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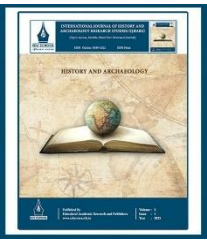

Buddhist-Animist Convergence in Pre-Colonial Arunachal Pradesh, 800-1826 CE

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Abstract

This article examines the encounter between Tibetan Buddhist monastic traditions and indigenous animist cosmologies in the hill societies of present-day Arunachal Pradesh between the eighth and early nineteenth centuries. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork by Verrier Elwin, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, and Niranjan Sarkar, alongside material and archival evidence, the study traces how the Monpa and Sherdukpen communities of the western districts selectively appropriated Gelugpa and Nyingmapa Buddhist elements while retaining animal sacrifice, spirit propitiation, and shamanic healing practices. In contrast, eastern communities the Adis, Apatanis, Galos, and Nishis maintained their Donyi-Polo and related animist traditions largely unmodified by Buddhist influence. The article argues that this differential reception was shaped by three principal forces: the political economy of Tibetan monastic expansion anchored by the Tawang Monastery (founded c. 1680–81), the trans-Himalayan trade routes linking the Assam plains to the Tibetan plateau, and the ecological constraints of high-altitude subsistence. The Monpa case demonstrates that syncretism was not passive reception or incomplete conversion but an active, creative negotiation in which communities constructed hybrid religious worlds tailored to their material circumstances. The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), which transferred Assam to British control, serves as a terminus by severing many of the trans-Himalayan political connections that had sustained the Buddhist-animist contact zone for centuries, while British colonial ethnography subsequently imposed categorical distinctions between "Buddhist" and "tribal" that obscured the integrated nature of local religious practice.

Keywords: - Arunachal Pradesh, Donyi-Polo, Religious Syncretism, Monpa, Sherdukpen, Tawang Monastery

Introduction

Between the eighth and early nineteenth centuries, the hill societies of what is now Arunachal Pradesh experienced a prolonged encounter between Tibetan Buddhist monastic traditions and deeply rooted animist cosmologies. The encounter was neither uniform nor inevitable. In the western districts of Mon, Tawang, and West Kameng, Gelugpa and Nyingmapa monasteries took root among the Monpa and Sherdukpen communities, while further east, among the Adis, Galos, Apatanis, and Nishis, animist practice remained dominant and largely unmodified by Buddhist influence. The conventional scholarly approach has treated this as a story of gradual Buddhist absorption a civilizing mission radiating from Lhasa southward across the Himalayan passes. That reading is too simple.

What the ethnographic and material evidence reveals instead is a process of selective appropriation, in which communities adopted, rejected, or reworked Buddhist elements according to their own political interests, ecological circumstances, and existing ritual structures. The Monpa did not become Buddhist in any doctrinally

orthodox sense; they became something new, retaining animal sacrifice, spirit propitiation, and shamanic healing alongside monastic Buddhism. The Sherdukpen maintained an even more visible dual practice, with bon-derived rituals operating parallel to Gelugpa observance (Sarkar 1980, 34–37).

Animist Foundations: Donyi-Polo and Tribal Cosmologies

Any account of religious syncretism in Arunachal Pradesh must begin with the animist systems that preceded and persisted alongside Buddhist penetration. These were not primitive precursors awaiting replacement. They were sophisticated cosmological frameworks governing social relations, land use, conflict resolution, and ecological management. The Donyi-Polo tradition literally "Sun-Moon" worship practiced by the Adis, Galos, Mishmis, and related groups, centered on a dualistic cosmology in which the sun (Donyi) and moon (Polo) represented complementary generative forces. Ritual specialists known as miri or nyibu mediated between the human community and the spirit world through animal sacrifice, divination, and recitation of origin narratives (Elwin 1957, 78–82).

Verrier Elwin, whose fieldwork in the 1950s remains the most extensive ethnographic survey of Arunachal's tribal religions, documented the complexity of these systems across multiple communities. Among the Apatanis of the Ziro Valley, Elwin recorded elaborate agricultural rituals tied to the rice cultivation cycle, in which propitiation of earth spirits (ui) required precise sequences of offerings. The Apatani priest the nyibu held both religious and judicial authority, and his ritual knowledge was transmitted orally across generations (Elwin 1957, 112–114). Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, working among the same communities a decade earlier, observed that the nyibu's authority derived not from institutional sanction but from demonstrated efficacy in healing and divination (Fürer-Haimendorf 1962, 156–160).

Among the Tangsas of the easternmost districts, the Rangfrah tradition shared structural similarities with Donyi-Polo but operated through a distinct pantheon of forest and river spirits. The Nishi communities of the Subansiri region practiced a form of animism centered on the abo-tani origin myth, in which all Nishi clans traced descent from a single ancestor whose adventures established the ritual order of the world (Dutta 1959, 43–48). What these traditions shared was a fundamental orientation toward the local ecology spirits were bound to specific rivers, mountains, forests, and fields, and religious practice was inseparable from subsistence activity.

This ecological embeddedness had a direct bearing on how Buddhist influence was received. Where animist practice was tightly woven into agricultural cycles and land tenure as among the Apatanis it proved resistant to displacement. Where communities occupied trade corridors linking the Tibetan plateau to the Assam lowlands as the Monpa did the incentives for adopting Buddhist institutional forms were considerably stronger. Laisram (2024, 19–20) has rightly emphasized that the religious traditions of India's northeast cannot be understood apart from the material conditions of the communities that sustained them.

The Tibetan Buddhist Advance: Monpa and Sherdukpen Communities

The principal vector of Buddhist transmission into Arunachal Pradesh was the network of Gelugpa monasteries established in the Tawang and West Kameng districts between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The Tawang Monastery, founded by Merak Lama Lodre Gyatso around 1680–81, became the institutional anchor of this expansion. It was and remains the largest Gelugpa monastery in India, second only to Potala in the Tibetan world in terms of administrative reach during the pre-colonial period. The monastery's founding was not an isolated religious act but a political event. Lodre Gyatso established the institution under the patronage of the fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, as part of a broader Gelugpa strategy to consolidate authority over the southern Himalayan borderlands (Sarkar 1980, 56–60).

The birth of the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, at Urgelling near Tawang in 1683 cemented the region's significance within Tibetan Buddhist geography. Tawang became a pilgrimage destination and a source of religious legitimacy for the Monpa community's Buddhist identity. Yet the Monpa adoption of Buddhism was selective from the start. The pre-existing Nyingmapa influences older, less institutionally rigid, and more accommodating of local spirit cults had prepared the ground. Nyingmapa lamas had been active in the region since at least the fifteenth century, and their tradition of terma (hidden treasure) discovery mapped easily onto Monpa beliefs about sacred sites in the mountains (Huber 2008, 112–116).

The Sherdukpen case is particularly instructive. Occupying the area between Rupa and Jigaon in West Kameng, the Sherdukpen maintained a dual religious system in which Gelugpa monastic practice coexisted with an elaborate complex of pre-Buddhist rituals directed by community priests called jiji. The jiji performed animal sacrifices, spirit invocations, and healing rituals that bore no relation to Buddhist doctrine. The Sherdukpen saw no contradiction in this arrangement. As Fürer-Haimendorf noted in his survey of the Subansiri frontier, the distinction between "Buddhist" and "animic" practice was largely a scholarly imposition; local actors experienced their religious life as a unified, if heterogeneous, whole (Fürer-Haimendorf 1962, 189–193).

The monastery at Tawang also functioned as a fiscal institution. It collected taxes in kind butter, grain, cloth from Monpa households, and it served as an intermediary in the tributary relationship between the Monpa and Lhasa. This economic function meant that adoption of Buddhist identity carried material consequences: access to monastic trade networks, protection from Tibetan military incursions, and participation in the prestige economy of religious patronage. The religious and the political were inseparable.

Mechanisms of Syncretism: Ritual, Material Culture, and Sacred Geography

The specific mechanisms through which Buddhist and animist traditions merged in western Arunachal Pradesh are visible in three domains: ritual practice, material culture, and the construction of sacred geography. Each domain reveals a pattern of selective adoption rather than wholesale conversion.

In ritual practice, the Monpa losar (new year) celebrations offer the clearest example. The festival incorporates Tibetan Buddhist elements monastic chanting, the display of thangka paintings, the performance of cham (masked dance) alongside animist components that predate Buddhist influence: the propitiation of local mountain spirits, the offering of animal blood, and communal feasting organized by clan rather than by monastic hierarchy. Stuart Blackburn's work on oral traditions in Arunachal Pradesh has documented how origin narratives were adapted rather than abandoned when Buddhist frameworks arrived. The Monpa incorporated Buddhist cosmological vocabulary karma, rebirth, the six realms into existing narrative structures without abandoning the animist spirits that populated their origin stories (Blackburn 2010, 87–92).

Material culture reveals a similar pattern. Archaeological and ethnographic surveys in the Tawang district have documented household shrines that combine Buddhist images (Avalokiteshvara, Tara) with non-Buddhist ritual objects: animal skulls, spirit traps made of woven bamboo, and stone cairns dedicated to local protective deities. The prayer flag ubiquitous across the Monpa landscape represents an object that straddles both traditions. In orthodox Tibetan Buddhism, prayer flags carry printed mantras whose merit is released by wind. Among the Monpa, the flags also serve an apotropaic function rooted in pre-Buddhist spirit beliefs, marking boundaries between the human settlement and the wild territory of forest spirits (Singh 1995, 234–236).

Sacred geography provides perhaps the most durable evidence of syncretism. Across western Arunachal Pradesh, Buddhist monasteries and stupas were built at sites that already held significance in animist cosmology mountain passes, confluences of rivers, groves associated with powerful spirits. This was not coincidental. Toni Huber has shown that Tibetan Buddhist expansion characteristically appropriated existing sacred sites by "re-reading" them through Buddhist hagiography, claiming that Padmasambhava or another Buddhist master had visited and tamed the local spirits (Huber 2008, 134–138). The result was a palimpsest in which Buddhist and animist meanings coexisted at the same physical locations, each tradition claiming the site according to its own logic.

Laisram (2024, 21–23) has drawn attention to how this process of cultural confluence operated across India's northeastern region more broadly, noting that the coexistence of distinct religious traditions was the norm rather than the exception, and that rigid categorical boundaries between "Buddhist" and "animic" or "Hindu" traditions obscure the lived reality of religious practice in the region. This observation applies with particular force to the Monpa and Sherdukpen cases, where syncretic practice was not a transitional phase on the way to full Buddhist conversion but a stable and self-reproducing religious formation.

Political Context: Ahom, Tibetan, and British Colonial Pressures

The religious dynamics of western Arunachal Pradesh cannot be separated from the political pressures that shaped the region between the eighth and nineteenth centuries. Three external powers the Ahom kingdom from the south, the Tibetan government from the north, and the British East India Company from the early nineteenth century each exerted influence on the region's religious and political configurations.

The Ahom kingdom, established in the Brahmaputra valley in 1228, expanded its influence into the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh over several centuries. Ahom-Monpa interactions were largely commercial and military rather than religious the Ahoms sought access to Tibetan trade goods (salt, wool, musk) that passed through Monpa territory, and they conducted periodic raids into the hills. The Ahom state religion evolved from its own animist origins toward Hinduization under Vaishnavite influence, but this process had limited impact on the hill communities, who remained outside the Ahom caste and administrative structure (Pemberton 1966 [1835], 78–82).

Tibetan influence was more directly consequential for religious syncretism. The Tawang Monastery operated as a de facto extension of the Tibetan monastic administration, collecting taxes, adjudicating disputes, and appointing local officials. This administrative apparatus gave Gelugpa Buddhism an institutional presence

that no animist tradition could match animist practice was organized at the household and clan level, without the bureaucratic infrastructure of a monastery. Yet the Tibetan monastic authorities were pragmatic. They tolerated and even incorporated local religious practices as long as communities paid their taxes and acknowledged the Dalai Lama's spiritual authority. This pragmatism was itself a mechanism of syncretism: by declining to suppress animist practice, the monasteries allowed a hybrid religious culture to stabilize (Mills 1946, 18–22).

The British arrival in Assam following the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 disrupted these arrangements. British colonial administration gradually eroded the trans-Himalayan political connections that had sustained the Tawang Monastery's authority. The McMahon Line, drawn in 1914, formally assigned Tawang to British India, severing its administrative ties to Lhasa though in practice the monastery continued to collect taxes from Monpa households well into the twentieth century. The colonial ethnographic project also introduced new categorical frameworks "Buddhist," "animic," "tribal"that imposed artificial boundaries on practices that had coexisted without contradiction for centuries.

Conclusion

The Buddhist-animist convergence in pre-colonial Arunachal Pradesh was neither a simple story of Buddhist expansion into primitive territory nor a case of superficial overlay leaving animist foundations untouched. The evidence from Tawang, West Kameng, and the surrounding districts points to a more complex process: one in which communities actively selected, adapted, and combined elements from both traditions according to their political interests, ecological conditions, and existing social structures.

The Monpa integrated Gelugpa monastic practice into a pre-existing religious world shaped by Nyingmapa influences and animist spirit beliefs. The Sherdukpen maintained a dual system in which Buddhist and non-Buddhist ritual specialists operated in parallel. Further east, among the Adis and Apatanis, animist traditions proved resistant to Buddhist influence altogether not because these communities were isolated, but because their ecological and political circumstances offered fewer incentives for adopting monastic Buddhism.

What this case study reveals about religious contact zones more broadly is that syncretism is not a sign of confusion or incomplete conversion. It is a creative response to the demands of living at the intersection of distinct cultural systems. The communities of western Arunachal Pradesh were not caught between Buddhism and animism; they constructed a religious world that drew on both, and that world proved durable enough to survive the political upheavals of Ahom expansion, Tibetan monastic rule, and British colonialism.

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