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त्रि.वि. प्राध्यापक सङ्घ, क्याम्पस एकाइ समिति,

तेह्रथुम बहुमुखी क्याम्पस, आठराई, चुहानडाँडा

In Limbu Mundhum: Authority and Gender

Krishna Prasad Niroula*

Abstract

The Limbus, one of the indigenous ethnic communities mainly inhabiting the eastern part of Nepal, live with their own distinctive culture under the guidance of Limbu ritual/religious scripture, the Mundhum. The Mundhum is recited and performed by Limbu ritual/religious actants/officiants called Phedangma, Samba, Yeba/Yema, etc. The Mundhum ritual performances embody various aspects of socio-cultural, religio-historical situations, and the role of gender and power in the Limbu community. As the Mundhum provides them with key roles to play, females do hold significant power and privileges in the Limbu community.

Keywords: Gender and Power, LimbuMundhum, myth, ritual performance, Yuma, Sammang

Introduction

Nepal is a diverse country in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, and language. The Limbu people are one of Nepal's most prominent ethnicities. They have their own culture, traditions, and philosophy, which they follow under Mundhum's rules. Limbu Mundhum refers to ceremonial (religious) narratives in both oral and written form, which include legends, folktales, prehistoric chronicles, sermons, moral or philosophical exhortations, and other lyrical language.

The Limbu folk religion is largely centered on traditional stories about ancestors, nature, and the practice of naturalism and animism. Folk tales aid to shape male and female roles, as well as project the community's ideals, philosophies, and worldviews. This research seeks to analyze how Limbu folk stories depict women's social, cultural, economic, and philosophical roles. While doing so, it also examines how the LimbuMundhum determines gender and power, and how the status of women differs from that of patriarchal society.

* Terhathum Multiple Campus, krishnaprasadniroula@gmail.com

Methodology

The study utilizes an exploratory and descriptive research methodology in order to effectively achieve its objectives. It is primarily reliant on secondary data from a variety of reputable sources such as websites, journals, textbooks, and other online platforms, in addition to complementary information obtained from key informants. Notably, this study seamlessly integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies with thematic analysis.

Result and Discussion

The Mundhum (also known as Peylam), the Limbu's ancient religious text and folk literature, is a folk epic that includes lines on religious rituals, rites, the creation story of the cosmos, animals, and so on. Mundhum means "the power of great strength" in Limbu. The Limbu hold a firm belief that the Mundinum is an eternal truth, sacred, and most powerful text. It has been classified into two key categories (Chemjong, 2003). They are: (1) Thung Sap Mundhum, and (2) Peysap Mundhum. The Thung Sap Mundhum is the original version, passed down verbally from generation to generation from time immemorial. The PeysapMundhum is a written book about religion.

Tagera-Ningwaphuma, the Mundhum's creator and supreme power holder, is described to as either sexless or feminine god. She is the Supreme Body of Knowledge and is said to have the ability to play critical roles in all activities, beginning with the pre-natural condition of the world and progressing to natural processes and, eventually, human activities.

The Mundhum Performance

The Mundhums are an oral collection of sacred stories, historical narratives, and philosophical proverbs that make up the Limbu religious canon. Every Limbu cultural and ritual observation must be carried out by reciting the Mundhums at a designated location and time.

Limbus people lead unique lives with their own native customs and social traditions. They also continue to execute a variety of Mundhum rituals, including Sappokchomen, Manggen-na, Nahangma, and Tongsing, as well as other rites de passage including naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and so forth. A reified cultural product is produced by repeated memory of the numerous matching modalities of spiritual and worldly actions through these performances. They are, therefore, the expressions of their inherited intangible cultural heritage from earlier generations. They have been an excellent source of information for creating their own unique culture. As a result, the Mundhum performance has a significant influence on the lives of the Limbu people, which aids in the development and formation of a unique philosophy. This kind of philosophy has a tendency to create Limbu and behavior, and those behaviors and cultures are representative of the Limbus as a whole (Kandangwa, 2079).

The Mundhum mostly comprises ancestry and nature worship. The Mundhums are simultaneous acts of recounting and enacting tales about the Supreme Creator, numerous

divinities, deities, demi-gods, and other natural and supernatural phenomena and agents. Oral narration of the Supreme Creator Goddess and other gods, as well as the chanting of numerous Mundhums such as Yuma Mundhum, ChasokTongnamMundhum, Akwama/AkwanamaMundhum, and so on, are all part of Limbu culture rituals.

Nature worship is the prime essence of this tradition and hence often referred to as animism. They worship nature divinities like Tamphungma (forest female divinity), Tenchama (divinity of the low land), Taksangba (divinity of the high land and hunters), Wagongma (female protector divinity of pregnant women), Miskpa or PungSammang (hunter's divinity), Khonjoma or Senghama (female divinity of southern low land), Warokma (female divinity of lakes), etc.

The worship of household divinities such as Yuma Sammang (Spirit of Yuma), Akwanama, ThebaSammang, Pichchamma (pervading divinity), Yangphuma (female divinity causing inauspicious acts or events), Khewaphukma (divinity of womb worship), Nahangma, Mangenna, etc. are essential ritual performances for good health and prosperity of the adherents.

The rituals of Chukmuba-hungmubaMundhums consists of Manggenna, Yangdangphongma (naming ceremony), Sappokchomen (worship of womb for safe delivery of child), Nahangma, Akwanama, Sakmurawademmma, Manghupwademma, Kudapingma, Phungwachangma, Panglumchama, Chotlungchangma, Tongsingtikma, Phungsotte?singma, etc., and Yaguchangsi:maMundhum (Death Ritual Mundhum) comprises the rituals like Kham i:ngma, Sam sama, Yumsana:kma, Khauma, Mikwasa:ngma, Nahensakma, Suguts-epma, Soghasepma, Sasikthepma, Yomasingyamma and so on, in which we find feminine roles and their authenticities occupying a great value.

Gender and Power

From the ritual acts, several socio-cultural reflections can be observed in the Limbu people's lives. Among these, it is also observed that a number of Mundhum myths heavily mirror the ideas of gender and power.

The creation tale, Yuma narrative, Manggenna myth, Okwanama myth, Dobate myth, Kummathakma myth, and other stories from the oral Limbu folk culture provide powerful examples of the knowledge and power bestowed upon female deities and divinities. Limbus are recognized as followers of Yuma Sammang, the grandmother deity who also serves as the supreme household deity. Even when the male divinities are invoked, she must be adored.

The almighty artist the feminine Almighty, TageraNingwaphuma, is a symbol of the highest intelligence and wisdom. As the most powerful figure in all early actions including the formation of the universe, the natural world, humans, and other creatures, she stands for ultimate power and knowledge. Akwanama is another domestic deity that is mythically

represented as a female in Limbu ceremonial practice. The Akwanama ceremony represents the important role that women play in the sociocultural sphere of Limbu homes. Yemas have a unique and respected standing among Limbu shamans that has persisted from the past to the present. It was thought that Yema Phakkokko Phakkomlama was embodied in the strength found in mantras and tantras.

The Manggenna myth alludes to a legendary personification, literally "sister," who represents unlimited strength and earthy warmth, but whose requirement never lasts. She represents life, vitality, advancement, and wealth, as well as the metaphorical 'brother' armor. Another misconception about Kummathakma is that it represents gender equality.

A song called Phungnawasamlo, which is sung during wedding ceremonies, alludes to the first marriages of our ancestors, when men and women were weighed and women wore khukuri and women wore gold. Even now, this practice is very logically important for women in the Limbu tribe. Similarly, masculine pain is metaphorically shared by females in the story of Dobate. It was a myth that men could conceive in their thighs. It demonstrates that a man going through childbearing and labor pains while pregnant. He died and became a fortunate deity known as Dobate because he was experiencing pain in his thigh during conception. This deity is revered in the belief that it guards, helps, and facilitates the

The worship of goddess Nahangma is observed in the name of the head of the household (especially of male) with a view to hold/rise his head high, and have courage and strength. It is a symbolic ritual observation of the female's assistance to the males. In the view of Philippe Sagant "Na is the hereafter, the other world; hang, power. Nahangma is a warrior goddess and Hangma means a mighty woman" (12).

The Mundhum, then, is a collection of oral story texts that include myths, legends, historical narratives, pragmatist and philosophical exhortations, and so on. Because Mundhum is an oral tradition, its continued existence depends on its performativity. Limbu ritual/religious actors recount the Mundhum in cultural/ritual observations, i.e., rites from before birth to after death. The Mundhum, as a performance culture, most closely embodies the Limbu people's daily activities, which are essential to their culture, history, and religion.

The associated stories and legends must be told or recited by the ritual officiants, such as Phedangma, Samba, Yeba/Yema, and Ongsi, in order for the rites to be performed. The myths of Mundhum include the creation myth, the Manggenna myth, the Phungwachangma myth, the myths of incest/sin, the myths of envy and jealousy, the Sogha myth, the Sugut/Sugup myth, the Yuma myth, the Theba myth, the Phungnawa/Kummathakma myth, the Kemba Theba, the Okwama myth, the clan/lineage myth, the Wagongma myth, the origin of Phedangma/Samba/Yeba/ Yema/Ongsi myth, the Master spirit myths, the Misamsepma myth, the Chasoktongnam myth, and so forth (Limbu 2011).

These beliefs and performances promote the idea that participation, sharing, and gender equity are the only factors necessary for success in any given activity. As the traditional, religious, and cultural validation of women's tutelary roles in the family and, consequently, in society, ancestor worship accords women due respect and the most prestigious position; it is a kind of religious and cultural construction of a normative domain where various concepts and knowledge about the males and females and their socio-cultural roles are derived from and where females' supremacy is conceptualized (Edingo, 2015).

Yuma's Position

In the Mundhum performance, a single Almighty Goddess "TageraNingwaphuma", popularly known as "Yuma" is considered to be the creator of universe, earth, planets as well as the entire living and non-living things. She is the sole authority of their preservation, sustenance and development. She is the Ultimate Supreme Goddess, Omniscient (all knowing), Omnipresent (found in all places at all times), Omnipotent (all powerful), Infinite (without beginning and end), and Eternal force, Light or Power of existence. Once or twice a year, especially during the harvest of paddy and finger millet (kodo), Limbus worship Yuma with offerings of newly harvested grains known as ChasokTongnam or Tok-sokThi-sok. She is thus compared with the deity of fertility, prosperity, and the agricultural cycle of the Greek mythology.

The Mundhum ritual practitioners are collectively known as Phedangmas. They are the incarnate individuals having an additional divine soul of departed dignitaries (deities/trans-migratory souls referred to "Sam Sire"), recognized and sent by the Almighty Goddess TageraNingwaphuma. Thus, they are reincarnate part-time religious practitioners. One cannot become a Phedangma by learning Mundhums. They officiate and perform all the life rituals and worships such as pre-natal womb worship, birth, new born child naming, purify the new born pollution, solemnize marriage weddings, death rituals, offerings of household divinities, harvest ceremonies, etc. besides curing and healing of the sick.

The Sammangs (Divinities)

The Sammangs are the categories of divinities. The word "Sammang" is the conjoint of Sam (spirit/soul) and Mang (god/goddess). Thus, the deities manifested in gods and goddesses in spirit or soul forms are Sammangs.

Yuma Sammang, the female goddess, is the home deity and is believed to be a manifestation of the Almighty Goddess TageraNingwaphuma. She is worshipped within the house using a "Mangdhan" (altar). Adherents worship invoking Yuma Sammang as the Goddess of creation of the universe, sky, and earth; goddess of power and strength; goddess of knowledge and wisdom; flora and fauna; ornament and beauty; minerals and rocks; food crops, fruits, and flowers; fate and destiny; long life and blessing; day light and darkness; technology,

development, arts and culture; Mother goddess of household and human beings; mammals and birds; livelihood and survival; goddess of wealth and prosperity, and so on (Subba, 2005).

Conclusion

Above importantly, the Mundhum tradition and its manifestations, both in performance rituals and in real-life situations, provide enormous benefits to Limbu women and openly exhibit 'gender as power'. According to Simone de Beauvoir, "[...], woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality". This raises the question of the universal world idea. Women of the Limbu culture, on the other hand, are not the kind that "is often very male pleased with her role as the other".

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