

The Dynamics of Religious Transformation of the Tamang Community of the Sub-Himalaya: Historical Perspective

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[Editorial Note: In this paper the author has talked about the process of the religious transformation of the Tamang community in the sub-Himalayan region through a historical lens. The article has highlighted the transformation of the Tamang community from animism to Buddhism.]

***Abstract:** The study of religion and cultural change has always cherished the historian and ethnologist. The Tamang have been the subject of study for historians, ethnologists and philologists for many decades. The cultural peculiarity and ethnographic distinctiveness has attracted the scholar. The present paper intends to highlight the imbibed religious transformative character of animism to Buddhism. It also attempted to explore the reasons for the cultural shift of the tamang from animism to Buddhism.*

***Keywords:** Tamang, culture, animism, Buddhism, rituals.*

The micro study of Tamangs religion and its customs reveals that they had undergone religious transformation from the inception of Buddhism in Tibet or particularly with the foundation of Lama Buddhism or Lamaism by Guru Padmasamvawa. The Tamangs call them as ‘they are by birth Buddhist’ but their rituals and beliefs are totally antithesis of what they actually are. The religious initiation and ritual practices of Tamangs exhibit ritual differentiation like the religious system of Himalayas mostly of the South and SouthEast Asia. Tamangs religion is essentially two distinct yet coexisting systems, Buddhism and Bonism (Shaminsm). These are traditionally recognized dimensions. Hinduism also had deep rooted influence among Tamangs. Tamang considers them Buddhist, as opposed to Hindu, but the distinction is not absolute in Sub-Himalaya, likewise Bon religion. The characteristics of the rituals and practices of Tamangs which is very much animistic¹, but still affiliation with this is obscure. Larry Peters² observes

¹ Radin. Paul, “*Primitive Religion Its Nature and Origin*” Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 2010, pp 99-100.

² Peters, Larry, *Tamang Shamans: An Ethnopsychiatric Study of Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal*, State Mutual Book & Periodical Service, Limited, New Delhi, 1998.

Tamangs are adherents of ancient Tibetan religion i.e. Bon, because the core theme of this religion is 'Shamanism.' Shamanism is thought to be mankind's earliest religion, possibly dating back 100,000 years or more; it may well have been the religion of Neanderthal man. Shamanism originated in association with the hunting and gathering way of life³ and many researchers believe that the shaman's role portrayed in the Upper Paleolithic cave art of southern France indicates that the first profession was that of shaman-curer.⁴ The term shaman comes to us through Russian, from the Siberian Tungusic term saman meaning "one who is excited, moved, raised." This is descriptive of the most salient aspect of the shaman's trance: shaking⁵. According to Professor Sir Harold Bailey, shaman ultimately derives from vedic sram meaning "to heat oneself or practice austerities," and sramana meaning monk or ascetic. This term made its way from India through central Asia to China (sha-men) and Japan (shaman), entering Siberia via the dissemination of Tantric Buddhism.⁶ The Tamangs have great faith as well as profound respect for shamans, who are identified as religious specialists of the community like other tribal religions. Belief in the existence of superhuman or supernatural powers is almost universal. Experiences of certain day to day sudden happenings of diseases, death and the explainable, have led tribal people into believing in other than the material visible world i.e. in the invisible spirit-world or supernatural powers. They have established a kind of close relationship between themselves and this power by adjusting themselves to it in two ways, first by controlling or overpowering the spirit by enchanting or practicing some techniques and canalizing the power, for

³ J. W. Williamson and Edwin T. Arnold, *The Appalachian Journal*, Volumes 1, 1972, Vol. 7, No. 4, Index: *The Appalachian Journal*, Volumes 1-7, 1972-1980 (Summer 1980), pp. 162-163.

⁴ Campbell, D. T., & Fiske, D. W. (1959). *Convergent and Discriminant Validation by the Multitrait-Multimethod Matrix*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 56, 81-105. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046016>

⁵ Watters. E. David. *Siberian Shamanistic Traditions among the Kham-Magars of Nepal*, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS_02_01_11.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/contributions/pdf/CNAS_02_01_11.pdf)

⁶ Andrei. A. Znamenski, *Shamanism: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, Routledge, 2004, pp. 132.

good or bad, and secondly, by offering puja or worship to propitiate the superhuman power for acquisition of the thing or object desired. We call the former magic and latter religion. In the tribals magic is actually an integral part of their religion and magical practices may be included as a method of propitiation⁷.

The general account of the tribal religion of the Sub-Himalaya can be traced out in various forms of beliefs, faiths and ism prevailing among the tribal including Tamang of India and Nepal. They use it to propitiate the effects produced by superhuman or supernatural powers. The sacred place and symbolic articles or objects representing the different powers constitute the sacred geography. Sacred specialists like Shaman or individuals who propitiate the so-called God of the group concerned and finally the sacred performance reflect the method of propitiation, rituals, worship, offering sacrifice etc adopted by the people. Vidyarthi and Rai⁸ made an outline of the nature or characteristics of tribal religion in the area concerned. Animism, Bongaism, Naturalism, Toemism, Taboo, Magic, Polytheism and Ancestor worship are the nature of belief in supernatural powers which makes them different from the mainstream religion like Hindu and Buddhism. In the same way tribal do propitiate number of spirits like protective spirits, benevolent spirits, evil or malevolent spirits and ancestral worship and for reverence to these elements they select particular place as sacred are sacred centers by sacred specialist. All these characteristics are distinctly seen in Tamangs belief and practices in the form of ancestral worship, devi stan, jhakri or shaman with their sacred performance. Tamangs from ancient times are followers of Bon religion, which was the religion of Tibet before the advent of Buddhism. Bon is the primitive native religion of Tibet, and it has, in spite of the influence of Buddhism, preserved itself till the present day. Bon was originally a cult of nature worship. It is said to have been widespread in inner Asia, China, East and West Turkestan, Manchuria, Mongolia and the Tibetan plateau. Tibetans of the early days were apparently completely subject to their formidable natural surroundings. Their religious ideas, which were rooted in and dominated by nature, revolved round the various good and evil spirits with which they populated their wild, highland landscape. These spirits in time became gods who had to be propitiated to avert harm and worshiped to secure help.

⁷ Vidyarthi, L.P., Rai. Binay Kumar, *“The Tribal culture of India”*, Concept Publishing company, New Delhi, 1985, (p. 236)

⁸ Ibid. pp. 239-240.

The belief in the spirits developed into a cult with its own elaborate ritual. There were Shamans or specialist priests who professed to be experts in controlling nature through their knowledge of the ways of propitiating the spirits. These practices varied from place to place and from clan to clan as Tibet in those days were not a unified state and were divided into a number of regions controlled by different tribes⁹. The Tamang tribe of the Sub-Himalaya also inherits same characteristics as of the Bon religion, which is evidence of as adherents of Bon religion, because they deified the forces of nature as Gods. Mountains and rivers, rocks and springs, land and sky and trees and bushes became the dwelling place of those gods. The helpful ones were worshipped, and the harmful ones propitiated. Among the Tamang beliefs and practice, main ingredients of worship or propitiatory rites were offerings in the form of food, drink, clothing and even sacrifices of cock, goat etc. From dawn to dusk of everyday life and from birth to death of Tamang, the rituals and practices of this animistic cult makes them firm believers of Tribal religion which is best known as Bon.

The advent of Buddhism in Tibet has changed the course of the belief system of the peoples of the place. There is no denying the fact that Buddhism is one of the most dynamic religions of the world. It is the only religion which made a notable contribution to the culture not only of India but also of other foreign lands. It is due chiefly to its catholicity that it could make an appeal to all, both Indians and foreigners, alike. King Asoka's contribution in this regard is highly noteworthy. He dispatched his missionaries to various countries in India and abroad to propagate Buddhism. But we know nothing of his mission in Tibet nor in fact do know of any activities of Indians for the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet. Before the 7th Century A.D. Buddhism was unknown in Tibet. Till then it was steeped in "barbaric darkness". Towards the early part of the 7th Century A.D. It first received Buddhism and through it some beginnings of civilization among its people. Undoubtedly Tibet received the largest contribution to its culture in respect of religion, literature, art and the like from India¹⁰. This was the stage of transformation of religion among the hill tribes of Tibet and Himalayan ranges. The

⁹ Bansal. B.L, *Bon its Encounter with Buddhism in Tibet*, Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, India, 1994 (p. 2)

¹⁰ Banerjee. A.C. *Aspects of Buddhist Culture from Tibetan Sources*; Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd, Calcutta, 1984. (p.19)

introduction of Buddhism in Tibet totally changed the outlook of the Himalayan tribes and gave birth to a mixed religion which was neither pure Buddhism nor pure Animism or Bonism but it was a culture oriented religious system particularly for the Tamangs. Here we must know about how Buddhism makes its way towards Tibet? The transition of Bonism and Buddhism in Himalayan region was best elaborated by Dr. A.C. Banerjee who has given an account of Buddhism in Tibet in the early part of the 7th Century A.D. It is generally believed that Buddhism entered Tibet during the reign of King Naradeva (*Mihi lha*) who ascended the throne at the age of thirteen only. *Bu-ston*, the greatest Tibetan historian, also writes that “thirteen years of age he ascended the throne and brought under his power all the petty chieftains of the border land who offered him presents and sent their messengers of submission”. Owing to his meritorious deeds he was later on better known as *Srong-tsan-gam-po* in Tibet. *Bu-ston* states that the original name of the king was *Khri-lda-srong-btsan* and he provides us with an interesting account of how the king came to be known as *Srong-btsan-gam-po*. It is to be noted here that “this original name of the king is practically forgotten in Tibetan history and his honorific name *Srong-btsan-gam-po* became firmly fixed”. He was the son of King Gnam-btsan-tri-srong-bstan who was a warlike king and held supreme authority over Tibet. King *Srong-bstan-gam-po* bred the martial spirit of his father and took delight in bloody wars and campaigns. On his ascension to the throne he increased his military powers manifold and laid an expedition against king Amsuvarman of Nepal in the south. Fearing defeat at his hands king Amsuvarman of Nepal thought it wise to establish a matrimonial alliance with the king of Tibet. He offered his daughter in marriage to him. The king gladly accepted the princess as his queen. King *Srong-btsan-gam-po* was only sixteen years old when he married the Nepalese princess who was aged eighteen years. Tibet became a very powerful nation then because of king *Srong-btsan-gam-po*'s military power. Some two years later king *Srong-btsan-gam-po* laid a military campaign against *Sen-ge-bstan-po* (*Tai-tsung*), the powerful emperor of China in the north. The emperor also evaded the war by giving his daughter in marriage to the king of Tibet. Many romantic tales are still current in Tibet about the marriage of the king with the Chinese princess. Thus *Srong-bstan-gam-po* had two queen one of them was “*Thi-btsun*” said to be the corrupt form of *Bhr-kuti*, the daughter of king Amsuvarman of Nepal, while the other was called *Wen-ch'eng* the daughter of *Tai-tsung* the emperor of China. S. Levi opines that the marriage of the king with two princesses was planned for the consolidation of the political power of Tibet. Both these wives were pious. The princess of Nepal was a devout Buddhist. As part of her dowry, she brought with

her the image of Aksobhya Buddha, Maitreya and Tara. To shrine the images *Srong-btsn-sgam-po* built a great temple which stands today in the middle of Lhasa. It is popularly called the Jo-Khang (House of the Lord). Its original name meant House of wisdom, perhaps, this change was a concession to the fact that Bon-pos were already becoming a little restive at this foreign influence. Nepalese architects and builders and the entire necessary craftsman were sent from Nepal for the work on the temple, the first to be built in Tibet. The princess of China was also a worshipper of Buddha. She brought to Tibet arts and crafts as well as an image of Sakyamuni which "is said to have been taken from Magadha by the Chinese about 1st century B.C." This was also installed in a great temple built by the king in Lhasa through the initiative of his Nepalese wife. It still survives there and it is the chief temple of Lhasa. Both the wives were further "canonized as incarnations of Avalokita's consort, Tara savouress or goddess of Mercy, and the fact that they bore no children is pointed to as evidence of their divine nature". The Chinese princess was glorified as the white Tara and Nepalese princess as the green Tara which is still very much venerated in Nepal. The king was a man of culture. He was deeply interested in cultural development, social reforms and the like. By the persuasion of these two queens, the king was soon converted to Buddhism. He felt the necessity of introducing Buddhism into his own country and henceforth devoted his attention to its propagation in Tibet.¹¹ Thus, Buddhism spread out in Tibet under the patronization of king *Srong-btsn-sgam-po*. The indigenous religion which has been deeply rooted in Tibetan culture became antagonistic against this foreign religion. The regular ups and downs make it difficult to establish a Buddhist church in Tibet in spite of strong support from the Tibetan monarch. During the rule of king *khri-srong-lde-btsan* (740-786A.D) marks the zenith of Tibetan power and the affirmation of Buddhism as the chief religion of the state. It was during his reign that Santaraksita, Padmasambhava and Kamalasila were brought to Tibet. He was a great admirer of Buddhism and to propagate Buddhism in Tibet he invited Santaraksita, the famous Indian Buddhist teacher to Tibet. But due to some reason he was unable to give permanency to this new faith in Tibet and had to leave for Nepal. Santaraksita was called back by the king. "Santaraksita advised the king to invite the celebrated Tantric teacher and *Yogi Padmasavbhava* for the thought that the people of Tibet being so attached to the local gods and magical practices would

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 20-21.

require a very powerful teacher”.¹² *Padmasabhava* on his part arriving in Tibet in 747 A.D, he vanquished all the chief devils of the land, sparing most of them on their consenting to become defenders of his religion, while he on his part guaranteed that in return for such services they would be duly worshipped and fed. Now, onwards Buddhism firmly rooted in the land of snow and propagated the Dhamma in new form in the Himalayan region which is known as “Lamaism” which was best suited for all the people of the region who earlier used to be adherents of Bon. The Lamaism which was introduced by Padmasambhava had the esteem space for deities of Bon religion as well as it was based on Tantra, which has been the central point of beliefs of the Hill tribes.

The Tamangs idea of religion contains a number of elements which combine to produce a representation of tribal cult of belief system in spite of being followers of *Nyingmapa* Sect of Lamaism or Lamaist Buddhism. The ecology determines the shape and form of the tribal culture, but their religious activities and beliefs lead to an environment of supernatural beliefs and rituals that modify and influence the tribal culture. To explain the religion of the Tamang tribe it is necessary to have a holistic approach: their religious life plays an important role in the configuration of their culture. In the formulation stage of Indian anthropology a number of studies were presented to explain the culture focusing on “Nature” and the activities of “Man”. But as studies advanced in the analytical phase of anthropology in India it became more and more clear¹³ that Nature –man relationship was not only confined to the ecological or subsistence level alone. The invisible spirit-world is there at every stage of the life of the Tamangs which gives them a means to explain certain sudden happenings and unexplainable experiences. Thus it is clear that Nature-Man-Spirit¹⁴ is useful for depiction of the Tamang culture. “Spirit World ” of the Tamang explains many things as well as paves the way for understanding its beliefs and practices. The Tamangs nature of primary beliefs is animism later they are Buddhist. The myths and legends provide them with sanctions. They worship all types of spirits whether benevolent or malevolent. Their huts, villages and fields and forests are all full of sacred places. The head of the family has the responsibility

¹² Vidyarthi, L.P., Rai. Binay Kumar. “*The Tribal culture of India*”, Concept Publishing company, New Delhi, 1985, p. 27.

¹³ Ibid. p. 242.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 269-270.

to propitiate the gods and deities at family level. The village priest takes the responsibility at community level. The shamans are to protect the Tamangs from *Bhut prêt*. In sacred performances objects from eggs to buffaloes are offered to the gods and deities. The religious festivals are eagerly awaited by the people. The ancestral spirits find a favour and appreciation from their new generation and the people believe that the ancestors of their family and household deity (*Khyapa*) who helps them in every walk of life. It is observed that the Tamangs have blended their beliefs and rituals with Buddhism predominantly Lamaist Buddhism.

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