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## Choe-kor: A blessing for abundance (An analytical study)

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### KEYWORDS

Choe-kor, Monpas, Nature, Mukto, Religion, Festival.

### ABSTRACT

The Tawang district and West Kameng are home to the Monpas, one of the largest tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. All tribal cultures, including the Monpas, are characterized by dances, songs, folktales, art and crafts, music and festivals. The Monpas enjoy major festivals like Losar, Torgya, Choe-kor etc. Choe-kor is a traditional Buddhist festival celebrated in the seventh month of lunar calendar at community level commemorating the year's first harvest. This ceremony has significance since it portrays the rituals carried out for the protection and prosperity of the agricultural yields, which is one of the main occupations of the Monpas. It is performed with an intention for everyone's prosperity, supernatural protection of the community and to ward off evil spirits rather than just a plentiful harvest. Nowadays, it is found that with modernization, globalization and occupational shift, decreased priority is given to such traditions and practices. The purpose of the paper is to study the rituals involved in Choe-kor and to examine its importance in the lives of the Monpas and to discuss strategies for preserving it.

### The Monpas:

The Monpas are an ethnic group occupying the districts of Tawang and parts of West Kameng. There exists little difference in the culture among the monpas of the two districts even the dresses worn by the men and women show much similarity with minor differences. But one major difference noticed is that we can find the people of the two districts speaking different dialects. Even within the districts variations can be found in the tone and

words spoken. The influence of the neighboring countries like Bhutan and Tibet is quite evident in the dialects and languages spoken among the monpas. The dialect of Tawang district shows similarity to the Tibetan language and much similarity can be found among the dialects of West kameng district and the Bhutanese language. The monpas followed a shamanistic faith (Bon-po) with beliefs in the existence of spirits in all things till the advent of Mahayana Buddhism in the region

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during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Now Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant religion of the people but we can still find traces of Bon faith in the rituals and customs of the people with people still worshipping nature and praying to spirits for their well-being. Like all other tribal cultures, the Monpas are also characterized by dances, songs, folktales, art and crafts, music and festivals. These festivals are not just for merrymaking but a way through which the traditions and customs can be preserved. The Monpas enjoy major festivals like Losar, Torgya, Choe-kor etc. Most Festivals have religious significance and follow elaborate rites and rituals. Festivals also help in understanding the bond with nature and it is also believed that the celebration of festivals build better relations in the society.

#### **Objectives:**

The study has the following objectives

1. To find the significance of the Choe-kor rituals.
2. To analyze the deviations and differences from earlier rituals.
3. To study the ways in which the customs and rituals can be preserved.

#### **Methodology:**

This study is based on mostly primary data which was collected through personal observation method and interview methods using a questionnaire. Available secondary sources have also been used for the study. Village elders and high priests and other lamas were interviewed about the rituals followed in the celebration of the festival.

#### **Choi-kor:**

Choe-kor is a traditional Buddhist festival

celebrated in the seventh month of lunar calendar at community level. This ceremony has significance since it portrays the rituals carried out for the protection and prosperity of the agricultural yields, which is one of the main occupations of the Monpas. It is performed with an intention for everyone's prosperity, supernatural protection of the community and to ward off evil spirits rather than just a plentiful harvest. Choe-kor is celebrated by all the monpa villages but the day of the celebration may vary from village to village. There is no fixed date to celebrate this festive ritual unlike the other festivals which has to be celebrated on a particular day. The rituals followed by most villages are similar with minor changes.

Mukto is a small village situated in the eastern part of Tawang district approximately 60 kms from the main headquarters. It has a population of 727 people with 378 male and 349 females according to the 2011 census. Literacy rate of the village stands at 34.94% (2011 census). Earlier it was an isolated village with just one roadway connecting it with the other parts of the district and the state. But with successive governments working for the infrastructural development of the state, it is now connected by motorable roads from the nearby villages of Jang, Lhou and Khirmu. The main occupation of the people still remains agriculture though other avenues of employment are being taken up. The younger educated generation are finding other employment opportunities which are helping them to empower themselves economically and socially. Education has encouraged many to also look at entrepreneurial opportunities.

Festivals are celebrated with much enthusiasm in

all tribal societies. In Mukto, Choe kor is a festival of much importance and it is celebrated with religious fervor. Being an agriculture dependent village, elaborate arrangements are made for its grand celebration. The preparation starts in the beginning of the seventh month of the lunar calendar. The actual day of the celebration is decided by the *Jambeyyang*, the High Priest of the village. Before the actual day of the Choe kor, the villager elders gather to make arrangements and decide also on the contributions to be sought from the members of the village in cash or kind. The celebration begins with the reading of the Kan-gyur, Ten-Gyur, Gye-tong or *Bum* (Buddhist Scriptures) in the village Gonpa. The reading of the holy scriptures is carried out to invoke the dieties and the spirits to seek their blessings. It has been noticed that in most villages, Bum scriptures are read as the other scriptures such as Kan-gyur and Ten-Gyur takes more than 1-2 months to be read. With the youth taking up modern education, the number of people having the knowledge of the bhoti script is diminishing and hence the trend of reading and chanting of the Bhum scriptures is gaining popularity as it requires a lesser number of lamas.

In the village of Mukto, there are two main Gonpas, i.e. *Khid-dung and Sherjong Gonpa*. In every village of Tawang district, we will find the village having one or two such gonpas, where the villagers gather during holy and auspicious days to worship and offer prayers. The reading of the Bum takes place at Khid-dung Gonpa for about 3-4 days involving around 25-30 readers. During this period of reading the scriptures, different members of the

village offer their services for cooking, cleaning and serving the persons reading the holy scriptures. It is not necessary for one to be a *lama* (Buddhist monk) to read the scriptures, any person male or female who is able to read the bhoti script is allowed to take part in the reading of the scriptures. In the village of Mukto, we find a registered society of men and young boys who have knowledge of the Bhoti Script called the *Lama Tsokpa*. These group of men are quite active in the preservation of traditional customs and rituals. They take initiative to see that past ceremonial rituals and customs are maintained and oversee that the ritualist festivals are celebrated on time in the village. They also help the villagers in learning the the Bhoti script, which the village folks very eagerly participate in. A good number of the local villagers are now able to read and chant the basic scriptures. With modernization like in all other parts of the world, the deterioration of cultures and slow disappearance of rituals is also observed in the village hence participation of the village members in all major rituals of the village is made compulsory, with at least one member of the family requiring participate in all activities of the village. Non participation may lead to fine in monetary terms.

On the day of the Choe-kor, participants from each family dressed in their best local attire gather at the Main Gonpa of the village. The initial rituals are conducted in the Main Gonpa in the morning, after which the participants carry holy scriptures and images of Buddhas on their back. Some of the villagers carry traditional Buddhist flags, others are dressed up as *Arpos* (warriors) carrying swords and

shields. Priests and lamas would lead the procession with drums and cymbals chanting holy scriptures. The procession would begin from the village gonpa and move around the village covering agriculture fields where crops have been sown. As the procession moves, the priests and other accompanying lamas would offer prayer for a good harvest, prosperity and good health of the whole village. The procession stops at designated places around the village and the high priests offer *tser-kim*, a traditional offering of food grains with tea or local wine. These offerings are done to appease the dieties and spirits. The villagers' participating in the procession with holy scriptures and flags rests at these places where they are offered tea and other refreshments. Once the main lama completes the required rituals at the place the procession moves on to their next designated place. In the earlier days, when agriculture was the only occupation, the procession would take two to three days to cover all the cultivated agricultural fields. But with other avenues of employment becoming available, fields which are at far distances from the village are left barren, and hence we find that the *choe-kor* procession is completed in just one day.

The monpa people believe in the existence of spirits in the nature both good and bad. In most villages we find men dressed as *Kyeng-pa*(clown) during the *choe-kor* who perform erotic dances and it is believed that this is done to divert the attention of evil spirits. But in the *choe-kor* celebration at Mukto village, we find no *Kyeng-pas*, but a great number of *Arpos*. The *Arpos* perform dances wielding their swords and shields symbolizing protection from spirits that would harm and disrupt

the procession. As the procession moves through the villages, people gather in queues to seek the blessing of the holy scriptures and other holy statues. We find people bonding with their friends and relatives dressed in beautiful monpa attires. The procession moves through the whole village, cultivable lands and other important designated places with the lamas chanting and praying to the gods and spirits for their blessings and protection. The procession stops at the main gonpa from where it started its journey. The scriptures are stacked back at their appropriate designated places. The lamas and priests continue with their chants and the villagers gather at the Gonpa. The *Arpos* display their skills with their swords and shields for the people to enjoy. Traditional songs and dances are performed. With chants of Om Mani Padme Hung and prayers for prosperity, the day comes to a close.

### **Findings of the study:**

1. *Choe-kor* plays a very significant role in the lives of the monpa people especially those living in the villages carrying on agriculture as their primary occupation. This festival is celebrated in order to seek blessings for a good and bountiful harvest.
2. The celebration has elaborate rituals that is to be followed. But with modernization, we find changes taking place in these rituals too. The holy Buddhist scriptures which would require fewer days are selected for reading as the people are engaged in other works. A one-day procession would suffice to cover the whole aerated fields as most of the lands are left barren.

3. Agricultural lands are being left barren as the other avenues of employment provide a more regular income.
4. As people migrate to towns and cities for employment, fewer people participate in these rituals, hence it has been made mandatory for at least one member of the family to participate in these festivities.
5. The youth can play a huge role in the preservation of the rites and cultures as seen from the role played by the Lama Tsokpa, a youth society of Mukto Village.
6. Festivals like choe-kor help to keep alive the religious traditions and also provide an opportunity for the people to learn and recall the legends associated with such festivals. These festivals also build bonds among the people who are otherwise busy in their lives.

### Conclusion:

As globalization and economic shifts influence tribal life, traditional festivals like Choe-kor are also undergoing change. While modernization brings convenience and alternate livelihoods, it poses a threat to the continuity of age-old customs. However, initiatives like mandatory participation and the active involvement of youth organizations reflect the community's resilience and commitment to cultural preservation. Choe-kor, beyond being a ritual for harvest, stands as a symbol of collective identity and spiritual cohesion for the Monpa people. Festivals are mediums for bringing a sense of unity among the people and can be the tapestry that binds them with their rich cultural heritage.

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