LIMBUS: AN OUTLINE OF THEIR MUSIC AND CULTURE

KRISHNENDU DUTTA
Assistant Professor, Department of Music, Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim, India

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 Yakthun) (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, Bhota, 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 Vansawai, 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 Tunglung-Maden. Listed Chaobisia, Mawakhola, Tambarkhola, Chakhola, 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, Chakhola is a present day Ilam and Jhapa districts, Maiwakhola area is in present day
Tinklejung district, Tinkhola is in Panchthar district, Panthar is Panchthar district, Phedap is the north-central area of Terhatum district, Athraya is in northeastern Terhatum district, Chethar is in southern Terhatum, Sankhwasabha and eastern Dhankuta district. Yangkor area is in present day Southeast Tinklejung, 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 mekhlis 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, kasto, 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 Limbu 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:

- **Khyaali** - 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 Yeaclang dance in a fast beat.
  - **Kemba Palam Samlo** - This song is sung during the Kemba Yeaclang 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:
  
  o 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.
  
  o Agricultural dance: Under this type of dance there are -
    
    o *Yea Kakma* - This dance is performed in the evening after the crops are reaped.
    
    o *Damke Akme* - This dance is performed while sowing crops.
    
    o 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.
    
    o Historical dance: In this dance form, the historical war of ten Limbus fighting in Aambepojoma Kamketlungma is depicted.
    
    o Mysterious and ancient dance performed by Shamani priests: this type of dance is known as *Yagrngsing 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, Meprama, Negra, Yea Pongey, Puttungey, Phakwa, Phamuk, Phenjekom, and Megphama.\[8pt\]

**CONCLUSIONS**

The word ‘*Kirā*’ occurred first in the *Kṛṣṇayāyur Veda*. The name also finds mention in the *Taiteriya Brāhmaṇa*, the *Atharvaveda*, the *Purāṇas*, the *Rāmāyana* 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 ‘*Khombe*, ‘*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 Dudhkoši and Kempi (or alternatively the *Arunākoši* or *Meci*) 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 in music, dance or any other form of culture and tradition.

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