

## LIMBUS: AN OUTLINE OF THEIR MUSIC AND CULTURE

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### ABSTRACT

The *Limbus* are a small but historically important ethnic race of the Nepalese and Indian Himalayan regions. The etymological origin of the word 'Limbu' is to be traced in various literature and popular traditions of the Tibeto-Indian Himalayas. Reference to these ethnic people is also to be found in Indian traditional literature including the great epics. The present article deals with the *Limbu* demography and patterns of settlement, their physical features, language and script, means of subsistence, religious practices, social customs including those of dress and garments. However what makes the *Limbus* an especially interesting people to study is their culture wherein traditional *Limbu* music and folk songs feature as the most remarkable.

**KEYWORDS:** Limbu, Kirat, Monpa, Limbuwan, Mongoloid, Gotra (Clan), Population, Limbu Language, Subsistence Farming, Limbu Society, Religion, Oral Scripture, Garments, Traditional Music, Folk Songs

### INTRODUCTION

The name *Limbu* is an eponym of an uncertain region. The word '*Limbu*' roughly translates as an archer or 'the bearer of bows and arrows'. The *Limbus* call themselves Yakthumba (or Yakthung) (in *Limbu* language). They are also known as Shong, Xong or Drenjongka (in Tibet) or Chong (or Tsong) (in Sikkim).

Northern Tibetans call the *Limbus* '*Monpa*', meaning those who live south of the Himalayas. Other tribes like Lepcha, Bhotia, Tibetan, etc. inhabiting areas like Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal call the *Limbus* *Tsong*. It is believed that they once lived in the Northern regions of Tsang and migrated to their habitat. Sources reveal that the Kathmandu valley was under the rule of Kirantis (Rai and *Limbu* are known as Kirantis) from approximately the first century B.C., to the second century A.D., and according to *Gopal Vansawali*, about thirty-two Kiranti kings ruled the valley. It is also mentioned that one of the Kiranti kings participated in the Mahabharat war. Gautama Buddha and Emperor Ashoka visited Kathmandu in the third century B.C., at the time when the Kirantis were ruling. The Tibetans believe that *Yakthungbas*, the ancestors of the *Limbus*, migrated into Limbuwan through the Kangla Pass and settled in the Yangma valley in the Tamar Khola region. Later they took over and drove off the eight leaders who ruled the land. These ten *Limbu* brothers came to power and divided the land among themselves.

The Yakthung or *Limbu* tribes and clans belong to the Kirati nation or to the Kirat confederation. They are indigenous to the hill or mountainous regions of east Nepal between the Arun and Mechi rivers to as far as southern Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim. This area is also known as *Pallo Kirant*.

*Limbu* clans and tribes are divided into the Lhasa *gotra* (clan) (from Lhasa, Tibet) and Yunan *gotra* (from Yunan, China. The *Limbu* are known as Yakthung Thi-bon or Des *Limbu* (ten *Limbus*), from which thirteen *Limbu* sub-groups have emerged. According to legend, five groups came from Yunan, China and the other eight from Lhasa, Tibet.

In 2004, the *Limbus*' total population was 359,379 or 1.6% of the population of Nepal (174,760 men and 184,619 women), with 333,633 mother tongue speakers (161,634 men and 171,999 women). This estimated population of 700,000 is centered in the districts of Sankhuwasabha, Tehrathum, Dhankuta, Taplejung, Morang, Sunsari, Jhapa, Panchthar, and Ilam in Nepal. These districts are all within the Mechi and Kosi zones, and are also known as 'Limbuwan'. Portions of *Limbu* population are also located in the east and west districts of Sikkim. A smaller portion of the *Limbu* population is scattered throughout the cities of Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal, India, and in north and south Sikkim and Bhutan.

*Limbus* are purely Mongoloid people and show the Mongoloid or epicanthus fold (a small normal fold of skin from the upper eyelid, sometimes covering the inner corner of the eye). The cheekbones appear high, with low nasal roots and a small, flat nose. Facial hairs are rarely seen and lips are thin but prominent, while some have slightly thicker lips. Their complexion is fair to pinkish and the body is sturdy and strong, short to medium in size.

The *Limbu* language belongs to the Himalayan group of Tibeto-Burman eastern sub-groups of complex pronominal dialects. It is placed in the Austro-Asiatic linguistic group. It is the language of the *Yakthumba* who were the original immigrants of the *Limbus* from the North. Their script is called '*Srijinga lipi*'. *Limbu* people have both a verbal and written language.

*Limbus* traditionally practise subsistence farming. Rice, wheat, millet, maize, etc. comprise their principal crops. Although there is an abundance of arable land, productivity is greatly influenced by insufficient technology. Excess crops are often traded for food that cannot be grown in the region. A sizable number of *Limbu* youths are enlisted in the British and Indian Gurkha regiments, providing their families with a steady stream of income. This income from military service helps to improve the *Limbu* community as a whole in terms of health and education. Nowadays some are involved in various occupations like teaching and intellectual professions.

In the *Limbu* society, the community voice, *Pancha*, plays a vital role. *Pancha* can decide on social boycotts, moral crimes, sins, as well as major communal crimes like law breaking, murder and other transgressions. *Limbus* avoids working for a day whenever there is an earthquake. Nobody will plough on the full moon or on any days of an important festival. From birth to death they are disciplined in their lives, which are full of religious rituals and traditions. They believe in *devi-devta* (deities), *bhutpret* (evil spirits), *sime-bhumi*, *nag-nagin* and the natural elements. They are very conscious of social positions and respect elders. They all eat together, placing the elders on the right hand side and served first.

The *Limbu* nation is made up of hundreds of clans. Each *Limbu* clan is classified under their Tribe or sub-national entity, or according to their place of origin. Some of the tribes are Aakwajungo (or Awajung), Phombo, Singthaba, Kurumbang, Kedem, Khajum, Nalbo, Huukpa and Samba. Almost all the *Limbu* clan names are unique; therefore it is not necessary to specify the tribe or the place of origin every time a reference to the clan is made. Although, some of the clan names may not be unique for example: *Chongbang* or *Maden*.

They are divided by listing their tribe name before or after their clan. Chongbang can be Sering-Chongbang or Huuppa-Chongbang or Tilling-Chongbang. Similarly Maden clan can be specifically Tilling-Maden or Thokleng-Maden or Tungleung-Maden. Listed Chaobisia, Mawakhola, Tambarkhola, Charkhola, Maiwakhola, Panthar, Tinkhola, Phedap and Yangrok are the names of the places where the respective clans belong to. Chaobisia refers to present day Dhankuta and Morang districts. Tambarkhola area is in present day Taplejung district; Mewakhola area refers to present day Taplejung and Sankhuwasabha districts, Charkhola is a present day Ilam and Jhapa districts, Maiwakhola area is in present day

Taplejung district, Tinkhola is in Panchthar district, Panthar is Panchthar district, Phedap is the north-central area of Terhathum district, Athraya is in northeastern Terhathum district, Chethar is in southern Terhathum, Sankhuwasabha and eastern Dhankuta district. Yangrok area is in present day Southeast Taplejung, Northeast Panchthar districts and West Sikkim. All of these areas make up Limbuwan.

The *Limbus* follow the Kirant Mundhum oral scripture similar to the *Bön, shaman*. However, their religion is also influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. They have their own distinct religion known as 'Yuma Samyo' or 'Yumaism'. They also have many different classes of ritual specialists, of which 'Phedangma', 'Yema/Yeba', and 'Shamba' are some. Their supreme deity is '*Tagera Ningwaphuma*', but the deity *Yuma* (literally: 'Grandmother' or 'Mother Earth') is the most important and popular among the *Limbus* and is worshiped in all occasions. *Yuma* is the mother of all the *Limbus*. Therefore one regards his or her mother as a goddess. Their religion is enshrined in the evergreen *Cynodondactylon* (Dubo) grass. Traditionally, the *Limbu* bury their dead, but due to the influence from their Hindu neighbours, cremation is becoming more popular. *Limbu* people also have their own clergy, such as Phedangma, Samba, Yeba (male) Yewa-Yema (female). According to the Nepal Census of 2001, out of 359,379 *Limbu*, 86.29% were identified as practising the traditional Kiranti religion, and 11.32% were identified as Hindu and other religions. Modern *Limbus* have also been influenced by Christianity, especially those living in parts of India.

The *Limbu* people's ancient garments were *mekhli* for men and *daugari* for women. Even today, with some changes and modifications, it is possible to see traces of their traditional clothing. Nowadays men wear ordinary Nepali dress like *daura-suruwal*, trousers, shirts, T-shirts etc. and women wear typical *phariya, patuka* (a piece of long cloth bound around the waist), blouse, *cholo, khasto*, shawls, etc.

Their settlements are found at altitudes between 2,500 feet and 4,000 feet. Their homes are mainly one-storey houses of stones with thatched roofs (matted layers of straw, rushes, palm leaves, etc.). They paint their houses red and white with earth. The window frames and doors are made of wood and painted black. The rich *Limbus* build houses that are larger than average with their roofs made of slate and zinc and with wooden balconies on the first storey.

*Limbus* residing in Sikkim, Darjeeling, Assam, Nepal and Bhutan, have their own identity because of a strong belief in '*Yumawad*'. *Yumawad* is a type of religious scripture which has been kept alive by their religious leaders and handed down verbally from generation to generation. Some of the retellings of *Yumawad* are also included in *Limbu* traditional music with social stories, dreams, and everyday life. There has been a rich tradition of *Limbus* singing their folk songs. Their folk songs can be divided into the following groups:

- *Khyali* - a conversational song in which young girls and boys sing with poetic expressions and in a very sweet tone.
- Traditional Love Songs -
  - *Sakpa Palam Samlo* - This song is sung during the Kusakpa Yeaalang dance in a fast beat.
  - *Kemba Palam Samlo* - This song is sung during the Kemba Yeaalang dance in a slow beat.
  - *Domke Akma Palam Samlo* - It is sung when doing the normal chores and also during the Domke Akma dance.
- *Hakpare Samlo* - this song is sung by middle-aged men and women who have interest in *Mundhum* and who are well known in it. One can find spiritual and worldly specialties in this song.

- *Nisammang Sewa Samlo* - This song is sung during religious functions. It is a devotional song. Dancing is an important aspect of life among *Limbus*. Based on acting style, the following types of dances are performed:
  - Dance performed after origin of life: This type of dance is known as *Ke Lang* or *Chyabrung Lang*. The dance imitates the actions of animals, insects and any form of living beings.
  - Agricultural dance: Under this type of dance there are -
    - *Yea Kakma* - This dance is performed in the evening after the crops are reaped.
    - *Damke Akme* - This dance is performed while sowing crops.
  - War dance: This form of dance is known as '*Nahangma*' and is performed during '*Nahangma*' – their religious function. In this dance, only adult males and '*Shamani*' priests can take part. During the dance, they carry a sword in their right hand and a shield in their left hand, or an arrow in their right hand and a bow in their left hand.
  - Historical dance: In this dance form, the historical war of ten *Limbus* fighting in Aambepojoma Kamketlungma is depicted.
  - Mysterious and ancient dance performed by Shamani priests: this type of dance is known as *Yagrangsing Lang*, *Phungsok Lang*, *Tongsing Lang*. The dance is performed only by the Shamani priests.

*Limbu* musical instruments include the *Niyari Hongsing Ke*, *Chyabrung*, *Miklakom*, *Simikla*, *Chethya/Yethala*, *Ta*, *Tungeba*, *Ungdung*, *Yalambar Baja*, *Tetlafakwa*, *Mephrama*, *Negra*, *Yea Pongey*, *Puttungey*, *Phakwa*, *Phamuk*, *Phenjekom*, and *Megphama*.

## CONCLUSIONS

The word '*Kirāt*' occurred first in the *Kṛṣṇayajur Veda*. The name also finds mention in the *Taiteriyā Brāhmaṇa*, the *Atharvaveda*, the *Purāṇas*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. It is further quoted in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* that India is flanked by the *Kirātas* in the east and the *Yavanas* (the Muslims) in the west. It is widely believed that the *Kirātas* are a group of aboriginal people inhabiting the lower Himalayan regions, especially Assam, that was later referred to as the 'outcaste *Kṣatriyas*'. It is also believed that in about 1000 BCE the *Kirātas* entered India through the *Louhitya* or Brahmaputra Basin of Assam. They preferred to call themselves '*Khoumbe*', '*Khembo*' or '*Kirwa*'. However it is more pertinent to call them '*Ekthumba*'s. The *Kirātas* use the surname 'Subba', although at present the use of '*Kirāta*' as a surname is gaining popularity as well. A section of the *Kirāta* or *Limbu* people used to inhabit the coastal areas of the Dudhkoṣī and Kempī (or alternatively the *Arunkoṣī* or *Mecī*) rivers of Nepal. The area between the River *Tāmār* and the boundaries of Sikkim may well be called the land of the *Limbus*. At present the *Limbus* reside extensively in *Ilam* or eastern Nepal, Bhutan, Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The *Limbus* stand out as an extremely valorous ethnic race who are at the same time upright, hearty and somewhat irritable. The *Limbus* are a group of people uniquely conspicuous in their own characteristics and in their own merits – be it music, dance or any other form of culture and tradition.

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