literature, the local deities were considered as wild and malevolent and ambiguous and they are said to be tamed and subdued and not considered powerful or at par with other Buddhist deity. When the higher lamas tamed the local malevolent spirits, some were added to the Buddhist pantheon and other malevolent deities which shamans appeased were said to be subdued and were instructed by the higher lamas not to appease them further and never to utter their names which if done, then those malevolent deities might become active and alive and inflict misfortunes on the people. The generation of fear in Sikkim and particularly in Thimchim and in Chochen, the villagers have been made to feel ashamed of pursuing their shamanic belief and practices (Balikci 2008:25).

If these examples are to be noted then it cannot be said that shamanic world view remained unchallenged since its beginning in Sikkim and I argue that deterioration or weakening of the Lhopo *bon* shamanic institution today is due to these implications and imposition of the soft power exerted by the Tibetan Buddhism towards *bon* shamanic practices from its inception. Buddhism in the beginning, in order to bring the 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.

When Buddhism as a pantheon along with different sects emerged from Tibet it overshadowed the entire, small Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples' religious realm. Sikkimese borderlands both before and during the Chogyal rule provided the space of

being a contact zone where Tibetan Buddhism from Tibet came in contact with the *bon* religion of Lhopo community of Sikkim.

In fact, Tibetan Buddhism was made a state religion and King was considered as the Dharma Raja (protector of state religion). During the reign of Chogyals monasteries were the main sources of social interaction. Conventional Buddhism started as proselytizing religion and it held the Bhutia Lhopo of Sikkim and other Tibeto – Burman speaking people under its fold. (Samuel, 2013:77). Tibeto- Burman speaking people wherever they might have settled, have their origin rooted in Tibet but what is interesting is to note that every Tibeto– Burman entity have their own flavor, distinctiveness especially with reference to their own languages, customs and religion which are in a way very different from that of the Tibet. Sikkim cannot be studied or comprehended in isolation without taking Tibet into account. Yet, Sikkim is not Tibet- as many Sikkimese states- the Sikkimese are not Tibetans (Mullard: 2011, 2). The infiltration of religious ideology along with many other factors of modernity has weakened the Shamanic indigenous belief among Lhopos of Sikkim. Nirmal Chandra Sinha, states that “Even in Tibet, the progress of Buddhism was by no means smooth for the first two hundred years as it had to reckon with the hostility of the native religion. The *bon* was deeply rooted not only in the mind of the common man; it was strongly entrenched in the court itself. Ministers and even members of the royalty were often ambivalent and some continued die-hard” (Hochotsang: 2008, 214).

Mumford in his study found out that in Gyasumdo ‘a contemporary clash between Buddhist lamas and Gurung shamans where the older shamanic layer is still being challenged by Tibetan Lamaism in a manner analogous to the confrontation that must have occurred again and again in rural Tibet in the past(1989:6-7)(Balicki :2008,19).Even in the article, ‘Case of disappearing Shamans’, Sherry B.Ortner (1995:355-390) talks about the Shamans of Sherpas (Tibeto-Burman speaking group ) of Nepal nearing the border of Tibet, she states that Sherpas were once dominated by the shamanic universe but due to the pressure emanating from the Buddhist religious establishment, the Sherpas , Shamanic cosmology have lost its ground. When Ortner arrived in the field in 1966, there was no single shaman practicing in Solu, Nepal. The construction of fourteen celibate monasteries in the region over a period of fifty years had effectively managed to eradicate shamanism in the course of their campaign of religious upgrading (1995:358-59). The monk and the lamas out- rightly rejected the

skills of the Shamans considering it as unreliable, ineffective and sinful, the lay people along with the shamans accepted the verdict of the lamas and the monks. The study carried out by Sophie Day in Ladakh describes about a form of shamanism which managed to adapt itself and openly survive within a Buddhist framework.

Shamanic ritual held by various specialists among Tibetan Buddhist communities such as the Sherpa's and Ladhaki's usually have disappeared under the influence of forms of Buddhism that did not support such worldly practices or have been absorbed into the hierarchy of the Buddhist monasteries (Balikci,2008:3). The Sherpa's due to the pressure exerted by the celibate lamas started consulting the shamans from different ethnic communities whereas the Ladhaki Lhapa oracles found a way to survive by adapting or merging themselves within the Buddhist structure.

Buddhism is revered by majority of the Bhutia Lhopo people today and the *bon* shamans and their practices are considered inferior by the Lhopo people themselves but the irony is, the language and the dialect with which Buddhism is professed is different and more Tibetan oriented and *bon* shamans propitiates in the local dialect as he/she is a specialist who is well attuned to the local supernatural entities. It is even more astonishing to note that, a similar case can be observed among the Bondos of Orissa highland who have their own dialect Munda , in conversation with the lowland Hindu neighbors' they employ Oriya as Oriya is the language of the dominant group and they even perceive that, when it comes to propitiation many prayers and magical formulae it is been spoken in Oriya, because Bondos think it proper that the deities and spirit should be addressed in "superior language".( Furer-Haimendorf: 1982:319)

Unlike Ladakh in Sikkim, monasteries are not associated in initiating or validating the role of *bon* shamans by the conventional Buddhist lamas. In fact, even in Ladakh despite village oracles being recognized by the monastery, they are merely a lay ritual specialist and are accorded less esteem than their monastic counterparts for they are associated with the lower reaches of the pantheon and with inferior ritual techniques (Sophie Day: 1989,2).

Buddhism though infiltrated or endangered the existence of Lhopo *bon* shamans but yet again it cannot be said that shamanic practices in Sikkim is not functional at all as it is reflected through many events which took place recently. Though Buddhism has overshadowed the *bon* shamans of Sikkim but it never totally effaced the survival

of the ancient traditions and they have included the shamanic deities into their pantheon in the recent past. And even *bon* shamans have incorporated or assimilated the Buddhist deities in their practices. The importance of shamans is still there in Sikkim as people still do consult them during their illness.

Samuel notes that what he calls the shamanic mode of operation or Mumfords 'ancient matrix' in Tibetan societies was constantly under attack either overtly or implicitly by Buddhism but it continually reconstituted itself throughout Tibetan history, it provided a background against which Buddhism took shape and in terms of which it had to justify itself (1993:6). Ortner also pointed that even though shamanism seems no longer to exist among the Sherpa's it may still exist in other forms for example by using shamans from other ethnic groups and the popularity of the tulku (reincarnate lama) who may be considered as an "upgraded shaman" (1995:381-82) (Balikci:2008,20).

Therefore, the event which unfolded in the recent past when nature was questioned is worth mentioning and analyzing. There are many events that occurred which indicates how people are still connected with their nature, their universe in Sikkim. The case of Kabi- Lunchok protest in North Sikkim, Rathong-chu case of West Sikkim (1977) and even the ACT (Affected Citizens of Teesta) of the Dzongu

North Sikkim. All these agitations and the frustration of the mass, busted out because new developmental projects were being introduced in these areas which would be totally destroying their revered places that is 'nature'. The local people of these areas were so aggrieved they came to the forefront and raised their voices. True preservation and continuity of biodiversity can only be done taking into account the sentiments and beliefs of the local people (Nongbri: 2006). The sustained relationship between nature and man is probably because of such beliefs where in the locals revered the sacred Lakes, Mountains and Nature and going against the nature would be, going against the beliefs of the people. When earthquake struck in September 18, 2011, North Sikkim was literally affected. Most of the people I heard them saying, Mother Nature was offended by the destruction that people posed on nature. On the way to North Sikkim namely, Chungthang to Lachung there are big tunnels being dug under (Teesta-Urza) right through the base of the huge rocky cliffs, making the place look shabby and deplorable. Most of the local people get dejected and laments on the turmoil of their environment. The affinity of the people with nature clearly depicts that the perception

of the people is still connected to the Shamanic view of universe. Therefore, for the sustenance of nature, the local beliefs play a pivotal role.

### **Ritual practitioner of Chochen (bon shamans and the lamas)**

Among the Bhutia Lhopo community of Chochen, the Lhopo *bon* Shamans are still performing *bon* shamanic rituals. However, in other parts of Sikkim either there are no traces of *bon* shamans or a very few Lhopo shamans are found. The Bhutia Lhopo shamans are scattered in different wards of 19<sup>th</sup>-Lhatuk Chochen Gram Panchayat Unit and they are actively participating in *bon* shamanistic ritual held in the village. There are older as well as newly initiated shamans who are actively functioning in the adjoining villages of Chochen. The *bon* shamans like Ajo Chagu (*bongthing*) who passed away in recent past due to illness in December 2019, Ani Tashim (*nejum*), *pawo* Kunga, *nejum* Narem and few more are the *bon* shamans who were actively participating in Chochen. The most popular shaman *pawo* Sangay who used to work together with Ajo Chagu (*bongthing*) in dealing with different and difficult cases passed away in 2015. During my field visit, Ajo Chagu along with Ani Tashim and few other *bon* shamans worked together to solve difficult cases in the villages. Ajo Chagu's death is certainly a major loss to the villagers as well as to the *bon* shamans. Ajo chagu was the senior most, respected and most knowledgeable amongst the *bon* shamans in Chochen and its connecting areas.

In 21-Lhatuk Chochen constituency, with the advent of Pathing Rimponche, he had instructed the people as well as *bon* shamans to stop killing of animals and sacrificing them for the rituals. Since then, the killing of animals was stopped for the shamanic rituals. In Shotak (a village which lay in extreme eastern part of Sikkim which falls on the way to North Sikkim) which happens to be my native place, I remember during my school days Pathing Rimponche visiting our place and performing a Shapten (rituals) in our village for many years and still today in the village, it is believed that he had subdued many malevolent deities. He also burnt the paraphernalia of the last *nejum* who had passed way and instructed her family not to continue shamanic rituals any longer.

The infrastructure of Sikkim before merger was not well connected and developed. Monarchical regime was not wealthy enough for maintaining a developed infrastructure or constructing Gumpas or monasteries in the remote villages of Sikkim.

During those days, Gumpas were the main place for social interactions (Balikci, 2008:24). Gumpas were made in few important locations where people used to meet once every year during the Dupche (Annual Buddhist Rituals). In Phodong (north Sikkim) still the people belonging to the adjoining areas meet during the Dupche and Kheykong (a group representing the native people who own the land) still contribute their share either in the form of money or other grains like rice and Bayo or Sahyo (boiled and beaten rice) for the occasion. However, in Chochen, Machong Gumpa is the main Gumpa where people assemble during the yearly Annual Buddhist rituals (Dupche) unlike Phodong Gumpa the contribution and the presence of different people belonging to different adjoining areas is not mandatory. The monk uses the fund provided by the state and the money voluntarily offered by the people of the locality. Chochen Mani Lhagang was constructed recently and a woman from different Lhopo households along with the *nejums* make their presence during the important Buddhist occasions.

In Chochen ward which falls under 21 Nathong -Machong constituency, there are more Bhutia Lhopo shamans as compared to other districts of Sikkim, and this ward has remained isolated due to blockage of roads and lack of proper communication. This area was considered as the most backward area in 2016 by SHAGGY (Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojna), a programme held in Chochen Lake and was attended by the former M.P (Member of Parliament) P.D Rai and Area M.L.A (Member of Legislative Assembly) D.T Lepcha. It was a programme where different central and State scheme Yojnas were channelized and implemented to alleviate the living conditions of the people living in this area. The Airtel connectivity tower was also constructed in 2017 unfortunately it does not function regularly.

In Chochen due to a terrible landslide which occurred sixteen to seventeen years ago, there was massive public property damage and road remained blocked for many years and road had always been the problem and Pakyong being the nearest junction was not developed those days as it is today. Therefore, people of Chochen used to go all the way to Rongli by foot to obtain their basic groceries.

From the above mentioned, it seems that the influence of the Gumpas was not strong during the monarchial regime. However, during the advent of Phulchung Tulku (Pathing Rimponche) there was interference in the practices of *bon* shamanic rituals. He stopped the offering of red (killing animals) where animals were required to be

sacrificed for the *bon* shamanic rituals and villagers said that he subdued many malevolent deities and added them in the Buddhist pantheon. Under his supervision the Lamas from the main Machong Gumpa had instructed the villagers that if animals are sacrificed then they will be heavily fined and taken out of village association (Mohhlha). During Pathing Rimponche's stay in Barapathing there were few shamans in the area as Rimponche had strong influence in the area. Villagers consulted him during illness and death of the villagers. Pathing Rimponche checked the *bon* shamanic practices and due to this reason, there were few shamans during his stay in 19-Lhatuk Chochen. After his death, more *bon* shamans have surfaced who are actively participating in these areas.

In the recent past there are other Rimponches who are entering in these areas. Thumi Tulku who is originally from Bhutan and who stays in Deorali, Gangtok is making his presence in different Buddhist rituals held in these areas and he is even constructing Pheri Gumpa and has brought Guru Rimponches Kudung (statue) to the important sacred places in Chochen. He is even planning to construct Sheda in these areas. As he is not permanently staying in these areas and his Gumpa is still under-construction, he is yet to become more influential in these areas. According to Thumi Tulku shamans and lamas are different ritual specialist. Shamans represent Zigten Gay Lha (worldly deities that are not enlightened) and their Sungma (protective deity's powers) are not powerful. They possess Mey phey day phey (half human and half malevolent spirits). They are totally different from Rimponche. In Bhutan, this *pawo* and *pamo* does not set up their altar in Choesam (prayer hall) rather they set their altar outside Choesam as they feel that their prediction does not become clear and vivid and their prediction becomes vague. Thumi Tulku said that in Bhutan Zay Khempu and Zongchen Khenchen rimponche have subdued all the malevolent spirits in Bhutan and he further said that it will be better if they don't invoke or possess these ambivalent malevolent spirits.

In Chochen, Older Lamas as compared to the middle-aged Lamas (especially those Lamas who had gone outside of the village to pursue higher Buddhist study) do not have a problem with shamanic rites and rituals and they do not hesitate to perform the yearly shamanic rites at their abode. Even in the dwelling of the few younger and the middle-aged lamas of Chochen, shamanic rites are performed but they said that they are more reluctant in performing these shamanic practices especially held in their

abode. They are hesitantly performing this rite because either their late grandmother, aunt or their parents are bon shamans and they are afraid that if they offend their *Za-sung* or their ancestral deities' *pho lha molha*, *farchay* (misfortunes) may afflict their family members. However, when asked what rituals would they prefer? They said that they feel Buddhist rites and rituals are better.

Unlike Tingchim, a study carried out by Balikci two decades ago in northern part of Sikkim, Lamas and shamans do not perform their ritual together in Chochen. Shamans and Lamas perform their rituals independently and separately. In Chochen and its adjoining areas, shamanic seasonal rites are held till date. However, in Chochen the shamanic practices cannot escape without being criticized or questioned by the organized Buddhist structure and its few orthodox followers.

In Tingchim, when need arose they consulted other shamans belonging to other ethnic groups. However, in Chochen, as this village is Bhutia dominated area, so, they do not have other ethnic community near their premises, so they do not consult other shamans belonging to other ethnic group as the villagers of Thimchim.

Unlike Thimchim who despite 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa effort to eliminate the practice of animal sacrifice in the early 1960's still felt that the most effective cure when death is threatening will be animal sacrifice (Balikci, 26). However, in Chochen, with the coming up of Pathing Rimponche, who tried to eradicate the sacrifice of animals, though it was difficult to influence and suppress those practices at the beginning but eventually when I was in the field, people no longer felt or had the strong belief that animals need to be sacrificed for curing illness or appeasing those local deities. However, they offered the *pho lha mo lha* (ancestral deities) sha-nga, the right hand of the ox which is being killed by the butcher.

Every house hold in Thimchim, without exception, performed bi-annual harvest offerings to thank their providers the *pho lha mo lha*. Even in Chochen, seasonal rites are performed but only in a few households where they invite *bon* shamans (*pawo*, *nejum*) to perform the seasonal rites at home. Dawa Chukche rituals (described in chapter 3) are exclusively held in the *bon* shaman's dwellings, however, there are few families in Chochen who offered Dawa Dinpo rituals as well as Dawa Chukchee rituals. There are families who performed once a year or once in three years and only during illness and these families only offered sha-nga to the local pantheon or guardian deity

and these rituals are mostly performed by *bongthing* or the member of the family who knows the Khelen of those rituals.

Further, the impact of education and influence of orthodox conventional Buddhism and the families whose members are working outside of the village either in Gangtok or other areas and whose financial status is sound have stopped appeasing *bon* shamanic deities. Most of school going students did not like the practices of the age-old traditions. The former member of Panchayat of Chochen (2013-2017) was literally against the *bon* shamanic practices, even his father who was a monk opposed shamanic practices. The member of Panchayat's mother who was diagnosed as a *bon* shaman was not allowed to practice the *bon* shamanic rituals by her husband who was a stern orthodox Buddhist monk. The lama who happened to be the apprentice of Pathing Rimponche refuted the *bon* shamanic practices. However, few lamas along with some of the villagers mentioned the fact that earlier *bon* shamans were more powerful and could perform many mysterious magical things but these days shamans are not powerful and said rather fake in many senses.

Thus, in Chochen, most of the households in Chochen consulted lamas, *bongthing*, *pawo*, *nejum* as well as Doctors. Initially, if they are sick, they either consulted *bongthing* or *pawo* or *nejum* then they consulted 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, infact they believe that patient becomes more severe if they consult a doctor without referring *bon* shamans first. Hence, they (most of the respondents or household in Chochen) consult the *bon* specialist or Lamas. Except few households whose children have gone outside the village to study or those people who are residing in Gangtok have left their age-old tradition. Few households in Chochen have left because of the political conflict which happened during the election of Gram Panchayat in the village. There were two candidates, one candidate who was the son of *bongthing* (an influential *bongthing* in the village) and another agriculturist who won the election. Since, then few of his supporters along with him have left performing *bon* (rituals). Most of the youths, especially the school going students did not like the *bon* shamanic practices. 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. There are few households who consult *bongthing*, doctor and Lama and not *pawo* or *nejum* who are being possessed by the deities. Except few households, 53 households with 309 population approx. residing in the Chochen area mostly consult the *bongthing*, *pawo*, *nejum* along with Lamas.

The reason why it still thrives in this region is because of its settings and its lack of strong Buddhist influence. The main Gumpa in Machong is far and was not strong enough to influence the people in its adjoining areas. The infrastructure and the economic condition of the people of Chochen is another reason. Majority of villagers in Chochen were farmers and depended on subsistence farming and they belong to lower income group. In case of emergency during illness villagers consulted *bon* shamans, lamas and depending on the seriousness of illness they either went to nearby public health centers in Machong or in Pakyong. Only in major illness they came to Gangtok. These are the main reasons for the persistence of *bon* shamanic practices in this region as people still consulted *bon* shamans during difficult times.

However, by observing the recent developments taking place in a small village Chochen, the development programs initiated by the State and the developments in infrastructure, roads and communication and recent construction of home stays near the Chochen lake by the tourism department of Sikkim and even intervention of Thumi Tulku who had a missionary vision to Buddhicize the area and bring people under the strict Buddhist fold and students both monastic and formal education seekers who are going outside the village might not hold the same sentiments towards *bon* shamanistic practices in days to come as the people who are staying in the village. Infact, in Chochen village today, there is conflict among the locals and shamans due to various reason. For eg. Due to political reasons and another reason is when a *nejum* predicted that an illness in a patient is caused by the shemo (illness caused by the death spirit) of a dead relative. The near ones of the relative got offended and there was some kind of tension generated between some of the locals and the *nejum* and there was a verbal spat between them.

Consequently, some of the villagers are performing *bon* shamanic rites as they feel they are compelled to perform the rites and they are ambiguous and doubtful and some locals are literally against performing such rituals as they believe in higher lamas and their teachings. It is very likely that with these developments taking place in

Chochen, the status of *bon* shamans, their importance and the number of *bon* shamans practicing in the area might not remain same in future as it is today. Adding to the matter, death of Ajo Chagu is a major setback or loss in the growth of influence of *bon* shamanic practices in Chochen.

### **Conclusion**

Buddhism and shamanism are different religious entities. However, when understanding the significance and change in the practice of *bon* shamanism, nature of practice of Buddhism in the region cannot be ignored and studying of former without latter would be incomplete when understanding the prominence and sustenance of *bon* shamanic institution. And Buddhism and shamanism cannot be studied in isolation. Therefore, in order to understand the prominence of *bon* shamanic practices, the nature of practice of Buddhism needs to be considered. Therefore, in this chapter I have tried to highlight the relationship of lamas and shamans by comprehending their nature of affiliation in religious sphere in Sikkim particularly in a small village Chochen.

Anna argues, that the decline of shamanism, however is not synonymous with the decline of the shamanic world view (Balikci, 2008:33). However, I would like to add that, even if shamanic worldview survives in Sikkim, the shamanic world view will be limited in Tibetan scripts and only chanted during annual Buddhist ritual or during illness but the essence of *bon* shamanic cultural worldview, the importance of their local space would be confined to those Tibetan scripts and those 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 higher lamas subdue and tames a malevolent deity, the villagers are instructed not to utter the names of these malevolent deity because it

is believed that these deities might get active and inflicts the people with illness. And particularly in Thimchim 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).

Further, when I had a casual conversation with a monk from Chalamthang (Eastern part of Sikkim) who had recently finished his retreat said that shamanic practices are not good and he further added that even during prediction (Mohtap) “those days” shamanic deities were malevolent and most of illness were attributed to them however “these days” these deities are less prominent and they hardly find those malevolent deities affecting the people these days as they hardly see them during prediction. He further, said that, “we held a ritual in Gumpa where these local deities who are tamed and subdued are appeased once in a year”. And even the younger village lamas of Chochen now like the Lopen Dugyal of Thimchim who earlier used to chant those mantras to appease local deities now after going into retreat hesitates to perform the rituals to appease the local pantheon, infact when asked the name or purpose of those malevolent or shamanic deities they hesitate, ignore or pretend not knowing about them. Some of the lamas who have gone outside of the village to study or have gone for retreat of three years three month three days might not hold the same view as the village older lamas and if questions are asked regarding *bon* shamanic practices in their village, then they get skeptical or simply sneer at the questions. One respondent from Chochen (lama who had gone for retreat in Nepal) dubiously, said that, the *bon* shamanic practices could be valid and cannot say that the deities they are propitiating is not valid. Though, his family used to perform *bon* shamanic rites in their abode earlier but now they do not perform those rituals at his home.

Above mentioned instances along with the Death of the senior *bongthing* in 2019, the installation of Tibetan Guru Statues in the sacred cave of Chochen and further development of network of road deteriorates and weakens the age-old cultural practices of Chochen.