

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CULTURAL IDENTITIES OF  
LIMBOO TRIBES OF SIKKIM**

**Reshmi Limboo,**

Phd Scholar, Department Of Sociology,  
Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University,  
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

**Abstract**

*This research paper based on the Limboo tribes of Sikkim consequently facing the identity menace. Limboo society has faced continuity and change in cultural identities throughout the decade specially focusing on the Limboo religion called "Yumaism" based on the universal mother goddess "Tagera Ningwa Phuma", which is very unique and due to the time change now the reformation in principles of Yumaism which has led confused state in the contemporary society. Now the Limboo society is dividing into two- one those who followed old traditional form and another reformation form of Yumaism.*

**Keywords: Yumaism, Religion, Limboo**

Higher Education &  
Research Society

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- Reshmi Limboo

**Introduction**

Sikkim is the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Union. Sikkim is bounded on the North and North-East by Tibet, on the East by Bhutan, on the West by Nepal and on the South by the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Sikkim is an 8<sup>th</sup> Indian state on the North Eastern Himalayas ranges with the area of 7096 Sq.km, with a low population of 607,688 as per census of 2011. Sikkim has three main ethnic groups: The Lepchas who were the original inhabitants of Sikkim, The Bhutias who migrated from Tibet in the seventeenth century and the Nepalese who migrated from Nepal started in the nineteenth century. Sikkim is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi cultural state. Subba writes in his forward in the book "The Limboos of the Eastern Himalayas with special reference to Sikkim" according to R.K spring, The Limboo were living in Sikkim before there was a Sikkim for them to live in (v). The history told that when Bhutia first came into Sikkim from Tibet during 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries they found Sikkim was inhabited by the Lepchas and the Limboos. Sikkim was a tribal land before 1642 from 1642 to 1975 it was a monarch under *Namgyal* Dynasty from 1975 it became a fully fledged state of greater India.

Limboos are one of the ethnic groups of Nepal, Bhutan, West Bengal, Assam, Sikkim and other Himalayan States of India. Subba writes Limboos are one of the indigenous tribe of Sikkim living there even before the formation of Sikkemese Kingdom. In fact, the name Sikkim itself is a Limboo Origin- *Su* (new) and *Khim* (house). Later this became Sukhim to Sikkim (1). Subba writes Limboo tribes are referred to as 'Tshong', 'Subba', and 'Yakthung'.

But certainly, the name *Limboo* and *Subba* is most widely common in this region as well as outside also. The word *Limboo* means an 'archers' and the name *Subba* means 'chief of the village' and the name *Tshong* meaning 'a merchant' is used to call by Lepchas and Bhutias in Sikkim and *Yakthung* means 'inhabitant of hills' or 'Yak headers' (84-86). *Subba* writes *Limboo* tribes has their own script called *Sirijonga* and have their own language associated with a Tibeto-Burman language (4). *Subba* writes *Rishley* says the leading principle of the *Limboo* religion is animism. The *Limboo* have distinct religion called 'Yuma Samyo' (Samyo means Religion) or 'Yumaism', worshipped the universal mother goddess 'Tagira Ningwaphuma'. The *Limboo* has its own Shamans called 'Phedandagmas' and the ritual traditions are based on oral traditions i.e. *Mundhum* (299).

## Religious beliefs

*Subba* noted the *Limboo* community believes that their life is guided by the philosophy by of *Yuma* religion called *Yuma Samyo* or 'Yumaism' which believes on supreme Almighty Goddess "Tagera Ningwaphuma". *Yuma* is a feminine figure generally meaning is Grandmother. The Almighty Goddess *Tagera Nigwaphuma* is the supreme source of energy considering she is Omniscient, Omnipresent, Omnipotent, Infinite, and eternal (179). *Yumaism* believes in animism. *Yumaism* has beliefs in numerous deities, prays and worships the Gods and Goddess in three categories:

- i) The *Mangs* are deities or messenger God and Goddess are prayed for better afterlife but never worshipped with any kind of sacrifices or offerings. *Mangs* comprises of Almighty Goddess *Tagera Ningwa Phuma*, creator God *Sigera Yabhumdinmang Porokmi Wanbhaminang* and a large number of *Sijoingmisa* (messenger of God and Goddess).
- ii) The *Sammangs* are the spirit or soul gods and goddesses worshipped with offering and even with blood sacrifices. *Sammangs* are again divided it into divinity forms of Almighty Goddess are *Him Sammang* are Household Divinities, *Tap Sammang* are Nature Divinities, *Thokley Sammang* are Clan Divinities, *Sam Sire* are incarnation of *Limboo*

*Phedangmas* (Shamans/religious priest). The Limboo tribes have their own Shaman collectively known as *Phedangma*. They are classified into nine types: *Muhikkum Ongshi*, *Phejiri Phedangma*, *Samboko Samba*, *YabokoYeba*, *YabokoYem*. These five priests are the incarnate deities other *Yuma Sam*, *Sammudhums*, *Yepmundhums*, *Dida-Sams/Sidapangdang*, while these four are not incarnate and do not perform shamanic functions but performs some priestly functions in the society and the last one is Herbalist. All these *Phedangmas* have their own gear and costumes and have their functional differences in the society.

iii) The *Sammang chyangs* are the followers of *Sammangs* forming a coterie of attendant around each of the *Sammangs*. Most of them are known as malicious, obnoxious, detrimental and wicked. They have to be propitiated before initiating the invocation rites of the main divinities so that they may not cause disturbance beforehand, e.g. huge followers of 'Nahen' (God of envy and Jealousy) (150-152).

## **The Religions and Influences**

Hasnain writes India is habited by the followers of three most important religious ideologies of world i.e. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity and other major religions are Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Sikhism (15). Subba noted down Sikkimese cultural and religious history as related in old anecdotal accounts, at first Buddhism was introduced in the eight century A.D. The first installation of *Phunshog Namgyal* (King) was accomplished in *Chu-Ta* (water horse) the year corresponding to the year 1642 A.D. The newly introduced religion and philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism exerted pressure on the Lepcha and Limboo tribe of Sikkim. Full emergence and spread of the new religion weakened their old religion and faith of the Limboos and the Lepchas tribes and they started seeking new ways to understand the meaning of life. The new religion affected the existing faith of Animism and Yumaism of the respective Lepcha and Limboo communities. Most of the Lepchas abandoned their existing faith and adopted Buddhism. Some of the Limboos also adopted Buddhism. The turning point came when *Teyongsi Sirijonga*

*Singthebe*, with his eight disciples entered West Sikkim from Ginam Yangwarok (Nepal) in 1734 knowing the declining faith of the Limboo community of Sikkim, and started awakening, strengthening and affirming the faith on *Yumaism* in West part of Sikkim by teaching the Limboo script reading and writing. This process redefined the meaning of the life and brought about social transformation tremendously in the community. However, the *Ta-Tshang Lama* (monk) of Pemayentse monastery of West Sikkim and they assassinated *Teyongsi Sirijonga* and with some of his disciples in the year 1741. Some of the disciples fled away from Sikkim to Limbuwan area of Present Nepal. The *Teyongsi Sirijonga* and his disciple's sacrifice bore the fruit today. Their sacrifice created a great awakening in the Limboo community and affirmed the *Yumaism* faith (145-150).

Subba noted down however Buddhism has tremendously affected Lepcha community from that period to till date. After Buddhism, the Gorkha invasion in Sikkim led the emergence and spread of Hinduism from 1774 onwards which has brought about a tremendous socio-cultural transformation to the existing people especially inhabiting these areas i.e. the Limboos, the Lepchas and the Mangars. Gorkha invasion brought Hinduism and it has been highly influenced. The Gorkha rulers imposed "*Char Jat Chattish Varna*" or Hindu caste classification, which they placed all the hill tribe communities in lowest social status under *Sudras*, which however they never accepted. They also banned reading and writing of their language and literature and imposed to adopt Sanskrit or *Khas Kura* (Nepali), which continued upto 1930 and the Nepal unification process promoted and imposed one language (Nepali), one religion (Hinduism), one administration (Gurkha rule) and suppressed the overall development of language and literature, religion and faith, culture and tradition etc of the entire Hill tribe communities.

After the Gorkhas invasion the emergence and spread of Christianity started from 1817 onwards. The Church of Scotland missionaries started from Kalimpong, West Bengal then came to Sikkim in the 1880s. Reverend MacFarlane started gospel among the tribesmen of

Sikkim. The missionary's main activities in Sikkim were evangelistic, educational, vocational training and health. Job opportunities attracted the local people many dispensaries were established in many parts of Sikkim by recruiting local Christian compounders and Nurses. However, Christianity spread in a large manner at present numerous churches have been established. The Christianity has affected the Lepcha most than the other community (152-154).

## **Continuity and Change in Cultural Identities**

Every society is a continuation of past, a series of continuity is maintained even in the middle of change coming into the same society from time to time. Religion is integral to other aspects of cultural activity. Religion is what people do on a day-to-day level. Religion is nearly always both a set of ideas and beliefs that people can engage with and also the framework for their lived experiences and daily practices. In the study of religion, culture cannot be separated whereas religion is a part of culture. Subba noted the history of religion and socio-religious transformation in Sikkim moved with the time in the past as the land that the people kept on changing since antiquity. The changes in religion, faith and belief system in different point of time subjected the different ethnic group of Sikkim which changed the new ways to understand the meaning of life (143). With the influence of various religions in the hills which still reflects the impacts. There are numerous sections of people who have been shifted to another religion. Though Limboo tribes are living together in a multi cultural and multi religious society which have found they have shifted to Christianity and Hinduism, Hinduism are Yumaism followers too. Subba writes Limboo tribes have oral tradition literature of *Mundhum*, mainly philosophy associated with the *Yumaism*. Limboos of Sikkim have preserved the ancient oral traditions through the *Mundhum* used by the Limboo Shamanic priests like *Phedangma, Samba, Yema, Yeba, and Tumyahangs* or learned personalities of society (147). Subba writes these oral myths are sacred spiritual instruction of the Almighty *Tagira Ningwaphuma* and here messenger god

and goddesses. These traditions are important means of cultural continuity in a non-literate society and that's inherited and passed down from generation to generation through their shamanic priesthood system (170). The transition of society in a globalized world led the reformation of Limboo culture in a large manner mainly focused on religion. Consequently the *Yumaism* has found in two different forms, firstly are those followed the indigenous religious belief systems, costumes and tradition and secondly are those reformation ones. The core teachings of Yumaism are the same for both. During the field visit I have met with *Yuma* (she being a messenger) or religious head in Darap, West Sikkim explained why there is a need of reformation in Yumaism. She narrates that Yuma have been summoned by *Tagiraningwa Phuma* to show new direction for purification and rectification in Yumaism. The reformation Yumaism beliefs are based on purity, the ideas of being polluted to the deities performing ritual by the Shamans. Instead of sacrificing fowl and etc they use milk for the conducting rituals. The Limboo tribes are non-vegetarian and alcoholic by diet. The '*thi*' traditional beverage and pork/ fowl have important facets in the various customs. This is purely based on pure vegetarian and non-alcoholic ideas. The reformation of religion which emphasized on the on layman for socially upliftment of the society by showing the new alternative way by giving away with non-vegetarian and alcoholic diet which is the cause of social problems occurred in the society. They have focused for the welfare of Limboo society enlightens through Yumaism. They followers are not only from Limboo community though they have welcomed all from every communities or caste. The traditional musical instruments like '*Chakbrung*' (drums plays at the time of marriage and festivals) and '*Negra*' (drums play at the time of marriage and death but rhythm remain different) which has the important significance in Limboo culture and also which represents the Limboo identity whereas they have been gave away these items. The Shamans have very important role in the society who have important role from birth till death, instead they have the *Suinim* who followed proceedings. The way in religious gathering is similar to Christian gatherings. The differentiation in greeting they greets

saying *NeeMingMee* and generally in Limboo dialect *Sewaro* (Namaste) use for greetings. The transformation of Yuma religion led the complex identity among Limboo tribe in contemporary society. The variation in the *Yumaism* has been resulted in the state of questioning of their ethnic identity. These reformations have brought drastic change in the existing Limboo society of Sikkim and put into a serious state where the Limboo identities are heading.

## Conclusion

The transformation of Yumaism, Limboo tribes divided into two forms which resulting in the cultural structure change and efforts have been made to sustain ethnic identity alive. Subba says Sikkim has a tremendous diversity in the case of food culture, dress culture with its most colourful diversity and patterns which also links to the history of Sikkim, culture and unique identity. Every communities of Sikkim have their own tradition dresses, patterns, ornaments etc. distinctly themselves (138-140). The continuity in defining and wearing traditional dresses symbolizes their commitment to their distinct community, identity and culture. The collectives identities are now-a-days the most trending traditional fashion among Limboo tribes is evolved. The indigenous dresses and ornaments have been revived with new designs for both men and women. Referring to the reformation Yumaism being ideas of liberal is good and bad too for the society it's like two faces of the coin. The good aspects are in focusing on social issues for upliftment of society whereas the bad aspects that creating complex identity among Limboo community as a whole. The community worship or temple is known as '*Mangkhim*' which is increasing day by day. The distinctive identities are *Silam Sakma* which is a symbol of protecting from evil spirits, and now it has become the symbol of 'we feeling' being Limboo community. The (*Neessa*) Limboo Flag which has been introduced at the movement of demand of restoration of seats in Sikkim Legislative Assembly which symbolize oneness of whole Limboo tribe. Yet with



the process of globalization has a significant shift is taking place in the perception of culture but the culture still has its roots in the customs and practices. Many scholars, authors, political activist and civil society are in affirm to preserve the culture and construction of ethnic identity through the social, cultural and political processes.

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