

Religion and Identity Politics in the Indian  
Himalayas:  
*Religious Change and Identity Construction Among  
the Limboos of Sikkim*

Linda Gustavsson



M.A. Thesis (60 Credits), History of Religions REL 4990

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# Abstract

This thesis analyzes the emergence of identity politics and religious change among the Limboos in the small mountainous state of Sikkim located in the eastern Indian Himalayas. The Limboos are underrepresented in research, and this study attempts to deepen our understanding of this ethnic group by describing and analyzing their ritual traditions which constitute part of their current identity politics. The ritual traditions are connected with processes of religious and cultural transitions occurring among the Limboos and largely promoted by Limboo ethnic associations. The Limboo ritual traditions are diverse and appear to have many similarities with the rituals of other Himalayan groups. The household, clan and geographical origin play important roles in ritual contexts; important are also the reciprocal relationships between village households during life-cycle rituals. The Limboos' use of ritual specialists from other ethnic groups indicates fluid and flexible ethnic and religious boundaries. In the contemporary ethno-political landscape of the state, we see competing assertions of ethnic identities as part of the desire to be recognized and visible to their surroundings. The religious changes promoted by the Limboo associations connect to processes of Limboo identity construction, where borders are clearly drawn between themselves and others. The association members' position as cultural engineers and promoters of religious change is a powerful one, and enables the Limboos to further define and re-define religious and cultural aspects in accordance to their interests. Processes of religious synthesis are evident, and the associations are attempting to create a seemingly new institutionalized religious category, that of Yumaism. By incorporating elements from what we may categorize as belonging to 'Great Traditions', such as: temples, study centers, symbols, festivals, a 'great' deity, a museum etc., help to construct physical façades in the Sikkimese landscape which emphasize their belonging to the land and display a strong and united community with a distinct and respected religion.



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# 1 Introduction

In this thesis, I seek to examine religious change among the Limboos in contemporary Sikkim. The Himalayan state of Sikkim is the second smallest and the least inhabited Indian state with only half a million inhabitants. It borders the Asian giant of China (the Tibetan Autonomous Region, hereafter TAR) in the north, while the historically important states of Bhutan and Nepal are located to the east and west. Despite being scarcely populated, Sikkim's ethnic composition is extremely diverse with over twenty different peoples, cultures, and belief systems. The majority of the Limboo population resides in eastern Nepal near the Sikkimese border where they are known by the alternative spelling Limbu. The Limboo population in Sikkim is therefore mainly concentrated in the borderlands of the western district of Sikkim. Nepali is the *lingua franca* for the majority of the Limboos, but is also associated with a Tibeto-Burman language named Limboo/Limbu, Yakhthung Pan, or Sirijunga script.<sup>1</sup> The group's ritual traditions are based on oral traditions (*mundhum*), chanted by *phedangma*, an umbrella term for different ritual experts, during rituals which are often dedicated to fertility of the land or the well-being of the household and its members.<sup>2</sup>

Sikkim's merger with India in 1975 led to massive changes in the society.<sup>3</sup> Prior to 1975, Sikkim was an independent Buddhist kingdom. New policies were introduced after 1975 and debates on ethnicity and indigeneity emerged in the public sphere. The Bhutia and Lepcha communities were enlisted as Scheduled Tribes (hereafter ST) in 1978,<sup>4</sup> which granted them several benefits and enhanced political representation. In contrast, the Limboos are commonly placed in the heterogeneous group of "Nepalese" and are therefore officially recognized as Hindus.<sup>5</sup> The label 'Nepalese' bears connotations of foreignness to the state and is contrasted to the Bhutia and Lepcha communities, which are two independent categories broadly viewed as the original inhabitants of Sikkim.<sup>6</sup> One of my aims in this

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<sup>1</sup> According to *the Linguistic Survey of Sikkim: Mother Tongues in Education*, 3 % speak and Limboo, and 4% claimed it to be their mother tongue (of 16,500 completed survey forms) (see Mark Turin: 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Phedangma* is also a specific type of ritual specialist so in order to prevent confusion; I will from now on use 'ritual specialist' or 'ritual expert', 'shaman', or 'medium', even though my informants mostly used *phedangma* as an overall term.

<sup>3</sup> Whether it was a merger or an annexation is disputed. See Datta-Ray 2004 [1984], who argues that Sikkim was annexed by India.

<sup>4</sup> Scheduled Tribes, i.e. ST is a status in the reservation politics or affirmative action policies of India, and will be further explained and discussed together with the reservation policies in Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> "Nepalese" also consists of: Rai, Tamang, Magar, Newar, Thangmi, Gurung, Chettri, and Bahun amongst others.

<sup>6</sup> For example in the recent *Sikkim: A Statistical Profile 2004-2005*. Here, the Limboos are included in the "Nepalese" category.

thesis is to examine how religious and ethnic identities are continuously defined, redefined and contested in contemporary Sikkim. The Limboos' endeavors to also be recognized and respected as a distinct group with its own unique culture and tradition create one of the important backdrops for the religious change I have studied. Extensive research has not been carried out on the Limboos in Sikkim.<sup>7</sup> The Lepchas, in particular, as well as the Bhutias have been, and are still, at the center of attention in scholarly work.<sup>8</sup> In order to obtain a more nuanced and broader perspective on the social and cultural context of Sikkim, one must shed light on the other communities as well. Consequently, the politicization of ethnicity in Sikkim has made 'identity' and 'ethnicity' sensitive topics and were, to a large extent, avoided as subjects of discussion with my informants. The words are heavily loaded with significance involving emotions, pride, ideas of justice/injustice and politics throughout Sikkim's ethnic communities.

## 1.1 Orthography

Limboo and Nepali words are written in italics and are marked with (L:) and (N:), respectively. A glossary of recurrent Limboo words in the thesis is provided in the appendix. I have noticed that Limboo words in English publications often have slightly different spellings and are often given the English plural 's'. The most frequent spellings will be used throughout the dissertation, but alternative spellings will be provided in the glossary. In cases where the definitions may be unclear, I will include more extensive explanations in footnotes. I will, however, not use plural 's', like *phedangmas* but rather *phedangma*. The Limboo words used in the thesis are mostly a phonetic rendering of Limboo. In some cases, I was able to crosscheck words and terms by asking people around me to spell them properly. Linguist George van Driem (1987) transliterates written Limboo as transliterated Devanagari. In this transliteration system *phedangma* is written *phe-dan̄ma*. However, I will use phonetics in the thesis, because the Limboo terms will then be clear for my Sikkimese readers who might not be familiar with linguistic transliteration systems. Tibetan (and Sikkimese), Lepcha, and Lhopo words will also have phonetic renderings. Since Nepali is the *lingua franca* in Sikkim, there appears to be many loan words from Nepali, and as van Driem points out: "Nepali loans show the tendency to assimilate to this native phoneme system." (1987: 2). Nepali words are

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<sup>7</sup> More extensive research has been carried out on the Limboos in eastern Nepal. Most of the publications on the Limboos in Sikkim are by Sikkimese Limboos, whose political neutrality may be questioned. Relevant research literature will be discussed further in chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>8</sup> The Lepchas are referred to as Rong in Lepcha language.

often applied to describe, for example, ritual practices, which can be explained by many of the informants' lack of fluency in Limboo. However, there might be errors and the responsibility is totally mine.

### **Limboo, Limbu, Subba, Tsong or Yakthumba/ma?**

Limboo will be used throughout the thesis because they refer to themselves as that in English.<sup>9</sup> It is a variant of Limbu, which, according to George van Driem, is a Nepali ethnonym (1987: xix). Yaktungba or Yakthungma, indicating male and female, respectively, is their endonym and is not used in either English or Nepali. Subba means 'village chief' and is commonly used both in Nepal and in Sikkim – primarily by non-Limboos. Another name is Tsong (Sk. *gtsong*), which was mostly older non-by Limboos when they referred to the "native" Sikkimese Limboos, distinguishing them from the more recent settlers from Nepal.

## **1.2 Thematic focus**

The material this thesis is based on has been collected during almost four months fieldwork from the end of August to mid-December 2012 in Sikkim, mainly from three villages in the western part of the state, the state capital of Gangtok and from Namchi, a city located in South Sikkim. My approach is eclectic, which means the material consists of a variety of sources, which have been collected through qualitative methods, such as: formal and informal interviews, informal conversations, and non-participant observations. Additionally, news articles from two Sikkimese newspapers, political documents and letters, as well as literature on Limboo religion and culture written by Sikkimese Limboos also make up the material. Aside from history of religions, my academic background is from social anthropology and South Asian area studies, which is reflected in my interests, topics, as well as theoretical and methodological framework of the thesis. Despite having visited India several times prior to the fieldwork, my experience with the Himalayan region was limited. However, issues concerning identity politics and religious change have been an interest for me for many years. With my material I want to:

- Describe and analyze the ritual traditions of the Limboos.
- Examine changing aspects in their religious practices.

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<sup>9</sup> Official documents in Sikkim refer to the group mostly as Limbu or Subba, but the Limboo ethnic associations use Limboo consistently. I was corrected several times when they saw I spelled Limbu in my notes. Names and ethnic belonging is a political matter, which I will deal with later in the thesis.

- Find possible explanations of why religious practices are going through changes in contemporary Sikkim.
- Discuss the constructedness of Limboo religious identity.

### **Promoters of religious change**

Limboo religion and culture are undergoing massive changes in Sikkim today. The main and the most noticeable promoters of change in Sikkim today are the Limboo ethnic associations. These organizations grew stronger after Sikkim's merger with India in 1975. Today there are numerous ethnic organizations seeking, amongst others, to develop, preserve, revitalize and revive the certain aspects the 'Limboo religion', which has been coined into the term 'Yumaism'. In addition, the two Limboo writers, Iman Singh Chemjong (1904-1975) and Jash Raj Subba are central agents and promoters of Yumaism. The two authors seemed to be generally regarded as very authoritative and knowledgeable of Limboo culture and religion by most informants. They can be described as what Grégoire Schlemmer refers to as 'indigenist' writers, i.e. intellectuals belonging to the elite who often promote their own culture in their literature, and work as spokespersons for their ethnic community (2002/2003: 120). J.R. Subba has published a number of books on Limboo culture and religion and may be seen as a continuation of Chemjong's writings. However, in a more active vein, he is attempting to create and establish a more purified, unified, systematized, institutionalized, and normative religion. The propagation of Yumaism is in many ways contesting elements of the ritual practices more commonly associated with 'traditional' Limboo religion, as described by, for example Philippe Sagant (1996 [1976]). For the purpose of this thesis and for the ease of the reader such things that can be described as 'traditional Limboo religious practice' shall be referred to as the 'phedangma tradition'.<sup>10</sup> In order to understand the processes of religious change today it is therefore necessary to have certain knowledge about the phedangma tradition, and this will be provided in Chapter 5. One of the most striking religious changes since the late 1980s is that the Limboo ethnic associations have started to construct *mangheem* in several locations in Sikkim. *Mangheem* are "temples" where Limboos can attend community rituals they name either *puja* (i.e. 'ritual') or worship dedicated to Yuma.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Phedangma* is both an umbrella term for Limboo shamans, as well as a type of shaman.

<sup>11</sup> The terminology reflect the informants' usage, since *mangheem* was often referred to as 'temple' and the ceremonies in the *mangheem* were referred to as '*puja*', or 'worship'. These terms will be used throughout the thesis.



These new forms of worship differ from the more traditional rituals conducted in or near the household, dedicated to the well-being of the households and for obtaining abundant harvests.

### **Other Limboo religious movements in Sikkim today**

In addition to the associations as promoters of religious change, there are also other religious formations seeking to change aspects of the Limboo belief system. The Sattelangma (or Satya Hangma ‘truthful prince’) movement and the Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Center (hereafter YMMCC) in Darap also claim to be ‘Limboo religions’ and have followers in the state.<sup>12</sup> Historically, the revivalist ideas of Sattelangma seem to have influenced the concept of Yumaism and changes promoted today, as shall be shown in Chapter 6. My initial plan was to include the YMMCC into my analysis. After having written a chapter about the center, it became evident that it would have exceeded the requirements of a Master thesis. The material is certainly interesting and relevant when analyzing the religious changes promoted by the Limboo associations but is beyond the scope of this thesis. The YMMCC will not be discussed thoroughly, but will be mentioned in those cases where the informants bring up the topic, or in cases where the center’s claims and teachings can provide potential meaningful perspectives in terms of the tense relationship between the associations and the center. The YMMCC is clearly contesting the associations’ version of Yumaism by providing their own version of Yumaism. The association members, especially, tended to regard the center as very controversial. While the Limboo ritual traditions are “traditionally” based on oral traditions (*mundhum*), the YMMCC have scripturalized *mundhum*. The center claims a twenty three year old woman to be Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang, who is believed to be the worldly incarnation of Tagera Ningwaphuma (often perceived as the most important deity) (see figure 13). The center has revived the role and significance of the Limboo shamans, by introducing only one ritualist – the *suingneem*. The YMMCC is a growing religious movement in Sikkim and also has followers in Nepal from various ethnic communities – not only Limboos, which stands in contrast to the ‘Limboo religion’ the associations propagate.

#### **1.2.1 Limitations**

A possible limitation in my research, which is necessary to point out, is that academic readers, who have knowledge of this part of the world, would be likely to question my lack of

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<sup>12</sup> The YMMCC was established in 2004 in Darap, which is the center’s headquarter, when the then fourteen year old Sancha Maya was appointed as the worldly incarnation of Tagera Ningwaphuma, Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang.

emphasis on the contemporary ethnic situations in Nepal and West Bengal. Here, identity and religion are highly debated and contested issues as well, and the contexts are certainly relevant for Sikkim – especially when it comes to the Limboos in Sikkim, among whom many have Nepalese heritage. In contrast to Sikkim, the tendencies in Nepal and West Bengal, especially in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas, Limboos tend to group themselves with the Gorkhali, while in Nepal they stress their belonging to the Kirat ethnic group. The Gorkhali emphasize their common Nepali language, which separate them from the Bengali speaking segments. In Nepal, however, the Kirats stress their common association with Tibeto-Burman languages. Yet due to economical and practical limitations, lack of time, and the fact that it would have been too much material for a Master thesis, the focus will mainly be on Sikkim. Similar to Sikkim, there are also ethnic associations in West Bengal and Nepal, which also are concerned about reviving Limboo culture. The Nepalese associations, such as Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Nepal,<sup>13</sup> are actively promoting their claims on the Internet, unlike the Limboo associations. The ethnic organizations in Nepal also have branches in other parts of the world, such as the UK, USA, Hong Kong, Korea, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. The available online material will, in a limited extent, be used in some discussions concerning Limboo ethnic organizations in Sikkim.

### **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

In order to provide the reader with an outline of the thesis this section provides a breakdown of the structure and content contained in the pages below. In Chapter 2 Sikkim's historical background will be briefly discussed. An emphasis will be put on the implementation of the Indian reservation policies and the emergence of tribal or ethno-politics in the state. Relevant anthropological research on Sikkim and the Limboos will also be discussed. Chapter 3 presents and discusses complex concepts and reviews the methodological and theoretical framework which will be used to analyze the material. A brief discussion of theoretical and methodological implications of Sikkim's location in a borderland of academic area studies will also be provided. As a continuation of the theory and method discussed in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 highlights concrete methodological challenges and ethical consideration experienced during fieldwork and the writing process. The villages where the data has been obtain and presentations of key informants will also be presented. Chapter 5 examines social

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<sup>13</sup> Kirat Takthung Chumlung, Nepal's website: <http://www.chumlung.org.np> [Accessed November 28, 2013].

and religious practices among informants from the three subject villages. Here, relevant social and religious concepts and practices are presented and discussed in various contexts. Inter-ethnic relations, religious flexibility, and fluidity and factors representing a challenge to social and religious practices will be highlighted. In contrast to Chapter 5, Chapter 6 deals with the Limboo ethnic associations' roles as promoters of religious and cultural change in contemporary Sikkim. Their propagation of new religious elements will be closely analyzed in relation to the findings in Chapter 2 and 5. In Chapter 7 the main points of the thesis will be recapped and analyzed closely in relation to the research objectives presented in Chapter 1 and the theories and methods discussed in Chapter 3.

## 2 Setting the Context

In order to understand and be able to examine religious changes among the Limboos in Sikkim today, it is essential to have insight into the contextual circumstances. Given the isolated and relatively unknown area of the eastern Himalayas, I will therefore present a brief overview of contemporary Sikkim, as well as its history from the time Sikkim was a Buddhist kingdom to its merger with India. In the last section of the chapter I will look into the processes of the politicization of ethnic identity in the 1970s and 1980s and the degree to which identity politics have affected the state's contemporary political culture. Lastly, previous anthropological research on Sikkim will be discussed.

### 2.1 Sikkim in 2012

Sikkim is a small state with a strategic location next to the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. The Nathula Pass was re-opened in 2006 and connects India to Central Tibet and Lhasa. The border is located just 54 km northeast of Gangtok and goods from the east can easily reach the state via the pass. In a comment in *Himal Southasian* (September, 2009), an unnamed author points to the state's location near the sensitive border with China/TAR as one of the factors of why the Central Government in New Delhi grants Sikkim huge amounts of money every year. The unnamed author further traces this sensitivity back to the 1962 Sino-Indian war, which heightened the security level and sensitivity regarding the border: "India remains massively aware of the need not to make the local population unhappy. And so, the cheque-book is always out."

The state capital of Gangtok is seemingly modern and clean, compared to other Indian cities and the state regularly receives prizes for its cleanliness and commitment to the environment. The streets of Gangtok are filled with fashion-conscious youths with clothes and hairstyles that resemble the actors in Korean or Japanese television dramas, which is a reminder of the state's closeness to East Asia. It is easy to see indications that a lot of money is in circulation; many people in the cities have the latest technology, international commercial brands are represented, and two casinos are located on the outskirts of the city. Sikkim is an agricultural state with cardamom as the cash crop. Today, the tourism sector plays an increasing role in the Sikkimese economy. The government's commitment to tourism and descriptions of how the citizens of Sikkim can contribute to the tourism sector is stated in

a letter signed by the Sikkimese Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling,<sup>14</sup> and are a part of the Sikkimese government's goals for to be accomplished by 2015, and named Mission 2015.<sup>15</sup> Since culture and tourism are closely related, temples, monasteries, religious festivals, and scenic locations are promoted and financed by the state government. Especially the Buddhist monasteries have traditionally been, and still are, popular among tourists and the monasteries contribute to the representation of Sikkim as a Buddhist land or a Shangri-la. Nowadays it seems to be a shift in politics towards a wider focus on the state's ethnic diversity. One of the Limboo households, which provided me with accommodation, had just started the process of becoming a homestay, which means that travelers can rent a room in their house and enjoy meals together with the family. As part of their preparation, they had painted their main house in blue, white, and green, which are the colors of the Limboo flag (see figure 1),<sup>16</sup> together with elements of "traditional Limboo" houses as part of the decorations and patterns around the door and the windows. This craftwork has been revitalized and can be seen in several places, such as in the Limboo Cultural Centre in Tharpu, West Sikkim, newly constructed Limboo study centers, and Limboo ethnic association buildings. When ethnicity enters the tourist domain it can become a commodification the state and households can benefit financially from (John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff: 2009). Also the use and repetitions of certain patterns and colors branded as Limboo symbols make their "limbooness" visible and can become potent symbols.

Despite being a prosperous and beautiful state, the ethnic situation is an area of concern in contemporary Sikkim, and is described by Mullard as: "(...) plagued by ethnic conflict, inequality and the competing assertions of rival ethnic groups as part of their desire to be recognised, their traditions and history respected." (2011a: 198). To actively use Limboo symbols can be understood as strategies for the ethnic groups to be recognized and visible in the political landscape, which consequently create and materialize "differentness" to other ethnic groups in the state. Statistics also reveal a darker reality. Today, Sikkim has the highest suicide rate in India. According to the report *Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India*

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<sup>14</sup> Mission 2015, letter signed by Chamling available online: [http://sikkimtourism.gov.in/Webforms/General/DepartmentStakeholders/pdfs/Tourism\\_Mission\\_2015.pdf](http://sikkimtourism.gov.in/Webforms/General/DepartmentStakeholders/pdfs/Tourism_Mission_2015.pdf) [Accessed November 28, 2013].

<sup>15</sup> Mission 2015 available online: <http://www.sikkim.gov.in/MISC/EXTRAS/MISSION2015.html> [Accessed November 28, 2013].

<sup>16</sup> The Limboo flag is different from the blue, white, and red flag of Limbuwan commonly used in Nepal, which shows that the Sikkimese Limboos are attempting to distance themselves from the Nepali Limbus.

2010 by the National Crime Records Bureau,<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs, the suicide rate in the state was 45,9 (as per 100 000 of population), while the national average was 11,4. Addiction to alcohol and substances also pose severe problems in the society, and compared to some other Indian states, alcohol is openly sold and is very easily accessible. As described later in the thesis (see e.g. 5.7.3, 6.2.3, and 6.6.2), alcohol makes up an important dimension in the religious changes I have studied.

## 2.2 Brief history of Sikkim pre-1975

Saul Mullard notes that little is known in general about the history of the period between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries (2011a: 195). Before Sikkim became an Indian state in 1975, it was a Buddhist kingdom ruled by the Namgyal dynasty. Mullard has based his analysis of state formation in Sikkim on documents from the palace archives in Gangtok and has recently published his findings (2011a). According to the local historical narrative, the state of Sikkim was founded by first *chogyal* or ‘religious king’ of Sikkim, Phuntsok Namgyal (1604-?). His enthronement had been prophesied by the eight- century, semi-legendary Guru Rinpoche or Padmasambhava, an immensely important cultural hero in Tibet and the Himalayas. This local narrative is still commonly taught in schools and is known all through Sikkim. Mullard argues that the narrative functions as a justification of the establishment and the formation of a Buddhist kingdom as well as maintaining the idea of Sikkim as a *beyul* (‘hidden land’). The narrative also identifies the royal family with a lineage of religious and political importance and shows a local desire to be associated historically with Tibet (Mullard, 2011a: 48- 50). Sikkim retained a strong relationship with Tibet and especially religion, politics, and language are heavily influenced by Tibetan parallels (ibid. 1-2). On one hand, the local narrative portrays the formation of Sikkim as peaceful and uncomplicated. The reality, on the other hand, involved conflicts, alliances, and opposition — especially by Limboo and Lepcha groups. One rebellion probably occurred in the late 1650s against Phuntsok Namgyal (Mullard, 2011b: 55). The signing of the Lho Mon Tsong sum agreement, a legal document signed by leaders from the three mentioned groups: Bhutia (Lho), Lepcha (Mon) and Limboo (Tsong) in 1663, can be seen as an attempt to stop the rebellions. By signing the agreement, they acknowledged the supremacy of Phuntsok Namgyal as the head of a single political order in western Sikkim (Mullard, 2011a: 140). The

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<sup>17</sup> *Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India 2010* available online: <http://ncrb.nic.in/ADSI2010/ADSI2010-full-report.pdf>, date [Accessed November 28, 2013].

agreement serves as evidence that Limboos held high positions in Sikkim during seventeenth century (ibid. 156). Also the second *chogyal* of Sikkim, Tensung Namgyal (reigned 1670 – c.1699) married a Limboo chieftain as well as two other chieftains from Tibet and Bhutan respectively (ibid. 163). The Limboo wife and the *chogyal* had a son, who according to colonial administrator H.H. Risley, was named Shalno-Guru, and a daughter, Pendi Tchering Gyenu (1989 [1894]: 11). The Limboo "branch" of the family tree stops with the two children and speculation abounds to why.<sup>18</sup> Mullard assumes that these marriages served to balance the competing powers in the region, since the Limboo wife probably was from the states of Limbuwan (Mullard, 2011a: 163).

### **The Limboos' historical narratives**

Limboos in Sikkim tend to describe the past during the Namgyal Dynasty as dark and oppressive. It is said that the Limboos were forced to convert to Buddhism and were not allowed learn or practice Limboo language nor to conduct their rituals. Local narratives highlight a man who resisted the rulers, Teongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe (c.1704-1741) (or often referred to as Sirijunga or Sirijunga Te-ongsi) who is often projected as a revivalist "hero". Textual sources about his life are scarce, but local narratives about him are numerous. Sirijunga is also closely associated with the Limboo script, which is why it is sometimes called the Sirijunga script. Some narratives say that he rediscovered the lost Limboo script, which gives associations with the Tibetan concept *terton*, a treasure revealer, while other narratives claim he is the inventor of the script. Because of Sirijunga's illegal activities of teaching the Limboo language and script, it is said that Bhutias or Tibetan lamas, or Tasong monks, according to van Driem (1987: xxiv), eventually killed him. His role and significance in among the Limboos in contemporary Sikkim will be discussed in Chapter 6.

## **2.3 Sikkim's merging with India**

Trade and the wish to open the Tibetan border to Indian and British products were some of the motivations behind the British expansion in the Himalayas. Their continuing expansion eventually led to stronger British influence in Sikkim. The Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814 - 1816 marks the start of Anglo-Sikkimese relations (Mullard 2011a: 179). The Anglo-Chinese

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<sup>18</sup> Personal communication with Mullard: "Many have articulated the theory that the children of the Limbu [sic.] wife of Tensung Namgyal were killed during the War of Succession (1699-1709)- Whilst this is certainly plausible we cannot rule out other scenarios if we accept, for example, the story told in *The History of Sikkim* that the son became a monk."

Convention of 1890 fixed the Sikkim-Tibet border and acknowledged the British Government's protectorate over Sikkim. After the signing of the convention, the British sought to get rid of Tibetan influence and encouraged Nepalese laborers to come and work in Sikkim.

Sikkim's incorporation into India 16 May 1975 led to drastic changes for Sikkimese society; the Namgyal dynasty and the monarchy were abolished, and in 1976 the Panchayat raj, a system of local government, was introduced along with party politics at village level. Schooling became accessible to more people and as the bureaucracy expanded, more job opportunities also opened up (Balikci, 2008: 55). *A Statistic Profile 2004-2005* shows great improvement of the literacy rate, which was 17.74 % in 1971, 34.05% in 1981, and 69.68% in 2001. The statistics also show that especially the female literacy rate have been greatly improved from 22.20% in 1981 to 61.46% in 2001 (2004-2005: 2, 5-7). The printing media also became more developed and widely spread, electricity became accessible in rural areas, and television was introduced in the end of the 1980s, (Balikci, 2008: 54-56). During the mid-1980s Indian influences also increased, when Hindi movies became widespread and Indian history was incorporated in the schools' curriculum (ibid. 327). The road networks were also improved, and today most villages in the state are accessible by roads.

### **2.3.1 The implementation of Indian reservation policies**

After reservation policies were introduced in 1978, especially the Scheduled Tribe status (hereafter ST) has been widely debated and caused controversies. India's reservation system is a form of affirmative action or positive discrimination, which is incorporated in the Constitution of India. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956),<sup>19</sup> who was a low-caste, was one of the engineers behind the constitution. The aim of reservations is to improve the status and well-being of weaker sections of society by giving the enlisted communities several advantages, such as: Increased representation for students in higher education, employment in the public sector, and enhanced political representation. One of the main controversial aspects of the reservation policies is that they link rights to collectives rather than individuals, which have caused several communal clashes in the ethnically diverse country. As Myron Weiner underlines, "Reservations remain a source of conflict between those who are included and

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<sup>19</sup> The reservation policies were not a purely a post-independence creation as there were reservations during the Raj era, and since that time have been a continuing source of debate and controversy. Under the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909, separate electorates were established for Muslims and the British provided separate electorates for Sikhs, STs, Anglo-Indians and other minority groups (Weiner, 2004 [1997]: 486).



those who are excluded.” (2001: 192). To be entitled to the status categories, the groups make use of new social constructs based upon language, religion, tribe and caste (ibid. 177).

Prior to 1978, there was an existing reservation system in Sikkim, where the Limboos had one seat reserved for the Tsongs and two seats were reserved for the Nepalese communities in the legislative assembly. The implementation of the new reservation policies deleted the seats for the Nepalese and the Limboos when the Constitution Order of 1978 declared the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim as STs.<sup>20</sup> As Melanie Vandenhelsken writes, it is important to notice that to accord the ST status to the Bhutias and Lepchas created a unique situation in India because segments of the two communities were traditionally the ruling elites and are of a higher social status than the Indian and Indo-Nepali segments (2011: 99).<sup>21</sup> The Limboos were accorded the Other Backward Classes status (hereafter OBC) the same year, which granted them some advantages. Yet, the ST status would have given them even more benefits. Therefore, many ethnic groups in the “Nepalese” category wanted, and still want, to be recognized as “tribals” in order to claim the ST status. The reservation policies have since its implementation been massively debated both in Sikkim and in India in general and has led to numerous different movements and social mobilizations.

### **2.3.2 Mobilization of lower castes, tribes, and religious groups**

Peter van der Veer views the reservation system as an ‘institutionalization of difference’ and claims it is a legacy of the colonial state, when such policies during the colonial period were condemned as ‘divide-and-rule’ by the same nationalists who continued them after India's independence in 1947 (1994: 188). The effect of the enhanced consciousness regarding caste identity became apparent during the 1990s when dalits mobilized and voted for the “dalit party” Bahujan Samaj Party (hereafter BSP), which its rhetoric contained strong polemic attitudes towards the high castes. According to Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, the secular and nationalistic politics of Jawaharlal Nehru was believed to improve the deprived castes and classes their well-being. When the state failed, they had to take action themselves and started to mobilize on the basis of group identity (2007: 19, 442).<sup>22</sup> Laura Dudley-Jenkins claims that the defined status groups in the reservation politics fail to reflect the interaction and the complexities of caste, race, religion, gender and other aspects of social identity. One

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<sup>20</sup> Politically, the Bhutias and Lepchas are referred to as the ‘B-L block.’

<sup>21</sup> ‘Bhutia’ as a ST category is broad and consists of Sherpa, Lhopo, Tibetan, Yolmo, Tromopa, Chumbipa, Dophthapa, Dukpa, and Kagatay. They are mostly referred to as Bhutias or Sikkimese in Sikkim.

<sup>22</sup> See also Kothari (2004 [1997]) for social mobilization based on caste and Dalit identities in India.

can argue and identify “backwardness” based on these mentioned categories, but she underlines the importance of being aware of the fact that reservations are based on the group’s distinct qualities. A dangerous consequence of this focus can form identity politics (2003: 1-2). Dudley-Jenkins observes that also low status Christians claim to have a caste identity, which is controversial because caste is a Hindu category. She therefore asks: “Do reservation policies reinforce the very categories they are meant to undermine?” (2003: 2). By adopting a caste identity in a caste-based struggle against caste discrimination, it reveals that caste can be absorbed into other identities and may result in communal clashes. Embracing a low caste status is to revive old categories, Dudley-Jenkins writes (*ibid.* 8-10), rather than overcome them.

## **2.4 The ST category – only for the “original inhabitants” of Sikkim?**

Instead of caste, tribalism has become the center of the political debates regarding ethnic identification in social and religious mobilization in Sikkim. However, one of the most remarkable aspects of the debates is that the ST status is also centered on questions regarding indigeneity to the state. The definition of the much debated ST status and which criteria a community must fulfill in order to be granted the status is found in a letter dated 21 July 1976 addressed to Shri Gyaltsen, the Chief Secretary of State Government in Gangtok, from O.K. Moorthy, the Director of Union Home Ministry (Ministry of Home Affairs) and read as follows: “Indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large.” Such characteristics are closely associated with a mode of exerting, for example, colonial power over the colonized by defining ‘the other’ as backward, and have been criticized by a range of scholars.<sup>23</sup> In more recent times such representations have also become tied into the development discourse, where ‘underdevelopment’ and ‘third world’ emerged as working concepts (Arturo Escobar, 2009: 429). Similar to colonial representations, the emergence of ‘development thinking’ also revolves around thinking in terms human evolution – a view of progression to a “higher” form of living. Yet, these types of formulations can be found in Indian law today, and these specific criteria have played a central role in the identification process in the Limboos’ endeavors towards the ST status.

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<sup>23</sup> See e.g.: Said (2003 [1978]), Spivak (1988), and Abu-Lughod (2002, 1991), and Narayan (1997).

Despite the fact that the ST definition does not mention, “being the original inhabitants of the land” as criteria, debates in Sikkim have tended to revolve around questions regarding indigeneity to Sikkim. In a pamphlet published by the Department of Information & Public Relations of Sikkim on the Limboos and Tamangs’ recognition as ST, it is claimed that after the Limboos were not granted the ST status, the consciousness among the community grew as people realized they had been denied a status that recognized them as original inhabitants (2009: 11). The letter to the central government, as referred to above further suggests to examine the Limboos’ close affinity with the indigenous Lepchas, and that they are animists is emphasized as reasons to why they also they potentially could be recognized as a ST community. It is further suggested in the letter that the authorities in Sikkim should closely review the Limboos’ case, “(...) and if necessary they may be grouped with the Lepchas.” The discussion illustrates that the ST status is not only perceived as just an instrument in improving the status of the poorer segments, but additionally involves notions of being “real” and “pure” Sikkimese.

#### **2.4.1 Ethnic classification in Sikkim**

The dichotomy Bhutia-Lepcha versus the “Nepalese” is very much alive today, even in scholarly work – despite it is widely known that there is much ethnic and religious fluidity in the state, including the fact that “Nepalese” is a broad category. Scholars today should approach the ethnic situation cautiously by problematizing the perceived ethnic borders and closely analyze them in relation to the political context of Sikkim. Already in the 1980s Trevor Ling (1985) criticized anthropologist Chie Nakane’s Weberian representation of the Sikkimese Buddhists communities of Lepchas and Bhutias as Buddhist versus the Hindu Nepalese. According to Nakane, differences in the groups’ intensity in labor and economy were grounded in their religious differences, as she observed that the Nepalese immigrants were more hard-working and soon became wealthier than the Bhutias and Lepchas (1966: 256). “The cultural and social gap between these two groups and the Nepalis is too great to allow them to become assimilated“, she argues (ibid. 262). Ling, in his article, points to the diversity in the ‘Nepalese’ category, and states that some of these groups are associated with Buddhism, such as Tamang and Gurung. Therefore, he proposes that the immigrants had multiple identities, and that Nakane’ article probably reflects the high awareness of the presence of the Nepalese among the Bhutias (ibid. 120-122). Ling argues that since the Nepalese immigrants settled in Sikkim because they wanted to improve their lives, it is logic

to assume that they were prepared to work intensively, and their restricted consumerism must be understood in terms of their poverty – not in cultural and religious terms (1985: 226). Nakane’s article however, touches upon an interesting perspective in regards to the Limboo community’s classification as Nepalese. If the “Nepalese” were viewed as successful and as a ‘forward community’ in the state in 1955, as she describes, then this might indicate that being grouped with the Nepalese at that time might have been regarded as more positive than it is in today – in contrast to the “indigenous” and less economical successful Bhutia and Lepcha communities.<sup>24</sup>

In censuses and statistics today, the Bhutias and Lepchas are treated as independent ethnic categories while the Nepalese make up a single ethnic entity. Consequently, the Bhutia and Lepcha populations appear as minority groups in the state making up less than 20% of the population. If the groups within the ‘Nepalese’ category were categorized similarly as the Bhutias and Lepchas – as independent ethnic groups, their demographical status would have appeared very different. The Bhutias and Lepchas’ positions as minority groups with the “threatening” Nepalese majority are central issues in the recent religious changes among the groups, which we will see in the review of the previous anthropological research in the state in this chapter. The perceived ethnic borders in contemporary Sikkim must also be closely examined in relation to British colonial accounts on Sikkim.<sup>25</sup> The British accounts are valuable sources, but it is crucial to take into account Melanie Vandenhelsken’s observation of their influence regarding the ethnic and religious classifications in Sikkim, which she sees as a:

(...) combination of the Sikkimese elite’s relations with others and early ethnological and colonial thought that created a representation of the population of Sikkim as being divided into a Hindu majority and an autochthonous minority. Since then, the term ‘Nepalese’ has been used to describe anyone who is neither Bhotia nor Lepcha, regardless of his or her language, religion, social organisation, or even origin. (2010: 98).

The Sikkimese journalist Pema Wangchuk Dorjee (2011) follows Vandenhelsken’s argumentation and underlines that the status of especially the Limboo and Magar communities in Sikkim were described as Nepalese castes in H.H. Risley’s *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (1989: [1874]), which consequently has become the prevailing official ethnic division in Sikkim today. Wangchuk also argues that the British’ stereotyping: “ (...) have become so ingrained that communities have come to believe the parodies of themselves even though

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<sup>24</sup> It is unclear which Nepalese communities Nakane is referring to, but it is likely that she is referring to the educated elite, i.e. Pradhans.

<sup>25</sup> Some of the relevant British accounts from the nineteenth century are: Campbell (1869), Hodgson (2013 [1874]), Risley (1989 [1894]), Hooker (2011 [1854]).

their histories speak otherwise.” (2011: 68). Similar tendencies were noticed during fieldwork, in terms of how influential especially *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* seemed to be. The older and well-educated individuals’ narratives about the Limboos’ history would often correspond to the narratives in the Gazetteer. Even though the Limboos also have been documented in Tibetan documents, few Limboos have been able to read them. Therefore it seems like the British accounts, especially, are regarded as authoritative and valuable, and have been used in the Limboos’ identity construction.

#### **2.4.2 The question of indigeneity**

The question whether the Limboos are “native” to Sikkim is complex, disputed, and highly politicized. Mullard notes that borders were fluid during the early Sikkim (2011a: 157) and it is important to underline the complexity of state borders in a historical perspective – one must not take for granted that the political borders functioned and were perceived in the past as they are today. The Tsongs are generally regarded as original inhabitants of Sikkim, both by scholars and among non-Limboos questioned during fieldwork. The case of the more recent Nepali immigration, among whom many are Limboos, is a contested issue. No Limboos mentioned the Tsongs or claimed to be a Tsong, therefore, it can illustrate that the representation of the Limboos being divided into a Hindu (Nepalese) and Buddhist (Sikkimese) community is largely being maintained in academic writings and among non-Limboos. However, today we see that the Sikkimese Limboos distinguish themselves from the Nepalese Limbus by a small modification of their ethnonym.<sup>26</sup> The material this thesis is based on is collected from places where the Limboos are in majority, so the issue regarding ‘recent Limboo settlers’ was not a central topic for my informants. However, in Bhutia or Lepcha dominated areas, the Nepalese immigrants might be looked upon differently.

Historical sources tell that Limbuwan (i.e. eastern area of Nepal), most likely incorporated areas of modern western Sikkim, making the question of indigeneity even more complex. Limbuwan’s belonging to Sikkim is also stated in Risley’s *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (1989 [1894]), and was conquered and permanently annexed to Nepal by Prithi Narayan in 1774 (2). According to Lionel Caplan, who carried out fieldwork in the Ilam district in East Nepal, the Limboos are generally regarded as the first inhabitants in this easternmost area of Nepal (2000 [1970]: 13).

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<sup>26</sup> The politicization of ethnic ethnonyms as surnames will be further discussed in 6.5.1.

## 2.5 The Limboo community's endeavors towards ST status

In the 1970s numerous political ethnic associations were established in Sikkim, which worked for their respective group's political and cultural interests. These associations still play an essential role in the ethnic situation today and are constantly requesting revisions of the law so they can obtain stronger political representation. Founded in 1977, the Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limboo Chumlung, a Limboo ethnic association, was central in the debates found in the *Sikkim Express*, a Sikkimese newspaper published in English. It seems like the association grew and became more politicized in the end of the 1970s, as members left their political parties in favor of the Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limboo Chumlung (November 19, 1977 and February 15, 1978, *Sikkim Express*). The Limboos' claims of being a ST community, sparked off some reactions: A reader, Subhir Rai (the Rais are also regarded as "Nepalese" in Sikkim), writes that the Limboos should not claim to be STs in Sikkim while claiming to be Kirati and should treat themselves as Nepalis because their community is not strong enough to stand on their own (November 12, 1977a, *Sikkim Express*). The Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limboo Chumlung answered Rai by stating that the Limboos' culture is different from any other community and that they, in fact, are numerous and make up a strong community (November 23, 1977, *Sikkim Express*).

The Limboos' rhetoric in the relevant news articles are concerned with the urgent need to develop the Limboo language and it should therefore be given status as an official state language (November 12, 1977b, *Sikkim Express*). The Limboos also claim that they are the most backward group in Sikkim and do not perceive their future as bright in "their state of origin" (April 1, 1979, *Sikkim Express*), and that they have a distinct identity and should not be lumped with the "Nepalese" (December 16-23, 1981, *Sikkim Express*). These claims from the Limboo community are important considering the developments that took place especially in the 1990s, which this study is mostly concerned about, and must therefore be regarded as a continuation of these debates. In the 1990s, the Limboo associations' claims took more physical forms, like publications on Limboo religion and culture, as well as the constructions of *mangheem* in different locations in the state. Similarly in Nepal, Martin Gaenzle observed that Kirat ethnic associations were founded and became important from the early 1990s in terms of forming an ethnic identity on an institutionalized basis (2011: 282).

### 2.5.1 The Limboos as STs – Reactions and opposition from the B-L block

Chyabrung dances by Limbus and Damphu Dance by Tamangs became a constant recurrence all along the way as even associations from neighbouring West Bengal lined up to thank the Chief Minister for his efforts which earned the two communities the ST recognition.

The citation is a description of how the Limboos and Tamangs celebrated the news that their two communities were granted the ST status taken from *NOW!*, another English newspaper in Sikkim (25-31 Dec, 2002, *NOW!*). On December 18 2002, the Lok Sabha passed the bill granting tribal status to 140 communities in India, including the Tamang and Limboo. Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin state that the remaining politically active citizens of Nepali ancestry, who were not granted ST status, lost two of their most prominent allies in the struggle for ethnic recognition (2006b: 56). The Limboos were removed from the OBC category and placed in the ST category,<sup>27</sup> which shows that the reservation categories are revisable. Also new categories have been created, for example, the Lepchas are now regarded as the Most Primitive Tribe (hereafter MPT). The requests from the Limboo and Tamang communities and their incorporation into the tribal category were strongly opposed by various Bhutia-Lepcha associations, such as the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (hereafter SIBLAC) founded in 1999.<sup>28</sup> The two communities' inclusion in the ST category is, according to SIBLAC, anti-Sikkimese, and anti-Bhutia-Lepcha in particular, and they claim that the decision lacks historical perspectives. This, once again, underlines the importance of being perceived as "original inhabitants" in order to rightfully claim ST status. In 2003, an opposition organization was created, the Sikkim Gorkha Apex Committee (hereafter GAC). In an article in *NOW!* 23-30 April 2003, GAC claims the seat reservations for the BL-block and the seat for the sangha (i.e. the Buddhist Order) to be unconstitutional because the B-L block constitutes 40 % of the thirty-two seats in the State Assembly while the groups make up only 20 % of the population in Sikkim. However, in the article it is also pointed out that the protests are targeting mainly the Bhutia community, stating that Lepcha land needs to be protected also against Bhutias. These statements show that the debate is more nuanced than a B-L versus Nepalese dichotomy, and might indicate a closer relationship between the "Nepalese" and the Lepchas (23-30 April, 2003, *NOW!*).

Today, the government has provided reservation for Limboos and Tamangs in Panchayats and Zilla parishad (i.e. the local government body at district level), where their population reflects the percentage of seats. However, there are mainly two repeating factors

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<sup>27</sup> The OBC category is a vague and less specified group consisting of 'backward classes'.

<sup>28</sup> SIBLAC 's web site: <http://www.siblac.org> [Accessed November 28, 2013].

that keep the ST debate alive in Sikkim today: First, the Limboos and Tamangs cannot compete for the twelve seats in the Legislative Assembly reserved for the Bhutia and Lepcha, which is an uncommon practice in India to reserve seats for specific groups. Second, the Bhutias and Lepchas cannot sell their land to any other ethnic groups, stated in article 371F in the Indian constitution, a rule that was added after Sikkim's merging with India, and which guarantees the validity of the old laws of Sikkim, in this case the Land Revenue Order no1 of 1917 (Vandenhelsken, 2010: 99).

## **2.6 Previous anthropological research on Sikkim and Nepal**

### **2.6.1 Cultural threats and religious revivalism**

The recent anthropological research on ethnic identification and religious change in Sikkim reflect the social and political changes discussed so far in this chapter. The majority of the studies on the Lepchas are conducted in their reserved area Dzöngu.<sup>29</sup> Since there are few other ethnic groups in Dzöngu, perspectives regarding the Lepchas' relationship with other ethnic groups were more or less left out of the scholarly work. Still today, much research on the Lepchas is carried out in Dzöngu.<sup>30</sup> The concept of 'cultural threats' might be analytically useful when examining the existing anthropological research in the state, since that is precisely what a main part of the research and the accounts on the Lepchas and the Bhutias from the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century emphasize. According to sociologist of religion, Meredith McGuire's concept 'meaning threatening experiences', such as: oppression, famine, earthquake, or economic depression can evoke religious expressions of a syncretic character, which she believes is probably the most common basis for creating new meanings (2002: 33-35).<sup>31</sup> Jenny Bentley states that the Lepchas consider themselves as a vanishing tribe, which she relates to A.R. Foning's *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* (1987).<sup>32</sup> Bentley also considers changes in the society, such as: the spread of the education system, demographic changes due to the settlement of immigrant laborers, and the introduction of

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<sup>29</sup> Dzöngu is located in the North District of Sikkim and was made a Lepcha reservation by Tashi Namgyal in the 1960s.

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Gorer (2005 [1937]), Halfdan Siiger and Jørgen Rischel (1967), Halfdan Siiger (1978, 1975, 1972) Morris (1938), and Nebesky de Wojkowitz (1952) are some of the central scholars who have carried out research on the Lepchas.

<sup>31</sup> With 'new meanings', McGuire means, for example, new religious formations (2002: 30-31).

<sup>32</sup> The Lepcha community as a culturally threatened community has also received international media coverage: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15626993> [Accessed November 28, 2013].



Buddhism and the more recent advance of Christianity as representing some of the threats to their culture. Consequently, these perceived threats have accumulated into a heightened self-consciousness and interest in conserving “traditional” Lepcha traditions (2007).

Issues concerning indigeneity to the state emerge in the Bhutias’ religious revivals. Balikci-Denjongpa states that during a debate on seat reservations for Bhutias and Lepchas in Sikkim’s legislative Assembly in the late 1970s, a Nepalese-speaking minister was said to have suggested that the Bhutias had no rights to seat reservation because they were foreigners to Sikkim and could not claim tribal status reserved for India’s original inhabitants. The minister’s arguments had huge consequences for the Lhopos, or also referred to as Bhutias, who found the need to distance themselves further from anything Tibetan (Balikci-Denjongpa 2006 border: 331-333).<sup>33</sup> According to Balikci-Denjongpa, the Nepalese immigration was perceived as threatening to the Bhutia and Lepcha communities in regards to their political and economical rights, as well as their language and culture (2006: 129). As a reaction to these threats they sought to define themselves as a distinct Sikkimese ethnic groups, and as part of the religious revival, they accentuated the worship of sacred locations, and the increased importance of local and ancestral deities (ibid. 132-133). Constructions of sacred landscapes constitute important dimensions in a different context as well. It is a tendency to revitalize the importance of mount Kangchendzönga in particular as a Sikkimese patron deity in the religious movements. The Bhutia and Lepcha communities have been engaged in protests against the government’s constructions of hydro-electric power stations. These protests have in many ways become the Sikkimese equivalent to India’s Narmada dam protests, and in the Sikkimese context these protests have accumulated into religious revival along with elements of ecological preservation movements. For example, in 1995 the Lhopos’ protests were centered on preserving their sacred land of Demojong (Balikci-Denjongpa, 2006: 134).<sup>34</sup> The Lepcha protests have received attention both inside and outside of academia, due to the activists’ drastic strategies; for example, some of the well-educated activists led a hunger strike in 2007 to protest the Dzöngu projects (Kerry Little, 2008: 251).

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<sup>33</sup> For Lhopo and Tibetan identities in Sikkim, see also: Arora (2006b, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> For literature on the Lepchas’ protests in 2006 see e.g. Little (2008, 2010) and Arora (2007, 2006a, 2006b). See also Bhasin (2002 and 2011) for research on mainly the Bhutia and Lepchas.

## 2.6.2 Previous anthropological research on the Limboos

Among recent research on ethnicity in Sikkim, Balikci-Denjongpa, compared to the other mentioned scholars,<sup>35</sup> has carried out the most extensive fieldwork in Sikkim. In Thingchim in the northern part of Sikkim she examined, during the years 1993 to 1995, the relation between ‘village religion’ and Buddhism among the Lhopos. The relationship between ‘great’ and ‘small’ traditions is also present in academic work on the Lepchas’ lama and *bongthing* and *mun* (the Lepcha ritual specialists), which constitutes a part of a broader discussion within anthropological studies of Buddhism in general and the Himalayas in particular (e.g. Gellner 1990, and Ramble 1990). Among the contributors to the general discussion about Buddhism as a ‘Great Tradition’ and localized Buddhism as a ‘Small Tradition’, see Gananath Obeyesekere 1963, Spiro 1970, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, Stan Royal Mumford 1989, and Geoffrey Samuel 1993 and 1994).

Much of the existing research on the Limboos, mainly carried out in Nepal, can be located within a shaman discourse. Sagant’s *The Dozing Shaman The Limbus of Eastern Nepal* (1996 [1976]) carried out fieldwork from 1966-7 and 1969-71 in the Taplejung district of Nepal grants a whole chapter to discuss aspects of shamanism among the Limboos.<sup>36</sup> Since Sagant’s study is mainly concerned with religion, it has been a valuable secondary source both during fieldwork and in the process of writing this thesis. However, Sagant refers to Chemjong throughout his book without explicitly stating his connection with Limboo ethno-political movements in Darjeeling in the 1920s nor does he mention Chemjong’s obvious Christian influence in his writings. Anthropologist Lionel Caplan’s *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A Study of Hindu-tribal Relations* (2000 [1970]) is based on fieldwork conducted in 1964-65 in the Ilam district in eastern Nepal. As the title suggests, Caplan examines Limboo - Hindu and Brahman relations through a caste-based study of landownership, economic and social change. His study does not contribute to the Himalayan discourse on ‘great’ and ‘small’ religious traditions, since he mainly points to cultural and religious differences between the Limboos and Hindus and Brahmins, and does not highlight any ritual competition or conflict, which often is central in research about ‘great’ and ‘small’ traditions in the Himalayas. Anthropologists Rex L. Jones, and Shirley Kurz Jones’ *A Himalayan Woman* (1976), provides a different angle, by mainly looking at the Limboo

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<sup>35</sup> Bentley is currently working on her Ph.D. thesis on the Lepchas, which is also on lengthy fieldwork in Sikkim.

<sup>36</sup> Sagant has also published articles (1988, 1985) dealing with many of the similar topics we find in his book (1996 [1976]).

women's roles in the society. Jones and Kurz Jones do not grant the Limboos' ritual traditions much attention. However, Jones and Kurtz Jones contribute to the shamanism discourse in *Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas* (1976). The most recent academic publication on the Limboos is anthropologist Ian Carlos Fitzpatrick's doctoral thesis *Cardamom and Class* (2011), which is based on fieldwork carried out among the Limboos in northeastern Nepal. Fitzpatrick's focus is on the introduction of cardamom production and the changed distribution of wealth and on how the international labor migration has opened another pathway to economic and social opportunities. In this study, religion is not, however, given much attention.

### **Other relevant research from Nepal**

Anthropologist Martin Gaenzsle's works on Rai cosmology (2011, 2008, 2001, 1999) are important due to the close relationship between the Rais and Limboos. Grégoire Schlemmer has published two articles (2010 and 2002/2003) on changes in conceptions of Kirat identity in Nepal. Sara Shneiderman, who also has cooperated with other scholars, has carried out extensive fieldwork in Nepal among the Thangmis and also focuses on identity politics and 'cultural engineering', for example: Shneiderman (2011, 2010, 2006), Shneiderman and Turin (2006a, 2006b), and Middleton and Shneiderman (2008). Schlemmer and Shneiderman's works are topic-wise highly relevant for my study, since they have examined the roles of indigenous literature and associations in creating a Kirat identity or a Thangmi identity, respectively. Bentley also discusses the role of Lepcha associations in Sikkim (2007).

### **2.6.3 Some notes regarding the indigenist writers**

The Sikkimese indigenist writers Jash Raj Subba and Iman Singh Chemjong, and to a less extent, T.B. Subba will have double roles in this thesis,<sup>37</sup> meaning that their writings will function as secondary literature because their accounts are helpful sources when it comes to understanding ritual practices, terminology and other social and cultural aspects.<sup>38</sup> Being Limboos themselves is not a problematic aspect in itself, as they are insiders of Limboo culture they can provide important insights of Limboo religion and culture. However, Chemjong and J.R. Subba's writings are susceptible to bias on account of the fact that they

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<sup>37</sup> Due to the many errors in J.R. Subba's quotes rendered in this thesis, I will not write [sic.] after the errors in the quotes, but rather make the readers aware of the mistakes here.

<sup>38</sup> Since there are more than one Subba, I will use the abbreviations of their names throughout the thesis and in the references, e.g.: J.R. Subba and T.B. Subba, in order to avoid any confusion.

have been active in Limboo ethnic associations.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, their writings have an underlying aim to present a unified Limboo religion and culture, which according to J.R. Subba is a way of ‘developing’ Limboo religion and culture. Most of J.R. Subba’s books, as well as the republication of Chemjong’s book are published by Kirat Yakthung Chumlung – a Limboo association. These writers’ common feature is that they received their education in Christian educational institutions, away from “traditional” village Limboo life. The authors, especially J.R. Subba’s and Chemjong’s specific articulations and claims regarding the Limboo ritual traditions also make them central contributors to the religious changes, and therefore constitute important roles in this study.



**Figure 1.** The Sikkimese Limboo flag outside the Limboo museum and conference center in Tharpu, western Sikkim.

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<sup>39</sup> J.R. Subba stated that he works as an advisor for the Limboo Literacy Association during a brief interview with him in his house in Gangtok in September 2012.

# 3 Theory and Method

The history of religions is an eclectic field drawing on a variety of perspectives, theories and methods from other disciplines. Apart from being positioned in the history of religions, this thesis' theoretical and methodological frameworks are developed mainly within anthropology and sociology of religion and can further be positioned within a critical theories perspective.<sup>40</sup> It is important to underline the complex relationship between theory and method, as they are intermingled and embedded with each other. Theories can also be understood as 'models,' i.e. as simplified presentations of reality with a systematic character, which give indications about what methods one should apply in order to inquire about the decided topic. The theoretical and methodological aspects are products of constant changing contexts. Therefore brief historical background of the critical theories perspective will be provided in order to show how the theoretical perspectives and methodological tools have been developed, as well as how they serve the type of study which has been conducted. As this thesis' topic is also closely related to potentially three area studies, namely: South Asian studies, Himalayan studies, as well as Tibetan studies, in the last section it will be briefly attempted to situate this study in this "landscape" of academic area studies.

## 3.1 Religion as a concept

Studies related to religious and social change, as well as identity and ethnicity have been numerous the past decades. The increased interest for such processes must be seen in relation to changes in the world, which have affected disciplines within humanities and the social sciences. From the 1960s and onwards, feminist, post-structuralist and post-colonial criticisms were put forward, and are here of great importance, as they questioned the lack of people's agency, power relations, orientalism and other biases in scholarly writings.<sup>41</sup> From seeking to inquire about a religion's true essence and nature, religion must instead be understood as social expressions, which are constantly changing along with the society and culture.<sup>42</sup> Analytically, therefore religion constitutes an integrated part of the culture as a whole, not as

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<sup>40</sup> Influential to the critical theories perspective are, amongst others: Foucault (e.g. 2005 [1966]) and Derrida (1976).

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g.: Said (2003 [1978]), Spivak (1988), Abu-Lughod (2002, 1991), and Narayan (1997).

<sup>42</sup> See e.g.: Geertz (1973), Flood (1999), McGuire (2002), and Davie (2007).

an independent sphere – contrasting earlier paradigms of functionalism,<sup>43</sup> structuralism and phenomenology, which tended to, according to Catherine Bell: “(...) think of paradigmatic or authentic ritual as a matter of relatively immutable sets of practices intent on preserving and promoting the unchanging structures of the sociocultural system.” (1997: 211). In many ways, the history of religions has made a turn towards social science, and theoretical and methodological implications will be discussed below.

## 3.2 Qualitative Method

Provided the understanding of religion as discussed above, contextualization and interpretation become central practices in the inquiries of religion. The aim is to examine how people relate to religious phenomena, and the empirically available narratives in which humans communicate, such as speech, texts, and body language, are therefore subjects to interpretation. This narrative approach underlines the relational aspect of, for example, knowledge, which anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup states: “(...) that it attaches itself to relations between people or between people and objects and in the sense that it emerges within a dialogical field.” (2004: 456). By engaging in such methodologies, researchers are potentially able to reveal important dimensions, which historically have been neglected in the history of religions, such as contextuality, power relations, gender, and everyday forms of religious life. In order to be able to study such dimensions of religious life, this thesis’ material is based on strategies found within qualitative method, such as: formal and informal interviews, observations, and conversations.<sup>44</sup> Similar to the theoretical perspectives discussed below, the aim of the qualitative method is to reveal specificities in the data consisting of people’s narratives rather than the broad meta-theoretical perspectives. However, during the research process, broad classifications, such as a specific ritual can be useful if we seek to compare different narratives about a specific religious phenomenon. To categorize our impressions and experiences is an every-day cognitive strategy, but for a researcher it is necessary to analyze and reveal nuanced layers of meaning of a broad category or a specific phenomena.

Quantitative research, which analyzes social phenomena through measurements using mathematical models, theories, and hypotheses and which produces data consisting of

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<sup>43</sup> The idea of scientific paradigm can be traced back to philosopher of science, Thomas Khun, meaning that the research within a field follows a specific model and practices, theories and methods are often taken for granted.

<sup>44</sup> See chapter 4 for discussions of research ethics and methodological challenges.

percentages or statistics, is often referred to as more “scientific”. For this type of study village surveys would potentially be a meaningful method, since they could have provided an overview of, for example, households in the villages and their religious belonging. However, religious belonging is a complex issue and a quantitative survey would not have been able to grasp the layers of meaning like in a qualitative approach. In an eventual Ph.D. thesis, however, village surveys might provide useful data to supplement the material obtained from qualitative fieldwork.

### **3.2.1 Problematizing scholarly representation – theoretical and methodological implications**

Qualitative research, unlike quantitative methods, has been described as more of a “creative art form” (see e.g. Unni Wikan 2002) – because the researcher is the “instrument” when collecting data, in the processes of interpretations, selections, and writing – something that makes qualitative research not as verifiable as quantitative research. Peter Pels and Lorraine Nencel underline the importance of how the end of political colonialism had major impact on anthropology, where the discipline’s authority was weakened as more people started questioning the capacity to define the non-Western ‘Other’ (1991: 3). Hence the “value-free” theory and the legitimation of fieldwork as an innocent method became suspect (ibid. 7). As a reaction, anthropologist Barbara Tedlock states that a ‘self-revelatory celebration’ took place in the 1980s, where more focus was put on the implications of the researcher’s presence in the processes of inquiry, interpretations, and selections (1991: 115). The researcher is situated in the whole research process, and therefore involves in processes of reflexivity, which means a reflection on how his or hers presence, presumptions, gender, ethnicity and class have implications on the research (Okely, 2007, Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

The borders between the dichotomies ‘insider’ or ‘the other’ (the studied) vs. ‘outsider’ or ‘the self’ (I, the researcher) are blurred because the emphasis is on the reflexive communication between the different actors, where the researcher also becomes a subject incorporated into the analysis. Historian of religions Gavin Flood argues for a hermeneutic and communicative approach to understand religion. Yet, he underlines a distinction between the insiders’ and outsiders’ narratives, where the insiders’ narratives are situated within a religious tradition, while researcher is situated in a narrative construction of scholarship and their discourses (Flood, 1999: 139). Here, hermeneutics,<sup>45</sup> i.e. reflections on interpretation and

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<sup>45</sup> Modern hermeneutics has its roots in German philosophy developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher

understanding, play a central role. According to Flood, a hermeneutical perspective is critical to claims of objectivity and truths and is therefore embedded in communication and we constitute a part in that which we seek to understand and interpret (ibid. 11). Hermeneutics is therefore a different process of understanding than the causal and naturalistic explanations discussed in the beginning of this chapter.

### **3.3 Theoretical perspectives on religious change**

#### **3.3.1 Constructivism and invented traditions**

Processes of religious change are complex and as the thesis' title suggests, my analysis of the constructedness of the Limboos religious identity make up a crucial part of the religious change which have been studied. When studying processes of religious change, the relationship between religion and other aspects of the broader social context must be highlighted. Sociologist of religion James A. Beckford argues in *Social Theory and Religion* (2006 [2003]) for a social constructivist approach in studies of religion. The concept and meaning of the category 'religion', is itself socially constructed, which means, according to Beckford, religion, as well as common aspects of daily life are in various situations: intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected, substituted, re-cast etc. (2003: 3).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, culturally constructed meanings are constantly being contested, rejected, modified, or confirmed (ibid. 13). The researcher's aim, according to Beckford, is not to theorize about religion as if it were a generic object, but rather to highlight and reveal the varied meanings and significances people historically have attributed to religion (ibid. 16).

Influential to the social constructivist approach is Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) criticism of the tendencies to perceive traditions and cultures as stable and authentic; instead he proposes to analytically understand traditions as invented. Hobsbawm is especially concerned about the importance of history and explains an invented tradition as a: "(...) process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, only by posing repetition." (Ibid. 4). Furthermore, he shows how "ancient" materials are used to construct invented traditions in order to create historical continuity (ibid. 10). Political scientist Benedict Anderson coined the highly influential concept 'imagined communities', which along with the 'invention of tradition' perspective is useful in order to understand the

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(1768-1834), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), and Jürgen Habermas.

<sup>46</sup> Other central concepts such as: Identity, tribalism, and ethnicity can, similarly to the concept of religion, be analyzed as constructed, as put forward by Beckford.



religious changes among the Limboos, although the author is mainly preoccupied by nationalism. Anderson emphasizes that some shared or imagined symbols, or for example a “sacred” language can enable communities to be imaginable (2006 [1983]: 13). Hobsbawm states that: “(...) the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions is not to be confused with the ‘invention of tradition’. Where the old ways are alive, traditions need to neither be revived nor invented.” (Ibid. 8). Instead one should see the ‘invention of tradition’ as continuous processes carried out by people in different ways depending on the situational contexts, and “the invention” must be linked to wider changes in society, and may be applied to all religious traditions. Whether a tradition is “genuine” or not, as Hobsbawm implies, is not a task for a scholar to determine. Anderson argues in a similar vein, and underlines that communities should not be distinguished by their “genuineness”, but rather by how they are imagined (2006 [1983]: 6). Seeing a tradition as genuine also stands in contrast to Beckford’s understanding of the social constructivist approach, where he stresses the relativism in how, for example, the concept of religion is understood and lived out by different people.

### **3.3.2 Processes of syncretism and anti-syncretism**

Charles Stuart and Rosalind Shaw (1994) argue for the usefulness of applying ‘syncretism’ and ‘anti-syncretism’ to religious and social change. The authors propose to restore the academic usefulness of the category syncretism, i.e. to make it a “neutral” concept without the “loaded meanings” that have been attributed by different academic traditions, especially within the history of religions. The concept was controversial within the discipline due to its close links to missionary and theological writings. Here, so-called “pure traditions” made syncretism become equal to “inauthentic” or “impure” ones. While the category syncretism has had more neutral connotation in anthropology or sociology, where other similar concepts are frequently used, such as: ‘hybridization’, ‘creolization’, or ‘bricolage’.<sup>47</sup> Since scholars started to see traditions as invented, as discussed above, syncretism became an optimistic notion and syncretic processes are now considered a part of religions and cultures (ibid. 1).

Syncretism seems to be a useful concept in the analysis of Limboo culture, which is often described as ‘syncretic’ because it is believed to contain components from, for example, Buddhism and Hinduism. In order to make syncretism analytically useful in studies of change, Shaw and Stuart also argue for an understanding of the ‘politics of syncretism’ where

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<sup>47</sup> For further reading, see for creolization: Hylland Eriksen (2007), for hybridization/bricolage: Lévi-Strauss (1966), Hebdige (1979).

the concept is used to analyze processes of change rather than a static religious form. By analyzing the politics of syncretism and 'religious synthesisism', they emphasize the strategies and power-plays involved in religious syncretism. When syncretism and religious synthesis are understood as processes, on the one hand, the workings of power and agency become involved (ibid. 7-8). 'Anti-syncretism', on the other, is rather a process of resistance to religious synthesis, a reactive process where boundaries are drawn to resist change:

The premise that pure equals authenticity tends to be dominant reading in discourses on ethnic, regional, or nationalistic identities, as well as those of religious movements which are categorized as 'fundamentalist' or "nativist". Such discourses are commonly anti-syncretic, involving the erasure of elements deemed alien from particular religious and ritual forms. Selected forms may be identified as foreign and extirpated, or alternatively recast and retained through claims that they have really always been "ours", thereby deleting former religious syntheses from authorized cultural memory (Stuart and Shaw 1994: 8).

Shaw and Stuart stress that religion and culture become part of the subject-matter of syncretism when scholars become attentive towards agency, i.e. ways people negotiate and redefine the boundaries of their ideas and practices, and the fluidity and political contingency in such boundaries (ibid. 11).

### **3.4 Ethnicity, identity, and agency**

'Ethnicity' and 'identity', together with religion are equally problematic to define clearly, and are often interrelated concepts. In Sikkim, identity and ethnicity are to a large extent embedded. However, this is not essentially valid elsewhere. In Norway, for example, ethnicity and identity are not so embedded compared to Sikkim, because the people who have a Norwegian identity are not necessarily ethnic white or belong to a certain religious tradition. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen states that the emergence of academic studies of ethnicity and identity as types of collective identification is a fairly recent phenomenon and started to become important in social anthropology in the 1960s (2010 [1994]: 5). The emergence must be linked with what has been discussed earlier in this chapter; the criticisms of scholars' tendency to perceive, not only religions, but also cultures and societies as essentialized, static, and a-historical.

Since the 1970s indigenous populations started to organize themselves politically, and it is important to underline that discourses concerning indigenous and tribal groups are closely linked to global organizations, such as the United Nations and various human rights discourses. The debates and discourses are not closed off to state and national borders, but are highly transnational matters. Notions of transnationality, in the sense I have described, seem

to be absent in the Limboos claims to have a tribal identity. The Kirats in Nepal, however, clearly state that they seek to improve their human rights as an indigenous people.<sup>48</sup> Why the discourse is seemingly absent among the Limboos may be explained in part by socio-economic differences in Nepal and Sikkim, where the people in Sikkim overall enjoy better living conditions but also have experienced different historical trajectories. Although, the specific aspect seemed to be absent, the global awareness of ethnicity emerged within the same period as the politization of ethnicity and tribalism emerged in Sikkim. Culture, religion, or ethnicity as potentially potent resources for political and social mobilization are highly relevant when examining the ethnic situation in contemporary Sikkim, as well as in a transnational perspective. More research is, however, needed on the topic and since the transnational discourse on ethnicity is not a main concern in this thesis, I have only introduced the topic.

### 3.4.1 Ethnic identities

Hylland Eriksen argues that ‘ethnicity’ is a useful concept since “(...) it suggests a dynamic situation of variable contact, conflict and competition, but also mutual accommodation between groups” (2010 [1994]: 13). However, as also Hylland Eriksen notes, ethnicity is closely related to notions of race (ibid. 4). The concept ethnicity, is, however, loaded with less negative connotations, both compared to ‘race’ or the colonial derived ‘tribal’ concept.<sup>49</sup> However, categorization of ethnicity is, similar to race or tribe, often based on culturally constructed criteria and differentness, and often, according to David I. Kertzer and Dominique Arel: “(...) identity can be *objectively* determined through ancestry.” (2002: 11). According to the two authors, the use of identity categories in mechanisms of state administration creates a particular view of social reality. Similar to Anderson’s view, they state that categories are assigned and conceptualized as shared with a number of other people as a common collective identity. In turn, the set categories encourage people to view the world as composed of distinct categories (Kertzer and Arel 2002: 5, see also Anderson: (2006 [1983])). Although ethnic identities are articulated as static categories in such contexts, ethnic or religious identities must be analyzed as processes of identification. Similar to Beckford’s constructivist

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<sup>48</sup> The objectives of the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung are available online: <http://www.chumlung.org.np/page.php?page=1> [Accessed November 28, 2013].

<sup>49</sup> In this thesis, tribal is an emic description. None of my informants used ‘ethnic group’ to describe themselves or other groups. When referring to themselves as ‘tribals’, it was often to distance themselves from the “Nepalis”. Furthermore, the different layers of meanings related to notions of tribalism are complex and will be discussed, for example in section 6.6.

approach, sociologist Stuart Hall underlines that individuals articulate their identification or resistance to the positions which they are ascribed. It is therefore important to analyze how individuals produce, perform, and stylize these positions, as well as processes of resistance and negotiation (1996: 14). For example, the definition of the ST status with its vague criteria provides characteristics of ST community, and if these criteria are acted upon and incorporated as aspects of the community's identification – such agency can potentially create successful resources for political assertion and be used strategically to, for example, mobilize groups.<sup>50</sup>

The materiality of social practice seems to play an increased role in the ethno-political landscape of the state. Materiality in this context refers specifically to newly constructed physical objects which are claimed to represent Limboo cultural heritage and has led to a revitalization of Limboo material culture. Relevant here are Jean Comaroff and John F. Comaroff's approach to ethnic identity. They emphasize ethnicity as a commodity, i.e. as a product that can be bought and sold in a marked context (2009: 150). The authors state that: "Identity is increasingly claimed as *property* by its living heirs, who proceed to manage it by palpably corporate means: to brand it and sell it, even to anthropologists, in self-consciously consumerable forms." (Ibid. 29). Notions of authenticity of such "properties" become crucial by drawing upon differentness or otherness related to the group's immediate surroundings. In Comaroff and Comaroff's understanding, the visible content, which represents a group's ethnicity, is always the product of specific historical conditions. The material objects have an effect on human perception, and frame the motivation, meaning, and materiality of social practice (ibid. 38).

To inquire about agency in these mentioned processes of articulating, inventing, creating, or syncretizing ethnic or/and religious identities are crucial in order to be able to grasp power structures and power-plays. Who or what segments are capable of defining or articulating a group's property in which a group's identity is to be represented? Who can act upon the ST criteria and potentially utilize these as political or social resources? Who will eventually benefit from the specific articulations? As for politics of identity and its negotiations of rights, rhetorical strategies draw on categorical or stereotypical identities, and Henrietta Moore argues that: "(...) resource flows are determined by a field of power within which identities are constantly being reformulated in categorical terms. The power to define reality is an economic and political power." (1994: 5).

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<sup>50</sup> See also Beyer (2000 [1994]: 97-98), Beckford (2003).

### 3.5 Sikkim – a geographic and academic borderland

Sikkim is a cultural borderland, since the state is encircled by other nation states. In addition to the politically defined borders there are also academic defined borders, which constitute institutionalized area studies, and in which geographical borders are not reflected on. The aim of this discussion is to introduce an ongoing debate about the Himalayan and Tibetan cultural areas, which problematize the academic constructed area studies. The borders of area studies which also have theoretical and methodological implications on this study, since Sikkim can be positioned on the border of three academic area studies: Tibetan studies, Himalayan studies, and South Asian studies. This discussion also points to the fluidity and constructedness of ethnic identities in the area.

The research found within each academic area study is largely influenced by certain gatekeeping concepts, introduced by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai as: “(...) concepts, that is, that seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question, and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region.” (1986: 357). Similarly, anthropologist Richard Fardon is concerned with regionalized anthropological theories, where regions become exemplars of type features and problems (1990: 28). Both Appadurai and Fardon state that a problem with gatekeeping concepts or regionalized anthropological theories is that they change slowly (Appadurai, 1986: 357; Fardon, 1990: 28). For example, in anthropological research on India, caste can be said to be a gatekeeping concept, and Appadurai states that even though other topics are dealt with today, caste and hierarchy are still sole points of interests (1986: 360).<sup>51</sup> As discussed in chapter 2, the British orientalist’s writings from the nineteenth century as well as rescent anthropological research on Sikkim, have been primarily focused on the Lepcha and Bhutia communities. Despite Sikkim’s geographical location as part of South Asia the previous anthropological research is positioned in-between Himalayan and Tibetan studies. Provided the reign of the Namgyal dynasty (1642- 1975), Sikkim’s historical past is firmly located within a Tibetan cultural area. The prevailing focus on the Bhutia and Lepcha communities in Sikkim within Tibetan studies consequently make the contemporary anthropological research on ethnicity and religion appear one-dimensional. Little research has been carried out on the communities typically associated with Hinduism and Christianity, and the problematic categories such as, ‘Hindu’

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<sup>51</sup> For example, the contemporary studies of Buddhism in India is often concerned with Dalit Buddhist movements associated with Ambedkar, see e.g. Omtvedt (2003).

and ‘Christian’ have not been extensively analyzed in recent anthropological studies.<sup>52</sup> The tendency to primarily focus on the “non-Nepali” segments can also be seen in anthropological research in Nepal, however, ‘non-Nepali’ has a different meaning compared to in the Sikkimese context, as exemplified by Mary des Chene:

(...) an unintended result has been to set up the hills, the in-between region as the really Nepali part of the country. It has been the Tibeto-Burman peoples of the mid-hills – Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Gurungs, Magars, Thakali – and to a lesser extent the caste Hindus of this region that represent true Nepali culture as presented by anthropologists. (2007: 213)

Geoffrey Samuel urges scholars to be aware of the tendency to treat Tibetan and Himalayan areas as isolates and underlines the importance of relating the studies to larger regional discourses (1994: 2). This tendency is due to, according to Samuel that: “The issues important to Indianists, Sinologists and Central Asian specialists are, for the most part, not central to the studies of Tibetan societies.” (Ibid. 3). The consequence of treating areas as isolates, is that there is not any unified theoretical framework, despite the areas’ historical, linguistic, and cultural connections (ibid. 5-6). Shneiderman, similar to Samuel, calls for a more consistent theoretical framework for the borderlands to Tibet (2010, 2006). While issues related to ethnic identity make up a central concern in contemporary research in both India and Nepal, Shneiderman notes a terminologically absence of studies related to ethnicity in Tibetan studies, and asks: “ (...) whether the different analytical frameworks applied within Nepal versus Tibetan studies derives from genuine indigenous differences, or are simply the result of different disciplinary histories.” (Shneiderman, 2006: 11). However, if we look beyond the borders of the Tibet Autonomous Region, notable amounts of research have been carried out on the Tibetan ethnic, for example, on Nakhi or Naxi and Muso communities, where processes of creating distinct ethnic identities along with religious revival movements are also central matters, quite similar to the processes we see in Sikkim today.<sup>53</sup>

### **3.5.1 Problematizing area studies**

Samuel attempts to provide a solution to the challenges of positioning the Tibetan societies in a wider academic context, and proposes to incorporate them in Southeast Asian studies, because of common language heritage historical connections, and cultural similarities (1994: 5-6). During recent years issues similar to Samuel’s concern, have accumulated into a larger

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<sup>52</sup> Many Lepchas are Christians, but they have been left out in the scholarly work where the focus is on their “traditional” belief system and aspects of Buddhist ‘syncretism’. The Lepchas near Hee Goan were Christians, according to my informant, and they all lived around the village’s church.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g.: Chao (2008, 2006, 1999).

debate.<sup>54</sup> However, unlike Samuels' arguments, the recent debate centers on the concept of 'Zomia', introduced by Willem van Schendel in 2002. It was not until after James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009) more scholars became engaged in the Zomia debate. Scott proposes Zomia to describe a 'non-state space' defined in social, political, and economic terms, which Shneiderman believes:

(...) can be of great utility to those working in the Himalayan region, particularly the emphasis on the ethnic, national, and religious fluidity of highland communities, and their agency vis-a'-vis the states with which they engage. (2010: 290)

In the citation above Shneiderman brings up important and relevant perspectives for this thesis: religious fluidity (and fluid identities) and ethnic groups' agency vis-à-vis the state, which force the researcher to take the specific area's actual geographical and political position into consideration. I will not use the Zomia concept in my thesis, since in my view the term is, at this stage of the academic debate, too alien and is constructed relying too much on an etic or "outside" perspective. To create a new area study will probably generate similar theoretical challenges as we've seen within e.g. Tibetan studies and Himalayan studies, only located at a different geographical point. I therefore discard it as a useful academic concept, but one which may, after further theorizing, prove to be useful in the future

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<sup>54</sup> Scholars engaged in the Zomia debate are, e.g.: van Schendel (2002), Scott (2009), Shneiderman (2010), Michaud (2010), and Giersch (2010).

# **4 Material and Informants**

## **4.1 Searching for contacts**

The heavy rain of the monsoon prevented me from leaving Gangtok the first month, when traveling is extremely risky and roads are often blocked due to frequent landslides. Jeeps are the most common mode of public transportation and are usually very crowded. Although the transport system is relatively effective, the road conditions make travelling often a tiring, bumpy, and dusty experience. During the frustrating first month of the monsoon period I was fortunate to meet a couple of Sikkimese Ph.D.- students in Gangtok, thanks to Balkci-Denjongpa. Their established networks helped me to point out potentially interesting areas for my project and got me in touch with people who became immensely important during the fieldwork. After the weather calmed down, frequent trips were made to West Sikkim.

## **4.2 Research ethics and methodological challenges**

### **4.2.1 The language barrier**

This dissertation is written in English because the empirical material analyzed is based on real people's narratives, thoughts, and experiences. My conversations with the informants were either conducted in English or by the help of an interpreter. Ethical issues are important to consider for the researcher and, for me it is important that the informants have the opportunity to read what has been written about them and that they also have the opportunity to give me response. English is neither my informants' nor my mother tongue. Consequently, chances for any miscommunications and misunderstandings between the informants and me increase. English is a widely spoken language in India and is the main language in many private schools. Still, I am aware that my insufficient language skills in Nepali and Limboo constitute a weakness in this study, since it then becomes challenging to grasp the culturally embedded nuances in the informants' statements. However, I consider my English skills as sufficient for conducting academic interviews and converse with people. As time went on, more Limboo words were adopted in my vocabulary. Despite being unable to speak Limboo (despite many eager attempts), my attempts to recognize words and my increasing knowledge about Limboo culture and religion made people appreciate me and therefore increased the informants' willingness to talk to me. By staying in Sikkim for several months, it was possible to travel back to the villages and further investigate unclear matters.



All my informants knew the objective of my inquiries, but topics regarding indigeneity to Sikkim and reservation issues were experienced as sensitive to most of the informants. Therefore these issues would often not be central in interviews or discussions with the informants. To talk about religion and politics in general seemed to pose some difficulties. Not only are these sensitive topics, but can also be experienced as complicated to talk and express feelings about. Simply describing events and situations, however, seemed unproblematic for most of the informants.

#### **4.2.2 Translators**

Due to my lack of language skills, I wanted to hire a translator who could assist me during the fieldwork, or at least for an extended period. Several people were engaged in the search, but it turned out to be very challenging to find anyone suitable. To hire a translator, as planned, was not possible since young people with good knowledge of English and Limboo were already engaged in either jobs or education. It forced me to reflect upon how the difficulties in employing a good translator would have implications on my data collection and how the language language barriers could be solved. It is possible that not having a translator/assistant granted me a certain amount of “freedom”. On the one hand, by only having myself to look after, there was no one who potentially could cancel or postpone appointments, on the one hand, but having a translator would, on the other hand, have enabled me to reach a deeper level of understanding. However, it is also possible that the presence of an unfamiliar Limboo serving as a translator would pose some difficulties when visiting people's homes. Instead, different translators were used who were from the villages or areas the fieldwork was carried out. In most cases the translators had family ties with the people who were interviewed. This means they knew or were related to my interviewees. When they brought me to people they thought would be interesting for me, the translator and interviewee already had a good relationship. By already being accepted by the translator, it seemed like the interviewees automatically accepted and welcomed me into their homes. No negativity was expressed towards my presence, but the fact that a young, foreign woman, traveled on her own, did seem to make some people quite skeptical. It turned out that most people were worried about me feeling lonely in an unfamiliar place being away from my family. Unlike many parts of India, Sikkim is generally believed to be very safe, and many Sikkimese girls around my age were also traveling alone. However, traveling alone posed some challenges for me because of the loneliness I felt at times, but at the same time being alone also opened up the possibility

for new encounters and discussions, and gave great opportunities for me to discuss the topic of my thesis.

### **4.2.3 The role as a researcher**

The positivity around my presence described above is also connected to the subject matter of my thesis, which is the Limboo community's desire for political and cultural recognition. It is believed by many that scholarly interest in and publications about the Limboos will grant the group attention and enhance the group's identity as a distinct ethnic group. Especially ethnic association members seemed to be aware of the opportunities a thesis would potentially bring. During an interview with "S.B. Limboo", a previous member of the All India Limboo Association (Teymen Yakthung Ma Chumbo), the apex body of all Limboo associations in India, the interviewee expressed that my work would be instrumental in achieving benefits and for the Limboo community and stated:

Today you are working for this down to earth-people. You are like a god angel for us, we take that you are sent by god to us, because you are working for our welfare. You are digging out our past, so that people can know.<sup>55</sup>

To reflect critically on how people responded to my project's topic and further on how they presented Limboo culture and religion to me became a crucial throughout the fieldwork. The fact that a researcher had chosen to write a Master thesis about the Limboos, was for many of the informants recognition in itself. That the thesis could potentially be used for political gains, something that poses an ethical dilemma. Today, most Master theses in Norway are published digitally, and the authors have little control over their work. In her doctoral thesis, Shneiderman observes that many Thangmi desire recognition by social scientists. My thesis could potentially function as a 'recognizing agent', which, according to Shneiderman, implies that it can contribute to prove an ethnic community's unique identity (2009: 58-59). Here, the Limboos' ethnicity can be viewed as a branded "property", carefully presented to the researcher, for example, the associations' version of Yumaism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 29). Shneidermann and Mark Turin also state that recognizing agents can also potentially be used to negotiate claims for recognition and enhanced rights vis-à-vis the state. Social science research can potentially aid indigenous movements, and also become involved in them (2006a: 100, see also Shneiderman, 2009: 50-53). However, it is uncertain whether my interpretations and analyses of the collected data will be positively received by all sections

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<sup>55</sup> The interview with S.B. Limboo was taped and carried out in English in December near Gangtok.

of the Limboo community. Through a critical analysis sensitive topics will be touched upon, as well as viewpoints which might not be “politically correct” in contemporary Sikkim.

#### **4.2.4 Anonymization**

Even though none of my informants expressed that they wanted to be anonymous, I have, due to the sensitive topics of ethnic identity and politics, anonymized all the informants by giving them pseudonyms. Some brief background descriptions, like age and to which village they belong, will be provided in this chapter. Another reason for this choice is that Sikkim is a very small state where many people, especially those belonging to the same ethnic group, know each other. To define a ‘Limboo religion’ is itself a contested and political issue, involving power struggles from different segments and groupings in the Limboo community, therefore the decision to anonymize the informants is done to avoid conflicts related to this thesis, even though such an outcome is unlikely. The villages where the fieldwork was carried out have been given the names of the nearest towns. The reason is again to avoid that interviewees are recognized, but by providing the information about the location, enables us to also link the area with its history.

### **4.3 The field**

#### **4.3.1 Conversations, interviews and observations**

With the exception of two interviews, I took notes while interviewing or conversing with people. The tape recorder was used during quite formal interviews which needed to be carried out in a limited time span. On the one hand, the interviews with older people and association members tended to have a more formal and “clinical” character, where an interview guide, prepared on beforehand was used actively. During these interviews, the interviewees would generally respond in a “politically correct” way. The informal interviews and conversations, on the other hand, were more relaxed and sometimes strong emotions were expressed, and on these occasions nuances, contradictions, and officially “hidden” social aspects would be revealed. Interview guides were not as actively used during the informal conversations, and on such occasions it was important for me that the informants raised topics and discussed perspectives important for them. Despite not using interview guides during these meetings, to write up such guides before every interview and trip to a village, helped me structure the conversations. The interviews would often start quite formally, but since most of the interviews took place in people’s homes, the families would often serve *tongba*, an alcoholic

beverage made from fermented finger millet, snacks, or food. The interview situations would then become more informal and relaxed and would often take several hours. This is also one of the reasons the interviews were not taped. By taking notes, it was easier to ask the interviewees to write down Limboo words directly in my notes. Informal conversations often took place during meals or during walks in the hills where my informants would show me objects, buildings or people they thought would be interesting to me. Therefore, my material also consists of photos and video recordings, which became useful tools, especially when observing rituals.

### **4.3.2 Gender and status**

Initially, I was determined to analyze my data in a gender perspective. Unfortunately, the gender aspect is almost completely left out of my thesis, since men mostly surrounded me in the field. This tendency reveals that men in their fifties and sixties were given informal positions to act like spokespersons, because people viewed them as knowledgeable. Therefore, although I made repeated attempts to get into contact with Limboo women, my material is dominated by men's voices. Still, since the Limboos in Sikkim are underrepresented in research, this study, although women's voices lack, hopefully provides a deeper knowledge on religion and ethnic identity among members of this group. Since I am aware of this tendency in my material, I have attempted to make up for it by making the reader aware of who is speaking for the Limboos, and also by indicating in which cases there might be different opinions. For further studies, I believe it is necessary to approach the ethnic question among the Limboos through a more gender sensitive approach. It is also important to highlight the high position Limboo association members have in the community. One example may illustrate this point. Before driving around with a translator and his friend, I had told them I would like to observe a ritual, and since I knew we had entered the ritual 'season,' I hoped this could be done. Suddenly, the translator's friend had to leave us because the Mangenna ritual was going to be performed in his family's house. Instead of joining the friend, the translator suggested we should visit an association member in his fifties in the neighboring village. This illustrates how highly my interpreter esteemed the man who was also a ritual specialist. Even though I had not intention on singling out male association members in their fifties or sixties as my informants I was repeatedly brought to speak with such male representatives of the Limboos. I started to wonder about ordinary people's seemingly lack of knowledge about Limboo religion and culture. Young adults in their

twenties, around my age, were natural to be around with, but they would often be reluctant to talk about Limboo religion. This point will be discussed more later in the thesis since it is significant for the analysis of the religious changes I have studied

#### **4.4 Presentations of key information and the field sites**

The initial plan was to stay in the villages as long as possible, maybe up to two weeks during each trip in order to be able to participate in the everyday activities and to understand more about my informant's social lives. After the first stay in a village, it was evident that the initial plan would pose difficulties, because the informants were busy either working or studying. The fact that some people took time off from work and school to accompany me was very uncomfortable. Not wanting to disturb my hosts for a long period, I managed to stay for four to five days during each trip. In total, I visited the Darap area three times, the Soreng area twice, and the Hee Goan area once. Interviews were also carried out in the cities of Gangtok and Namchi, the latter located in South Sikkim. Despite being unable to stay for as long as I planned, the time spent in the villages was intense, but productive in terms of data collection.

It is difficult to describe every individual from whom information was obtained, but some of the 'key informants' will be presented in the description of the villages (see below). Other informants will be introduced throughout the thesis and are mostly linked with the key informants. Since the data is obtained mainly from different localities, it is possible to compare data from several villages – an analytic strategy which can shed light on the complexities, fluidity, and diversity of religious and ethnic change among the Limboos. Here follows a presentation of each village:

##### **Darap**

Darap, where the YMMCC is located, consists of a bazaar area where different ethnic groups and religious practitioners live and perform their activities ranging from commerce to worship. According to several villagers there are around 1000 inhabitants of which the Limboos make up around 90%.<sup>56</sup> Limboos and Lepchas mainly inhabit the surrounding hills (see section below). The town is located approximately 6 km from Pelling, which is a popular tourist destination for national and international visitors who are drawn to the important Buddhist monasteries of Pemayangste and Sanghacholing, as well as beautiful scenic views of

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<sup>56</sup> The numbers given are most likely somewhat exaggerated, as I believe my informants included some of the villages from the hills in that number.

the world's third highest mountain, Kangchendzönga. It is apparent that people in Darap are also trying to develop their village as a tourist destination since many households had been made into homestays. The YMMCC *mangheem* and the Yumaist *mangheem* are located in the outskirts of the bazaar area, and further down the lane a number of YMMCC followers live. There is also a small Sai Baba *mandir* near the *mangheem*, while the nearest Hindu temple and church are located about an hour walk down the hill near the Rimbi river. Compared to the hilly areas around, the households below the bazaar seemed poor, most likely because agricultural land was almost non-existent.

### **Darap area**

“Maya” is one of the key informants who resides in one of the villages in the upper hills of Darap. She is in her late teens and has attended a government school in a different area of Sikkim. She claimed that, to her, Limboo religion is confusing. She has good knowledge of English and had chosen to focus on learning Hindi at school instead of Limboo because she regarded it as more useful in future education and jobs, despite that her older brother wanted her to learn more Limboo. Her family consists of a mother and father in their 40s who are farmers, two elder sons in their late 20s, and one other daughter in her early teens. Compared to the area where YMMCC followers live, they own large areas of land. The parents had been farmers all their lives and did not speak English but were fluent in both Nepali and Limboo. They spoke mainly Nepali when addressing their children but would also speak Limboo to them to “freshen” up the childrens’ knowledge of it. Many of the households in the village also kept livestock, such as cows, pigs, goats, and chickens, which were offered and consumed during rituals or festive occasions, but also for regular meals. The family house was relatively new, and Maya stated that her father was brought up further up the hill where her uncle now resides. Her mother is from another village, something that indicates patrilocal residence.

### **Soreng area**

Because of the steepness of the area where the village is located, there was difficult to get a proper overview of the households of the village. There was little cultivated land around the house of the informants. The reason to this may be that this family was the fifth generation who lived in Sikkim. The father's forefathers had emigrated from Nepal to find work in Sikkim. However, they claimed to own their land and there were mainly Limboos living near their house. Unlike the Darap area, which had a heavy Buddhist influence, there is a strong

Christian influence in the Soreng area. Many churches and Christian schools are established here. Unlike the family in Darap, the mother and father of the family are both employed in the governmental sector and only the mother spoke English and Limboo. Although leading a more “modern” lifestyle compared to the family in the Darap area, they owned a small plot of cultivated land, and expressed proudly that most of their meals consisted of home grown produce. Livestock, however, was rare in this village and there were many vegetarians. This household also has two sons; the oldest, Suraj, is in his twenties, while the youngest is attending primary school. The two sons are fluent in English and Nepali, but do not speak Limboo because of their schooling in Christian schools where English is the main language. Patrilocal residence is also practiced here, since the original household where the father had previously resided was located near the house they lived. The mother is originally from another village.

### **Hee Goan area**

Similar to the Darap area, this village is also located on a steep hillside with a bazaar further down the hill while the upper hillsides have cultivated land. The household of one of the main informants, Gopal, kept livestock and the members were not vegetarians. Gopal is in his late twenties and his friends in the same age group became important informants. His mother, who was in her late sixties, only spoke Limboo, making Gopal also fluent in Limboo. Similar to the Darap area more ethnic groups resided near the bazaar located by the main road and the houses were more densely located compared to the hilly areas. The Limboo households seemed to be situated close to each other further up the hill. In contrasted to the inhabitants in Darap, the Lepchas were all Christians and they lived close to a small, newly constructed church. There was also a number of, what my informant called, ‘Nepali households’ like Chettris and Rais, who had settled in the village more recently – meaning they had been living there for about one or two generations. During the time spent in the village, the cardamom crops were about to be harvested and the bright green color of the plants dominated the whole village. A friend of Gopal said that cardamom is incredibly expensive these days and is the main source of income for many people in the village. Some are very successful in the cardamom business and a couple of men have even married a second wife. There are also businessmen from Delhi who come here to grow cardamom, Gopal said.



**Figure 2.** One of the villages in the upper hills.



## 5 The phedangma tradition

The aim of this chapter is to examine some of the central religious and social concepts of Limboo religious life in the three villages the fieldwork was mainly carried out. I will provide a relatively lengthy discussion for two reasons. First, no academic research has been carried out on the Limboo belief system in Sikkim. Second, it is crucial to have knowledge of the “old” tradition or ‘village religion’ – here referred to as the ‘phedangma tradition’, in order to understand the processes of religious change and identity construction promoted by the Limboo ethnic associations in contemporary Sikkim. I also seek, to a certain extent, to analyze the material in a wider Tibetan and Himalayan anthropological context. However, due to the limitations of a Master thesis, it has been necessary to keep this wider analysis to a minimum. In contrast to the next chapter, this chapter will mainly deal with narratives from individuals not engaged in the political associations.

### 5.1 Who are the Limboos?

Despite several scholars’ attempts to determine the origin of the Limboos, they do not seem to agree on the matter. Geoff Childs, one of the contributors to a recent publication (2012), writes that no Himalayan scholar, despite having large amounts of data, has developed an explanatory framework that rests upon formal theories of migration (11). Most of the sources available are oral migration narratives, and Toni Huber and Stewart Blackburn argue that they can hardly be taken as reliable historical data, but the memories can reveal much about the aspirations and values of the people (2012: 4). In the British orientalist writings from the nineteenth century, we find great variations regarding the group’ origin. Risley separates “Sikkimese” Limboos, believed to hail from places in the Tibetan province of Kham (1989 [1894]: 27), and Limbuwan Limboos – similar to the common narrative today (ibid. 2). Here we also learn that the Limboos originate from different areas, for example, Lhasa and Kasi. Eventually they settled each in their respective districts in Limbuwan and became chiefs of their respective regions (ibid. 38, see also: J.R. Subba, 1999: 73-77, and Chemjong (2003 [1966])). While Hooker emphasizes a Tibetan origin (2011 [1854]), Campbell highlights their possible Mongolian origin (1869: 144). Hodgson, however, associates both the Limboos and Lepchas with Sikkim, and claims they are Buddhists, despite having their non-Buddhist ritual specialists (2013 [1874]: 1, 137-138). More recent anthropological research, such as that by Caplan, writes that the Limboos and Rais are descendants of the Kiratis and are described in

the Mahabharata as dwellers of the eastern Himalayan regions. There are some disagreements as to whether the Limboos are Kiratis, and Caplan refers to Vansittart in a footnote, who states that the term is closely linked with the Rais, but since intermarriages are common between the groups, he includes them both into the Kirati category (Vansittart, 1915: 7 in Caplan, 2000 [1970]: 14). In Nepal, both the Rai and the Limboo communities are associated with the easternmost area of Nepal often referred to as Kirat, while the Rais are associated with the mid-region and the Limboos with the far-eastern area called Limbuwan (Caplan, 2000 [1970]: 14).<sup>57</sup>

### **5.1.1 Villages and inter-religious relations**

The households in the three villages explained that the father of the family was native to the village, whereas the mother came from another part of Sikkim, or from another Indian state, which indicates patrilocal residency. The fathers' childhood homes were located in the village, but a new household had been constructed if an elder brother had inherited the parental household. As mentioned in the village presentations in the previous chapter, there appeared to be more ethnic diversity near the bazaar areas, where the houses had no or small areas of agricultural land. People here often run small shops or are engaged in tourism, or sometimes they work in the fields further up the hills. In the Darap area, the only Limboos residing by the bazaar area were Christians.<sup>58</sup> Some Christian relatives of the family residing in the Soreng area also lived outside the village near a bazaar area. Maya and Sanjay, along with other informants explained that the settlement pattern was caused by ritual differences, such as the Christian Limboos failure to contribute to the marriage and death rituals, something that is expected from households in a village. Two of the households living in the upper Limboo area were YMMCC followers. Maya's parents stated that they found their vegetarianism problematic during weddings, especially, since they underlined the importance of contributing meat during such occasions. In spite of Maya's parents' statements their household contributed to the preparations for one of the village's YMMCC follower's death ritual.

A village's reciprocity or mutual exchange system is also central in Balikci-Dejongpa's observations, where Lhopos who converted to Christianity were expelled from

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<sup>57</sup> Also commonly spelled Limbuan, translated by Caplan as 'the country of the Limboos' (2000 [1970]: 13).

<sup>58</sup> Issues concerning conversion to Christianity belong to a sensitive area, and they were therefore difficult to discuss with informants. Moreover, I would not have been able to deal with the topic extensively, as it would exceed the requirements of the thesis.

the village (Balikci, 2008: 154). Bentley, however, writes that even though Christian missionary work is generally disliked Christian Lepchas are accepted and can continue to live in the village and they attend festivities such as marriages and funerals. Yet they do not attend the religious ceremonies conducted by lamas or other ritual specialists, nor do they consult them in cases of illness (2007: 65). Central questions remain unanswered, as to whether Christian Limboos are expelled, like in Balikci-Denjongpa's example, and eventually who are entitled to make these decisions. More research needs to be carried out on this specific topic in order to understand the bigger picture regarding conversion and village dynamics.

### 5.1.2 *Thar*

*Thar* is often translated as 'clan' or 'lineage', although my informants often referred to their *thar* as their sub-caste and Limboo as their caste. Their statements probably reflect the administration's usage of the words. Caplan operates with 'clan' and 'sub-clan', which he observed in areas near Ilam (2000 [1970]: 23-24), but none of the people questioned mentioned any sub-*thar*. However, many Limboos have two *thar*, in which one usually indicates a specific geographical place, while the other is not. Whether one of these names is regarded as a sub-*thar* was not confirmed by any informants. According to J.R. Subba it is difficult to distinguish *thar* and sub-*thar* from each other (2012a: 148-158), and lists 922 *thar* and sub-*thar*,<sup>59</sup> but emphasizes that the list is incomplete (ibid. 154). He also notes that non-Limboo individuals that are either adopted or married into a Limboo family are included in the *thar* (2012: 147). In a similar conclusion, T.B. Subba states that some Lepcha and Limboo clans are interrelated and whether they are considered 'Limboo' or 'Lepcha' depends largely upon where a given clan is located. For example, in a Limboo area clan 1 will be regarded as Limboos but in a Lepcha area the same clan will be considered Lepcha. A similar situation exists between Limboo and Rai clan names. Subba sees this condition (in both the Limboo-Lepcha and Limboo-Rai examples) as being related to their similar religious and social practices and beliefs (2010: 118).<sup>60</sup> Vague *thar* boundaries may point to fluid and flexible ethnic boundaries and complexities in identity formation and belonging.

There are different rules regarding marriage and *thar*. Maya expressed that it is socially prohibited to marry someone from either her mother's or father's *thar* and stated that the social ideal is that it is permissible to only marry within a *thar* where the point of relationship to the individual whom one marries exceeds five generations. According to the

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<sup>59</sup> J.R. Subba does not state where his data about *thar* is collected.

<sup>60</sup> The *thar* T.B. Subba mentions are: Youngmu, Sitling, Lucksom, and Mangmu (2010: 118)

mother of the family in the Soreng area, however, one cannot marry any *thar* of three generations back. According to several informants – the family near Darap in particular – some *thar* like their own – are only found in Sikkim, for example. Begha (a place in western Sikkim), Nego, Phurunbo, Khamdhak etc.<sup>61</sup> It is of course impossible to tell whether this is correct, but my data from the villages suggest that some *thar* (the *thar* of the family near Darap, in this case) is more closely associated with Buddhism, while for other families this is not the case. According to the family from a village near Darap, their migration *mundhum* (‘migration narrative’) states they are originally from Lhasa, and the deity associated with their *thar* is Muden Sammang (a Limboo deity sometimes associated with Tibet).<sup>62</sup> In order to maintain the prosperity of the *thar*, the Nahangma ritual will be performed by ‘raising the head’ of the household. The family in Darap, unlike the other *thar*, claimed that they needed to ritually sacrifice a cow for Muden Sammang. The specific practice resembles the Yangthang family (Mullard, 2003: 57 n10.). Individuals from other *thar*, especially the family near Soreng, claimed that they restrained themselves from eating beef, and to ritually sacrifice cows was unacceptable. Contrary to the claim of the Darap family, the family near Soreng had been living in Sikkim for five generations, and shows that the practices may vary along *thar* divisions and geographical belonging.

Given the debates linked to the ST status regarding the ethnic group’s indigeneity to Sikkim, one might assume that the family in Darap would strongly emphasize their claimed belonging to Sikkim, which they did not (the mother’s birth *thar* was a Nepalese *thar*). Balikci-Denjongpa states that some Limboo families in Thingchim, claimed, similar to the narrative we find in Risley (1989 [1894]), to belong to the Lhasa *gotra* (N: ‘clan’) and that they had Tibetan origin – similar to the family near Darap, and considered themselves partly Buddhists. The Kasi *gotra* Limboos were, according to Balikci-Denjongpa, Hindus (2008: 178n 8). However, Darap’s approximate location to the Pemayangtse monastery might also explain the informants’ seemingly closer connection to Buddhism, but unlike Balikci-Denjongpa’s findings, the family near Darap did not consider themselves Buddhists or Hindu, though others considered them to be Hindu. This is an example of the problems of the current designation of Limboos as Hindu (see 5.8.1 for more information). The discussion of a death ritual later in the chapter will also reveal further reciprocal perspectives and significances of *thar* in a ritual context.

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<sup>61</sup> *Kham* means ‘soil’ in Limboo,

<sup>62</sup> Muden Sammang (sometimes written Mudem or Mudemba Sammang) is a deity associated with Tibet, Bhutias, or certain *thar*.

### 5.1.3 Marriages

Maya's parents met during a village dance near Darap, which also Caplan mentions and refers to it as 'the Limboo paddy dance'. The dance was usually held when visitors arrived in the village (1970: 65-66). One of the guests (a man in his 50s) at the death ritual said that when he was young, the younger generation would dance all night and maybe meet potential spouses. Around thirty-five years ago, however, people started to lose interest in these dances and now the younger generation does not know how to dance, he sighed. One of Maya's brothers expressed that finding a suitable and good Limboo girl was very difficult because he seldom met any Limboos, due to his employment in another part of the state. According to him, his parents would not allow him to marry a non-Limboo girl. A possible solution to the problem would be to go to Nepal to look for a potential spouse. Despite his father's claim of being affiliated with a Sikkimese *thar*, to have a Nepalese Limboo wife did not matter, Maya's brother said. To marry other 'Nepalese' groups was not possible, and he provided an example where a relative of his had a Nepali girlfriend, whom he wanted to marry. He consulted his parents about his wish to marry the girl, but the parents, especially the mother, refused the liaison.

Considering the political climate in Sikkim, with the heightened importance of having distinct identities, my presumption was that there would be strong notions of endogamy among the Limboos, as well as a separation between Sikkimese and non-Sikkimese Limboos. However, according to the informants, they did not perceive the marriage rules as endogamously strict – except for the informants near Darap, as discussed above. Despite not expressing strict endogamy within the community, all informants, except for one, stated that an ideal spouse would be Limboo and all the married informants' spouses were Limboos.<sup>63</sup> Lepcha and Rais are generally accepted as marriage partners, which is also noted by Campbell (1869: 149), something that probably reflects the strong relationship between the groups as noted by T.B. Subba and referred to above. Bentley, however, observed that inter-ethnic marriages between Lepchas and individuals from the Nepalese community are rare and a recent phenomenon. (2007: 68). She does not specify which Nepalese community she is referring to, but J.R. Subba's family tree tells us that two of his forefathers married Lepcha women six and seven generations back (1998: 51). T.B. Subba, whose wife is Lepcha, notes similar tendency that Limboo men marry Lepcha women during his fieldwork (2010: 122).

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<sup>63</sup> Except for the woman for whom the death ritual was dedicated – she was Lepcha. I will discuss the death ritual later in this chapter.

To marry Bhutias, however, was generally not accepted. “Suraj” from the Soreng area grounded his reasoning by stating that the Bhutias are originally from Tibet, and not from Mongolia, like the Limboos. In J.R. Subba’s publications the Bhutias are generally not mentioned as a “native” Himalayan ethnic group. Also, the non-YMMCC followers in Darap stated that the center encouraged its followers to not support Bhutia shops nor to use Bhutia-associated things, such as cups with dragon images. We have also seen that there were debates between especially between the Bhutia and the ‘Nepalese’ the years after 1975 were quite tense. Balikci-Denjongpa provides a discussion of tensions between and the landowning Bhutia and their Limboo tenants (2008: 225). Similar to Bentley’s observations for the Lepchas, Balikci-Denjongpa states that inter-marriage among the Lhopos in Thingchim is a recent phenomenon. According to Balikci-Denjongpa it is generally acceptable for Lhopos to marry Buddhist Lepchas and Tibetans, even though “pure” Lhopos were looked upon as more desirable. To marry a non-Buddhist Nepalese, like a Limboo, is considered shameful, but Sherpas and other highlanders of Nepalese origin have become more acceptable because of their Buddhist background (ibid. 252). Sanjay from the Hee Goan area is from a mixed family background, and has a Bhutia girlfriend. He, however, did not think of their relationship as complicated. Here it is possible to draw a similarity to what Nakane observed among Bhutias and Lepchas; that intermarriage occurred more frequently among individuals with already mixed ethnic backgrounds (1952: 247). Sanjay’s mother is Christian and may be an explanation for why Sanjay claimed his relationship to be uncomplicated. Since Bentley’s and Balikci-Denjongpa’s data is collected from villages where the Lepchas and Bhutias are in a majority, their findings, especially Bentley’s, indicate that there might be local variations in terms of inter-ethnic marriages, where minority-majority issues are likely to be a central factor – especially between Limboo and Lepcha communities.

Despite the fact that the Limboo community is widely regarded as Hindus, marriage with Chettris or Bahuns were generally not regarded as ideal. Something which indicates a problem with the designation of Hindu for the Limboo community. Studies from Nepal from the 1970s are mainly concerned about the Limboos’ relationship with the ‘caste Hindus’, and, for example, Jones and Kurtz Jones observed that such marriages were uncommon, due to substantial cultural differences, for example the Limboos’ alcohol consumption versus the no alcohol consuming Hindus (1976: 65). Caplan also observed a certain cultural “cleavage” between Brahmins and Limboos, but argues that it has, to a large extent, grown out of land struggles. The cultural boundaries are not clear-cut between the groups, since the Brahmins

have incorporated Limboo household deities into their belief system, amongst others (2000 [1970]: 63).

## 5.2 ‘Bön’ and ‘animism’

Much of the research in tribal areas of Nepal is concerned with animism or shamanism, which often works as characteristics of the religions of the Tibeto-Burman “tribal” groups. The category ‘*bön*’ is also commonly applied to these groups’ ritual practices in the Himalayan and Tibetan areas, but scholars avoid giving precise definitions of what is meant by *bön*. Anthropologist T.B. Subba provides, what I believe is a suitable description of Limboo belief system, at least on a village level. According to him, the Limboos’ belief system is an interactive relationship with their physical environment and with the realms of deities and spirits. The deities and spirits are believed to respond to humans’ actions and intents, and are to be able to punish or to help humans. When the deities and spirits are unappeased, a crisis might strike humans – for example, sickness. They must therefore be appeased with appropriate sacrifice and ritual (2010: 117-118) determined by the Limboo shamans. The term *bön*, according to the Tibetologist and specialist on the Bön religion, Per Kværne, has three meanings. First, it can describe pre-Buddhist religious practices, of Tibet, where the *bönpo* ritual specialist made sacrifices and ensured the happiness of the deceased in the land of the dead and at the same time provided the living with beneficial influence for the welfare and fertility of the living (1995: 9). A second meaning refers to a religion that appeared in Tibet in the tenth and eleventh centuries which has similarities with Buddhism, but is more a form of an unorthodox Buddhism, but yet a distinct religion. Third, *bön* is used to refer to the numerous popular beliefs of local deities and conceptions of the soul. However, since they often do not form an important part of Buddhism or Bön, Kværne argues for using the term ‘nameless religion’ coined by R. Stein c. 40 years ago (Kværne, 1995: 10, Stein, 1972).<sup>64</sup> The first and third meaning can certainly suitably describe the Limboo ritual practices, but it is impossible to determine whether they constitute “pre-Buddhist” religion due to lack of historical sources.

Matthew T. Kapstein states that even though Bön in its organized and monastic modern form is closely related to Buddhism, he underlines Bön’s deep roots in autochthonous

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<sup>64</sup> A ‘nameless religion’ as it is described by Stein, seems to share many similar characteristics with the Limboo ritual traditions: For example, that the group’s relationship with the deities is ratified by reciting the origins of deities and ancestors (1972: 198) and the ritualistic importance of pillars, which e.g. denote a household deity or deity of the soil (ibid. 204).

Tibetan practices (2006: 45). The Limboo ritual practices can, more appropriately be categorized as a ‘nameless religion,’ but neither this term nor Bön will be used, mainly because none of my informants used it. Like Kapstein states, Bön is emically and by some researchers applied to the shamanistic aspects of groups which are more closely associated with Buddhism. Balikci-Denjongpa, for example, applies *bön* to characterize the village religion among the Lhopos in Thingchim and argues that the shamanistic aspects and their oral traditions of Lhopo village religion are locally perceived as being rooted in Bön (ibid. 157, 378, 380). The Limboo ritual traditions seem to carry certain similarities with their village religion in many respects, for example, practices of healing, house and, harvest rituals (2008: 136-137), as well as the concepts of and the initiations of the Lhopo *pawo* (‘male shaman’) and *nejum* (‘female shaman’) (ibid. 145-156). Unlike the Lhopos, the Limboos are not associated with a “conventional” Buddhist aspect, i.e monasteries and lamas. Despite many informants used ‘animism’, to describe their religion, I will not use this concept either, due to the strong connotations to orientalist writings from the nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup> In addition, animism is loaded with political significance in contemporary Sikkim, and will be analyzed in the next chapter. ‘Shamanism’ can be an appropriate term to describe the Limboo ritual traditions, and will be discussed below.

### 5.3 The Limboo ritual specialists

The study of mediums, shamans, oracles, and spirit possession constitute a strong research tradition in the Himalayas. To deal extensively with the phenomena among the Limboos lies beyond the scope of this master thesis, but might be an interesting project for eventual Ph.D. research in the future. The terminologies applied to Himalayan ritual specialists vary among scholars, and the concept of ‘shaman’, especially, is applied differently and its definition is not agreed upon. A classical definition of a shaman is provided by, for example, the historian of religions Mircea Eliade (2004 [1951]), who argues for a narrow usage of the concept, where a central characteristic is that he or she conducts soul journeys or “magical flights” in order to reach other terrestrial worlds,<sup>66</sup> for example, to upper and lower realms through a state of trance. Åke Hultkrantz asks whether it is appropriate to apply the concept of ‘shaman’ outside the North East Asian areas where the term originates. Terminologies are place-bound and Hultkrantz states that the terms can lose their adequate meaning and nuances if they are

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<sup>65</sup> For example, T.B. Subba describes the Limboo belief system as ‘animistic’ (2010).

<sup>66</sup> A discussion of the different worlds can be found in section 5.6, see also the section on the death ritual, 5.7.2.



applied to similar phenomena elsewhere. However, if we refrain from applying, for example, ‘shaman’ in a Himalayan context, the term loses its comparative usefulness function (1973: 66). The concept’s comparative utility is also embraced by, for example, Geoffrey Samuel (e.g. 1993) and Ioan M. Lewis. Lewis further criticizes the artificial distinction between possession and shamanism, a distinction that defines possession as a deity that enters a human body, while for the shaman, his or her soul undertakes celestial flights during trance (2003: xix).

‘Spirit possession’ is another frequently used concept, which Rex L. Jones (1996 [1976]) argues, in a similar vein as Lewis, that ‘shaman’ can be applied to individuals who both conducts soul journeys, as described above, but also to individuals who go through a specific type of spirit possession, which he refers to as ‘tutelary possession’ (1996 [1976]). Since he specifies a specific type of spirit possession, Jones provides a more narrow approach than Lewis, and defines spirit possession as:

(...) an altered state of consciousness on the part of an individual as a result of what is perceived or believed to be the incorporation of an alien form with vital and spiritual attributes, e.g. the spirit of a superhuman form such as a witch, sorcerer, god, goddess, or other religious divinity. (Jones, 1996 [1976]: 1).

Another characteristic of this specific spirit possession is that it is a periodic and specific possession, but the place where the possession takes place is sporadic and unspecific, and is determined by situational demands. In other words, the ritual specialist is not dependent on a special location, for example, a monastery, prayer hall etc. in order to get possessed by spirits. The Limboo ritual specialists can fall under the category of shamans, since soul journey, spirit and tutelary possession constitute central elements, which will be discussed more extensively in the sections below.

### 5.3.1 The types of Limboo ritual specialists

J.R. Subba lists nine Limboo ritual specialists, while only *phedangma*, *yeba*, *yema*, and *samba* were encountered during fieldwork. These ritualists are generally considered incarnations, which means that their specific vocations are inherited, along with their ancestors’ *guru* (i.e. tutelary deities), from which the ritualists receive their powers and who guide them when they undertake journeys to other-worldly realms (*den*).<sup>67</sup> The *guru* of *phedangma*, *yeba* and *samba* are generally believed to be inherited through patrilineal lineages, while the *yema* inherit their

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<sup>67</sup> My informants used the term *guru* instead of *yeming* which is used by J.R. Subba (e.g. 2012b: 20). Therefore *guru* will be used throughout the thesis.

*guru* through the maternal side of the family.<sup>68</sup> Sometimes several generations can pass without any individuals becoming a ritual specialist, but all ritual specialists questioned claimed to have inherited their vocation from a grandparent.

Similar to other ritual specialists in the Himalayan areas, the Limboo shamans use *sama* ‘ritual paraphernalia’ (Sagant (1996 [1976]): 87). These appear to be similar to the Lepcha *mun* and the Tamang *bompo* as they are depicted in Helen Plasier ‘s *Lepcha Grammar* (2007: 15 [plate 10]) and Gabriele Tautshcer (2007: 80-81), respectively. Common features are the characteristic feathers in their headdress, which resembles a turban (*wasang*) (Jones 1976: 34), which the shaman informants believed to protect them from spirits attacking them from above. Though the shamans are clearly structured below in accordance to their ideal tasks, it was generally agreed upon that swapping occurred in cases where the ideal type of shaman was not available.<sup>69</sup> Such swapping was, however, not conceived as ideal.

### ***Phedangma and samba***

The *-ma* suffix of *phedangma* usually indicates a female, but it is believed that only men can become a *phedangma* and *samba*. Both the *samba* and *phedangma* are generally associated with household and agricultural rituals, or the “inside-sphere”, as one of the informants described it. Ideally, *phedangma* and *samba* also carry out death rituals in cases of natural deaths, marriage rituals, and the rituals of Mangenna and Nahangma for the prosperity of the lineage and *thar*. Some informants systematized the shamans hierarchally by their antiquity, placing the *phedangma* on top. In addition it is believed that *phedangma* are a direct creation of Tagera Ningwaphuma, which is also noted by Jones (1976: 32). Even though the roles of the *phedangma* and *samba* were generally described similarly, J.R. Subba and “S.B. Limboo”, a retired former member of the national Limboo association, underlined that the *samba* is an expert of *mundhum*.

### ***Yeba and Yema***

The *yema* and *yeba* (sometimes written *yama* and *yaba*) are also simply called *yea* or *ya*. In contrast to the *phedangma*, one can say that the *yeba*’s and *yema*’s sphere is “outside”, because they often deal with harmful deities entering the locality from “outside” or from

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<sup>68</sup> However, a man in his fifties residing near Darap claimed to be a *samba*, *phedangma*, and a *yeba* at the same time and claimed to have inherited his vocations from both his mother’s and father’s sides. He will be referred to as the *phedangma/samba/yeba*.

<sup>69</sup> For fluidity and flexibility in shamanistic practices, see, e.g.: Michael Oppitz (2011: 266); and Balkci-Denjongpa (2008: 153)

unnatural deaths (*sogha*) and jealousy (*nahen*), and are believed be able to cause illnesses and disorder to the household. The family in the Soreng area perceived the ritual specialists' roles as distinct, and according to the mother, a *yeba* and *yema* could not perform the household rituals because they usually deal with potentially transmittable and dangerous deities and could cause harm to the household and its family members, or the crops. In order for "D.L. Limboo", a *yeba* from the Soreng area in his forties, to destroy evil sprits, he kept a tusk from a warthog, in which he used to invoke and control the potentially evil warthog spirit (Tambongpak), which was also used to call upon his three tutelary deities:<sup>70</sup>

According to both ritual specialists and ordinary people, there are no differences between a *yema* (female) and *yeba* (male) in terms of their roles and ritual equipment. However, D.L. Limboo claimed to be an *aboko yeserija yeba*, a specialist only concerned with household rituals, similar to a *phedangma* and *samba*. The *yaboko jedova yeba*, however is the specific type dealing with evil spirits. Due to these variations within the *yeba* category itself, it is hard to believe that there are not any differences between a *yeba* and *yema*. I only met one *yema* near Soreng, and many informants expressed that there are few *yema* left in Sikkim today. Unfortunately my data is not able to provide any explanations of their eventual decline, since it was not possible to converse extensively with her due to many people in her house during my visit. Due to patrilocal residence, a woman often moves to another town or village at her marriage. For a *yema* marriage therefore poses different challenges than for a man. A discussion of the apparent decline in the number of Limboo ritual specialists in general can be found below.

### **5.3.2 The powers of the ritual specialists**

Sagant observed that children in the Taplejung area engaged in processes of what he calls 'stealing of knowledge', i.e. essential techniques, knowledge, and skills were learnt or "stolen" through their observing older people in the village (1996 [1976]: 50-57). Nowadays, more people move to other parts of the state or the country to receive a higher education. The childhood and adolescence of these individuals will therefore only partly be spent in their native villages, something that consequently poses challenges to the traditional way of training Limboo ritual specialists. Sanjay in the Hee Goan pointed out a direct link between the tendency of frequently using lamas instead of a Limboo shaman, to the fact that many people nowadays desire a higher education and must therefore move to the cities of Gangtok,

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<sup>70</sup> To receive powers from tutelary deities seems to be common also among other Himalayan peoples, for example, among Gurung shamans (Mumford, 1989: 119-123)

Namchi, Geyzing, or elsewhere in the country or the world. Two ritual specialists in the Hee Goan area expressed some distress about the declining numbers of ritual specialists, especially the *phedangma* and *samba*. The two ritualists believed that few people nowadays were suitable for the role because, according to them, many people were not behaving in a suitable manner. The reason why *yeba* and *yema* were not mentioned might have to do with their healing practices, which were generally perceived as important.<sup>71</sup>

According to J.R. Subba, the apprenticeship to become a shaman under an experienced ritualist should start from an early age, since it may take ten to fifteen years to become a fully learned shaman (2012a: 21). Also, in order to learn *mundhum*, a novice must also speak Limboo and one should ideally live in the natal village to receive the extensive training by senior ritual specialists. A mother of a young son near Soreng proudly said that her son had been appointed as the *phedangma* after his grandfather. Her son was also enrolled in a good boarding school in another town in Sikkim where they did not have Limboo language classes. She expressed that the situation posed a dilemma because he would not be able to become a *phedangma* when attending that school. Still, the mother clearly prioritized her son receiving a good education. However, it seems that the training system is also adaptable to the changed circumstances. For example, “R.M. Limboo” did not start his *yeba* training during his childhood but in his thirties.<sup>72</sup> Being educated with college degree separated him from the other ritual specialists, who were farmers often with little or no schooling. Before R.M. Limboo was recognized as a *yeba*, he experienced sickness for six months. His grandfather was a *yeba* and when he went to the elders in his village he felt the spirit or soul go inside his body, and suddenly he was able to explain his spiritual lineage and describe his *guru*. The seniors in his village accepted him as a medium when he was possessed by his grandfather’s *guru* and became eligible to start his training together with an experienced *yeba*.

Along with claims of declining numbers of Limboo ritual specialists, narratives about them being spiritually weaker nowadays compared to the past were also recurrent topics. Balikci-Denjonga also noticed similar narratives from her informants in Thingchim, where they perceived that people had stronger faith in the power of religious specialists before 1975 (2006: 137). A close relative of the family living near Soreng was described as a very powerful *phedangma* during his lifetime, and was able to control the weather and prevent

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<sup>71</sup> Balikci has also found that shamans in Thingchim were perceived as superior especially in curing illnesses (2008: 145).

<sup>72</sup> R.M. Limboo is in his forties and a resident in a village near Darap.

thunderstorms. After he died, no other Limboo ritual specialist in the area had been this powerful. Similar notions of the diminishing power and knowledge of mediums were expressed during an interview with a *phedangma* in the same area. Since the ritual specialists could control blizzards, they would have “spiritual wars” with other Limboo and non-Limboo ritualists. The “war” consisted of mediums “hurling” lightning on each other in order to demonstrate their powers. Now the Limboo ritual specialists have lost the ability, said the *phedangma*. However, a black stone, *serilung*, often made up a part of a ritual specialist’s equipment, was believed to function as protection from “spiritual enemies” and “wars”. Interestingly, in eastern Nepal Jones observed that the teacher of a ritual specialist ideally should be from another place than his or her apprentice in order to prevent jealousy for each other’s spiritual powers. In cases of jealousy, the ritual specialist could engage in “spiritual conflicts” and could potentially kill each other (1996 [1976]: 50, 46).

## 5.4 *Mundhum*

*Mundhum* appears to be a complex and vague concept, but most commonly they refer to the vast body of oral narratives chanted by the Limboo shamans. Similar to what Martin Gaenszle writes among the Rais’, *mundhum* seem to maintain the Limboos’ link to the ancestral world and can be viewed as their foundation of their cultural order and the source of ethnic identity (2008: 6). Gaenszle states that the concept of *mundhum* is found among other Kirat groups and suggests that the root of the word, *-dum* is related to the Tibetan term *sgrung*, meaning ‘fable’, ‘legend’ or ‘tale sung by the bards’, or to the Tibetan term *dpe*, meaning ‘pattern’, ‘model’ or ‘parable’ and therefore he suggests that the concept *mundhum* also have parallels in the languages of the Tamangs and Gurungs (2011: 281-282). Schlemmer, on the other hand, suggests that *mundhum* is not particularly a Kirat concept, since also Chettris in Kirat dominated area use *mundhum* to refer to ritual practices concerning local spirits (2003/2004: 131 n20). He further argues that the meaning of *mundhum* is closely related to the anthropological concept of ‘Little Tradition’ (130). Although Schlemmer is more concerned about examining *mundhum* in a Hindu context, we also find similar body of oral tradition among the Lepcha and Lhopos in Sikkim. The Lepchas’ body of oral traditions is called *lungten sung* (Bentley, 2008: 100). Similarly, the Lhopo shamans, *pawo* and *nejum* are associated with *khelen*. However, some of these oral narratives have been written down and are now included in Buddhist rituals (Balikci-Denjongpa, 2002: 13).

T.B. Subba states that *mundhum* is difficult to define, but are oral narratives about the origin of the world, human beings, plants, animals, customs, traditions, rites and rituals, agriculture, hunting, fishing etc (1999: 46-47). To provide an example of a *mundhum*, a part of a *mundhum* told by a *phedangma* near Soreng will be rendered. This specific *mundhum* is chanted for Yuma, the household deity and provides an explanation on why the humans and deities got separated, and goes as follows:

The place of origin of Yuma is Taktak Mabohang Banbe and here she can roam freely among the blue skies. When she returned to the earth, she traveled to Sewalung Phaktalung [‘Mount Jannu’].<sup>73</sup> She looked towards the peak (*kolima*) and wanted to walk up to the top, but she found it very hard to reach. Yuma rather walked up to the peak in her dream. When she reached the peak of the mountain, she saw Kasi [a village] from the top and wanted descend again. On her way down, Yuma found herself suddenly lost inside the mountain. Then, an earthquake pushed her up to the ground, which tore the land apart. She was now in Kasi village, and turned herself into seven sisters, and taught them the marriage customs of the Limboos as well as how to make carpets. Menohanering, a relative of Yuma and the husband of Yuma [Yuma representing the humans] went hunting together. The bad aspect of the human mind was revealed when Yuma’s husband was asked if he had killed a boar. He refused, even though he had killed a boar. Menohanering and his dog, Hasulepasule eventually discovered the truth after Yuma’s husband returned to Kasi. Back in Kasi, Yuma asked her husband: “How did my relatives treat you?” A bird’s leg was kept in the husband’s pocket, which he showed to Yuma, and said: “This is all I got left, they took the boar!” He threw the leg so it touched Yuma’s leg and caused her leg to break. Yuma’s brother Eringhang did not like what had just happened, so he tried to separate them. As a part of the separation process some villagers built a wall, which separated Yuma and her husband. The husband was asked if he could see Yuma through the wall. They asked him several times, and he replied: “Yes, I can see [her]”. The husband got irritated because they were repeating the same question to him, so at one point he answered: “No, I cannot see her” – which was a lie. This is how gods and humans got separated. Subsequently, the spirit of Yuma went into the body of humans, one after the other, wherever she went. She travelled to many places: Chemjong, Phedap, Muden Gaon, Panter, Jangrock, Sudap, and Yesok.<sup>74</sup>

According to G.S. Kirk such origin stories fall under the classic definitions of the category ‘myth’, and such sacred stories explain both the origin of the humans, the origin of their settlements, and certain customs, for example, hunting (aetiological motives) (1974: 53-54), and are traditional tales with varying qualities and functions with many levels of meaning. It is therefore difficult to provide a single satisfactory definition of the category (ibid. 38-39). Mythical narratives and oral traditions, especially, are also social constructs and subject to reinterpretation, and must be analyzed closely to their social contexts. For example, D.L. Limboo’s (one of the *yeba* interviewed near Soreng) narrative about Yuma was very different from accounts I heard during fieldwork. The *yeba* claimed that there are different forms of Yuma, two of which are her principal forms: Yasok Kosayok, who demands blood sacrifice and is therefore not worshipped much nowadays; and Yuma Kuma Mang, who is the mother of Yasok Kosayok. Yuma Kuma Mang demands fruit and water instead of blood, and might

<sup>73</sup> Kangchendzönga was, by to some informants, referred to as Sewalung, but according to my informant who rendered this *mundhum* said he referred to Mount Jannu in this context.

<sup>74</sup> This *mundhum* was taped in Nepali and translated into English near Soreng. There have been made some small grammatical changes in this rendered version.

reflect changes within the Limboo community, specifically the tendency to embrace vegetarianism.

Kirk also underlines that there is often a strong link between myths and rituals (1974: 64), which seems to be the case among the Limboos. Gaenzle states that nowadays, some *mundhum* are narrated outside a ritual context but the narratives have traces of verbal, chanted, or ritual journeys, which reflects the soul journey the ritual specialists undertake in a ritual context, where he or she must narrate myths of origin in order to, for example, lead the souls to other realms (2008: 6). Even though the specific *mundhum* above does not contain a verbal journey to any other-worldly realms, we are instead taken to geographical places in Nepal and Tibet. Verbal or ritual journeys to both “worlds” seem like a common characteristic of *mundhum* and must be chanted in order to invoke the spirits and deities. By incorporating a ‘this-worldly’ dimension grounded in the landscape, the ritual specialists situate humans, their *thar* belonging and probably their forefathers’ geographical origin in a ritual context.<sup>75</sup>

The seven sisters we learn about in this myth may have parallels to the Tsering Chenga (*Tshe ring mched lnga*), ‘the Five Sisters of Long Life’, protector deities believed to reside in Kaurishankar (see e.g. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 177-203), but are believed to visit or reside also in other localities in Tibet and the Himalayas. J.R. Subba states that there are many local variations of how Yuma or Tagera Ningwaphuma is perceived. Although my informants did not emphasize this particular dimension, J.R. Subba claims that Yuma is also often associated with different mountains, such as Mt. Jannu, Mt. Everest, and Kangchendzönga. From its abode, Yuma/Tagera Ningwaphuma has created some sisters known as Kasihangma, Pattagekma, Khanjama, Temphoma etc. in order to look after the life on earth. (2009: 323).<sup>76</sup>

## 5.5 Houses

Houses have been granted much attention in research on Himalayan and Tibetan societies. Sagant provides a discussion of internal organization of domestic space of Limboo houses and their significance in ritual contexts (1996 [1976]: 90-115). My informants did not state that

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<sup>75</sup> See also Nebesky-Wojkowitz, (1952: 34), Oppitz (1992), Gaenzle (1999), Mumford (1989: 119-123), and Larry Peter (1998) regarding ritual journeys in Himalayan societies.

<sup>76</sup> Yuma appears to be given different names, which probably reflect the locality or the origin of the religious practitioners’ forefathers. This is also evident in the *mundhum* rendered in section 5.4, and J.R. Subba states that other names are, e.g.: Sinyuk Hangma (‘Chinese Goddess’), Muden Hangma (‘Tibetan Goddess’), Thak Thakkumma (‘weaving maiden’) (2009: 323)

their houses were divided into lower and upper parts, as Sagant does. My informants did not live in “traditional” houses (see figure 3), similar to a photo provided by Sagant (ibid. 10-11 [Fig.1]). On the contrary, my informants’ houses consisted of two or more one-storied houses similar to figure 11. Architectural changes may have led to different understandings and interpretations of how houses are divided, since the divisions provided by Sagant are difficult to apply to modern houses. In addition, my lack of language skills probably limited the access to this information, as both Gaenzle (1999) and Nicholas J. Allen (1972) emphasize that linguistic data are important when it comes to understanding the importance of the vertical dimensions in the Mewahang and Thulung Rais’ conceptualizations. Allen, who studied the Thulung Rai in eastern Nepal, further states that in Nepali and English the terms expressing the vertical dimensions are optional (1972: 82). Despite domestic divisions were not emphasized, the informants certainly regarded their houses as ritually important, mainly because of the center pillar of the house (*murumsitlang*) and the fireplace.<sup>77</sup>

Jones and Kurtz Jones state since there are traditionally no temples, the houses become the dwelling place for deities (1976: 58). Weddings and death rituals are some of the few rituals with a village community aspect, but they are still carried out near the household. Apart from these, most rituals take place inside the household dedicated to the *heem sammang*,<sup>78</sup> an umbrella term for numerous deities associated with the household, *thar*, or lineage. A *yeba* near Hee Goan said the house itself is very important. The entrances of the older houses are low (see figure 3), and the *yeba*’s explanation for this was that people bow down and show respect to the house when entering. However, we also find low entrances in other Himalayan and Tibetan societies. For example, Mumford observed low doorways among the Gurungs in Nepal, and according to his informants it would prevent *ro langs* (‘zombies’) from entering (1989: 56), which is a recurrent character in Tibetan folklore.

My data suggests that the main pillar of the house, the *murumsitlang* (see figure 4), plays an important role in rituals conducted in the household.<sup>79</sup> Even though the family near Darap lived in a relatively new house, their main house resembled the inside of older houses. The family had also maintained a traditional fireplace with three stones, where each stone

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<sup>77</sup> T.B. Subba states to associate the stones in the fireplace with spirits is more common among the Rais than Limboos (1999: 15), which was not stated by any of my informants.

<sup>78</sup> *Heem, him, kheem, or khim* are different ways of spelling ‘house’. *Mangheem* is therefore also written e.g. *mangkhim*.

<sup>79</sup> The *murumsitlang* is also referred to as *hangsitlang*, in which *hang* means ‘power’, according to my informants. Sagant however, refers to *hang* as ‘ancestor’ (1996 [1976]: 108). Even though it might seem more meaningful to refer to the pillar as *hangsitlang*, most of the informants used *murumsitlang*, meaning the ‘lower pillar’.



represents a spirit, as well as the ritually important *murumsitlang* which had been painted with bright colors. I have not found many references to similar pillars among other ethnic groups in the area in the existing literature, and many Limboo informants claimed the *murumsitlang* to be “unique” to the Limboo community. Among the Thulung Rai, Allen has found that agricultural rites takes place by a giant silk-cotton tree (1972: 87), but does not mention any pillars inside houses with ritual significance.

The concept of *murumsitlang* is similar to Eliade’s idea of *axis mundi* (‘the center of the universe’) (1987 [1957]), and might also be linked to the concept of *mu* (see below, 5.6.). Poles and pillars in general are recurrent elements in ritual practices, not only in the Himalayan areas but other areas of the world.<sup>80</sup> The families in Darap and Hee Goan both lived in relatively new houses. Unlike the family near Darap, the family in Soreng did not have a *murumsitlang*, which the family members acknowledged as a missing element. It seems like big copper containers (*wobokwa*) may replace the *murumsitlang* in ritual contexts which might be a recent invention and an adaption due to changes in how houses are constructed nowadays. The father’s childhood home in the same village, however, had a *murumsitlang*, but the *murumsitlang* was not ritually connected to the family’s new house nearby. The tendency to not include such elements in modern houses was expressed as a concern by an association member in Soreng. The *murumsitlang* is also one of the elements the YMMCC encourages their members to remove. This was observed during visits to YMMCC followers in the village near Darap. For example, during a visit to a previous *yeba* in his 70s – now a *suingneem* for the YMMCC, the household members had clearly actively removed the pillar. The YMMCC’s teachings stress the wrongness of worshipping other deities than Tagera Ningwaphuma, and the pillar is associated with a *heem sammang*, Okwanama (‘turtle’ or ‘supporter of the universe’ or ‘deity of the land or soil’).

The *murumsitlang* is associated with several myths, and one of them was commonly known by most of the informants. Maya’s younger sister explained that she had learnt the myth in school. At the same time, most people also associated the pillar with Okwanama, but the deity does not appear in the myth. This specific myth has not been found in any of J.R. Subba’s books. The myth goes as follows:

Once there were seven brothers and one sister who resided in a small hut. The seven brothers tried to erect the central pillar in their new house, but they could not manage to do it. The sister helped them and was able to erect the pillar only with a single hand. But just before she raised it, her comb suddenly fell into the hole where the pillar would be. She tried to reach the comb, but fell into the hole and the huge pillar killed her. She is believed to be inside the pillar, and therefore the *murumsitlang* must be worshipped.

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<sup>80</sup> For literature on pillar and poles in ritual contexts, see e.g. Eliade (1996 [1958]).

Jones and Kurtz Jones (1976) describe a very different practice from what was presented to me during fieldwork. After a new house is constructed, Okwanama must be invoked, and blood from a sacrificed pig together with some Nepali coins are placed at the bottom of the house's center pillar, which is believed to connect the house and its residents symbolically to the center of the world. Chemjong provides similar description (2003 [1967]: 67). The construction workers during this house-warming ritual are fed with pork and the household members will invite a ritual specialist to carry out a ritual for the *heem sammang*. According to D.L. Limboo, a *yeba* near Soreng, the practice described by Jones and Kurtz Jones was common in the past. According to him, some villages do not practice animal sacrifice anymore. Nowadays, milk, water, or fruits are substitutions for the pig. These practices changed about twenty years ago and he believed the reasons for why more people became vegetarians nowadays, was because they had become more "civilized". Ritual animal sacrifice are still conducted some places, but mostly among uneducated people, said the *yeba*. The rituals for the *murumsitlang* or Okwanama are, according to the educated *yeba*, R.M. Limboo near Darap, a way to protect the house and the crops from landslides and thunderstorms. In order to please Okwanama, the ritual specialist must present *thisok* ('rice liquor') to the deity when it is invoked. Okwanama, or Oama, as Sagant refers to the deity, might have links, according to Sagant, to the Tibetan deity *gzhi-bdag* or *sa-bdag*, (1996 [1976]).

### **5.5.1 Health aspects**

The ritual specialists healing functions were generally regarded as one of their most important tasks. However, here 'health' must be understood as something beyond a physical state and a medical concept. Also the household and the crops can suffer from "illnesses", and can also affect the members of the household. The ritual specialists are believed to be able to remove any negative afflictions and restore peace and harmony. During an interview with D.L. Limboo, a *yeba* near Soreng, he stressed the dangerous nature of Keba ('tiger spirit') for ordinary people. If he saw people suffering from, for example, lack of blood circulation or if someone is vomiting blood, Keba might have attacked his patient. In order to help the patient the ritualist must exorcise the deity and sacrifice a cock to please it. Also ordinary people often regarded especially Keba as an especially dangerous spirit. Mongal, residing near Hee Goan, for example, viewed Keba as an evil character because of its power to harm humans. Ordinary people are not, however, able to control Keba. For ritual specialists Keba can

become a helpful spirit when it is controlled. Especially when someone dies an unnatural death, the *yeba* will wear a tiger skin and invoke Keba, and the spirit can help him lead the *sam* or soul to another realm (See also Sagant, 1996 [1976]: 114).

As already briefly mentioned, *nahen*, is a type of negative notion mentioned by all my informants. The *phedangma/samba/yeba* near Darap claimed that *nahen* could manifest itself in forms of, for example, disagreement between people, which could lead to negativity in the household. Therefore, he underlined that when constructing a new house, it is especially important to make an offering to *nahen* in order for the new house to be peaceful. As Balikci-Denjongpa points out, the ritual specialists must know the villagers well, as well as being aware of the history and activities of every household and its members in order to heal eventual tensions and violations (2008: 125, see also Sagant, 1996 [1976]: 360-366). This further underlines the importance of being a resident in the village from one's childhood, and is a tradition that may be fragile considering the previously mentioned social changes in contemporary Sikkim. Many villagers in Darap were skeptical about Sri Sri Srime Yuma Mang's healing powers because of her refusal to visit people's homes. Some also pointed out her lack of knowledge of *mundhum* to the reason why she would be unable to cure illnesses. However, the *suingneem* who was interviewed near Darap in December 2012, expressed that the *suingneem* would visit people's homes and claimed that they are able to heal and cure sicknesses. Instead of drawing upon powers from various spirits and deities like the shamans in the phedangma tradition and Yumaism do, he stated that Tagera Ningwaphuma communicated through the *suingneem* and would guide them which often made their bodies tremble. Here, it is evident that a type of spirit possession constitutes an element in the YMMCC as well.

D.L. Limboo, a *yeba* near Soreng said that when he visits a sick person's home, the family must pay him with, for example, money, rice, sugar, or chickens depending on the harvest season. First he must determine whether the patient is ill due to influences of any evil spirits, and thereupon identify what kind of spirits are causing the suffering. In order to get rid of the spirits, and especially when they are strong, it is necessary to sacrifice, for example, a hen; only then the spirit will be appeased. If a sacrificial offering is not given, the spirit will not go away, the *yeba* said. In cases where the patients suffered from severe illness, he had to look inside the patient's *sam* by chanting *mundhum*. If a patient was dying, the *yeba* would see a black soul, while a white soul would appear if the patient would continue to live. The severe and potentially lethal deities come from the outside, like the hen, *takegamba*, he said.

If he was unable to get rid of the bad spirit by chanting *mundhum*, he would make an amulet. He showed me how to make one, and carefully selected different plants and herbs he had collected from the jungle. Where he would find the specific plants and herbs, would come to him in his dreams. This particular amulet he made was for curing *kapat* (N: ‘food poisoning’). He also described different kinds of *kapat*: Black *kapat*, a condition when a person’s teeth turn black and yellow *kapat*, when a person’s eyes turn yellow.

Near the *yeba*’s house there was a *nahenlung* which is necessary in order to carry out a ritual for *nahen*. The *nahenlung* consists of a bamboo stick with a small stone next to it on the ground. In the past, when an animal was sacrificed, in most cases a cock, its head was placed on top of the bamboo stick. The ritual specialist had to chant *mundhum* in front of the *nahenlung* while throwing grains and rice nine times into the sunset and: “Our sorrows are thrown into the sunset and they will then disappear together with the sun into the horizon”, said the *yeba*. Nowadays, the ritual is conducted in a different way, because the Limboos should not sacrifice animals during rituals, but rather place some kind of fruit on the bamboo stick instead of the head of an animal, said the *yeba*.



**Figure 3.** An old “traditional” Limboo house in West Sikkim.



**Figure 4.** A *murumsitlang* next to the kitchen area inside an old Limboo house.

## 5.6 The concepts of *sam* ('soul') and *den* ('realms')

One of the objectives of a death ritual is to separate and lead the deceased's souls (*sam*) to other-worldly realms (*den*), and the concept will therefore be briefly examined. The system of *sam* and *den* and their significance is complex, and the whole system did not appear to be known in details by the informants. It is generally believed that there are eighteen realms, and the pyramide-shaped altar (*sangbhe/mangdan*) found inside *mangheem*,<sup>81</sup> represent the eight top-most realms (see figure 15). *Sam* play central roles in many rituals, for example, to ritually maintain the prosperity of the *thar*, or to 'raise the head' of the household, is done by restoring Mukuma Sam ('life force') or the Phung Sam ('flower soul', which symbolizes life in the "other world" (Sagant, 1996 [1976]: 14, 20-21).<sup>82</sup>

Sagant notes that the concepts of *sam*, for example, Mukuma sam, and deities like Nahangma are treated similarly, which shows that the concepts of *sam* and a deity are closely related (ibid.19). According to J.R. Subba, human beings have eight *sam*. During the death ritual only the Hangsam (the main *sam* or ancestor *sam*) or Kunusam (an ancestor *sam* or guardian deity), Phungsam (a *sam*, which wanders around in dreams during sleep), and Sisam (after death this *sam* rests by the graveyard and the ritual specialists help it to reach the realm of Samyukna Den, the ancestral land) were mentioned. J.R. Subba also mentions five other *sam*: Nisam ('sight'), Khemsam ('hearing'), Sikkumsam ('intuition'), Ninwasam ('mind') and Thanasam ('consciousness'), which seem to relate to the general sense-like faculties.

It is generally agreed upon that human beings are subjects to karma, which is also stated by J.R. Subba (1999: 331). According to him, *suyo kheyo* is the Limboo term for karma, but was never used by any informants (2005: 1). After ordinary people's deaths, the *sam* will be led to the Samyukna Den ('realm of the dead/ancestors') by a ritual specialist during a death ritual. Then the *sam* will be taken to Munthang Khara Den ('realm of judgment'), where the karma will be reviewed and it will be decided whether the *sam* must go to Khemading Yongsong Den ('hell') or Sangram Pedang Den ('heaven') (1998: 7). However, according to J.R. Subba, people are reborn on earth again after a while (1999: 333). Whether ritual specialists are subjects to karma is uncertain, because it is believed that they go

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<sup>81</sup> The pyramid-shaped altar in the *mangheem* was referred to as *mangdan* by my informants. J.R. Subba, on the other hand, claims that *mangdan* is a household altar, while *sangbhe* is the pyramid-shaped structure found inside the *mangheem* (2012b: 182)

<sup>82</sup> Sagant claims *phung sam* is comparable to the Tibetan concepts *bla-gnas*, *srog-gnas* ('external soul' or 'seat or life') (Sagant, 1996 [1976]: 21).

directly to Sunaingtong Den ('realm of truth'). Here they stay until Tagera Ninwaphuma decides that they will be incarnated as ritual specialists on earth again (ibid. 331).

Larry Peters describes similar divisions of eighteen 'worlds' among the Tamangs in Nepal, and are important in the shamans' soul journeys to 'heavens' and 'underworlds' (1998: 88), similar to the Limboo shamans. Mumford, who also has carried out fieldwork among the Tamang community, also states that the upper world can be reached by nine ladders, arriving at the *mu* (Gurung: 'sky') (1989: 8). The Tibetan concept of *mu* (and *phyu*), according to Stein, is a deity from one story of the sky, associated with the first mythical kings – for example, Shenrap Miwo, the patron saint of the Bonpos. The kings made their descent from the sky with the *mu* ('rope' or 'ladder'). It remained attached to their 'high head', 'mighty helmet', or 'pillar of the sky', and they epitomized in themselves the link between the sky, man, and earth, and thus asserted their kingship and personal authority (1972 [1962]: 221). *Mu* is also associated with a warrior god (ibid. 225), which gives associations to the Limboo female warrior deity of Nahangma, which is central in the ritual of restoring the prosperity of the *thar* by 'raising the head' of the household. Here it is also possible to link the *murumsitlang*, which also is a type of ladder used during the Limboo shamans' soul journeys, which I discussed in 5.3.

## 5.7 Rituals

The rituals for the household, its member and the crops generally follow bi-annual 'ritual seasons', which the informants referred to with their Nepali names: Udhauli 'low or descending season', which occur during Mangsir, according to the Nepali calendar, or Sencherengla Laba, according to the Limboo calendar (mid-November - mid-December). It marks the start of the winter season.<sup>83</sup> The other season is named Ubauli, the 'ascending season' during Baishakh (N) or Theyrengnam Laba (L) in mid-April – mid-May.<sup>84</sup> The specific season and its produce determine the offerings to the deities. During Udhauli, the ritual specialists offer the specific season's harvests to the deities, for example: rice, wheat, barley etc. While during Ubauli, jackfruits and honey from the forest are then offered to the deities.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Mangsir corresponds to the month of Losung for the Lhopos.

<sup>84</sup> Balikci-Denjongpa notes similar biannual harvest ritual seasons for the Lhopos (2008: 145)

<sup>85</sup> For a review of Limboo ritual activities month by month, see Sagant (1996 [1976]: 248-275).

### 5.7.1 Nuwagi – a household ritual

Nuwagi, according to Gaenzle means ‘ancestors’ in Nepali, however, according a friend who is a university teacher in Limboo claimed it as a Limboo word, which means ‘to offer harvests to the deities’. Among the Rais Nuwagi is, according to Gaenzle, a major occasion to commemorate the ancestors, where the ascending lineage ancestors who have died in a natural death are fed with newly harvested rice (2008: 8). My informants claimed that the purpose of the ritual was to offer newly harvested produce to the different *heem sammang* – which appear to be linked with the lineage to the members of the household, but yet they did not explicitly underline the importance of ancestors as Gaenzle does. Nor was the ritual a major occasion, but in Nepal the ritual seems to have been revitalized into a grand community festival, which Schlemmer describes like this:

It was described to me as a land (bhūmī) and harvest (bali) festival addressed to the supreme god, Bhagavān. The ritual took place on top of a small hill where these associations plan to build a big temple. The ritual area was composed of a large platform with pyramidal terraces in the middle. Close to it, there was a big trident surrounded by two large bells, and a little further a triangular fireplace. The entire area was decorated with flower garlands and prayer flags (on which are words in the Srijanga script) flying above benches with moons and suns painted on them, reminiscent of the commemorative resting places built after funerals in Kirant communities. On the pyramidal terraces and on the ground, offerings brought by devotees and ritual paraphernalia could be seen (such as incense, candles, fruits, flowers, oil for lamps). (Schlemmer 2003/2004: 136)

Schlemmer’s description is interesting since it provides us with information of the Kirat ethnic associations’ central roles during such newly revived grand community festival, which most likely is the case in Sikkim as well. Yet, the quote also tells us that there are dissimilarities between what the ethnic associations in Sikkim and Nepal have attempted to revive. In Sikkim, the Nuwagi ritual appeared to be of little significance, compared to, for example, Nahangma or Mangenna. The *phedangma/samba/yeba* near Darap admitted that he was not familiar with this particular ritual. Contrasted to the *thar* with Nepalese connotations in the area near Soreng where the Nuwagi ritual was carried out, the shaman near Darap belonged to one of the claimed Sikkimese *thar*. Different practices between *thar* are indicated here, but whether Nuwagi is more closely associated with Nepal is uncertain.

#### The steps of Nuwagi

The ritual consists of seven steps, each dedicated to a specific deity. Except for one of the last steps, the members of the household were not engaged in the ritual, but sat in the kitchen area and chatted. The first part of the ritual was performed in one of the rooms of the household. Four *lasso* (‘altars’) dedicated to each *heem sammang* were lined up against a wall (see figure 5). When the *phedangma* was finished chanting the specific *mundhum* to the particular *heem*

*sammang*, its altar was destroyed, removed and piled up to the *phedangma*'s right hand side with the help of a man in his late 60s. The senior also provided the ritualist with practical help, such as making sure the incense was burning, or that he always had rice to offer. He also corrected the *phedangma* several times while chanting *mundhum*, even though he was not a ritual specialist or a member of the Tumyanghang (a Limboo village council, consisting of male and female seniors). According to the household members it was important to carry out such a ritual to protect the household and its members from negativity. Children are viewed as particularly vulnerable to such negative spirits, and can become inflicted with illnesses if the ritual is not carried out. The most ideal days to conduct the ritual is on full moon (*lao ogen*) days, and according to my calendar the ritual took place the day after full moon.

The *phedangma* who carried out the ritual never went into a trance, in contrast to what I observed during the death ritual. The *mundhum* chanted for the specific deities had different rhythmical qualities, and the *phedangma*'s gestures corresponded to the *mundhum*'s literary contents. For example, the *mundhum* for Sikari (N: 'hunter' deity, which was claimed to be a Rai deity) tells about Sikari making a bonfire for Yuma, and the *phedangma* imitated the movements of igniting a fire. Even though the particular *lasso* was dedicated to Sikari, we see that Yuma plays a role in the *mundhum*. Similar tendencies can be traced in the *mundhum* dedicated to Muden Sammang in the fourth and last *lasso*. The myth is about a time Yuma stayed in a Bhutia village, named Alpego. The Bhutias in the village suffered from diseases, and since Yuma helped them, they let her stay in their village. The second *lasso*, however, was dedicated particularly to Yuma where the deity was offered *tongba* (a fermented millet beer) and rice. Contrasted to the more this-worldly contexts of the other mentioned *mundhum* in 5.4, this *mundhum* chanted for Yuma seems to take place in an other-worldly realm, about a time where the deity and Tagera Ningwaphuma created the world together with other deities. Here is a shortened version of the particular *mundhum*:

There was nothing in this world except for a lake [or spring] made from Tagera Ningwaphuma Mang's tears. A lotus flower grew in the lake and Yuma Mang appeared from the flower. She saw no land, only water everywhere. Yuma Mang said to Tagera Ningwaphuma that as long as there is no land, nothing can exist in this place, and asked if she could provide the earth with land. Tagera Ningwaphuma went to Porob Mang [the creator of the earth] and asked the same question. Tagera Ningwaphuma and Yuma Mang discussed how to drain the lake that would make some land appear. Then Polok, Ningwaphuma and other deities came together and created everything in this world: trees, grasshoppers, air, humans, animals etc.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> The *phedangma* who rendered this *mundhum* only provided a shortened version. This version was written down during an interview with a *phedangma* near Soreng in November 2012 using a translator.



The Nuwagi ritual demonstrates that the representations of Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma are varied and there appears to be little consistency between them. Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma are often used interchangeably. In Yumaism propagated by the Limboo ethnic associations, which will be discussed in the next chapter, Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma are often regarded as the same deity – where Yuma is the “worldly” aspect, whereas Tagera Ningwaphuma is perceived more as a formless power. Contrasted to this understanding, Yuma Sammang is also perceived as a *heem sammang* – as a ‘grandmother deity’ (*yuma*, ‘grandmother’), which complements the third *lasso* dedicated to Kappoba, Kappotungdang, or Thoba Sammang, the ‘grandfather deity’, but Yuma was not perceived as a grandmother in this particular context. Though it appears difficult to provide a clearly formulated understanding of Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma, a conclusion we may draw, however, is that Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma are regarded as important in this specific context.

During the last steps of the Nuwagi ritual Yuma was never mentioned. After the four *lasso* were piled up, the *phedangma* stepped just outside the house where the ritual had taken place. While standing outside he chanted *mundhum* for the ‘jungle deity’, Piccha Sambok Dangma and offered rice. The *phedangma* went inside again and the mother of the household stepped up to the *phedangma* who placed the folded clothes he had been keeping by his side during the first four steps of the ritual. He placed the clothes, some rice, and a coin first on the woman’s head and then on each of her shoulders. The family members said that the clothes belonged to family members who were not present this specific day, so via their clothes they too would enjoy the positive effects the ritual was believed to bring to the household. The *phedangma* then walked quickly into another house where the *murumsitlang* was and chanted *mundhum* while he touched it several times. The last step of the Nuwagi ritual was dedicated to the fireplace, which traditionally consists of three stones, where each is believed to be the dwelling place for a deity, which are: Phen Jeri Phendo Ti Mang, Sum Jeri Sum Ha Lu Mang, and Mejeri Mi Ha Lung Mang Musuri Musu Lung Mang.



**Figure 5.**

The Nuwagi ritual. The *phedangma* chants *mundhum* while he rhythmically swings a bouquet of fresh twigs for the grandfather deity.

Next to the *phedangma* are the folded clothes, which were given to the mother of the household.

The *phedangma*'s assistant can be seen in the background.

### 5.7.2 Death ritual – a village ritual

The ritual took place in a small village in the Soreng area and two association members accompanied me along with their friend who functioned as a translator throughout the ritual.<sup>87</sup> Since the deceased had died a natural death, in this case from an illness, a *samba* would carry out the rituals, otherwise a *yeba* or *yema* would officiate. There were around forty guests present during the ritual, all cramped in to a relatively small area near the deceased's household, which made it challenging to carry out a full overview.

A death ritual consists of several different ceremonies, and the day before was the ritual of Sanjey Hipma, where the household announced the upcoming event with drums so that the residents of the village would know that tomorrow, the final death ritual would take place. The day I was present started by the graveyard (*yebungden*, J.R. Subba 2012a: 124), where a rectangular stupa-shaped gravestone (*falaincha* or *ipung heem*) had been placed where the dead body had been buried – not cremated.<sup>88</sup> Next was the Hangsam ritual, then the

<sup>87</sup> The three men are in their fifties to sixties.

<sup>88</sup> In the Soreng area, people generally stated that burial was the most common practice, but they were aware that some Limboo *thar* cremated dead bodies instead –as in the Darap and Hee Goan areas, similar to Buddhist practices in the state.

cleansing ritual of Kaoma, and last, the Tongsing ritual where one of the *sam* was finally guided to the Sangram Pedang Den (heavenly realm) by three *samba* and their assistant. This last ritual continued throughout the night. Since the ritual took place in December, the nights were very cold and the three men who accompanied me wanted to go back to their homes in the evening. I was therefore not able to observe the very last step of Tongsing, which took place next morning.

### **Burial, cremation, and gravestones**

In the Soreng area, the informants generally stated that burial was the common practice, yet they were aware of that some *thar* cremated dead bodies instead – which the informants stated that they did in the Darap and Hee Goan areas, similar to Buddhist practices in the state. Nebesky-Wojkowitz states that the Lepcha used to bury dead bodies, but due Buddhist influences, they now commonly burn dead bodies, and the ritual is often performed by lamas and not the *mun* or *bongthing*, as they did in the past (1952: 31-32). The varying practices may also be grounded in economical reasons, as for example Oppitz (1982) and Ernestine McHugh (1981) have highlighted by noting that firewood is scarce among the Magar and Gurung communities, and may be an alternative reason for the practice of bury other than cremating the dead, other than being a Hindu influence. In contrast to what I observed, and according to Campbell's observations the Limboos raise a square stone tomb on the site of the cremation, placing an upright stone on the summit. A chief's stone had inscriptions stating the record of what had been distributed at the chief's funerals (1869: 155). J.R. Subba suggests some *thar* rather constructed a *mandang*, like Tibetan Buddhists and which he separates from a *falaincha* or an *ipung heem* (2005: 99). It is unclear what J.R. Subba exactly means, but *mandang* can possibly be linked to the Tibetan concept *mandung*, which refers to both the tomb itself and the mummified body – in Sikkim, however, the *mandang* is in fact a series of stupas which form a continuous wall leading up to a religious site, the summit of a ridge or a village boundary. A stupa is therefore constructed to honor these individuals, who are mostly from the more wealthy segments of the society. Interestingly, a pyramid or stupa-shaped “altar” can be found inside *mangheem*, which is called *mangdan*. Whether the *mangdan* in the *mangheem* is influenced by the *mandang* of the supposedly Tibetan Buddhist practice J.R. Subba describes, is unclear. No informants ever mentioned a possible influence from Tibetan Buddhism regarding the *mangdan* in the *mangheem*, however, the use of a term more commonly associated with Bhutia religious and village contexts seems to suggest a degree of influence.

### *Ipung heem*

Unlike Campbell's observations, the *ipung heem* was not constructed on any mountain summit, but was located thirty minutes' walk down from the village in a steep, green hillside. There were about five other individual graves. The villagers were gathered around the gravestone and two young boys were beating on two one-sided drums. According to the translator, the Phung Sam will rest in the *ipung heem*. Therefore, the three *samba* must invoke the particular *sam* and make it rest.<sup>89</sup> While chanting *mundhum*, where they addressed the particular *sam* by stating: "You are not part of this world any more, so take these offerings. You should be happy with these offerings." The *samba* rang small bells while villagers, family, and friends offered fruit, beer, *tongba* and put white Buddhist ceremonial scarves (*khata*) on the gravestone (see figure 6). After about forty minutes, the ceremony was over and all attendees cut the fruit and shared them, but no one touched the alcohol.



**Figure 6.** Beer, *tongba*, and fruits are offered by the *ipung heem*. A family member places a Buddhist ceremonial scarf on the stone.

### **Hangsam**

After all guest had walked up the steep hill from the graveyard, the three *samba* and their assistant sat inside one of the family's houses. Inside the house mostly older people, both males and females, sat inside together with the *samba* and chatted loudly and smoked. The *samba* invoked the Hangsam of the deceased, the translator stated. A cooked chicken was

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<sup>89</sup> Phung Sam is translated to 'flower soul' by J.R. Subba, Sagant, and Chemjong, 2003 [1966]

offered. It is believed that the Hangsam is inside a little container, which the *samba* extracted from the graveyard. The *samba*'s aim here is to guide the *sam* to the Sangram Pedang Den. Once again the *samba* addressed the *sam* directly by saying: "This is not your home. You must leave this home". The relatives came into the house and once again presented the same type of offerings to the Hangsam, which they put in front of the *samba*, while stating: "You are not a part of this world anymore, so take these offerings on your journey on behalf of all the people that are here today". When *tongba* was offered, the guests cleansed the straw three times, as a living person would do, before drinking it. All the offerings were also made with the guests' left hand, while in the living realm one must use the right hand, which according to the translator symbolizes that the deceased and the living are now separated and reside in different realms (see figure 7). The *samba* must make the deceased attentive to humans' actions, in order that he or she understands that this realm is no longer his or her home. Nebesky-Wojkowitz also observed similar practices during Lepcha funerals the Lepcha *mun* or *bongthing* actively reminds the deceased that he or she is not a part of the living world anymore (1952: 30).



**Figure 7.**

The three *samba* chant *mundhum* for the Hangsam while the attendees offer fruit, beer, and *tongba* to the deceased with their left hands.

## **Kaoma**

After the Hangsam is guided to the Sangram Pedang Den, the members of the *thar* of the deceased must go through a cleansing ritual that marks the end of the nine days of mourning (eight if the deceased was a man). Nebesky-Wojkowitz observed similar practice among the Lepchas after a ceremony by the grave, only here an ox is sacrificed and its blood is sprinkled in the corners of the house (1952: 33). However, animal sacrifices also seem to be a common element in Limboo funerals of the past. During the mourning period the *thar* members are not allowed to eat meat, rice, liquor, oil, or salt. Kaoma therefore marks the end of the mourning period. The ritual took place outside on a large field by the household and members of the same *thar* of the deceased stood together and faced to the west (according to the translator and also mentioned by J.R. Subba, 2005: 110) looking at the members of the Tumyanghang ('the elders council' – who were facing east), which can consist of both males and females, who are then called Tumyanghangma, although there were mostly men present. The Tumyanghang on this particular day does not consist of any individual from the same *thar* as the deceased. Also, the Tumyanghang, according to the translator consisted of both Limboos and Lepchas.

The members of the *thar* had chosen one of the *samba* to lead the ritual, and he stood before the members of the *thar* and communicated with the Tumyanghang on their behalf. Throughout the ritual the *samba* had to ask permission from the Tumyanghang for every step of the ceremony. The deceased's brother, also a Lepcha, stood on the side in the middle of the *thar* and the Tumyanghang members. The *samba* exclaimed: "She is no more!" and the Tumyanghang members answered: "Yes! She is no more". Then all the guests had to collect a small stick (*tesipina*), which was given to the *samba*, symbolizing that they had witnessed the ceremony.

The son of the deceased stepped up to his maternal uncle who shaved his nephew's hair and left just a little tuft of hair at the center of the head.<sup>90</sup> It was believed that shaving the head would prevent this type of negative situation from occurring in the future. Also, when the head is shaved, everyone would know that he is the son of the deceased. The translator believed that the practice of leaving a small tuft of hair on his head is called *masopa* and that this specific practice has been influenced by Hinduism.<sup>91</sup> Oppitz also describes head-shaving as an element of Magar funeral rituals. In cases where the deceased is a female, her mourning sons have to shave off their beard and mustache. Oppitz, however, provides a different

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<sup>90</sup> If there are no sons, an unmarried daughter would cut the tip of her hair and if there are not any unmarried daughters, a nephew, niece, grandson, or granddaughter will cut their hair (J.R. Subba, 2005:100).

<sup>91</sup> During a novice ordination in Buddhism a tuft of hair is also spared.

explanation for the tuft of hair, which he states represents a man's line to the deceased (1982: 388-389) and according to Michael Vinding, a tuft of hair is referred to as *mu* among the Gurungs (Thakalis) (1982: 297) (see 5.6 for other references for *mu*). T.B Subba, in similarity to my informant, states that many Limboos consider the practice as an Aryan import, and has therefore been debated in the community where some argue that the practice should be discontinued (1999: 91). The son was then given a white hat and white clothes. Similar hats were given to the *samba* and to the older male members of the *thar*, whereas new shawls were given to the female members of the *thar*. To mark that the mourning period was officially over, ginger was served due to its purifying qualities. As a sign that the ritual was over, the *samba* broke the stick he was holding on to during the ceremony.

### **System of mutual exchange**

Studies on systems of mutual exchange or reciprocity make up an immensely important part of anthropology. To mention the highly influential sociologist Marcel Mauss is inevitable in this context. In particular Mauss's work *The Gift* (1967 [1923]) deals with social implications of gift exchange. In Limboo society, much like other Himalayan communities, it is very expensive to arrange certain rituals, and a death ritual is one of the more costly rituals to arrange for a household. During a break after the Kaoma ritual, the younger residents of the village, who did not belong to the deceased's *thar* had prepared and served food to all the guests. In order to arrange this type of ritual, the household is dependent on lots of practical help prior to and during the death, and this help is a task for the households from other *thar*. The ritual specialists cannot belong to the same *thar* as the deceased. The roles and forms of exchange are turned around or "repaid" if someone from the other *thar* dies. In addition to practical help, the household also needs financial help, which is given in a systematic manner. The donation system is called *tongyang* and two young adults from a different *thar* sat by a counter near the food buffet and received money from the guests, which they put in envelopes on which they wrote the amount and the name of the donor. The same information was written in a book. By donating this money, the receiver must help the donor if something happens in his or her household and the household must give an equal amount of money, said my translator. Anthropologist Ernestine McHugh describes similar system of reciprocity among the Gurungs in Nepal in the 1970s (1985: 9). Also, Balikci-Denjongpa, states that the donations offered during Lhopo funerals are called *thug gso* (2006: 136-137).



**Figure 8.** The *samba* are sitting next to the erected bamboo pole while preparing their ritual clothing and implements before invoking their *guru*, who will help them guide the deceased's *sam* to other-worldly realms.

### Tongsing

Tongsing was carried out next to the main house centered around an erected bamboo pole (see figure 8) (2005: 117). Before the ritual started, the *samba* went inside the houses and walked around the household area with incense by chanting *mundhum*. The translator explained that Tongsing is potentially dangerous and they do not want to get attacked by the evil spirits invoked during the ceremony, and therefore they had to cleanse the area. Two drums were placed on the ground by the pole, which two young boys beat during the ritual. Further up on the pole two baskets were placed. The basket for the dead, *see tongsing*, was the smallest and had a red mark, while *hing tongsing* which represented the living had a blue mark on it. The Tumyanghang members sat to the left side of where the ritual was performed. Unlike the Nuwagi ritual, nothing by the pole represented Yuma or Tagera Ningwaphuma. The deity was never mentioned during the former ceremonies either.

The ritual specialists changed their clothes and put on their turban-like headdress with feathers as well as the *ablak* (the garland of rudraksha seeds, or the cloths they wear across their chest with shells attached to it). Before starting the actual ritual, the ritual specialists



invoked their *guru* (tutelary protector), as my translator called it, which would protect them and help them to guide the *sam* to Sangram Pedang Den. Their equipment was kept in a big basket, called *yalumpu* and seemed very powerful, as when the three *samba* touched it, their bodies would tremble – especially the oldest *samba* trembled quite dramatically at times. The three *samba* and their apprentice carefully prepared their ritual equipment and would sometimes put them inside the *yalumpu* in order to make them more powerful. The senior *samba* was leading the ritual and it was evident that hierarchy was age based. The other *samba* were carefully following the senior's lead. The translator stated that the second oldest *samba* would take the leading position when the oldest *samba* is too old to carry out such exhausting rituals.

Then the oldest *samba* approached the family members, who were standing around the pole, and provided them with messages from the deceased, as well as with predictions. The *samba* asked the deceased whether the treatment she had received earlier, before she died, was fine and if she was happy. The answers, which were communicated to the family, were expected to help them in the future in case something similar would happen, the translator said. A similar practice is described among the Lepchas by Nebesky-Wojkowitz, where it is believed that the *mun* is possessed by the Muk nyam (soul of a dead human) and the deceased can communicate with his or hers relatives (1952: 34). However, here the situation is described as more dramatic since the *mun* was in full trance, which the *samba* did not seem to be.

The oldest *samba* then greeted the Tumyanghang members and asked their permission to start the ritual. The three *samba* and their apprentice started to move rhythmically around the pole while beating their *yathala* 'brass plate' (see figure 9).<sup>92</sup> J.R. Subba writes that during this part, the ritual specialists are accompanying the deceased *sam* to the Samyukna Den where they hand over the *sam* to the ancestors. Samyukna Den is located on a mountain top, e.g. Phaktanlung (J.R. Subba, 2005: 122-123) which is Mount Jannu in the Kangchendzönga range. The *samba*'s rhythmical movements around the pole would continue the whole night until the next morning. The very last session takes place in the morning and is called Karakma or Kongsingkakma, which completes the specific *mundhum* they used during the Tongsing ritual. The family of the deceased is involved in the last step and the members must jump over

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<sup>92</sup> According to Oppitz, the use of drums is a widespread feature among Himalayan and Tibetan ethnic groups. A drum is the shaman's transcendental transport, and helps him or her to enter states of trance in order for them to communicate with ancestors and spirit (2011: 263). A brass plate, according to him, has the same function as a drum (ibid. 268). Interestingly, Jones observed animal carvings on the Limboo ritual specialists' drum handles representing spirits and deities (1996 [1976]: 35).

images drawn by using maize flour by the *samba*, in order to prevent such a situation to reoccur.

### 5.7.3 Ritual changes

According to the translator, death rituals have undergone several changes. He remembered that alcohol and meat were central in such rituals. The guests would consume large quantities of alcohol and meat was served to the guests. In contrast, the meal we were served was vegetarian. Nowadays, the alcoholic beverages, such as *tongba* and *thisok* are only offered and not served to the guests. Today meat and alcohol are served only during wedding rituals, stated the translator. The practice changed around twenty years ago, the translator believed. To serve expensive goods like meat and alcohol was a financial burden for many households, so the ritual changes are grounded in economical reasons, he stated. Also, he believed that more people had become more aware of the “backwardness” and harmfulness of animal sacrifice. Although J.R. Subba urges Yumaists to replace blood sacrifices with fruit offerings, he states during death rituals in the past, a goat would be sacrificed by the *ipung heem*. Also during the Kaoma ritual, a goat or ox would be sacrificed. He too stresses the financial burden of such practices and that these are not compatible to modern lifestyles (2005: 102-103). Vegetarianism, ritual animal sacrifice, as well as alcohol consumption make up central parts of contemporary and historically attempts by elite segments to revive and purify the Limboo ritual traditions, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In Darap, however, the informants regarded both alcohol and meat as central elements in rituals, and did not claim any changes towards vegetarianism and stated that the YMMCC followers’ vegetarianism posed challenges to the village mutual exchange system. Meat and alcohol are important contributions especially during weddings, they stated. To strongly hold on to the centrality of meat and alcohol in ritual contexts, they also differentiate themselves from the center’s propagation.



**Figure 9.**

One of the *samba* is beating his brass plate while rhythmically moving around the erected bamboo pole during the Tongsing part of the death ritual.

## **5.8 Religious and ethnic identities and inter-religious practices**

Religious belonging or religious identity is a complex issues for most of my informants. Except from the association members, who mostly stated they followed Yumaism, the younger informants generally defined themselves, although sometimes reluctantly, as Hindus. They supported their answer by stating the fact that they are officially regarded as Hindus in the state. Ordinary people, and young adults in particular, would often express that they were not knowledgeable persons concerning Limboo religion and culture and would rather often direct me to older ‘seniors’ or ritual specialists. However, by exploring the narratives about younger people’s thoughts about being a Limboo as well as the role of religious specialists from other ethnic communities, the religious and ethnic fluidity and flexibility can be highlighted.

### 5.8.1 “Even though we are Hindus, we eat beef – so we are not exactly Hindu either”

Expressed Maya near Darap. She noted that that she also believed that the Limboos are tribals because they have their distinct traditions and language. She regarded the ‘Limboo religion’ as confusing and stated that she wished it was as easy to understand as Buddhism or Christianity since they have monasteries or churches, monks and priests, and scripts which everybody agrees upon. Sometimes she would attend *puja* in the *mandir* and the monastery, but she never observes a service in a church. She and her family rather attend worships in the small Sathya Sai Baba center in Darap.<sup>93</sup> One of Maya’s siblings traveled to Bengaluru a few years ago to visit the Sai Baba headquarter.<sup>94</sup> Being Sai Baba followers did not seem to conflict with or have any impact on the Limboo ritual traditions. The family near Soreng also claimed to be Sai Baba followers, and the whole family had all traveled to Bengaluru together once. They clearly expressed that that the trip was important for them spiritually. Interestingly, Suraj stated that he regarded Sai Baba as a real religion. The Limboo rituals, on the other hand, were also considered important by him because they would make them “Limboo”. Here, he closely links the Limboo ritual practices with a Limboo identity, and clearly emphasizes the practical dimension in the rituals. Sai Baba, on the other hand, he regarded as more of an intellectual religion – in the people’s minds, as he described the religion as. The Sathya Sai Baba movement appeared to be very popular, especially in the areas of Darap and Soreng. The Sathya Sai Baba movement constitutes an additional dimension of the religion lives of the informants, which will not be highlighted, since it lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

Maya near Darap clearly separated Hinduism from the Limboo ritual traditions, contrary to what “Nosang”, one of Gopal’s friends in Hee Goan. He regarded Yumaism as a branch of Hinduism, because of their resemblances. In most Limboo homes there is an “altar” dedicated to Yuma/Tagera Ningwaphuma, which are symbolized as one or on or two copper vases with fresh twigs (see figure 10). S.B Limboo, the former member of the national Limboo association, perceived the biggest vase as the sun, and the smaller one as the moon. A *yeba* near Hee Goan, however, stated that the two vases signified the household deities (*heem sammang*) Yuma Sammang and Kappoba Sammang (‘grandmother’ and ‘grandfather’

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<sup>93</sup> Sathya Sai Baba is often referred to as a Hindu reformist movement. The recently deceased guru was considered an avatar of Shiva and is popular many places in the world.

<sup>94</sup> To travel from Sikkim to Bengaluru in the southern part of India is a long journey, and given that most people I met had not been outside the states of Sikkim and West Bengal, it shows how important the trip was for Maya’s brother, which he also stated himself.

deities). Sometimes photos or paintings of relatives were put up on the wall near the altar as well. These altars, however, would often contain images of Hindu deities, Buddha, or Sai Baba – sometimes they were all represented at the same time.<sup>95</sup> The families near Darap and Soreng carried out their daily *puja* by burning incense by their altars in the morning and the evening. The mother near Soreng, however, did not let me into the room where the altar was. As an outsider, the household spirit could be disturbed by my presence, which potentially could lead to an attack by the spirit and potentially cause illness in the family. The mother stated that she was extra sensitive to the spirit if it got upset, because she had brought it with her from her household when she married – which is generally a common belief and practice. The specific deity she referred to was Kebimba (‘monkey’), and in order to appease it, the family members had to offer new harvests and keep a chicken near the house. When Kebimba is satisfied, it stays inside the room but it may come out if it is disturbed. Then it would hide in the dark corners, and if someone would spot it, it is a negative sign, the mother stated.

Nosang took me to a Hindu *mandir* located just outside the village near Hee Goan. He believed this Hindu temple was more “real” than Yumaism’s *mangheem*, because the latter had only existed for fifteen to twenty years. The Hindu temple, however, he perceived to be much older and its location was seen as ‘sacred’. He was under the impression that many people, Limboos as well, often come to the *mandir* to perform *puja*, but some Limboos also



attend the services in the *mangheem*. It is not a problem to do both, he believed. Sanjay was of the same impression, because his father, who he defined as a Hindu, would go to the *mangheem* once in a while to converse with his friends and neighbors. Even though it might be accepted to attend *puja* in the *mandir*, people would often express that they did not rely on *pandit* for ritual purposes, other than in the temple.

**Figure 10.**  
An altar in a Limboo home with photos of Sirijunga, Sathya Sai Baba, and Buddha. The lamp and vase symbolize Yuma Sam.

<sup>95</sup> The tendency to “mix” deities and gods like described here is quite typical in other areas in India as well.

### 5.8.2 *Lungta* flags by Limboo households

Most of the households in the Darap and Hee Goan areas had *lungta* flags (see figure 11) near their houses. According to Maya, lamas put the flags by their house, which was also confirmed by other villagers.<sup>96</sup> Maya's family stated that they would use a lama to carry out rituals for them in situations where there were no Limboo ritualists available. The father underlined that a 'Yakthung lama' would be preferable, meaning a Limboo lama. According to him there are several Limboo monks in Sanghacholing monastery, which was also claimed by other people and can be found in Risley's *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (1989 [1894]). Here it is claimed that the particular monastery is open to different ethnic groups, unlike many of Sikkim's monasteries which limit entry to the *Tongde Rushi Bebtsengyey* (the 12 'elite' clans of the Bhutia). There are however, Buddhist education institutes, affiliated to the premier Sikkimese monasteries, which enroll Limboos – for example the Denjong Pema Choling Academy near Pemayangste monastery in Pelling.

Be that as it may the last time a lama was in their house a few years ago, he ritually purified it by reading from his scripture. No family member knew what kind of book the lama had or what he said during the ceremony, nor did they know why they had to make a small figure of a human out of mud and wheat flour – only that it would lead to a peaceful and prosperous household. The figure was probably a *torma*, commonly used in Tibetan Buddhism. According to the father, a lama can also carry out the Mangenna ritual for the prosperity of the lineage. The father then emphasized, to my surprise, the Lho Mon Tsong sum agreement, which, according to him, describes the similarities between the Limboos, Lepchas, and the Bhutias.<sup>97</sup> So even though the ritual specialists may carry out the rituals dissimilarly and not based on *mundhum*, he did not find the differences problematic. *Pandit* (Skt: learned Hindu priests), however, do not carry out any rituals for the family. Maya recalled that a *pandit* came to their house once around Diwali one year, but since they did not eat the food offered to them, her parents did not welcome them. T.B. Subba also writes that Limboos in Sikkim and Darjeeling generally abstain from inviting Hindu ritualists to their houses (T.B. Subba 1999: 70), which also R.M. Limboo, the educated man near Darap, underlined. Since the Limboos cannot become Hindu priests and are not caste-born, he found the state's classification of Limboos as Hindus illogical. However, many Limboos celebrate

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<sup>96</sup> It is unclear whether my informants meant lamas or monks and they would use both words, but I was not able to find out what they really meant, which shows that the distinction did not seem to matter when performing rituals.

<sup>97</sup> For further information on this agreement see Mullard 2011: 140-147.

Hindu festivals, such as Dasain and Diwali, but he believed they should rather become more aware of their own religious identity and embrace the Limboo celebrations, such as the newly revived festival of Balihang Tongnam.<sup>98</sup>

Near Hee Goan, around 50% of the houses in the hills had *lungta* flags, and the informants provided different explanations compared to the informants in the Darap area. According to Gopal, the flags were raised in cases where the Limboo ritual specialists were unable to cure an illness. In this village, older generations mostly rely on the specialists' healing powers, and if a Limboo ritualist is unable to cure the patient, a lama may be their second attempt. If he fails as well, the patient will probably go to a hospital, Gopal said. Notions of less powerful ritualists are also visible when Gopal also underlined that in cases where a person has died an unnatural death or committed suicide, the Limboo ritual specialists are unable to deal with the negative and potential dangerous spirits caused by the *sogha*, because the *sam* of the deceased is destroyed. According to Nosang, also from Hee Goan, however, the lamas' ritual services are very expensive and therefore only used by the wealthiest villagers. Nosang had to quit school at an early age, and compared to many of the other younger informants, he was not from a wealthy segment of the village. This indicates that the selection of informants and their background are crucial determinants in terms of their explanations as well as what issues they brought up during formal and informal interviews. Due to my limited language skills, the selection of informants consists of people with knowledge of English, often belonging to wealthier and more educated segments of Limboo society. Nosang, however, had learned English by engaging in the tourism sector. Economic and class dimensions, like this example, would probably be highlighted to a larger extent if there were more variations in the informants' background and the use of lamas may also be linked to high status segments of the Limboo community.

According to R.M. Limboo, the *lungta* ritual is one of the most common ones performed by lamas for the Limboos today. It is believed that the *lungta* ritual will protect the head of the household and therefore also the whole family. Lamas may also carry out death rituals, and the interviewee stated that his family chose a lama to carry out the ritual of a close relative who died few years ago. The lama or monk does not have to be Limboo, which stands in contrast to what Maya' father said. According to the scholar informant, lamas do not carry out any shamanistic rituals, but they might invoke some local deities who may be able to help them. The informant also stated that his family celebrated Buddhist festivals like *losar*, the

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<sup>98</sup> The religious overtones of the celebration of Dasain, especially, have become weaker in Sikkim and may be compared to Christmas in the West.

Tibetan Buddhist New Year) and would often go the monastery at that time together with his family when he was young.<sup>99</sup> He perceived the Limboos' links to Buddhism as stronger than to Hinduism because: first, the shamanistic practices carried out by the ritual specialist are massively influenced by what he described as Bön, second, the elite segments of the Limboo community in the past, especially the headmen of the religious kings (*chogyal*) were often cremated in the monastery, and third, some households still pay *lamapati* (i.e. tax or donation to a monastery), because it is believed that the monks will pray for their crops and the protection of their families. Even though R.M. Limboo suggests that to pay tax to Pemayangste is optional, it is in fact not optional in those villages associated to Pemayangste. Nowadays, however, the growing consciousness among the Limboos regarding their ethnic identity may gradually erode the Buddhist aspects of their religious practices, he stated. Since the endeavors towards the ST status in the 1970s, more individuals and organizations are attempting to develop the 'Limboo religion', and is one important reason why the religion is now being promoted as Yumaism, he said.

### 5.8.3 The powerful *bongthing*

There were few *lungta* flags in the Soreng area compared the two other villages. The tendency must probably be seen in relation to the fact that there are no historically important monasteries near Soreng. Also, the area has been administered by Limboos since Tensung Namgyal ruled in Sikkim.<sup>100</sup> The authorities of the specific places have been governed by in the past might have an impact on the religious practices in the specific areas. However, one of the *yeba* near Soreng had *lungta* flags outside his house, because he acknowledged the powerful Lepcha *bongthing*, he said. This is interesting considering that *bongthing* are not always Buddhist. The reasons why the *yeba* found the *bongthing* powerful were because only he could carry out rituals using an old text. He informed me that the *bongthing* is able to destroy extreme *nahen* (negative notions or sprits caused by jealousy), and that he could hurl thunderbolts, an expertise the Limboo ritual specialists only had in the past. Similar to the family in Darap, the *yeba* seemed to be unfamiliar with the contents of the *bongthing's* scripture, but yet they clearly esteemed it as a powerful object. The *yeba* also recognized the lamas' powers and their ability to hurl lightning. The *yeba* claimed that he too could carry

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<sup>99</sup> He is now in his forties.

<sup>100</sup> Saul Mullard presented an interesting land grant during a talk in Sikkim in November 2012, which had granted the traditional rights of tax collection and administration to the descendent of Nam Hiri Tsonq, who had been granted this right by the second king of Sikkim Tensung Namgyal.



out household rituals for Lepchas, but not death rituals. Also René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1952), Siiger (1967: 161-162), Gorer (2005 [1937]: 216), and Morris (1938: 126) note that Lepchas use Limboo *yeba* and *yema* for ritual purposes. The family near Soreng stated that they would actually choose the Lepcha *bongthing* to perform rituals in their household rather than the *phedangma* available in their village because they viewed the *bongthing* as more powerful, and highlighted his abilities to heal sick people, since they claimed he had helped them on several occasions, said the mother.

### **Are the Limboo ritual specialists the ‘keepers of tradition’?**

Although ordinary people participated to a larger extent in the death ritual compared to the Nuwagi ritual, the shamans were still in control of the ritual situation. The lack of demand for ordinary people to engage in rituals may be a reason why ordinary people expressed the Limboo ritual tradition as confusing or that they were not knowledgeable. In addition, most informants stressed the practical dimensions of the rituals carried out by shamans, for example: to cleanse, heal, to bring prosperity to the household, to diagnose any eventual disturbances or sickness etc. *Mundhum*, which is used in order to carry out these tasks is primarily taught to the shamans. It is also a shaman that can make the *mundhum* potentially powerful. A *mundhum* can be rendered outside a ritual context, but here the myth will be an account of the past or a folk story about the creation of the universe. The authority and ritual knowledge of the ritual specialists themselves is demonstrated by the recurrent tendency where the informants were seemingly unfamiliar with the actual contents of either the *mundhum*, what the lama said during his house cleansing ritual near Darap, and lastly, what kind of book the *bongthing* used during the rituals for the family in the Soreng area.

We have seen that the mother near Soreng and the family in Darap highlighted the ritual specialists’ scriptures as powerful objects. Multi-faceted meanings of rituals and scriptures have been given some attention in anthropological research on Himalayan and Tibetan societies. Charles Ramble and Hanna Havnevik, amongst others, have examined mainly Buddhist communities, where the different layers of significance of their scriptures have a central focus. Ramble asks whether the local people can be considered Buddhists when they are not familiar with the contents of the scriptures and rituals. Still they incorporate the scriptures in ritual context, even though the ‘Buddhist intent’ is almost absent in the content and expression of their ritual performances (1990: 188). Havnevik (2011) has also shown that in Tibet, Mongolia, and the Himalayas, there are often two dimensions of ritual practices:

first, there is an articulated dimension, where the written words and their meanings are emphasized. Second, there is also a non-articulated knowledge, which is transmitted orally. This non-articulated knowledge is linked to the powers of the materiality of scriptures or objects themselves, and accompanied by ritualized practices regarding how to handle the specific objects. Unlike Ramble and Havnevik's examples, the Limboo ritual practices are not scripturalized and do not have, or does not exist side-by-side a 'great', 'conventional' or 'institutionalized' religious dimension with a script-based normative tradition. Therefore, the comparison to Ramble and Havnevik's examples may not be fully appropriate, but my example might highlight multifaceted meanings in a non-scripturalized, oral religious tradition. On one hand, it is probably valid to assume that the scriptures used by the *bongthing* and lama were in fact regarded as powerful objects in ritual contexts. Though the scriptures in my examples only seem to be regarded as powerful when a ritual specialist handles them or reads from them – and they might have less spiritual value in themselves, compared to the 'sacred' materiality described by Havnevik. Since the oral narratives of the ritual specialists most likely have played a central role in the Limboo ritual traditions for a long time, the ritual

specialists themselves are crucial elements in ritual contexts. In the next chapter, however, materiality plays a central role in the associations' promotion of a Limboo cultural heritage, and the Limboo ritual specialists' positions as the 'keepers of tradition' are disputed by the Limboo ethnic associations.



**Figure 11.**

This is a relatively new Limboo home with *lungta* flags. See figure 3 for an older house.

Newly harvested cardamom pods are drying in the sun in the foreground.

## 6 Yumaism – the religion of the Limboos?

In the previous chapter, Limboo ritual practices were examined from a village and mainly from a non-political perspective. Here, we learn that the Limboo ritual tradition shares many similarities with neighbouring groups, and the religious and ethnic boundaries appear to be fluid and flexible. This chapter however, will examine and discuss the creation, emergence, and significance of Yumaism, which is also referred to as Yuma Samyo or Yuma Sam Samyo, i.e. ‘Yuma Religion’ (J.R. Subba, 2012b: iii). The narratives this chapter is based on mainly derive from individuals residing in urban areas who are involved in ethnic associations, as well as J.R. Subba and Chemjongs writings. In order to understand the roles of the ethnic associations in Sikkim today, a brief historical account on religious revivalist movement in the neighboring areas of West Bengal and Nepal will be provided.

### 6.1 A brief introduction to Yumaism

As far as I know, Chemjong was the first to use Yumaism and Yumaist to define the Limboo ritual tradition and its followers.<sup>101</sup> While J.R. Subba strongly emphasizes Yumaism as the ‘Limboo religion’, Chemjong (2003 [1966]) only mentions the term twice and does not discuss it extensively. Even though the two authors embrace Yumaism, they do not discard the phedangma tradition. In two letters dated April 20, 2000 and December 4, 2002 (the former is signed by J.R. Subba while he was the president of the Sikkim Yakthung Sapsok Songchumpho) addressed to India’s Home Minister and Prime Minister respectively. In both letters Yuma Sam Samyo is explicitly claimed to be the religion of the Limboos. In his letter, J.R. Subba presents Yuma Sam Samyo as an animistic religion and claims that alcohol and meat are central in the Limboos’ “primitive” culture. However, as we will see in this chapter J.R. Subba and the associations are attempting to move away from these “primitive” characteristics.

Yumaism in the literary representations has been given a “christianized” dimension, which consequently transforms the Limboo ritual traditions into a ‘great’ religion. According to J.R. Subba, he seeks to develop or improve the Limboo traditions by systematizing the belief system and attempts to create a normative foundation. Since Yumaism is mainly articulated by elite segments associated with political ethnic associations, the articulations and

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<sup>101</sup> I asked several of my informants whether they knew when Yumaism was first used and who introduced it, but no one seemed to know.

attempts to revive the religion will be closely analyzed in relation to the political and social context of Sikkim. Although a division between the “old” tradition and Yumaism cannot be traced in the literary representations, empirically there are differences, at least according to my data. Therefore, for analytical purposes the phedangma tradition and Yumaism are separated. Although J.R. Subba is closely involved with the associations in Sikkim, readers must be aware of that there are many voices within the ethnic associations in the state, and Subba’s accounts are not necessarily in accordance with the associations’ ideas and guidelines.

As the category ‘Yumaism’ implies, Yuma holds a central position in the two authors’ understandings of the deity. The two authors’ influences from their Christian education are evident in the way they perceive Tagera Ningwaphuma and Yuma, since the deities are highlighted as a ‘great’ deity. According to Chemjong, Tagera Ningwaphuma is a forceful power, an omnipresent “God Almighty”, and the creator of the life on earth. Yuma Sam is understood as an aspect of, a forceful spirit, and Tagera Ningwaphuma’s worldly messenger (2003 [1966]: 25, 99). While Chemjong refers to Tagera Ningwaphuma as a male deity (ibid. 20), J.R. Subba emphasizes it as a supreme goddess.

### **6.1.1 Other perspectives on Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma**

Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma are provided central positions and clear roles in Yumaism. My empirical data as well as other secondary sources reveal discrepancy in the indigenists and association members’ accounts on Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma. Risley explicitly states that Tagera Ningwa Puma is the great deity of the Limboos. Campbell, however, claims Sham Mungh to be the highest deity (1989 [1894]: 153). A recently published Master’s thesis based on fieldwork in Maunabuthuk, eastern Nepal, reveals that Fatanagan was perceived as the Limboos’ most respected deity (Shanti Limbu, 2011: 63). Balikci-Denjongpa mentions the Limboo deity, Ajo Goka, also referred to as Tsong Goka, or Kame Ajo as a Limboo deity worshipped by Lhopos all over Sikkim (2008: 104, 180). No informant mentioned these deities during fieldwork. Sagant, who follows Chemjong to a great extent (1996 [1976]: 371), interestingly suggests that the Yuma ‘cult’ is quite recent and believes that the female deity, Nahangma, belongs to an ancient cult, which might have given precedence to the cult of Yuma. Their rivalry is evident in a myth, which relates how the two deities tear one another to pieces when they meet (ibid. 12). Nahangma is, according to

Sagant, a beautiful woman, armed with a bow, shield, sword and perhaps a helmet, and is believed to dwell on a snowy mountain (ibid.).

According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz, the Tibetan word *yum* means ‘female consort’ or sometimes ‘secret consort’, to which he links the sankrit term *sakti*. The male counterpart of *yum* is *yab* (1975: 21). Interestingly *yeba* is also referred to as *yaba*. Whether Yuma has any links with the *yum* concept is not possible to tell at this point. My informants translated *yuma* as ‘grandmother’. Ian Fitzpatrick, however, states that *yuma*, means ‘to come down’ and is used to describe ‘descending to a lower area’, as well as the verbs ‘sitting’ and ‘staying’ (2011: 62). Fitzpatrick’s translations are meaningful in relation to Chemjong’s and J.R. Subba’s understanding of Yuma as the descended and worldly daughter of Tagera Ningwaphuma. Yuma as a ‘grandmother’, on the other hand, fits the setting of a household ritual, which I have discussed in 5.7.1. Since the contemporary understanding of Yuma and Tagera Ningwaphuma, at least among my informants, correlates with Risley’s representation, it is important to underline once more the *Gazeteer of Sikkim*’s (1989 [1894]) possible influential role in regards to the Limboos’ conception of their history and identity and its construction. More research is needed in order to examine this particular issue extensively.

## **6.2 Limboo revivalist movements in the past and the present**

The Limboo language is an important identification marker, and since the 1970s, when the Limboo associations fought for it to receive official status in Sikkim, the language has been revitalized. The Limboo language and publications in Limboo also played a central role in the early ethnic activist mobilization in Darjeeling in the 1920s, in which Chemjong was engaged. The first Limboo ethnic association was established in 1925 (Gaenzle, 2011: 288), and since then publications in Limboo and English on Limboo culture and religion have continued to play central roles in the associations’ propagation of Yumaism. Along with the revival of the Limboo language, Sirijunga, who is closely associated with the language and script, has also become a central symbol for the Limboo community, which will be discussed below. This section will also provide a brief historical backdrop concerning revivalist movements in Nepal in the 1930s, which are relevant to this thesis’ topic due to their possible influence on the contemporary ethnic associations in Sikkim.

### 6.2.1 Sirijunga and Iman Singh Chemjong

Here, I will present a version of a local narrative about Sirijunga,<sup>102</sup> which surprisingly also incorporates Chemjong. A retired Limboo teacher narrated the story during an interview in his home near Hee Goan. The story goes as follows:

Sirijunga was born in the 9<sup>th</sup> century as a prince in Limbuwan. He found his countrymen illiterate and backward because of the lack of education and a script. Sirijunga then received a vision in a dream: The Hindu goddess Saraswati took him to the heavens – the Himalayas, and when they arrived, the mountains opened up for them. Saraswati took him inside the mountain where Sirijunga saw the script on a stone. After he had studied and learned the script he then received it on a stone slate from Saraswati, who returned him to his kingdom. He named the script ‘Sirijunga script’ and started to teach it to the country’s inhabitants, who soon became literate. For a long period, there was no development of the language, as the Limboos faced dark periods. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Sirijunga was reincarnated in Sinam, a village in Limbuwan. The reincarnated Sirijunga Teyongsi revived the script and the Limboos’ religion, Yumaism. He too travelled around and taught the people about the Limboos’ language and religion. The *Chogyal* of Sikkim had banned any religion other than Buddhism, so he hid in Martam in western Sikkim and secretly taught the Limboo script and culture. Eventually, the *chogyal*’s men found him and killed him. They tied him to a tree and shot him with an arrow, but he did not die. A piece of paper in his stomach saved him from the arrows but ultimately he was killed and his body was put in a leather bag and thrown into the river: where the Kerekma river meets the Kelleg river. When the leather bag was thrown in the water, a small bird flew out and said: “I shall come again in the future”.

According to the former Limboo teacher, Sirijunga Teyongsi became a martyr for the sake of the Limboo language and culture. He also said that the period after Sirijunga Teyongsi’s death was also a dark one in terms of the development of Limboo culture, which resulted in the destruction of documents by the *Chogyal* and the disappearance of Limboo culture. It is here that Chemjong appears in the narrative:

Fortunately, four documents were saved, and in 1904 Chemjong was born in Kalimpong. During his lifetime, he rediscovered some of these documents and started to encourage people to learn the script. Chemjong made attempts to preserve the script and went to the library in Oxford to collect more documents and published highly influential books on Limboo religion and culture.

The former Limboo teacher’s narrative clearly shows the importance of both Sirijunga and Chemjong, and links them both to the revival of Limboo culture. It is interesting that Chemjong, who passed away 38 years ago, is granted a position similar to the two Sirijungas, since he too rediscovered the lost Limboo script. The narrative also reveals that the narrator can incorporate recent events and situate these as a continuation in an already familiar narrative. Despite the fact that Sirijunga is not understood to be a Limboo ritual specialist, it is revealed in the narrative that he was reincarnated, which contrasts with the common belief that no individuals other than the Limboo ritual specialists can be reincarnated, as discussed in

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<sup>102</sup> Gaenszle states that the historical origins of the script can be located in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Sirijunga, who Gaenszle sees as a Limboo monk affiliated to a monastery in Sikkim, began to propagate the Kiranti script. There is no historical evidence that the script had any predecessors, and is therefore likely a recent invention. According to the Hodgson manuscripts, Sirijunga was also known as Rupihang, a separatist, according to the kings of Sikkim (2011: 286).

5.3. Chemjong himself, grants Sirijunga an active role in the development of Limboo culture and religion (2003 [1966]: 124). Michael Oppitz (2006) has found similar myths about scripts being lost and then rediscovered in Burma, Cambodia, and Tibet and states that these myths seem to point towards a justification of their perceived deficiency. According to Caplan, the Limboos' explanation for not having religious scripts is expressed in a myth where they burned and ate their books, while the Brahmins took good care of them (2000 [1970]: 66-67).



**Figure 12.**  
Two different depictions of Sirijunga in the Sirijunga *mangheem* in Martam.

### 6.2.2 Revitalization of Sirijunga as a religious symbol

It seems to be generally agreed that there are no elements of idol worship in Limboo ritual practices. However, in Limboo homes (especially those of educated and well-off Limboos), at the Cultural Center in Tharpu, or even in the *mangheem*, it is common to see at least one portrait or altar dedicated to Sirijunga. Many of my younger informants also knew the story of Sirijunga, but were more reticent when I asked questions about Yuma, *mundhum*, or rituals. Although Sirijunga is not part of any household, harvest, or life-cycle rituals, portrayals of him contain powerful religious elements and symbols such as the common depiction of Sirijunga shows him tied to a tree with arrows in his chest, which brings to mind notions of ‘martyrdom’. In another common representation, he is dressed in white with a halo around his

head, resembling a Catholic saint or an Eastern Orthodox icon (see figure 12). The *mangheem* in Martam, in western Sikkim, is dedicated specially to Sirijunga. Here, the Limboo ethnic associations are also constructing a study center next to the *mangheem*. Martam is the place where it is believed Sirijunga was killed, and these new constructions on this specific historically important place draw links between religion and history, which creates an important historical and religious ground for the Limboos in the landscape of Sikkim.<sup>103</sup>

A small statue of Sirijunga can be found outside the *mangheem*, but a much larger statute of him is being constructed on a hilltop near Hee Bermiok in western Sikkim by Limboo ethnic associations, with funds by the state government. Gaenzle also observed a Sirijunga statue in Dharan in eastern Nepal, where many well-to-do Kiratis reside (2011: 287). This type of construction is part of a broader trend found both in Sikkim and elsewhere in India. In order to understand the significance of such statues, they must be discussed in the context of the statutes near Namchi in southern Sikkim. Here, there is a thirty-meter tall white Shiva statue, which was finished in 2011. Also visible from Namchi, on another hilltop, is a thirty-six meter tall shimmering gold Padmasambhava/Guru Rinpoche, built in 2004. In the political climate of Sikkim, this way of materializing and displaying symbols representing ethnic communities must be seen in relation to the contemporary ethno-politics of the state. A Sirijunga statue on a hilltop does not only display the Limboo community's "unique" symbol in the Sikkimese landscape and mark their belonging to it, but can also be understood as a claim by the Limboo community to have a respected religion or 'great' tradition, similar to Hinduism and Buddhism. Here, therefore, Sirijunga as a symbol becomes crucial because he is one of the few available personified symbols which can represent the Limboo community, as Shiva or Padmasambhava represent Hindus and Buddhists, respectively.

The ethnic associations are apparently investing considerable amounts of both time and money to make Sirijunga a Limboo symbol. At the same time, there is a lot of emphasis on Yuma, who has a central position in the Yumaism propagated by the indigenist writers. However, in contrast to Sirijunga, Yuma does not play an important symbolic role. Sirijunga, unlike Yuma, does not have a ritual function in Yumaism, but can be characterized as more of a cultural hero. It is unclear whether these two different processes concerning Yuma and Sirijunga are grounded in disagreements between the different Limboo ethnic associations or if it has been decided that Sirijunga is the most appropriate and representative symbol for the

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<sup>103</sup> Martam with its *mangheem*, cave and the Sirijunga statue nearby was often promoted as a tourist destination, which can also be seen here: <http://www.sikkimtourismuttarey.com/teen-chahangay-hee-bermiok-sirijunga-phocku-rinchenpong-kaluk.html> [Accessed November 28, 2013].



Limboo community as a whole. The fact that Sirijunga is situated outside the realm of ritual action is a possible explanation for why he has become such a potent symbol. As I have shown in the previous chapter, ordinary people generally seem to have limited knowledge of the content of *mundhum*, which includes knowledge of rituals, deities etc. The iconographic depictions of Sirijunga appear to make him much more accessible to ordinary people and easier for them to relate to. The same can be said of the tales about him, which are not as complicated as the *mundhum* myths.

### 6.2.3 Sattehangma and religious revivalist movements in Nepal

It has already been mentioned that the Limboo associations and the indigenist writers are the main propagators of Yumaism. The way these associations are politically mobilizing in contemporary Sikkim today is not a new invention. Elite, i.e. well-educated, ethnic mobilization happened, as we know of, already in the 1920s in West Bengal and 1931 in Nepal.<sup>104</sup> In 1931 Limboo leaders gathered and decided to change some of their basic elements of their religion and culture in order to reform their culture to be able to confront the dominant Hindu religion (Gaenzle, 2011: 289-290). One of the attendees in the meeting was Lingden Phalgunanda (1885-1949), the leader of the Sattehangma movement (or Satya Hangma, ‘the truthful prince’).<sup>105</sup> Many of the principles of his social reform movement appear to resemble the teachings of Yumaism propagated in Sikkim today, such as: non-violence, meaning opposing ritual sacrifice, vegetarianism, no consumption of alcohol, and a more systematic education system (Gaenzle 2011: 289). Gaenzle states that the Sattehangma movement represented a kind of process of sanskritization,<sup>106</sup> where elements of high caste Hindu traditions were syncretized with Limboo deities and rituals (2011: 289-290).

S.B. Limboo, a previous member of the national apex body of the Limboo associations in India, provides a different interpretation of the emergence of the Sattehangma movement, which also puts the Limboos in a vulnerable position. He believed that the Hindu Gorkhali kings took advantage of Phalgunanda and encouraged him to build temples which would make him appear more Hindu, which the interviewee claimed to be beneficial to the

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Vinding, in 1972-1981, found similar tendencies among the Gurungs (Thakalis) in Nepal, where the elite in Kathmandu in particular changed and abolished a number of their cultural elements, since Tibetan-speaking groups were looked down upon and were regarded as impure. They therefore stopped eating yak meat, especially in Hindu dominating areas (1982: 292).

<sup>105</sup> According to Gaenzle, it is believed that Phalgunanda, like Sirijunga, discovered the Kiranti script in a cave (2011: 289).

<sup>106</sup> ‘Sanskritization process’ was initially introduced by sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1952, see also 1956) and refers to a process where low castes imitate high caste elements (e.g. vegetarianism) as strategy to improve their social status.

administration. Therefore they transformed him into a *sadhu*, ‘Hindu holy man’, but since he also used *mundhum*, the Limboos were confused but also attracted to this man and many departed Yumaism in favor of Sattelangma. Despite S.B. Limboo’s understanding of Phalgunanda being exploited, the fact that he was present during the meeting probably tells us that the Limboo leaders did not oppose his ‘Hinduized’ ideas and practices. On the contrary, his ideas seem to have rather influenced the resolutions passed during the meeting. Interestingly, J.R. Subba reproduces these ten resolutions. Here is a selection of some of the ones I believe are the most relevant in the Sikkimese context:

- Each household should contribute to the construction of *mangheem* and the amount donated should be documented;
- animal sacrifice should be replaced with fruits and flowers;
- the pollution period after death should be reduced from 8 days for females and 9 days for males to 3 and 4 days respectively;
- the pollution period after childbirth should be increased from 3 days for females and 4 days for males to 10 days for the family and 22 days for the mother;
- stop offerings of meat to the deceased during death rituals, people should offer ginger, milk, and rice instead;
- Limboos should stop drinking alcohol and also stop offering alcohol to the deities (J.R. Subba, 1999: 241-243).

Interestingly, the Sattelangma movement or this meeting’s resolutions were not mentioned by any informants, and are not presented directly as influences in the indigenists’ accounts. In his first English publication, J.R. Subba links the concept of the *mangheem* to the Sattelangma movement (1998: 14-15). Many informants described the Sattelangma movement as very Hindu, and might be the reason why J.R. Subba never mentions that particular specific link again in later publications. By rejecting this specific part of recent Limboo history, opens up the possibility to claim that the construction of *mangheem* is non-Hindu and purely a Limboo creation. The informants’ opinions regarding ritual animal sacrifice and use of alcohol in ritual contexts, as well as consumption of alcohol were divided. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, animal sacrifice was not conducted during the death ritual and ginger were offered to the guests, in accordance to one of the resolutions. The pollution periods as described above, correspond to what the informants stated. The discussion above shows that the resolutions have certainly influenced ordinary people’s religious life in some aspects but have not been universally accepted which suggests incorporation of some of the resolutions

and resistance to others (such as offering alcohol and meat). In Sikkim today, there are few Sattehangma followers in the state,<sup>107</sup> but according to some informants the movement is more successful in Nepal.<sup>108</sup>

### 6.3 Limboo ethnic associations in Sikkim

Compared to the Nepali Limbu and Kirati associations, the Limboo ethnic associations in Sikkim seem to keep a low profile, both in the media and on the Internet.<sup>109</sup> Also the YMMCC and its members use the Internet, social media, such as Facebook and YouTube more actively, which might suggest that YMMCC followers might belong to younger generations: representing a possible dynamic approach to the propagation of this religious movement.<sup>110</sup> My informants would only speak reluctantly about the activities of the Limboo associations, and would often not even reveal that they were members unless they were asked directly. Few wore a small pin with the revived Limboo symbol, as found on the Limboo flag (see figure 1). All association members I met during fieldwork were well-off individuals with higher education, and the majority lived in urban areas. The individuals who were pointed out as especially knowledgeable were male seniors in their 50s to 70s and held leadership positions in the associations. S.B. Subba, the former member of All India Limboo Association, explained that the national association is the decision-maker, and provides the local associations of Sikkim, West Bengal, and Assam with guidelines in accordance to the apex body's decisions.<sup>111</sup> The local associations are dedicated to the development of Limboo language and culture locally, including, constructing *mangheem* and study centers, arranging festivals etc.

The concept of *chumlung* ('council') may be meaningful to relate to the existing associations in contemporary Sikkim. Many of the associations also use '*chumlung*' in their organizations' names. According to T.B. Subba the concept can also be found among the Rais, and he believes that such a council is ancient and has always been an integral part of Limboo culture and history. He finds it likely that these councils consisted of landlords, and

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<sup>107</sup> There is at least one Sattehangma *mangheem* in Sikkim not far from Soreng.

<sup>108</sup> My informants, especially association members, generally avoided discussing Sattehangma and Yuma Mang in Darap.

<sup>109</sup> For example the Nepali Limboo organization, Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Nepal: <http://www.chumlung.org.np> [Accessed November 28, 2013].

<sup>110</sup> The official YMMCC website: <http://yumamang.org> [Accessed November 28, 2013].

<sup>111</sup> S.B. Limboo claimed that the national organization did not cooperate with the Limboo and Kirat associations in Nepal, but given the seemingly similarities in the ways Limboo culture and religion have revived in India and Nepal, it is a topic which should be examined more closely in eventual further research.

the poor and non-Limboos were not represented in the decision-makings (1999: 46-47). According to my data, the associations seem to consist of well-off individuals. By claiming the associations as an ancient and an inseparable part of Limboo culture, further enhance their authority and legitimizes their decisions.

### **6.3.1 Uniting the Limboo community**

During an interview with a retired association member, who was interviewed in his house in Gangtok, he expressed some dissatisfaction with the state of the Limboo community, which he saw as divided. He expressed a desire for the Limboo community to unite and become strong. The reason for the division of the community was, according to him, that many people have turned their backs on their traditional ritual practices and rather embraced Hinduism. During the Namgyal dynasty, the situation was the same, only then people converted to Buddhism, he said. The retired association member also claimed that whether alcohol consumption and non-vegetarianism should be allowed or not, were issues which members of the community have different opinions on, and are one factor that prevents the community from uniting.

The invention of Yumaism as the religion of the Limboo community can be argued to be an attempt to unify the Limboo community. The ‘-ism’ suggests an institutionalized category and a unified religious belief system of the Limboo community, and is evident in a quote from J.R. Subba:

The Limboo tribal society is an autonomous social conglomeration, followers of an ancient religion called Yumaism. It is a socially, culturally and religiously strong society reinforced by traditional wisdoms refined through consistent abidance since antiquity. (2012a: iii).

In this quote, Subba provides a close link between being Limboo and a Yumaist. By claiming an ethno-religious identity grounded in a claimed ancient and consistent religious tradition is a potentially powerful assertion in the political context of the state. Here it is relevant to link Beckford’s idea of religion as a social construct (2003: 3), where the meaning of the category of religion itself is constructed into a Limboo identity, which provides a sense of the Limboos being a unified and strong community.

To coin a single category, which groups the Limboos’ ritual practices into a single concept can be understood as an anti-syncretic process (Shaw and Stuart, 1994). A single term resists the diversity, syncretic tendencies, fluidity, and flexibility highlighted in the previous chapter. A single category may also be an attempt to construct a ‘great’ tradition. In addition, a seemingly institutionalized religious category contrasts and might contest the earlier and

vague representations of the Limboo belief system as, for example, a nameless, animistic, or syncretic religion. In the ethno-political context of Sikkim where the Limboos are, according to themselves wrongly recognized as Hindus or Nepalese, so a single religious entity might also be analyzed as an attempt to resist the tendency to be grouped in these two categories. If we also take the retired association member's concern into consideration, about Limboos turning their backs to the "traditional" Limboo religion, an independent Limboo religious identity, similar to 'Buddhist' or 'Hindu' can, on one hand, be capable of "competing" with the 'Hindu' category. On the other hand, an independent religious identity itself proves that the Limboo community is a unique and respected ethnic community: something of immense importance in the ethno-politics of Sikkim and the wider region.

However, to my knowledge, Yumaism has not become an independent religious category in official censuses, statistics, or documents, although this may be one of the associations' objectives. Yet, these categories are promoted on websites, such as Wikipedia and Facebook, and the former, especially is an important source of knowledge today. Here, we find Yumaism and Yuma Samyo being promoted as the Limboos' religion.<sup>112</sup> The role of religion in the processes of creating a distinct Limboo ethnic identity in the political context of Sikkim is clearly very central. The tendencies discussed here can be linked to what anthropologist David Gellner has found in the ethno-political situation in Nepal, where he claims that religion rather than culture, or religion as culture, is growing in importance as a marker of identity. Arguing that religious allegiances have become more self-conscious, more problematic, and much more politicized (2007 [2001]: 178).

### **6.3.2 Asserting a religious identity as a negotiator vis-à-vis the state**

Despite the overall lack of political and social perspectives in J.R. Subba's books, he does direct some criticism towards the government. According to him, since the strengthening of government institutions in 1975, Sikkimese society has become more multicultural, and the government does not pay any attention to the Limboo institutions of Tumyanghang and Yehang (i.e. a type of religious council), which consequently have become weak and insignificant and defunct nowadays. Both J.R. Subba's criticism as well as the group's present recognition as Nepalese and Hindus can be linked to what Charles Taylor states: that identities are partly shaped by recognition or non-recognition and become driving forces

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<sup>112</sup> Wikipedia article on the Limboos: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbu\\_people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbu_people) [Accessed November 28, 2013].

behind nationalistic movements. According to him, misrecognition can cause suffering, damage, and distortion to a person or group. Taylor further compares these states as a form of oppression since they imprison someone in a false, and reduced mode of being (1992: 25). Even though the Limboos' endeavors are not nationalistic per se, their claims have certain similarities to political scientist Dominique Arel's description: "The nationalist claim that a culturally distinct group has legitimate rights to make territorially-defined political demands implies, that the group must be *recognized* as a legitimate entity by the larger state." (2002: 92). Taking Arel's quote into consideration, it can be argued, in a similar vein as Sara Shneiderman (2009), that the Limboos' claims to be a distinct group with a unique religion and culture can be understood as a way to negotiate vis-à-vis the state in order for the community to improve their rights. The group's negotiation with the state becomes clearer when examining the Sikkim Statistic Profile 2004-2005 (56-59), where it is stated that the state government accord ethnic and religious communities with financial funds to develop their cultural heritage. Interestingly, the specific types cultural activities (construction of *mangheem*, study centers, statues, and the development of religious festivals) correspond directly to the sources of financial support offered by the government. The administration buildings provide the ethnic associations a space to organize themselves and enable them to establish administrative platforms.

The discussions in the previous chapter demonstrate that Limboo ritual traditions in the three villages revolve around social and village relations. The rituals were closely associated with, for example, the household, *thar*, or life-cycle rituals. According to my data these types of buildings appeared to be of little significance on a village level. It is therefore meaningful to ask whether the ethnic associations are attempting to create a demand for such institutions and buildings in order to receive governmental funds? Does their propagation of Yumaism serve to establish such demands? Clearly the *mangheem* are dedicated to Yuma and/or Tagera Ningwaphuma and such community worship places create a ritual space for this specific deity. This can further enhance the associations' attempts to make the deity appear like a respected and "great" "Limboo deity". The propagation of Yumaism might therefore be understood as a way of legitimizing the needs for these specific buildings by grounding their functions into a religious narrative and a seemingly historical continuity. In addition, when these new constructions are incorporated into a religious narrative, they might appear more meaningful to ordinary Limboos.

It is also important to notice that the state government's list of what they support financially is indirectly a stipulation of what a religious community is, or what institutions it

should consist of. Similar funds are potentially provided to Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian groups (interestingly, Sai Baba is an independent category). Paradoxically, the ethnic groups in the state are claiming to be distinct from each other, yet they simultaneously endeavor to be accorded funds which enable them to construct similar religious and cultural institutions. It can be argued that a sort of religious “uniformity” is created by the state, and may be understood as an attempt to control or regulate the religious and ethnic groups in the state.

## 6.4 Creating an active “membership” of Yumaism

“Yumaism is a responsibility to live and act in the world in a particular Limboo way.”  
(J.R. Subba: 2012b: 1).

In the previous chapter I argued that the Limboo ritual specialists can be referred to be ‘keepers of tradition’, since *mundhum* is mainly their task to learn and pass on to the coming generations. In contrast, it seems like ordinary people seldom play active roles during rituals. *Puja* in the *mangheem* clearly present a different religious practice since people participate in the ritual to a larger extent. Although temple rituals constitute a new element in the Limboo ritual traditions, the concept of a temple itself is certainly not an alien religious element. In Sikkim temples are mainly associated with the ‘great’ traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. I have suggested that the invention of Yumaism can be understood as an anti-syncretic process. However, processes of being recognized as an authentic and unique religious community also involve syncretic processes. By syncretizing temple worship, Yumaism may resemble a ‘great’ or a ‘world’ religion to a larger degree. A community meeting place like this can further create stronger sense of a membership of Yumaism and belonging to the ethnic group. J.R. Subba states:

To provide growth, development and maintaining spiritual life in Yumaism, every individual is responsible and must through internalization of the doctrine of Yumaism and autonomous freedom though daily private prayers at Manddhan (Mangtan) or at the *Mangheem*. (J.R. Subba 2012: 178)

In the quote J.R. Subba urges people to internalize Yumaism by, for example, engaging in worship in the *mangheem*. Why he urges people to internalize Yumaism, can be understood in terms of his criticism of how ordinary people relate to their ‘Limboo religion’. Modern lifestyles are, according to him, contributing to the desires of people to make their own decision and lead their lives independently (J.R. Subba, 2012b: 207). Since Limboos do not abide by either the religious or customary rules anymore, Yumaism has become weak, he believes. It is therefore necessary, according to him, to document the evolution and ideology

of Yumaism (J.R. Subba, 2012: iii), like he does in his publications, as well as internalizing the faith of Tagera Ningwaphuma.

In a similar vein as I have argued in the previous chapter, he too appears to view the Limboo ritual specialists as the ‘keepers of tradition’. Although his statements appear slightly ambivalent, he perceives the authority of the shamans as problematic, because many Limboos solely depend on them and their knowledge in terms of religious practices. Consequently, the ‘spiritual’ life of the Limboos is therefore lost to a great extent, he believes (ibid.).<sup>113</sup>

According to him, as long as Yumaism lacks institutions where Limboos can, for example, receive education about the religion, the adherents must embrace and internalize Yumaism through private prayers so the religion and its ‘spiritual’ dimension can be revived within the community (J.R. Subba 2012: 175-176). Developing a personal faith, will, according to J.R. Subba lead to a less remote Tagera Ningwaphuma, contrasting with the way he believes people experience the deity today (J.R. Subba, 2012b: 192). His statement corresponds to what I discussed in the previous chapter; that ordinary people, especially the younger informants, did not seem to know much about the ritual traditions – or did not consider themselves as knowledgeable. According to J.R. Subba, Limboos should start creating a strong relationship with the deities by relating to them as parents of human beings (ibid. 162-163). Apart from the association members, no informants expressed that they felt a personal “bond” with any of the Limboo deities on a daily basis. Take the case of Suraj from Soreng’s comparison of Limboo rituals and Sai Baba, mentioned in the previous chapter. Suraj described Sai Baba as a “religion in people’s minds”, (i.e. an actual religion) whereas he understood Limboo rituals as the practical and constructive aspects of the Limboo identity (see 5.7.1). This is in stark contrast to what J.R Subba has attempted to do through his representation of Yumaism as an actual religion – inside people’s minds.

Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere applied the concept of ‘protestant Buddhism’ on the religious changes related to rapid changes in people’s material and social life they observed in Sri Lanka in the mid-1960s. The two scholars found that Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka had absorbed elements of Protestantism. Their characteristics of the concept share some similarities to Yumaism, such as;

- an emphasis on individual responsibility which can lead to self-scrutiny;
- privatized and internalized religion;
- an increased focus on what happens in one’s mind and soul;

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<sup>113</sup> ‘Spiritual’, according to J.R. Subba is deep, personal, inner and authentic experiences.



- claims that the tradition is a philosophy rather than a religion;
- dependence on English language concepts.

Spiritual egalitarianism and the universalized nature of a religion applicable to everyone, on the other hand, cannot be applied to Yumaism, which is by its nature exclusive to Limboos. Similar to the syncretic Buddhism, Gombrich and Obeyesekere describe, Yumaism seems to appeal to privileged and urban segments. J.R. Subba's propagation of a personalized spirituality may emerge from his own experiences with Christianity. It could also be said that promoting this type of religion can be an attempt to prevent Limboos embracing new religious movements, Christianity, or the YMMCC,<sup>114</sup> and not abandon the "traditional" Limboo ritual practices, as underlined by the retired association member (see 6.3.1).

J.R. Subba underlines the importance of having Limboo educational institutions, and must probably be seen in relation to the numerous Buddhist educational institutions in the state. There have been constructed Limboo study centers in the state. Nevertheless, no informants said that these were in wide use at the moment. To make the Limboo ritual traditions a subject in an eventual institutionalized education system raises a central question about scripturalization. In order to educate people about Yumaism, a religious text might be a necessity, and J.R. Subba desires to scripturalize *mundhum* in order to guide the ritual specialists (2012b: iii). He even suggests that his own books on *mundhum* are in fact "sacred" scripts (2005: 6). This, however, is not mentioned explicitly in his later publications. At the same time he underlines that the oral tradition and the practice of passing down the teachings from generation to generation constitutes one of the cores of Yumaism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, and as far as I know, *mundhum* have not been scripturalized, and the oral traditions still prevail in ritual contexts – also in the *mangheem*. Whether J.R. Subba's normative articulations of Yumaism or the great religious diversity we find on the village level will be incorporated in an eventual institutionalized education system, is an interesting question for the future.

Interestingly, the YMMCC promotes similar ideas propagated by J.R. Subba with regards to how Limboos should relate to and practice Yumaism. In addition to Gombrich and Obeyesekere's characteristics mentioned above, 'spiritual egalitarianism' and 'universalized religion' can also be applied to the YMMCC. Unlike Yumaism, the YMMCC appear to have, in a more successful way, incorporated an individualized and internalized religion through urging people to 'know your own soul' and take part in the regular worships and meetings in

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<sup>114</sup> Numerous new religious movements are emerging in the state, such as Brahma Kumaris, Lovism or Heavenly Path, and the mentioned YMMCC, to name a few.

the YMMCC *mangheem* and mediation center,<sup>115</sup> as stated by two *suingneem* (YMMCC ritual specialists) interviewed in Darap in December 2012. Unlike the phedangma tradition and Yumaism, one does not need to be a Limboo in order to be an YMMCC member. In contrast, in order to become a member of the YMMCC, one must take a vow in front of other members, stating that you will lead your life according to the teachings of the YMMCC. The YMMCC's *mundhum* are scripturalized and are actively taught to the members during regular worships and meetings in their *mangheem*, which also include study sessions – similar to how J.R. Subba describes an 'ideal' Yumaism. One may therefore ask whether the seeming success of the YMMCC is because it is an actual religion. Although it is new it has some of the dominating characteristics of a religion, whereas Yumaism does not, because it is transposed upon a pre-existing ritual tradition, which it needs in order to justify and project itself into the past as a historical tradition. J.R. Subba is concerned about propagating Yumaism as the faith and belief of the Limboos, and a central question is whether belief constitutes a central dimension in the phedangma tradition. By having changed many of the structures of the phedangma tradition, as well as incorporating a worldly goddess into their

teachings, the YMMCC seem to have created a deity people can believe in and have a closer relationship with.



**Figure 13.**

A household altar dedicated to Sri Sri Srime Yuma Mang. She wore the same clothes during my meeting with her in Darap, September 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Sri Sri Srime Yuma Mang stated during an interview in Darap in December 2012 that to a part of the center's 'know your own self/soul' philosophy would lead to a perfection of human beings, but in order to know your own self, people must seek refuge in Tagera Ningwaphuma.

### 6.4.1 *Mangheem*

As far as I know, no academic research has been carried out on Limboo *mangheem* in Sikkim or Nepal. *Mangheem* is the general term for Limboo ‘temples’ (see figure 14). The constructions of several *mangheem* in the state constitute a different trajectory of religious change of the Limboo in Sikkim compared to other ethnic groups in the state. It appears that the Rai community also has *mangheem*,<sup>116</sup> at least in Nepal. It is uncertain whether there are any in Sikkim, since my informants who were members of the ethnic associations tended to claim the temples to be uniquely Limboo. *Mangheem* are also associated with the Sattedhangma movement and the YMMCC, but these are separated from the Yumaist *mangheem*. Why the tendency of constructing temples is not found among other ethnic groups, is probably because many groups are more closely associated with Hinduism or Buddhism. For example, the Gurung and Tamang communities are closely associated with Buddhism, and have their own Tamang and Gurung Buddhist monasteries, even though their religious practices may also include shamanistic practices.

During an interview with J.R. Subba in Gangtok, he told me that there are about twelve *mangheem* in Sikkim at the moment, but that the associations are planning to construct more.<sup>117</sup> The first *mangheem* in Sikkim was constructed in Mangshila, located in the North District of Sikkim, in 1983.<sup>118</sup> Contrasted to earlier, Limboos can now enjoy community rituals which are held in the morning (*namlinge*) and evening (*emsimlo*). However, according to most of my informants, the *mangheem* were first and foremost associated with the newly created grand community celebrations (see below 6.4.3), especially Sirijunga’s birthday and New Year’s celebrations. Sattedhangma might have been influential when it comes to the concept of *mangheem*. As we have seen, they probably existed already in the 1930s. S.B. Limboo, however, claimed during an interview, that a Sikkimese Limboo stood behind the invention and design of the *mangheem*, which was the one in Mangshila. As mentioned in 6.2.3, J.R. Subba states that *mangheem* were spread together with the Sattedhangma movement (1998: 14-15), and since this link is not mentioned in his later publications it suggests that the political function of *mangheem* outweighs the historical origin of them. In J.R. Subba’s later publications, the *mangheem* are also described as an authentic and important part of Yumaism constructed on the basis of Limboo mythology. The pyramidal-shaped *mangdan/sangbhe*

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<sup>116</sup> Despite not being a trustful source, according to Wikipedia there are Rai *mankhim* in Nepal: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mankhim> [Accessed November 28, 2013].

<sup>117</sup> I assume this number only includes the Yumaist *mangheem* which the associations are behind. If we include YMMCC, Sattedhangma and eventual Rai *mangheem*, the number is higher.

<sup>118</sup> I also heard that the Mangshila *mangheem* was constructed in 1992.

(see figure 15), for example, represents the eight upper realms of the universe, with Tagera Ningwaphuma dwelling in the highest realm. (Subba 2012: 181). However, the *mangdan* also resembles a small stupa.

It seemed to be generally agreed that the *phedangma* or *samba* were the only types of ritual specialists “pure” enough to carry out ceremonies in the *mangheem*.<sup>119</sup> *Yeba* and *yema* often deal with negative and potentially dangerous spirits and were not looked upon as suitable for such task. According to S.B. Limboo, to have *yeba* or *yema* lead *mangheem* worship is forbidden and a ‘sin’, and stressed that knowledgeable people, such as seniors, could be more suitable. Additionally, alcohol and blood sacrifices are strictly forbidden inside the *mangheem*. The decision to only allow *phedangma* and *samba* to carry out *puja* in the *mangheem*, suggests that women are excluded from this particular task – which was confirmed by S.B. Limboo. However, the ritual specialist who carried out the two morning *puja* I attended stated that both men and women could perform such rituals. He himself was a *yeba*,<sup>120</sup> which illustrate that practices may vary, and suggests a discrepancy between the literary representation and actual practice. The reasons for this may be manifold such as a *phedangma* and *samba* may be grounded in a narrative which gives this type of ritual expert a more compassionate or loving background rather than the *yema* and *yeba* whose task rather is to appease local violent spirits. Perhaps one should also ask whether the associations’ decisions reflect the patriarchal tendency within the associations. Another reason may be to create a different ritual function for the *phedangma* and *samba*, as these types of ritual specialist are believed to be declining nowadays. In addition, the *yeba* who carried out the *mangheem* ritual had a close relationship with a respected senior association member, and can be a reason for why he had been accorded the role as the ritual specialist in the *mangheem*. Although, I attempted to inquire about the selection process of the ritual specialists in the *mangheem*, my data cannot clarify the matter.

Unlike the *phedangma* tradition, the attendance at the *mangheem* is not restricted to the inhabitants of the particular village where the *mangheem* is located. Nor are, *thar* and village belonging central in those rituals. Limboos from other nearby areas can meet there. Some of the attendees at the morning *puja* lived in urban areas and drove their cars to the *mangheem* to attend the morning *puja*. Creating a place for Limboos to meet fellow Limboos has the potential to create a stronger sense of Limboo identity and of belonging to the Limboo

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<sup>119</sup> I assume the ‘*phedangma*’ category in this context also includes *samba*.

<sup>120</sup> The specific *yeba* claimed to be a type of *yeba* who did not deal with dangerous spirits (see the section on Limboo ritual specialists 5.3.1).

community and to Yumaism. However, another type of belonging is created because the responsibility for the daily upkeep of the *mangheem* is divided between the people who attend *puja* there. One family looks after the *mangheem* one week, the next week another family takes their turn, and the duties continue to rotate between all of the families who attend worship in the *mangheem*. Whether there is a system of donating money is unclear, but the attendees placed donations on top of the *mangdan/sangbhe* when the *puja* was finished. These donations would be used to arrange festivals, such as the Sirijunga celebration.



**Figure 14.** The Sirijunga Mangheem in Martam, West Sikkim.

#### **6.4.2 Observations of two morning worships in a *mangheem***

A couple of association members accompanied me to the first morning *puja* I attended. The ceremony lasted from 7:00 to 7:30 a.m. When we approached the *mangheem*, I could hear the sound of bells ringing, reminiscent of church bells or the bells of Hindu temples. On my arrival I was greeted by a couple of other association members.<sup>121</sup> The *yeba* was equipped with a microphone and had a cup of incense by his feet. 108 oil lamps were placed on the *mangdan/sangbhe*'s eight steps, and some of them were lit. We, the attendees, lit three lamps each. Before we lit the lamps, we walked around the *mangdan/sangbhe* in a counter-clockwise direction many times. In the next step of the *puja*, the attendees each came up to

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<sup>121</sup> The attendees consisted of: a man in his 60s, who supervised the *yeba*, two older ladies in their 60s who wore their traditional costumes, a woman and man in their 40s, a man who was connected to a Limboo association, as well as two boys in their late teens.

the *yeba* and kneeled before him with their palms open while receiving a “blessing” from Yuma. This blessing consisted of a *tika* (a mark on the forehead), while the *yeba* spoke the blessings into the microphone. The blessings were in Limboo but they did not have the melodic and rhythmical quality of the *mundhum* I heard during the death ritual and the Nuwagi ritual – even though I was told that the blessings were in fact a part of *mundhum*. The second time I attended a morning *puja* in the same *mangheem*, the situation was very different. There were no association members who greeted us by the *mangheem*, in fact my informant and I were the only ones there – except for the *yeba*. We rang a bell when we entered, lit three lamps, and then the *yeba* blessed us – which only took a few minutes. The attendees at the first morning *puja* were all expecting me, and were eager to show me the *mangheem* and tell me about the activities there. However, my second visit was unannounced, which raises the question of how many people normally actually attend these *mangheem* services.

### **The *mangheem*’s significance**

The younger informants near Soreng and Hee Goan stated that they had never been to a *mangheem* before they took me to one. They said that they did not know much about the *mangheem* or the activities that took place there. This once again raises the question whether the *mangheem* is an active religious institution. Sanjay from the Hee Goan area said he thought that the *mangheem* were a way of making the Limboo religion more “mainstream” or “institutionalized”. Even though Sanjay had not been inside a *mangheem* before, he was under the impression that some Limboos regularly attended the *puja*. In most cases he thought parents encouraged their children to attend the *puja* there in order for them to learn more about Limboo culture and religion. In the Darap area, the *mangheem* appeared to be associated with the activities of the YMMCC and appeared to be more of a contested issue. Maya and her family stated that there are no morning or evening *puja* carried out there at the moment, only New Year’s celebrations and Sirijunga’s birthday, which again suggests that the activities and how the *mangheem* is used vary. This may indicate several things, and once again the question of whether the *mangheem* is an active religious institution or not. Are *mangheem* just the outward physical expression of an idealised religion, devoid, therefore of actual usage? Are they, therefore, more important as physical, cultural, identity, and political symbols rather than as centres of religious practice. These issues will be discussed with in the following section.



**Figure 15.** *Mangheem puja.* The *yeba* is blessing one of the attendees. In the foreground is the pyramid-shaped *mangdan* or *sangbhe* with 108 lamps, representing the eight top-most realms.

### 6.4.3 Emergence of material culture and grand community festivals

I have already linked the emergence of numerous physical constructions in the state with the financial funds provided by the state government. In this section I will approach these new constructions in a different manner. Similar to what have been discussed in terms of the Sirijunga statue, these new buildings can be understood as a way of strategically situating Limboo cultural heritage in the Sikkimese landscape and underlining their belonging to the land. Indeed it was this perspective that was uttered by D.L. Limboo near Darap, who thought it was advantageous for the Limboo community to build *mangheem* since they would make the Limboo religion visible to Sikkimese society in general, and make it clear that the Limboos too had their own religious traditions.

Linguistic and cultural literature can also be used for a similar purpose. Shneiderman and Turin have observed that dictionaries of endangered languages or anthropological

monographs are highly esteemed among the Thangmi community and: “(...) have become valuable commodities for the ethnic communities of Darjeeling and Sikkim, and are frequently used as political tools.” (Shneiderman and Turin, 2006b: 53-54). J.R. Subba’s publications are relevant here. His seemingly intellectual approach in his more recent publications, together with the large quantity of books he has published may present an impressive façade when they are lined up in a bookstore, and can, as Shneiderman and Turin note, serve as recognizing agents for the Limboo community. In other words, objects that can potentially persuade both members and non-members that the Limboos have a sophisticated and intellectual religion. By writing in English, J.R. Subba, on one hand, appear intellectual and respected. On the other hand, his publications also reach a broader mass of readers, for example, foreign researchers. Material culture can create a façade of a united and unique Limboo culture and religion. My position as a researcher was, in many ways, similar to the state and national governments’, in terms of the potential beneficial outcomes if the Limboo religion and culture is represented as unique and consistent – or as a “property” of the Limboos, following Comaroff and Comaroff (2009).

Early in my fieldwork I was taken to the Limboo Cultural Museum in Tharpu and many informants wanted to take me there. Various kinds of hunting gear, tools, carrying baskets, traditional costumes, jewelry, drums, and old and new pictures from Limboo celebrations were exhibited in the museum. They seemed proud of the museum and its Limboo artifacts, even though they were not always able to explain how tools were used or what some of them were. A museum can create a sense of having a cultural heritage, and can enhance the feeling of belonging through shared properties of the Limboo community. In addition, a museum also places objects claimed to be genuinely Limboo into a consumer context. A museum potentially become a tourist spot, like the NIT in Gangtok, and can generate money and spread an image of the Limboos as a united community.

The process of selecting what will be represented as the property of, for example and ethnic group, is what Steven D. Lavine and Ivan Karp concerned about, and who argue that exhibitions in museums involve a struggle of what is to be represented, as well as who will control the means of representing (1991: 6-7). By highlighting the specific agency in such context, can reveal power dimensions. Museum exhibitions, as well as materials, *mangheem*, or festivals that are also in a way displayed – only not in a museum context, involves a selection of what will be represented, and what will be left out. Lavine and Karp argue that within a bigger picture, these “Decisions about how cultures are presented reflect deeper judgments of power and authority and can, indeed, resolve themselves into claims about what



a nation is or ought to be as well as how citizens should relate to one another.” (1991: 2). Interestingly, Yumaism or any artifacts representing the phedangma tradition could not be seen in the museum’s exhibition in Tharpu. This might point to disagreements as to how one should understand and represent Yumaism or Limboo ritual tradition in general.

Apart from an increased importance of material culture, over the last decade, more Limboo festivals with a grand community aspect have also emerged. Rituals with community aspects or big celebrations in general, appear to be a recent invention and clearly stand in contrast to the rituals within the phedangma tradition, where prosperity of the household, its members and the harvest are important. These festivals often take place partly in the *mangheem* and where they are celebrated, people typically engage in various activities, such as dancing, singing, and playing music while wearing their traditional costumes. Examples of such festivals are Sirijunga’s birthday on December 28, New Year’s celebrations, an annual Limboo cultural day at the museum in Tharpu, and Balihang Tongnam.<sup>122</sup> Balihang Tongnam was celebrated during my stay in Sikkim. My informants told me that this particular festival had been recently revived. Even though the activities which take place during the festival closely resemble the Hindu festival of Diwali,<sup>123</sup> and that it is celebrated at exactly the same time, my informants claimed that the festival is a unique and old Limboo festival, which shows a process of invention of tradition in practice (Hobsbawn, 1983). Such celebrations also constitute a central element in both Buddhism and Hinduism. Similar to many of Hindu and Buddhist celebrations, Sirijunga’s birthday is now recognized as a public holiday in the state. As such it is marked on official state calendars, and thus serves to highlight and legitimize the uniqueness of the Limboo community throughout the state.

## **6.5 Are the Limboo ethnic associations cultural producers and promoters of change?**

### **6.5.1 Politicization of names in contemporary Sikkim**

The practice of using one’s ethnonym as a surname is common among other communities in Sikkim. A specific attempt to unite the Limboo community was made at a Limboo convention

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<sup>122</sup> D.L. Limboo from Soreng stated that Limboos celebrate Yuma in the *mangheem* on December 25, which might be related to the Christian influence in this particular area. No other informants mentioned this celebration.

<sup>123</sup> I will not go into details about the activities which take place during Balihang Tongnam, but as with Diwali, people visit each other’s houses while carrying candles and lamps. Balihang is believed to have been an ancient Limboo king who survived a severe illness, and people must spread the joyful news of his survival to their neighbors.

in Gangtok in May 1998, an attempt which shows that ethnic groups' names in contemporary Sikkim are also a politicized matter. As with the meeting in Nepal in 1931, leaders gathered and made decisions meant to apply to the whole Limboo community. In 1998 the attendees decided that Limboo individuals should use 'Limboo' and not 'Limbu', 'Subba' or their *thar* as surnames (J.R. Subba, 1999: 88). This decision might be understood as an attempt to separate the Sikkimese Limboos from the Nepali Limbus, however, such statement is not uttered explicitly. Despite the decision in 1998, 14 years later there seems to be little consistency in Limboo surnames. The widely used name of Subba has Nepalese connotations, but also denotes a 'chief', which may distinguish those aristocratic Limboos from the wider Limboo population. Why certain *thar* and individuals seem to reject the use of Limboo as a surname raises important questions regarding class. During the interview with S.B. Limboo he clearly denied that *thar* belonging had any importance in the Limboo community. His statement stands in contrast to the data analyzed in Chapter 5. What really matters, according to him, was to identify oneself as a Limboo. Although J.R. Subba mentions certain religious differences along *thar* divisions, he does not highlight the topic to a large extent. The avoidance and rejection of *thar* we find here, might illustrate a resistance against the potential divisions of the Limboo society based on either *thar* or class. As for the *thar* names, many of the claimed Sikkimese *thar* are often used as surnames today, compared to those that clearly are Nepalese. J.R. Subba justifies the name decision in 1998 by administrative issues, for example, some *thar* are found both among the Limboos and the Lepchas and in order to separate the communities, he urges Limboos to use their ethnonym. Also, he underlines that there are hundreds of *thar* and each one cannot be included in the Report of the Sikkim Commission for Backward Classes submitted to the Government of Sikkim in 1998 (1999: 88).

### **6.5.2 Creating religious normativity**

Chemjong, who also belonged to the educated elite, provides his readers with several sets of rules for the Limboos regarding social norms, marriage rules and fees, as well as religious rules, which he refers to as "the ecclesiastical rule of the Limbus" (2003 [1966]: 66). We also have seen that J.R. Subba attempts something similar in his publications, discussed in 6.4. I found myself in situations during fieldwork where it became clear that some association members are entitled, at least according to themselves, to articulate "correct" and "incorrect" ways of understanding and practicing Limboo religion. One example, which may illustrate

this is S.B. Limboo's statement during our interview after we briefly discussed the YMMCC: "(...) the work done by you should be authentic, so no one will raise their finger." 'Authentic' refers to the information given by him and other 'knowledgeable seniors' (a term he used to refer to his friends and colleagues from different associations). During the interview I also told him about my experiences of visiting different *mangheem* and that I had found various artifacts inside them, such as small knives. My informants believed the knives were Yuma's weapons. When confronting him with this, S.B. Limboo clearly stated that such weapons have nothing to do with Yumaism, since Yuma is not associated with any weapons because of her pureness. The weapons, *trishul*, photos, drums or other objects, one might also be found inside the *mangheem*, are simply human creations – and not Yuma's creations and are therefore "wrong", he underlined. S.B. Limboo's statement shows, on one hand, that the national association's decisions are legitimized by being presented as 'god given' and therefore authentic. On the other hand, we see a discrepancy between the literary presentation and actual practice, which point to a tendency of Yumaism not being fully ascribed to ordinary people. Whether the placing of, for example, knives and *trishul* can be interpreted as a way of resisting the associations' top-down dictates by ignoring their decisions is an interesting question, but the data collection neither confirms nor denies this. Similar situations occurred during meetings with association members in more rural areas. For example, two association members near Soreng said explicitly that I was lucky to have met the two of them because, according to them, some foreigners had been 'misled' by other villagers in the past. It is unclear what exactly these foreigners had experienced, but my discussion shows that the elite segments of the Limboo community take a strongly normative approach, which creates the appearance of a more institutionalized religion.

The decisions made during the 1931 and 1998 meetings in Nepal and Gangtok respectively, and the normative views of the indigenist writers, can be understood as 'cultural engineering', which Shneiderman says:

(...) is typically shot through with class relations, with elites coaching and coaxing their constituents into the proper "tribal" mold, the results being power-laden alterations in daily life. By codifying abstract cultural types (in this case that of the "tribal") and hanging benefits on such essentialised notions of identity, state policies may in fact encourage communities to abandon traditional practices that do not correspond to actual and perceived criteria for becoming ST, and to adopt or accentuate other practices that may better conform to the stereotypical image of the "tribal". (Shneiderman 2008: 41).

Shneiderman's quote is from a study on ethno-politics in Darjeeling, where she emphasizes that the elite attempts to codify aspects of ethnic groups' culture and religion and make them correspond to what is seen as beneficial, for example, the criteria for the ST status. Here,

‘strategic essentialism’ coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) is appropriate to apply, since the associations and the indigenist writers strategically embrace essentialized identity markers which they can represent themselves and identify the diverse ethnic group with, and can potentially be advantageous for them in a particular context.

Shneiderman’s concern about the ethnic groups’ eventual abandoning their “traditional” practices may be a valid assumption. However, changes in religious practices have occurred throughout history and often reflect changes in the wider social and political contexts. Therefore, to clearly identify any traditional practices and eventual abandon of them are problematic, but are necessary and useful for analytical purposes. Elite attempts to codify and change Limboo social and ritual customs happened already in 1930s (or maybe earlier). Today, unlike over eighty years ago, the literacy rate is higher, people can travel more freely, and the media’ role has an increased importance. For example, because of the Internet, decisions, claims, or trends in general can reach urban areas and remote villages at the same time. Changes promoted by, for example, ethnic associations, will reach more people in a shorter period of time. In addition, more people are also able to clearly challenge or contest the decisions of the ethnic associations.

### **6.5.3 Contesting the associations**

So far in this chapter we have seen that the association and the indigenists writers are the main promoters of change. Here it is relevant to link what Moore states; that the power to define reality is an economic and political power (1994: 5). The associations are in a position where they can create and reformulate religious and ethnic categories, and potentially mould them into political and social utilities in the ethno-political context of the state. To regulate and access private household rituals, as discussed in Chapter 5 is an impossible task for the associations. The construction of *mangheem* can therefore be understood as an attempt to create a space where the associations can regulate, and potentially standardize religious practices, and further claim a Limboo identity where we see Yumaism make up a central part of its construction. Such ritual space may also promote and enhance awareness and belonging to this identity. One can say that the power of defining religious and cultural categories, make the association members and the indigenist writers the religious authoritative experts because they are the holders of knowledge, and challenge the authority and knowledge of the shamans – especially if the training to become a ritualist will be institutionalized.

According to Bentley, the members of Lepcha associations are also well educated, and

are subject to criticisms from certain sections of the Lepcha village community because they have become a driving force behind social and cultural change. There is an ongoing debate as to who has the authority to make decisions which influence social change, and which further define culture and Lepcha identity (2007: 76). Although no disagreements were stated explicitly between Limboos in urban areas and Limboos living in rural areas, one of the villages near Darap seemed to have rejected the propagation to stop blood sacrifices, and did not express any notions of backwardness towards such practice, in contrast to other villages.<sup>124</sup>

One of the main challengers of the associations' authority is clearly the YMMCC in Darap. During an interview with one of the YMMCC *suingneem* in Darap, I was shown the book *Ninghingse Saywa Mundhum On Yumaism* (year n/a), which he had received during his training to become a *suingneem* – a ritual specialist specific to the YMMCC. *Ninghingse Saywa Mundhum On Yumaism* was wrapped in a white cloth and the *suingneem* handled it with care. The format of the book is horizontal, similar to Tibetan manuscripts, even though it was an ordinary printed book. Most of the text was written in Limboo, but some pages were also in English, which provides us with interesting perspectives regarding the YMMCC's position in relation to the phedangma tradition and Yumaism. The opening section of the book is written in the first person narrative where Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang addresses the reader directly. It states that the *mundhum* presented in the book are not her own creations, but have been presented to her by Tagera Ningwaphuma through meditation. It is also stated that the original tradition passed down by Tagera Ningwaphuma through the 'phedangma tradition' was pure and unadulterated. After hundreds of years, however, the oral practices began to focus on blood sacrifices in order for the deities to be pleased and bring peace and prosperity to the households. The bloodshed was wrong, thought Tagera Ningwaphuma, and she therefore granted Yuma Mang with her name: Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang in order to review and propagate the scriptures of the Mangden ('godly world') in a textual form. Next, the book points to a subject discussed earlier: That the Limboo ritual specialists are gradually ceasing to exist. Therefore, Tagera Ningwaphuma has, as the book says, 'trans-migrated' the *mundhum* from the 'worlds of *mundhum*' on to the devotees of Yumaism. According to Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang's communication with Tagera Ningwaphuma the existing *mangheem* and the existing knowledge of *mundhum* must be purified, and in order to strengthen the religion in a uniform way, it is necessary to advocate meditation and establish cylindrical

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<sup>124</sup> Since I have interviewed mostly relatively well-off individuals, the material would possibly showed other tendencies and reactions against the ethnic associations.

shaped mediation centers. Here we see that the YMMCC also criticizes the associations' Yumaism and seeks to redefine and revive *mundhum* and the *mangheem*. The book claims that, if these elements are purified, it will bring unity, peace, and prosperity among the adherents and will wash away evil thoughts and actions. Since the phedangma tradition is vanishing, the *suingneem* have been sent by Tagera Ningwaphuma to replace the *phedangma*, *yeba*, *yema*, and *samba* in order to bring further development of Yumaism (vi). J.R. Subba and the associations also seek to create an internalized faith, the Limboos can believe in and belong to, as well as purifying the 'Limboo religion'. Similar to what is written in the *Ninghingse Saywa Mundhum On Yumaism*, J.R. Subba has also voiced some criticism towards the ritual specialists' authoritative positions and towards ritual blood sacrifices. While Yumaism does not seem to be fully ascribed to Limboos residing in rural areas, the YMMCC's attempts and actions in terms of changing and reviving the Limboo ritual practices are expressed much more explicitly and they have realized and incorporated their redefined *mundhum* and the *mangheem* as a religious institution into their teachings

During the interview with S.B. Limboo, a retired member of the All India Limboo Association, we also discussed the controversial YMMCC. All association members included J.R. Subba and the interviewee stated that the center was false and wrong. The great authority when it comes to defining Limboo culture was clearly demonstrated when S.B. Limboo expressed his thoughts on why he believed the center is false: "We have not recognized her. The apex body of the nation have not recognized the Yuma. We do not believe in her.", he said rather puzzled when the controversial topic was brought up. His statement demonstrates that his disregard of the YMMCC is not necessarily grounded in the different practices the center promotes, but rather that the YMMCC challenges the associations' definition of Yumaism and continues their activities despite the national organization has not recognized them. In essence the YMMCC refuses to acknowledge the authority of the Limboo apex association.

## **6.6 Changes and ambivalence**

### **6.6.1 Ambivalence towards being animists**

J.R. Subba's publications in English (2012a, 2012b, 2011, 2009, 2005, 1999, and 1998) are quite similar to each other, but a shift in his rhetoric is evident after (1998) and (1999). In the 1998 and 1999 publications, before the Limboo community was accorded the ST status, he clearly claims that Yumaism is an animistic religion because many of the deities are

personifications of natural phenomena, and every object in nature has a soul and acts to regulate the universe (1998: 13). In the later publications, J.R. Subba is more reluctant to apply the term ‘animism’ to Yumaism, and argues that Yumaism is no longer animistic or polytheistic, but has become a monotheistic religion. (J.R. Subba, 2012b: 10). During a brief interview with J.R. Subba in his house near Gangtok in September 2012, he underlined that Yumaism must be understood as a ‘Limboo way of life’, and has also become a philosophy. He also describes *mundhum* as secular and philosophical, since they contain intellectual understanding and reasoning (2012b: 3). Similar claims of being a philosophy, rather than a religion can also be found within Buddhism and other “new” religions, such as Sathya Sai Baba, Lovism, the YMMCC etc. The “goddess” of Yuma Mang/Tagera Ningwaphuma serves as evidence that Yumaism is monotheistic and that the religion is ancient, because, according to him, ancient religions were monotheistic and the highest form of divinity was female (2012b: 33). The description fits his version of Yumaism and he therefore traces Yumaism’s origin from 25,000 B.C. to 7000 B.C. (2012b: 37).

To be associated with animism and primitiveness had its benefits when the community was endeavoring to achieve ST status, but who really wants to be recognized as primitive? J.R. Subba’s approach to religion is clearly evolutionist, and he embraces an essentialist understanding of culture and religion. Even though the modern social sciences and humanities have, to a large extent, disposed of these approaches, they become important tools for J.R. Subba because an evolutionist approach enables him to argue that Yumaism has developed from an animistic to a philosophical stage of evolution, which he understands as the highest stage a religion can reach (1998). By applying an essentialist understanding, he can argue for the truth and homogeneity of Yumaism. Additionally, J.R. Subba applies complex terminology from, for example, Eliade, making his texts appear quite ‘Christianized’, which I believe is an attempt to make the texts appear more intellectual.<sup>125</sup> A further analysis of the ‘tribal’ category will be discussed in the following section.

## **6.6.2 Notions of ambivalence in claiming a tribal identity**

The legal definition of the ST status is closely associated with ‘animism’ and notions of primitiveness. However, being tribal does not necessarily involve identification with backwardness according to Shneiderman and Turin:

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<sup>125</sup> Unfortunately J.R. Subba’s terminology is a hindrance to a proper understanding of the Limboo concepts he presents.

A tribe, in its politically-charged modern incarnation as used in India, is a bounded ethnic community held together by a tidy catalogue of cultural, dietary, linguistic and religious habits distinct from those held by its neighbours. (2006b: 57).

Is a tribe only an imagined community and a politically charged category in India, as Turin and Shneiderman's quote suggests? Sanjay near Hee Goan understood 'tribal' as a distinct way of life: "'The Hill People' are simple people and alcohol is something many people enjoy – myself included." Here it seems Sanjay draws upon an existing stereotype and associates himself with its characteristics. Interestingly, linking 'tribal' to primitiveness and alcohol consumption seems to be a recurrent tendency. The two association members in the Soreng area seemed slightly offended when I asked if they could explain to me what it means to be a tribal community. Surprisingly, they replied that all the talk about being tribal was really about politics. However, they underlined that the Limboos are tribal. The two men also associated tribal with being primitive, being ancient inhabitants of a region, and with animism. One of them suddenly interrupted the other while he was replying to my question and underlined that the Limboos were primitive before, since they used alcohol in their rituals and went to the forest to worship the forest deities.<sup>126</sup> Several other informants repeated the ambivalence these two association members expressed.

Correspondingly to my experiences, T.B. Subba states that alcohol is commonly consumed in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal, and alcohol consumption also involves a discourse on the Tagadharis (Hindus, such as Bahuns and Chettris) versus the non-Tagadharis who are presented, in contrast, as alcohol drinkers (N: *matwali*) (T.B. Subba, 1999: 76). There seems to be an awareness of the fact that excessive use of alcohol can cause severe social problems. While I was walking in a village near Darap with Maya we met a couple of men who shouted loudly while they stumbled up the hillside. They were obviously drunk, and I asked Maya if she thought that alcoholism was a problem in the village. She said there are some people in the village who openly drink a lot, even when there are no celebrations. Their families are struggling economically and she felt bad for them, she said. One of T.B. Subba's informants stated: "The Limbus are backward because they drink and eat the entrails of the pig much against the teachings of their *mundhum* but the words of which have been interpreted to suit their alcoholic and non-vegetarian tastes" (T.B. Subba, 1999: 105). Bentley also discusses attempts by individuals from the Lepcha educated elite to stop the practice of donating millet beer to the monastery. She links these attempts with a general criticism of the

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<sup>126</sup> Although 'forest deities' are not discussed in the thesis, there were some specific spots in the village near Darap the shamans would carry out rituals in the past. No informant was able to explain in detail about these rituals.



community's consumption of large amounts of beer, which is often described as hindrance to the Lepcha community and Sikkimese society in general. However, older members of the community and the lamas of the village protested against these changes. Here, educated people were once again accused of making decisions which were for their own benefit, and not for that of the whole community (2007: 76).

In an interview with a forty year old man, who had been a follower of the YMMCC for four years also considered excessive alcohol consumption to be negative for society. Compared to other informants, he or the other YMMCC members I questioned did not claim to be tribal, nor did they bring up the topic. According to him, before the YMMCC came into existence, society was in decline. Many people consumed large quantities of alcohol, and as a result there were drunkards everywhere causing trouble for themselves and others. He also stated that in the past, alcohol was present in every religious ceremony, ritual blood sacrifices were common, and people had to pay the ritual specialists to carry out rituals for them. All these practices were very expensive and some families were forced to sell their land, and they became very poor. An important question here is also whether the YMMCC also resists the *lamapati* to the Buddhist monasteries, as mentioned in 5.5.2. Similarly, J.R. Subba discourages the use of alcohol for ritual purposes and argues strongly that blood sacrifices are wrong and are not associated with Yumaism. According to him, people who still conduct ritual blood sacrifices are ignorant, because placing blood or meat on the *lasso* is strictly forbidden (2012: 48). During the death ritual and the Nuwagi ritual, alcohol was used for ritual purposes but was not consumed. Encouraging the non-consumption of alcohol can be seen as a strategy to improve the overall well-being and status of the community, both socially and economically. The family and individuals I questioned in and near Soreng claimed that blood sacrifices were something that only happened in the past. In the vicinity of the Soreng area, more individuals claimed to be vegetarians, and if they were non-vegetarians, they tended not to eat beef. In contrast, the informants in Hee Goan and especially Darap said that blood sacrifices were important and necessary elements of the rituals to invoke the deities. There might be a connection with the informants' Nepali ancestry in the Soreng area and their refusal to eat beef or meat. Also, Soreng is located near Tharpu, which has been an important center for the ethnic associations, which might have had a stronger influence in the areas near Soreng.

My data suggests that being tribal is among the informants closely linked with being backward on a social level. Sanjay seemed rather proud of his identification as a tribal, but especially the association members strongly claimed that the use of alcohol and blood in ritual

contexts were something that belonged to the past. At the same time, my informants seemed to be aware of the benefits involved with being recognized as a tribal group politically. On one hand, the word therefore seemed to have positive connotations. On the other hand, being recognized as a tribal community socially appeared to be more negatively loaded and was associated with backwardness and low status, to a great extent. The paradox of the reservation policies is visible here, since low statuses – in this case a tribal identity, has been made into a desirable cultural resource in a political and jurisdictional context.

### **6.6.3 Is Buddhism a “tribal religion”?**

According to Balikci-Denjongpa, being tribal is closely associated with Buddhism, since “Nepalese” groups tended to reject Hinduism and rather embrace Buddhism as a strategy to be recognized as tribal communities (Balikci-Denjongpa: 2006). She further states that during the 1990s, as part of the Limboos endeavors towards ST status the community started building Buddhist temples, cremating the bodies of their dead instead of performing burials, and abstaining from animal sacrifice. The Tamangs and Gurungs formed Buddhist associations, while Limboos boycotted Hindu festivals and started to attend Buddhist festivals instead. Balikci-Denjongpa believes that this strategy of engaging in Buddhist practices paid off for the Limboos and Tamangs, as they were both eventually accorded ST status. I would assume that Balikci-Denjongpa’s observations present her Buddhist Lhopo informants’ perspective, which is interesting, as no Limboo individual I talked to expressed any desire to be associated with Buddhism rather than Hinduism. As I discussed in 5.8.1 many of my younger informants viewed themselves as Hindus. The association members did not affiliate themselves with either Buddhism or Hinduism, but stated that they were Yumaists.<sup>127</sup> Neither J.R. Subba nor Chemjong claim a close relationship with Buddhism.

However, the Limboo community’s strategies during the 90s might have been different to those used in today’s situation, and the tendencies in urban or Buddhist-dominated areas might have been different to those in the areas where I collected my material. Given that ST status was accorded to Buddhist communities in Sikkim and the debates after 1978 revolved around questions regarding indigeneity to the land of Sikkim, one would assume that embracing Buddhism would potentially be a meaningful strategy in the Limboo community’s endeavors towards ST status. The Limboo ritual traditions, as I have discussed, share similarities to those of other ethnic groups in the Himalayas, some of which are closely

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<sup>127</sup> R.M. Limboo, the educated man who lived near Darap stated that his family was more closely affiliated to Buddhism than Hinduism (see 5.8.2).

associated with Buddhism. However, compared to, for example, the Lepchas, Tamangs, and Gurungs, the Limboo community does not seem to have a close ritual affiliation with monasteries. My data suggest that lamas are used mainly in cases when there are no Limboo ritual specialists available. I failed to see any tendencies which would correspond to Balicki-Denjongpa's claims regarding the Limboo community adoption of Buddhism. With that being said, Yumaism can be said to have similarities to both Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, because elements of community temple worship, a respected divine figure, study centers, statues etc. have been incorporated or syncretized into their construction of Yumaism. A politics of religious synthesis is evident here, since these religious elements are utilized into making Yumaism appear similar to these 'great' traditions and can be beneficial in the ethno-political context of Sikkim.

If we compare the religious changes among the Limboos to the religious revivalist movements among the Lepchas and Bhutias, there are clear differences. The Lepchas' and Bhutias' religious revivalist movements are centered on their claim of belonging to the 'sacred land' of Sikkim by embracing local deities situated in the Sikkimese landscape, for example, Mount Kangchendzönga. The religious changes I have studied among the Limboos do not seem to reflect this particular phenomenon to a significant extent, even though I had expected that Kangchendzönga would play a central role in the religious changes among the Limboos. Kangchendzönga and mountains in general are relevant in the Limboo belief system. Interestingly, in the influential *Gazetteer of Sikkim*'s rendering of a Limboo creation myth, the specific mountain (which Risley refers to as Khamba-karma) has a central role (1989 [1894]: 36). Why the mountain does not constitute a central role in the Limboos religious identification processes is an interesting question. The mountain is a potential identification marker, but is not highlighted in the group's attempts to revive the ritual traditions. When questioning my informants about Kangchendzönga, they either replied that they were not aware of whether the mountain had any special significance. The association members, on the other hand, mostly denied any close link with the mountain but would mention other mountains in Nepal, such as Jannu. The *phedangma/samba/yeba* near Darap, who belonged to one of the mentioned proclaimed Sikkimese *thar* was the only one who stressed the central role of Kangchendzönga, which correspond to the claim that some *thar* may be Sikkimese.

So it is clear that the Limboos' ethnic mobilization has been grounded not in the adoption of Buddhism but rather the creation of their own religion. This seems to be in

contrast to what Balikci-Denjongpa has argued and more inline with Middleton and Schneiderman. They clearly dispute the assumption of ‘being tribal’ as something Buddhist, but instead argue that there is a presumption within the government and Indian society generally that ‘tribes’ must be “non-Hindu” and exist in contradistinction to the ‘great’ tradition of Hinduism. They continue:

As a result, communities who aspire to inhabit the tribal category engage in elaborate cultural acrobatics to create an impression of non-Hindu tribal authenticity, which often entails a marked departure from previous cultural practice. (Middleton & Shneiderman, 2008: 41)

This is clearly the case amongst the Limboos. However, now that they have received the political recognition as a distinct group this study has shown that certain segments of the Limboo community are attempting to distance themselves from the tribal criteria, through their creation of their own ‘great tradition’ of Yumaism. Rather, the tendencies, especially as they appear in the indigenists’ accounts reveal a desire to incorporate both physical and religious elements which one might associate with ‘great’ traditions. Another reason for the Limboo’s lack of explicitly and ritually claiming a belonging to the land of Sikkim, may also be the associations’ seemingly close relationship with the ethnic associations in Nepal. However, further research is needed on the topic. Although close ties with the Nepalese associations were mostly denied by association members, there are undeniably many similarities between the associations’ claims and activities.

Although my material suggests that the individuals questioned have placed little emphasis on the question of indigeneity to Sikkim, the debates in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s reveal that the question of indigeneity to the land of Sikkim was important, and is a complex and sensitive issue. T.B. Subba states that the claim to indigenous status for the Limboos was one of main issues for the Akhil Sikkim Kirat Chumlung from its establishment in 1973. This was also discussed in the newspaper articles I outlined in 2.5. Association members in particular would emphasize the Lho Mon Tsong sum agreement as evidence for their belonging to Sikkim, and this agreement has also been referred to in several memorandums asking for ST status for the Limboo community.

## **6.7 Urban versus rural lifestyles**

There is a sharp contrast between leading a life as a full-time farmer and being, for example, an office employee or a schoolteacher in a larger town or city in contemporary Sikkim. As mentioned, most association members, especially the leaders reside in urban areas. With this urban versus rural perspective, the propagation of Yumaism appears more intelligible. The

Limboo community's "traditional" rituals are centered on bringing luck and prosperity to the crops, livestock, and the household, and are meaningful actions if you live in an environment where these elements are part of your life. In an urban setting, however, livestock and crops are rare, and performing such rituals may seem alien. Additionally, the practice of blood sacrifice, especially, is also less acceptable in a "modern" context of a Sikkimese city. The *mangheem puja*, as well as the grand community festivals can, possibly, be analyzed as ways of adapting the ritual traditions to an urban environment and can provide these segments of the Limboo community with a religious alternative to embracing, for example, Hinduism. However, the associations' propagation of Yumaism is not limited to urban Limboos.

In order to carry out, for example, a death ritual, we have seen that large areas of space are needed in order to house the guests and to perform the Kaoma ritual in particular. In urban areas, such spacious areas are not as easily accessible. Neither can the village structure and the mutual exchange system be easily transferred to an urban area, since there is more ethnic diversity and there is higher density housing. These challenges may also be faced by poorer segments of the Limboo community in rural areas, which, according to my observations, do not reside in the upper hills but near a bazaar or in areas where there is no agricultural land. The majority of the YMMCC followers resided in a similar area and there also were higher density housing. This may be the reason for why the YMMCC arranges, for example weddings in the *mangheem*, rather than in the household. That being said, more research needs to be carried out on the dynamics between individuals in rural and urban areas, as well as incorporating economic aspects into future analyses. I believe a more thorough study of these specific issues would potentially reveal important class dimensions – which might be overshadowed by the current ethno-political situation in contemporary Sikkim.

# **7 Religious change and identity construction among the Limboos of Sikkim**

This study is the first extensive academic study on an ethnic group other than the Bhutias and Lepchas in Sikkim, and is therefore a contribution to a deeper understanding of the situation of the Limboos in contemporary Sikkim. The group's under-representation in research has made this particular topic challenging and is an ambitious task for a Master thesis. However, much more research is needed on the Limboo community in general. Hopefully, in the near future more scholars will highlight other ethnic groups' present status in the state, which potentially can benefit our understanding of complex and problematic concepts, such as 'ethnicity' or 'religion' and possibly enabling us to approach them in a more nuanced and constructive fashion. Saul Mullard has, during the past year, begun translating Limboo-related manuscripts from Tibetan, which will most likely clarify more of the group's relatively unknown historical past. While there is still much to be done to improve our understanding of the history and social relationships of the Limboos in Sikkim, this thesis, it is hoped, has gone some way towards understanding the current situation within the Limboo community. For example this thesis has begun the process of describing and analyzing the ritual traditions of the Limboos. It has also connected these traditions to the religious change currently occurring within this community, raising questions and, where possible, providing explanations for these changes. By analyzing this transition, it has then been argued that Limboo religious identity is currently undergoing a process of construction, tied closely to the political ambitions of the community and its 'leadership'.

## **7.1 Creating and re-articulating a Limboo identity**

This thesis has shown that the religious traditions of the Limboo community are undergoing a substantial transition in contemporary Sikkim. We have seen that after the implementation of Indian law, especially the reservation policies, ethnicity has become increasingly politicized. Consequently, identity politics and ethnic polarization have led to a stronger emphasis on embedding religion and ethnicity into a Limboo identity. The Limboo ethnic associations can be said to be the main actors concerning cultural production and are promoters of religious

change in Sikkim today. Ethnic mobilization methods, where well-off individuals have established ethnic associations, seem to have roots in the political climate of 1920s Darjeeling. Economically and educationally advantaged individuals often work as decision-makers and spokespersons for their ethnic group as a whole in a process similar to what Schlemmer describes as ‘indigenists’ (2002/2003: 120). My data also reveals that the Limboo example follows this wider trend with the most respected members of the associations in Sikkim being men, often seniors in their 50s to 70s, wealthy and educated.

The much-debated ST criteria postulate ‘primitiveness’ and ‘being animist’ as characteristics ‘Tribal’ communities must have. A possible way to comprehend the religious changes, especially propagated by the Limboo ethnic associations is that politically, ethnicity potentially becomes a cultural resource, meaning that this vague concept can, when acted upon, be a strategic tool in processes of formulating and negotiating the group’s rights and improving their political representation in the state. In terms of making these culturally and collectively defined concepts instrumental, recognition by the state is necessary. Identification with the ‘Nepalese’ was clearly undesirable during the group’s endeavors towards the ST status, due to its connotations of foreignness to the state. By postulating a “unique” and independent Limboo identity in this context, demonstrates the constructedness of Limboo ethnic identity. It is a matter of defining Limboo identity, which can be utilized in a given context – like a unique Limboo identity can be understood as a counter-approach to resist the undesired ‘Nepalese’ identity. By further developing and propagating Chemjong’s term ‘Yumaism’ as the ‘Limboo religion’, the Limboos’ identification with Hinduism is rejected by offering a seemingly similar institutionalized and normative religion as an alternative. The YMMCC clearly separates itself from both Yumaism and the phedangma tradition by defying the authority of the associations with propagating a different form of Yumaism, which contests the powerful positions of the seniors (and by extension the associations), the Limboo shamans, and the oral traditions.

## **7.2 Invention of religious identity as “property”**

The ethno-political climate in the state has led to a “competition” between the ethnic groups, where they desire to attain the improved political and social benefits the ST status can provide. As we have seen, physical objects representing the Limboo community’s material culture and heritage have been constructed in various locations in the state. Comaroff and Comaroff present an understanding of ethnicity as commodification, or as ‘property’ of an

ethnic group which potentially can be “sold” to, for example: researchers, the government, tourists etc. (2009: 150, 29). In order for the Limboos to be recognized as a distinctive group with their own religion, materiality of ‘ethnic culture’ plays a central role. *mangheem*, study centers, statues, and administration buildings for the ethnic associations, etc. can, on one hand, be analyzed in relation to the Sikkimese government’s financial funding goals, where they provide money to ethnic groups to develop their religious institutes and cultural heritage. As, interestingly, the Limboo associations’ recent creations (*mangheem*, study centers, statues etc) correspond directly to what the government provides funds for. In a way, the government stipulates a specific definition of a religious community, or at least what constitute a religious community in a material sense. In order for the associations to receive financial support from the government a demand for the specific institutions need to be created. A philosophy, in this case ‘Yumaism’, can contextualize and apply meaning to these newly constructed institutions by grounding them in a fabricated context which gives the appearance of historical continuity (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 38). Yet on the other hand, given the debate of indigeneity in Sikkim, these physical constructions accentuate the Limboos belonging in the Sikkimese landscape by displaying their “ancient” and “native” cultural heritage. Here, it is appropriate to link Hobsbawn’s ideas of ‘invention of tradition’, since “ancient” materials, together with processes of formalization, ritualization, and repetition, create a sense of historical continuity (2012 [1983]: 4, 10). Also, in order for the associations to create a Limboo *community*, some shared elements which represent notions of “limbooness”, or what Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]) would have referred to as an ‘imagined community’, are potentially crucial when it comes to ethnic, social, and political mobilization. Subsequently, one might question to what extent these new constructions are active institutions, or if they serve a function as a suitable façade in the ethno-political context. My material demonstrates that especially the study centers were not actively used, and the participation in the *mangheem puja* appeared to be limited to people from urban areas. Informants in both rural and urban areas however, often regarded Sirijunga as a Limboo symbol, the museum, as well as the festivals, as important and positive. The data from the YMMCC, reveal contrasting tendencies, since the religious institutions constitute essential elements in the YMMCC teachings, due to the center’s emphasis on education and organized religious meetings and worship.



### 7.3 Challenging practices of the phedangma tradition

A challenge during fieldwork was the tendency of being directed towards older male ritual specialists, or senior male association members, because they were often regarded as being knowledgeable of Limboo religion and culture. Ordinary people, however, regarded themselves as unknowledgeable, and that they would find the Limboo belief system confusing and complicated. Their reluctance might be related to the perceived authority of the senior association members, as well as the central position of the ritual specialist as the ‘keepers of tradition’. *Mundhum*, the body of oral traditions, such as: myths, rituals, social norms, etc. play a significant role in ritual contexts and are passed down orally. Since it is believed that the ritual specialists are incarnated, blood relations matter and the vocations are kept in certain families. During the two rituals (of the phedangma tradition) observed during fieldwork, the *phedangma* and *samba* carried out the rituals without much involvement from the household members. Most rituals take place inside or near the household. Except from life-cycle rituals, most rituals are also carried out according to the bi-annual harvest seasons. The objectives of the household rituals are to bring prosperity to the household, its members, the *thar*, lineage, and the harvests. During life-cycle rituals, such as marriage and death rituals, villagers and family members, through systems of reciprocity, assist and celebrate together with the host household. Here, social dimensions, such as *thar* belonging and geographical origin and location play important roles.

According to J.R. Subba, the Limboo ritual specialists are too authoritative nowadays, due to the lack of institutions that can control and guide them. For example, to carry out ritual blood sacrifices in order to appease the deities is, according to him, incorrect according to Yumaism. According to S.B. Limboo, a former member of the All India Limboo Organization, the Limboo shamans have become “corrupted” since they ‘started’ claiming that the deities demanded meat in order for them to be content, while in reality, according to him, the ritual specialists were the ones who wanted to be served meat. Therefore, the former association member stated that ritual blood sacrifices were human creations, not something that derived from Yuma directly.

The negative loaded narratives towards the Limboo shamans might suggest a desire from the associations to challenge the authority of the ‘keepers of tradition’. Although J.R. Subba does not reject the different shamans, he underlines that the only ritualist pure enough to carry out the *mangheem* worship is the *phedangma* and *samba* – meaning that women are excluded from this task and the system of the shamans becomes less complicated. Both the

comments above and the associations' and indigenists' creations and attempts to revive and to re-define certain religious practices can be understood as a way of gaining control over the practices conducted by the ritual specialists. If the decisions come from them, they will become the experts, or the 'holders of the tradition' – instead of the ritual specialists. This discussion shows that layers of power-plays involved in terms of defining religion are crucial underlying factors of the religious changes among the Limboos.

Apart from the political power-plays, there are also important social changes in the state which are crucial to take into consideration when reviewing the phedangma tradition's position today. The tradition of a long apprenticeship with an older and experienced shaman which must be undertaken in order to become a ritual specialist, is challenged by the changing social circumstances in contemporary Sikkim. Education, for example, appeared to be regarded as important. Good schools and colleges are often located away from people's natal villages, and prospering ritual specialist do not receive their tutoring or language training. With education has come increased employment opportunities both within and outside the state, increased interaction with urban and international lifestyles and as such, fewer people choose to remain in rural villages. Some of the informants' concerns about the perceived diminishing number and the weakened powers of the Limboo ritual specialists are possibly related to the altered circumstances discussed above.

## **7.4 Processes of syncretism and anti-syncretism**

The usage of non-Limboo ritual specialists and the variations in religious practices in general, illustrate that the Limboo ritual traditions and ethnic boundaries are fluid and flexible.

Therefore, to create and use 'Yumaism' – a single term meant to be applied to these diverse practices can, following Shaw and Stuart, be comprehended as an anti-syncretic process. A single category resists the diversity, syncretistic features, and fluidity in the ritual practices. Also, a category stands in contrast to the vague descriptions of the British' orientalist from the nineteenth century. Processes of anti-syncretism involve, according to the two authors, selecting and identifying certain religious elements as false (1994: 8), for example, ritual blood sacrifice in Limboo ritual traditions. Additionally, the *mangheem* worship can be understood as an attempt to standardize a Limboo ritual. As we have seen, the shamanistic practices, such as soul journeys, trance, and spirit possession do not seem to be desired practices inside the *mangheem*. Instead, at least according to my data, the practices there are mostly dedicated to the single deity Yuma/Tagera Ningwaphuma. The anti-syncretic

tendencies are at the same time highly syncretic. Ideas and practices such as community worship places, the claim of a ‘high’ deity, grand community festivals, and cultural heritage objects are also found in other religions, especially those that may be referred to as ‘great’ or ‘world’ religions, and out of them particularly Christianity. Here, the politics of syncretism are visible. By syncretizing these central elements in Yumaism, the religion appears similar to a ‘great’ religion, which is able to “compete” in the ethno-political context of the state by exposing a strong, united, and unique religious façade.

A similar process of syncretic and anti-syncretic is recognizable in the YMMCC. The center’s teachings can be regarded as anti-syncretic because they draw clear boundaries between themselves and Yumaism and the phedangma tradition, because, for example, their introduction of a new system of ritual specialists is on the basis of perceiving the “old” one as impure. They have, however, in a syncretic vein, incorporated elements from Yumaism, such as *mangheem*, administration buildings, grand community festivals, as well as Yuma/Tagera Ningwaphuma and *mundhum* also found in the phedangma tradition, but their significances and usage are re-cast. Yet while these are re-understood, these elements still provide a sense of “limbooness”.

Juxtaposed to the practical and constructive dimensions of rituals found in the phedangma tradition, for example, to bring luck to the household, its members, and the harvests, both J.R. Subba in his later publications (especially 2012a and 2012b) and the YMMCC emphasize a highly individualized religion. According to him, a personal relationship with Yuma/Tagera Ningwaphuma will revive Yumaism in the Limboo community on a private level, since religious knowledge, he believes, must not be limited to the ritual specialists. Similarly, the YMMCC informants stressed that the Sri Sri Srīma Yuma Mang’s teachings had to be incorporated into each individual and acted upon. Although much more research is needed on the subject, the YMMCC shares similarities with other newly emerged religious organizations in the state and the country. The Sathya Sai Baba organization and Lovism have substantial amounts of followers in the state and the center has adopted many elements shared by these two movements. Since J.R. Subba also propagates many similar ideas as the YMMCC, it is likely to assume that his literary and normative descriptions of Yumaism also are influenced by ideas found both within these individualized and reformist religious movements and Christianity. The strong disregard of the YMMCC uttered by J.R. Subba and association members – especially by S.B. Limboo, might not have so much to do with what the center actually propagates, but rather that it challenges the associations’ power and authority by continuing their religious activities despite the fact that

the All India Limboo Organization's has refused to recognize it, as S.B. Limboo stated. The emergence of, for example, YMMCC, and the status of other new religious movement in the state has not been extensively studied, but for the future it might be insightful to examine why certain individuals choose to become members of these organizations.

## 7.5 Final remarks

The ethno-political situation in Sikkim may have drawn our attention away from class-related issues. Social and religious differences between segments within the Limboo community are probably playing crucial roles in the religious change we see in Sikkim today. Already mentioned, is the apparent authority of well-off senior male association members, which according to them have the prerogative to define a 'Limboo religion'. From interviews with YMMCC followers, we learn that economic perspectives also appear to be important, and are mentioned as one of the reasons why the "old" practices needed to be revived. The attempt to change the name into Limboo from Limbu, Subba, Yakthumba or *thar* name, might tell us that there are divisions within the Limboo community, which may challenge the associations' objective to be recognized as a united and strong community. For future research, I believe religious practice among the Limboos should be analyzed in more developed class and gender perspectives, which might also force us to step out of the "paradigm" of ethno-politics in Sikkim and provide us with new perspectives.

Be that as it may, this thesis has shown that the religious changes promoted by political Limboo associations revolve around processes of Limboo identity construction. It is hoped that the readers now have an improved insight into some of the manifold reasons and ways of explaining the religious and cultural transitions within the Limboo community in contemporary Sikkim. Central in this thesis has been the creation or further development of Yumaism as the unique and united 'Limboo religion'. By constructing their own Limboo worship places, the associations are proving to the surroundings that the Limboos are not Nepalese Hindus, but a distinct ethnic community with their own respected religion. Physical constructions in the landscape are potentially powerful when claiming a distinct Limboo religious identity, since they display a cultural heritage and can provide a sense of historical continuity which legitimizes their claims of belonging to Sikkim. Paradoxically, the associations seek to construct a distinct Limboo religious and ethnic identity, but we have seen that by syncretizing elements from 'great' religious traditions, Yumaism appear more similar to other 'conventional' religions in the state, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and

particularly Christianity. The top-down decision-making from male elite segments of the community does not seem to be fully ascribed to people in rural areas, nor are some of their constructions actively in use (for example the study centers). This thesis has shown that politically, what constitute a Limboo religion or identity is continuously redefined in relation to the social and political contexts.

We are in the midst of an interesting period where the Limboo community in Sikkim is undergoing massive changes. More religious and cultural developments will most likely take place in the years to come. We have seen that the YMMCC actively challenges the associations' attempts to create a united Limboo community, as well as their decisions and definition of a Limboo religious identity. Therefore, the associations' authority as the religious and cultural engineers is disputed. Whether there are other types of resistance within the Limboo community is possible, but is yet to be examined.

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# Appendix

## Glossary

- ablak*: A garland made of, for example, rudraksha seeds which ritual specialists wear across their chest during rituals.
- aboko yeserija yeba*: A type of *yeba* who is only concerned with household rituals, similar to a *phedangma*.
- Ajo Goka/Tsong Goka/Kame Ajo: A deity associated with the Limboos, according to Balikci-Denjongpa, and is it is worshipped by Lhopos all over Sikkim (2008: 377).
- Balihang Tongnam: A recently revived Limboo festival. The activities, which take place during the festival closely resemble the Hindu festival of Diwali, where people visit each other's houses while carrying candles and lamps. Balihang is believed to have been an ancient Limboo king who survived a severe illness, and people must therefore spread the joyful news of his survival to their neighbors.
- bongthing*: Lepcha male ritual specialists.
- chumlung*: Limboo council.
- chyabrung*: Drum used for festive occasions.
- den*: Other-worldly realm. There are believed to be eighteen upper and lower realms, where each is associated with a deity and are central in the ritual specialists ritual journeys.
- emsimlo*: Evening.
- Eringhang: Yuma's brother, according to the *mundhum* rendered in 5.4.
- falaincha* or *ipung heem*: Gravestone.
- Fatanagan: According to Shanti Limbu, it was perceived as the Limboos' most respected deity in Maunabuthuk, eastern Nepal.
- gotra (N): clan
- guru* or *yeming*: The incarnate shamans' tutelary deities/tutelary protector they receive their powers from when carrying out rituals.
- hang/hangma*: Male/female power, or powerful person i.e. king or 'ancestor', according to Sagant (1996 [1976]): 108).
- Hangsam/Kunusam: The main *sam* or ancestor *sam* of a person.
- Hasulepasule: Eringhang's dog, according to the *mundhum* rendered in *heem sammang*: Umbrella term for 'household deities'.
- heem, khim, kheem, him*: House.
- hing tongsing*: A basket with a blue mark (representing the living) on the erected bamboo pole the *samba* moved around during the death ritual.
- Kaoma/Khauma: Cleansing ritual during death rituals.
- Kappoba/Kappotungdang/Thoba Sammang: A Limboo grandfather/ancestor deity associated with the household.
- Karakma or Kongsingkakma: The very last session of the death ritual which takes place in the morning.
- Keba: Tiger spirit, often perceived as an an evil spirit because of its power to harm humans. For ritual specialists Keba can become a helpful sprit when it is controlled.
- Kebimba: Monkey, a Limboo spirit.
- kham*: Soil.
- Khamba-karma: Kangchendzönga, according to Risley (1989 [1894]): 36).

Khamdhak: A Limboo *thar*.

Khemading Yongsong Den: The lowest realm, a type of ‘hell’.

Khemsam: Soul associated with hearing.

Kirat Yakthung Chumlung: A Nepalese Kirat/Limboo association, with branches in other places in the world.

*kolima*: Mountain peak.

*lamapati*: Tax or donation to a monastery.

*lao ogen*: Full moon.

*lasso/lasoo*: Temporary altar.

Lho Mon Tsong sum agreement: A legal document signed by leaders from the three mentioned groups: Bhutia (Lho), Lepcha (Mon) and Limboo (Tsong) in 1663, can be seen as an attempt to stop rebellions against the *chogyal*.

Limbuwan / Limbuan: The easternmost area of Nepal.

*mandang*: According to J.R. Subba, it is a type of gravestone, similar to the ones like Tibetan Buddhists construct (2005: 99). It is unclear what J.R. Subba exactly means, but *mandang* can possibly be linked to the Tibetan concept *mardung*, and have maybe influenced the stupa-shaped “altar” which can be found inside *mangheem* – often referred to as *mangdan/mangdhan* or *sangbhe*.

*mandir* (N): Hindu temple, also often used to describe a Sai Baba worship place.

*Mangdan/mangdhan/mangtan* or *sangbhe*: The eight-stepped pyramid-shaped altar inside the *mangheem* both in Yumaist and YMMCC *mangheem*. The *mangdan/sangbhe* is believed to symbolize the eight top-most realms.

Mangden: Godly world, according to the *suingneem*’s book, *Ninghingse Saywa Mundhum On Yumaism*.

Mangenna: A ritual for the prosperity of the lineage.

*mangheem/manghim/mankhim*: Limboo temples constructed by the Limboo associations and the YMMCC. The concept is may be influenced by the Sattelangma movement.

*mangtan/manddhan*: A private altar in the house, or the pyramid-shaped altar in the *mangheem*.

*masopa*: The practice of leaving a tuft of hair when the deceased son’s head is shaved during a death ritual.

Mejeri Mi Ha Lung Mang Musuri Musu Lung Mang: One of the three deities who dwells in the three stones in the fireplace

Menohanering, a relative of Yuma and the husband of Yuma according the *mundhum* rendered 5.4.

Mudem/Muden: Tibet.

Muden Hangma: Tibetan Goddess (J.R. Subba, 2009: 323).

Muden Sammang/Mudem/Mudemba Sammang: a Limboo deity associated with Tibet or the Bhutias.

Mukuma Sam: Life force, a type of soul.

*mun*: Lepcha ritual specialists, often female.

*mundhum*: Oral traditions, body of myths, rituals, norms, family history etc. taught to the ritual specialists. On the contrary, the YMMCC has scripturalized *mundhum*, and are the words of Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang, the worldly incarnation of Tagera

Munthang Khara Den: The realm/world of judgment.

*murumsitlang/hangsitlang*: Central pillar in Limboo households.

Nahangma: Sagant describes it as a warrior deity and a beautiful woman, armed with a bow, shield, sword and perhaps a helmet, and is believed to dwell on a snowy mountain. A rivalry between Nahangma and Yuma is evident in a myth, which Sagant believes to have given precedence to the ‘Yuma cult’. In order to ritually bring

prosperity to the *thar* or ‘raise the head’ of the head of the household, a ritual for Nahangma must be carried out. According to J.R. Subba this ritual is called Phungsok Timma (J.R. Subba, 2009: 293), but also simply Nahangma.

*nahen*: Jealousy. Appears to be referred to as a spirit and as well as a negative emotion which can cause severe harm to the household.

*nahenlung*: A small erected bamboo pole which is central in the ritual where the shaman get rid of *nahen* (jealousy). The *nahenlung* consists of a bamboo stick with a small stone next to it on the ground. Usually a sacrificed cock’s head is placed on the stick. Nowadays some people places a kind of fruit on top of the stick, instead of a cock’s head.

*namlinge*: Morning.

Ninwasam: Soul associated with the mind.

Nisam: Soul associated with sight.

Nuwagi: according to Gaenzle means ‘ancestors’ in Nepali, however, according to the informants it is a Limboo word, which means ‘to offer harvests to the deities’.

Okwanama/Oama/Akwanama: A Limboo deity associated with the *murumsitlang/hangsitlang*, or is perceived as a turtle or a supporter of the universe, or a deity of the land or soil. According to Sagant the deity has similarities with *gzhi-bdag* or *sa-bdag* (1996 [1976]).

*pandit*: Hindu learned priest.

Phaktalung/Phaktanlung/Phaktanglung: Mount Jannu in the Kangchendzōnga range.

Phedangma tradition: The “older” shamanistic ritual traditions of the Limboos, where rituals are carried out for the prosperity of *thar*, lineage, harvests, the household and its members inside or near the household. Ritual animal sacrifices are done in order to appease the deities and spirits.

*phedangma*: An umbrella term for all ritual specialists, but is also a specific type of a incarnate shaman who deals primarily with household rituals and deities, as well as natural deaths.

Phen Jeri Phendo Ti Mang: One of the three deities who dwells in the three stones in the fireplace.

*phung sam/phungsam*: Flower soul, which symbolizes life in the “other world” (Sagant, 1996 [1976]: 14, 20-21). *Phung sam* is also described as a *sam*, which wanders around in dreams during sleep.

Phungsok or Gurupuja: Ritual for the rituals specialists to maintain and gain power and knowledge.

Piccha Sambok Dangma: Limboo jungle deity.

Porob Mang: The creator of the earth, according to the *mundhum* rendered in 5.6.1.

*puja*: Ritual/worship. Often used to describe *mangheem* rituals.

*sam*: Soul, but the concept seems to be closely related to a deity or spirit.

*sama*: The ritual specialists’ ritual paraphernalia, according to Sagant (1996 [1976]): 87).

*samba*: Male incarnate ritual specialists, similar to the *phedangma*. J.R. Subba claims that the *samba* carry out more intricate rituals and are experts of *mundhum*.

*sammang*: Deity or spirit

Samyukna Den: The ancestral land/realm.

Sangram Pedang Den: The highest realm where Tagera Ningwaphuma dwells.

*See tongsing*: A small basket with a red mark (representing the dead) on the erected bamboo pole the *samba* moved around during the Tongsing part during the death ritual.

*serilung*: A black stone which often made up a part of a ritual specialist’s equipment and was believed to function as protection from spiritual “enemies” or “wars”.

Sewalung: Kangchendzönga, but one informant near Darap referred to the mountain as Nangtsonglung

Sham Mungh: The highest Limboo deity, according Campbell (1989 [1894]: 153).

Sikari: A Limboo hunter deity, but was also claimed to be a Rai deity.

Sikkumsam: Soul associated with intuition.

Sinyuk: China

Sinyuk Hangma: Chinese Goddess (J.R. Subba, 2009: 323)

Sirijunga Teyongsi: The second incarnation of the Limboo cultural hero, also a king in Sikkim?

Sirijunga Xin Thebe: The first incarnation of the Limboo cultural hero

*sisam*: A sam (soul) that rests by the graveyard.

*sogha*: ‘Unnatural deaths’

Sri Sri Srima Yuma Mang: The worldly incarnation of Tagera Ningwaphuma according to the teachings of the YMMCC.

Subba: A title for a village chief. Commonly used as a surname today instead of Limboo.

*suingneem*: The YMMCC ritual specialist.

Sum Jeri Sum Ha Lu Mang: One of the three deities who dwells in the three stones in the fireplace.

Sunaingtong Den: The realm of truth.

*suyo kheyo*: Karma (according to J.R. Subba, 2005: 1).

Tagera Ningwaphuma/ Tagyera Ningwa Puma: Often perceived as the main, ‘high’, and omnipresent creator deity or goddess. Yuma Sam is often believed to be its worldly aspect.

*takegamba*: ‘Hen’.

Taktak Mabohang Banbe: Yuma’s origin, according to the mundhum rendered in 5.4.

Tambongpak: Warthog spirit, potentially evil.

*tesipina*: Small stick, which was collected by all guests during the death ritual and were given to the *samba*, symbolizing that they had witnessed the ceremony.

Teymen Yakthung Ma Chumbo (N: Bharatiya Limboo Maha Sangh): All Limboo All India Limboo Association.

*thak thakkumma*: Weaving maiden (J.R. Subba, 2009: 323).

Thanasam: Soul associated with consciousness.

*thar*: ‘clan’ or ‘lineage’, or sometimes referred to as caste.

Sattehangma (or Satya Hangma ‘truthful prince’): A socio-religious reform movement founded by Lingden Phalgunanda in the 1920. Many of the principles of the movement seem to have influenced the religious changes promoted by the associations.

*thisok*: Rice liquor – often homemade. Is often offered during ritual contexts.

Toksongba: A Limboo hunter deity.

*tongba*: Beer made from fermented millet and is often offered to deities during rituals.

*tongnam*: Festival.

Tongsing: the part of the death ritual where the *sam* is lead to the ancestral land.

*tongyang*: Donation system. During the death ritual, money donations were put in envelopes on which they (individuals not belonging to the same *thar* as the deceased) wrote the amount and the name of the donor. The same information was written in a book. By donating this money, the receiver must help the donor if something happens in his or her household and the household must give an equal amount of money.

*trishul* (N.): Trident, as symbol often found on older Limboo gravestones – often symbolizes

Shiva.

Tsong: A name used to describe the Sikkimese Limboos.

Tumyanghang/ Tumiahang: Limboo village council consisting of both male and female seniors.

Ubauli: One of the bi-annual ritual seasons, meaning the ascending season during the month of Baishakh (N) or Theyrengnam Laba (L) in mid-April – mid-May. The specific season and its produce determine the offerings to the deities.

Udhauli: One of the bi-annual ritual season, which refers to the low or descending season and marks the start of the winter season – during Mangsir, according to the Nepali calendar, or Sencherengla Laba, according to the Limboo calendar (mid-November - mid-December), The specific season and its produce determine the offerings to the deities.

*wasang*: Turban worn by Limboo shamans, according to Jones (1976: 34).

*yaboko jedova yeba*: A type of *yeba*, who deals with evil spirits.

Yakthung Pan: Limboo language.

Yaktungba (male)/Yakthungma (female): The Limboos' endonym.

*yalumpu*: A basket where the *samba* kept their ritual implements during the Tongsing ritual during the death ritual. When the *samba* touched the basket, their bodies would tremble

Yasok Kosayok: A type of Yuma who demands blood sacrifice.

*yathala*: 'Brass plate' the ritual specialists use during rituals to invoke their *guru* or other deities.

*yeba/yaba/ye/yea*: Male incarnate ritual specialists, who mainly appease evil or harmful spirits, carry out death rituals in cases of unnatural deaths. This type of shaman is not allowed to carry out *mangheem* puja, according to association members.

*yeebungden*: Graveyard.

Yehang: A religious Limboo council, probably on a village level.

*yema/yama/ye/yea*: Female incarnate ritual specialists, and carries out similar rituals as the *yeba*. It appears to be few *yema* in Sikkim at the moment.

Yuma Kuma Mang: A type of Yuma (the mother of Yasok Kosayok), who demands fruit and water instead of blood.

Yuma Mang Meditation Committee Center (YMMCC): A revivalist movement seeking to purify and improve Yumaism by challenging the Yumaism promoted by the associations. The shamans found in the Phedangma tradition are rejected, and have instead replaced them with the *suingneem*. The center has also scripturalized *mundhum*, established initiation rituals in order to become a member etc. Is open to non-Limboos as well, and appears to be successful.

Yuma Samyo/Yuma Sam Samyo: 'Yuma Religion' another name for Yumaism (J.R. Subba 2012b: iii).

Yuma/Yuma Mang/Yuma Sam/Yuma Sammang: 'Grandmother', a *heem sammang* (household deity). According to the indigenist writers and the association members she is the worldly aspect of Tagera Ningwaphuma. According to Fitzpatrick, *yuma* means 'to come down' and is used to describe 'descending to a lower area', as well as the verbs 'sitting' and 'staying' (2011: 62). *Yuma* is also a type of ritual specialist or a healer.

Yumaism: The 'Limboo religion' promoted by the Limboo associations. The indigenists or the Limboo ethnic association members does not reject the Phedangma tradition, but is promoted as a 'great' tradition, a unified and systematized religion of the Limboo community.

*wobokwa*: Copper container.