

# Understanding the *samjik mundhum*: Definitions and Meaning, Religion, Orality, Classification and Cultural Significance

**Ash Bahadur Subba**

Assistant Professor, Department of Limbu, Sikkim University

## **Abstract**

The *samjik mundhum* is the philosophy of Limbus which constitutes vital components like ritual, spiritual, linguistic, and cultural heritage of Limbus of Eastern Himalayas. One of the main objectives of the research article is to explore the definitions, nuanced meanings and pivotal role in practice and worldview of Limbu shamans. Drawing from oral traditions, contextual enquiries and interpretations, it clarifies the conceptual foundation of Limbu *mundhums* as collective and socially oriented ritual narratives embedded within the philosophy. The sacred narratives of available in the *mundhum* guide the community, and reinforce moral codes. This also facilitates interaction between human, nature and spiritual realms. In this article, the classification of *mundhums* have been proposed on the basis of ritual functions, performances related to kinship rites, communal festivals, agriculture cycles, and classified the *mundhum* on the basis of the disciplines of Limbu shamans. In this article, the findings of the study indicates that *samjik mundhum* not just preserves ancestral cosmology and heritage but also shapes social cohesion, ethical paradigms and identity.

**Keywords:** *samjik mundhum*, philosophy, *yuma*, *tagera ningwa?phuma*, rituals

## **1. Introduction**

Limbus are the natives of Eastern Himalayas which include Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam in India and the Himalayas of eastern Nepal. The eastern Nepal has the largest chunk of Limbu people so far. It is estimated around 3,87,300 (Nepal Census 2011) and the second homeland of Limbu is India which has approximately 105000 population. They belong to the Mongoloid stock. They are very rich in culture, customs and traditions, oral traditions, mythology, language and literature and so on. The community is known as Limbu which means ‘archer’. They are also known as ‘*Subba*’ which is an honorific title. This title was given by the Gorkha rulers after the conquest of the Limbuwana, which is, still known as the land of the Limbus. It is presently located in the eastern Nepal. They called themselves as ‘*Yakthung*’ which stands for ‘inhabitants of hills’ or ‘yak herders’. Most probably, this title might have come from when they were the natives of southern region of Tibet called ‘*Tsangpo*’. In Sikkimese context, they are also known as ‘*Tsong*’ or ‘*Chong/Chang*’. The Tibetan, the Bhutia and the Lepcha people call them as *Tsong* or and cattle merchants in the past.

## Religion

Right from the Tsang of south Tibet, Limbus had a primal religion unlike *bon* which was an animistic religion in those olden days. In Sikkim, there was religious institution headed by the Chogyals was the proto-type of Tibet which had the Buddhist religious temporal heads to administer the country as well as religion. The legend and folklore say that the majority of them didn't accept the Buddhism when they were tried to be converted, during the time of Guru Padma-Sambhav in Tibet and later in Sikkim. Therefore, they became the religious victims and fled to some other destinations permanently. Most of the fore-fathers were illiterate and economically marginalised but they didn't let down their animistic philosophy. They preferred to live in a place where they can practice their own faith peacefully. Since animism is a neutral religion, scarcely any Limbus practice Buddhism and Hinduism but all the rituals are performed in animistic way. They are non-idolatrous. Observation of Maitreyee Chaudhari reveals that "*the tribes and communities living in Sikkim follow Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. And....though, the early inhabitants of Sikkim, viz. the Lepcha and the Limboos were not known to have great religious traditions, they practice various forms of nature worship (27).*" A French scholar Philippe Sagant has expressed that "*the Limbu are neither Hindu nor Buddhist, even though numerous syncretic elements appear in their beliefs. They have a religion which is peculiar to them in traditional religion 'without name'. It has its own mythology, its own pantheon of gods and goddesses and its own group of priests (58).*" However, Subba has stated that "*the Limboo people have termed their religion as Yuma Samyo (10).*"

As quoted above, Limbus are the nature worshippers and have the lesser-known religion called *yuma samyo*. The word "*yuma*" stands for the Supreme Goddess called *Tagera ningwzaphuma* who is believed to be the creator of entire universe. The community does not worship idols and man-made gods and goddesses. They deeply believe on what they have. They have retained it properly as late as these days.

## Meaning and Definition of *Samjik Mundhum*

Most of the animistic religions have no written sacred narratives as the *yuma samyo* does. They have depended on the oral tradition from the time unknown. The fore-fathers have passed down the culture, customs and traditions, local indigenous knowledge generation after generation through oral tradition. Likewise, the Limbu or *yakthung samjik mundhum* is a unique example of oral tradition of Limbus which is prevailing in their community.

The word *samjik* stands for 'spiritual' or '*the philosophy of divine words*' and *mundhum* is the two syllable word '*mun*' and '*thum*'. The first syllable *mun* stands for movement and the second syllable *thum* or *dhum* means power. A historian, Iman Singh Chemjong (1966) has defined it as "*mundhum means power of great strength.*" An eminent writer and poet Bairagi Kaila has an opinion that "*mundhum, oral or written, is related with the creation of the cosmos, earth, different deities, and man and rest of the mortal world.*" As stated by Gensel (2002), "*mundhum is oral tradition, ancestral knowledge or more generally traditional way of life.*" A. Weidert & B. Subba have defined as "*Mundhum is a legend, a folktale, prehistoric account, sermon and moral or philosophical exhortation in poetic language. It is scripture living in oral tradition (2-3).*" It is a philosophy of Limbu community that includes culture custom, tradition and language.

## **Language and *Samjik Mundhum***

*Mundhum* is the source of Limbu language and literature. During the chanting of *samjik mundhum*, a divine language is used to invoke Goddess, Gods, deities, spirits of deceased persons. In other words, it is a ritual or classical language of Limbu shamans. In religious context, the language used during rituals is referred to as ritual language or sacred narratives. It is specific, exceedingly formal or archaic form of language. The words used in the *mundhum* convey meaning and maintain Limbu traditions within the rituals or the language is liturgical in nature. They perform the whole episode of rituals orally which can last for complete three days and three nights. The classical words are often used by the poets and writers etc to make the sentences more meaningful and powerful in their literary work. The article proposes a systematic classification of *mundhum* which is rooted in the thematic contents, ritual functions and performances.

## **Shamans and Rituals**

In Limbu society, shamans are the key figures to keep the religion alive. They are the repository of Limbu *mundhum*. They are believed to be the incarnations of their progenitors. According to the *mundhum*, they are the mediators to Goddess and Gods, deities, souls of deceased persons created by *lepmuhang* who taught them powerful *samjik mundhums* and endowed with spiritual powers to heal the ailing human-beings including animals and plants, other natural objects to bring peace and to work for the welfare of society as well as for the living planet we live. They act as the mediators between human and Goddess, Gods, deities and departed spirits during the performance of various rituals. They perform such rituals if they are requested by the family members who are sick and need healing, unhappy persons to fulfil wishes, those who are threatened by enemies and want to ward them off and also to restore well-being, happiness, power, treasure, wisdom, knowledge and so on. The Limbu shamans are known as ritual experts of Limbu community. They are not only the custodians of the *mundhum* but also the custodians of religion, language, literature, culture, customs and traditions, *samjik mundhums* etc. They are philosophers, teachers, guardians who can guide the society in right directions.

Subba quotes that so far “*the Limboo society has no written form of religious books. Religion is practiced through the aforementioned shamans and old folks who have sound knowledge on the subject. Particularly in the religion, Limboos have a primary orality which is a spiritual discourse and one cannot be a shaman or priest as he or she wishes so.*” Further, he writes that “*a process of incarnation takes place if one has to born as the Limboo priest or shaman. It is the mercy of tagera ningwazphuma. It is not comparable to the Pastors of Christian, Pandits of Hindu and other religions. The entire Limboo society is based on faith and beliefs delivered orally by their progenitors to them from time unknown (147).*” However, within few years a lot of Limbu *mundhum* books are already published and writing and compilation works are being done.

## **Classification of Limbu Shamans**

Many Limbu and non-Limbu communities and scholars are getting confused with the term ‘shaman’. They do not find any difference between *jhakri*, *mangpa*, *pao*, *bungthing* and so on. As such, they have very less importance in the society because they do not belong to the Limbu community. They are not

recognised by the *yuma* religion. In Limbu, the shamans are called *pele-phangsam*. They play a pivotal role in the Limbu society. They are categorized discipline-wise as follows:

1. *phedangma*: He is the first created shaman who has a multipurpose work in the society. He is the priest and performs normal death, marriage and other important rituals of Limbu community.
2. *samba*: He is the second creation as shaman. His duty seems to be similar with that of *phedangma* but he is the specialist in singing or chanting *yehang mundhums* which deals with the creation of universe, earth, planet, stars, human-beings and other beings etc). He enjoys the highest echelon among shamans in terms of *samjik mundhum*. He can perform the rituals related to households, purification of births, marriage ceremonies, normal death rituals and healing practices.
3. *yeba* and *yema*: He or she is believed to be the third creation of its kind. They are more powerful than other shamans. He can perform the unnatural death rituals like suicide, murders, death of mother during delivery of baby and death of baby during delivery, before and after delivery of baby and other cases. He is the specialist in driving away evil spirits. He can even share duties of *phedangma* and *samba*. He or she is a *tantric* (who practice magic by using mantra) type of shaman. Some scholars opine that there were many shamans apart from the abovementioned shamans in the past but they have become extinct now.

### **Classification of *samjik mundhum***

The Limbu *mundhums* were classified during the creation of *mundhums* by the legend *lepmuhang* and later by the *pele-phangsams* themselves and *mundhumists*. Among the classifications by *pele-phangsams*, *mundhumists* and *tumyehangs*, here is only one kind of classification has been highlighted. They were classified according to the role of *pele-phangsams* and the length of *mundhums* in the past. Data collected from the *peliphangsam*, a senior *yeba* Rup Lall Khamdhak (online 17.04.2021) of Timbrong, Sikkim are as follows:

1. *yehang Mundhum*: These are lengthy *mundhums* to be deliberated by *samba* and experienced *yeba/yema* and *phedangma*. This kind of *mundhum* deals with how and who created the universe. Not only these, how the oceans, rocks and animals and plants were evolved and created and also how the Limbu society was established are described in the *yehang mundhums*. These *mundhums* are delivered orally during the performance of rituals like *hing-tongsing* (one day and three days life time rituals), *si-tongsing* (death ritual) and other related rituals.
2. *yesik mundhum*: These are shorter than *yehang mundhum* and longer than *ye-ing mundhums*. The Limbu rituals are performed without going through the *yehang mundhum*. These *ye-sik mundhums* are chanted orally during rituals to ward-off jealousy, envy, evil spirits for the safe delivery of child, invoking house-hold deities, house warming ritual and many more.
3. *ye-ing mundhum*: These are concise in nature. The members of the house offer wine, meats, fruits and some amount of money in return to thank those shamans and helpers who performed in such important rituals. During the thanks giving ceremony, they call back all the spirits including master spirit. These are chanted during returning call of those spirits who were invoked at the time performance of ritual.

4. *Yegap mundhum*: These are the least long *samjik mundhums* and secret of all *mundhums*. They are called ‘*mundhuk*’. They are not audible and if the words become audible then also either one cannot follow it or words are meaningless for them. They are powerful, secret and sacred *mantra*.

### **Relevance of *samjik mundhum***

The *samjik mundhum* has always governed the Limbu culture and society. It has remained as a subject and source of knowledge, intelligence and wisdom. It is the source of science, language and literature. The community people take *mundhum* as the sources of songs, dances and music. It is the store-house of Limbu words, phrases, folklores etc. This is a valuable treasure and an asset of the Limbus. The oral tradition of this community cannot exist without the *samjik mundhum* and vice-versa. There will be no shamans in the absence of *mundhum* and no *mundhum* without shamans because they are its custodians as well as guardians of community as well as society. One cannot become *peli-phangsam* if he or she wishes so. The supreme goddess *tagera ningwazphuma* must have chosen him or her to become *peli-phangsam*. It is not like becoming the *pandit* of Hindu, the *pastor* of Christian, the *lama* of Buddhist and *maulana* of Islam religion. He or she must possess the *sam-sire?* or the master spirit to drive him/her. If we talk about the relevancy of *samjik mundhum*, it is their day-today philosophy which is depending on it as oral tradition. As it is their identity, they want to retain them in the future courses.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions:**

Everyone is aware that this is the era of technology, rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, globalization, competition etc people have no time to stay at home and listen folktales, singing folksongs, play folk sports etc. The upcoming generations will definitely miss those identity saving elements in their near future. They are missing backyard childhood games, fruits, flowers etc. Now-a-days, they are depending on fast foods, fastest bullet trains, air planes to save their time. Everyone seems hasty and busy every time. In such a peculiar situation, the value of oral tradition has subsequently gone down.

As such, the *mundhum* tradition is deeply rooted in religion and culture and traditions of Limbus. Attacking of one religion by another is not a new story. It is a daily practice. The *yuma samyo* is a lesser-known religion for which believers are very less in number. They are in minority and marginalised one. It is being badly affected by the religio-politics from different corners. It is being a primal and neutral religion it has to face the undesired criticisms which has led to conversion into dominant religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Another factor is the new Kirat religion introduced in Nepal and other places have divided the Limbu community into many fractions which has helped to increase the number of Hindus because the Hindu practice is being copied by the Kirat followers. This kind of practice has badly affected the society and aroused a lot of confusion among Limbu people. The Limbu centric religion has always existed along with the culture, customs and traditions, rituals, language etc. The young generation believes on dominant religion like Christianity in the name of civilisation. It is to blame themselves because they do not have institution to impart knowledge and wisdom through religion and culture. There are no reading religious materials as the young generation have such feelings and demands. The young generation is quite materialistic and have radical ideas that they need evidences which are not available in *yuma samyo*. As the Limbus are nature worshippers, they do not have temples and images of God and Goddess to offer prayers. They do not have sacred religious books as other



religions have. It seems they need to keep oral traditions at home to make them aware and conscious about their religion, culture and so on.

However, it is not one's cup of tea to collect all those *mundhums* and translate into other languages; they need to be done at utmost and should be provided top priority for its preservation. They have already lost more than sixty percent *samjik mundhum*, culture, customs and traditions, language and so on. A lot of in-depth research works in different areas of *mundhum* are the prime demands of situation.

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