

The Tibetan Buddhist Tradition of Sacrifice and Religious Ritual Using Instrument Made of Animal and Human Body Parts Among the Memba Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

Dr. Chera Tamak

Department of History, Faculty of Social Science, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, 79112, India

***Corresponding author**

Dr. Chera Tamak

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Abstract: This article explores the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of sacrifice and religious ritual using instrument made of animal and human body parts among the Memba tribe of Menchuka Valley. The Memba is a name given to a collection of group of Buddhist people who migrated from various parts of Bhutan, present Tawang district and Tibet (China) respectively and settled in Menchuka Circle of West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, India during the early 17th Century A.D. The paper tries to present the ritual tradition of Memba tribe of Menchuka who follow Tibetan form of Buddhism and belong to Nying-ma-pa sect. It is interesting to know that Memba are still following and preserving most of the age-old ritualistic tradition of their ancestor. They followed extensive tantric ritual and comes under third vessel Vajrayana form of Buddhism introduced by Guru Padmasambhava in Eight century A.D. in Tibet. The article tries to provide brief information regarding the types of sacrificial ritual and use of animal and human body parts that are still prevalent among the Memba tribe. The paper also traces the belief and myth associate with it. In order to do so, varieties of sources in the form of secondary, primary, field study and folk narration are briefly examined to provide glimpse of their ritualistic practice.

Keywords: Sacrifice, Instrument, ritual, Gomp (Monastery), Chorten (Stupa), Neh (Pilgrimage place), Lama (Monk), Kapali

INTRODUCTION

The Memba ethnic group is one of the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who inhabits in the Menchuka Circle of Menchuka Sub-division in the northern part of West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Menchuka has international boundary facing China towards north, Upper Subansiri district on the west, Upper Siang district on the east and Upper Subansiri district and Yomcha Sub-division on the south. As per 2011 census, the population of Memba was 4,395 [1]. The Memba is a nomenclature given to a collection of group of people who had migrated from various parts of Bhutan, present Tawang district and Tibet (China) respectively and settled in Menchuka. According to their vernacular literature *Cheik* it was during the Seventeenth Century A.D under the guidance of *Lama Lorde Gyatso* they moved towards Menchuka. *Cheik* is a vernacular text dealing with rules and regulation to be followed by Lamas and contain some detail account of their early history. The original copy of *Cheik* was confiscated by Chinese army during Indo-China war of 1962 [2].



Fig-1: Statue of Guru padmasambhava

Historically, the Tibetans and the western people know Menchuka by the name *Pachakshiri* (*Baechakshiri*) and its resident as *Pachakshrisba*. Politically before 1947, Menchuka (*Baechakshiri*) was a private estate of Tibetan aristocratic family called *Lhalu*. *Lhalu* family considered to be one of the most powerful, respected and come under *Yabshi* group in Tibet [3]. *Yabshi* are those families and their

descendants into which Dalai Lamas have been born. Linguistically Memba belong to *Bodic* group of Tibeto-Burman linguistic group [4]. They follow Tibetan form of Buddhism and belong to *Nying-ma-pa* sect [5]. It is interesting to know that Memba people still follow and preserves most of the age-old ritualistic tradition of their ancestor. They follow extensive tantric ritual and come under third vessel *Vajrayana* form of Buddhism introduced by *Guru Padmasambhava* in the eight century A.D. in Tibet [6].

The purpose of this paper is to highlight their religious tradition by tracing their link between their oral tradition and practice. Till now there are few research work done on the Memba tribe but no attempt has been made by any researcher to understand their tradition belief and practice. Thus the information provided in the paper is first hand information gather by the correspondent through extensive field study and collection of oral narration gather during interaction with Memba people.

Tradition of sacrifice

The Memba community practices and follows many rituals during their lifetime. They consider these rituals as the only medium through which they can contact the spirit and deities living in this universe. It is a practice where religious actions are performed for their symbolic value. They believe that, they live in a world tamed with malignant, aggressive and violent spirits who if not dealt properly can cause great trouble, for which they have to pacify it by countless offerings and perform various rituals to protect as well as avoid individual or the community from wide range of misfortune to befall.

In early days before the introduction of modern medicine, the Memba people did not believe in the perception that illness or accident has a natural cause. They measured it to the work of evil spirits or malevolent deities who wanted to exert control upon them. In order to ward away the evil spirit or deity one had to appease the malevolent deities through worship and ritual. In the Memba community the *Lamas* plays a vital role of a shaman. He acts as a medium through which the ritual could be successfully achieved. Only a *Lama* has the knowledge of communication with the spirits that share the natural surrounding with man and his environment. In case if a family member happens to fall ill or some unusual incident occurs, they consult the *Lama* to determine the cause of the misfortune. The *Lama* with the help of the sorcerers, oracle and astrology tries to locate the source of the trouble and then suggests remedies required. In order to avert trouble of any kind, a ritual is considered the most effective means of solving it.

The Memba rituals include offerings of symbolic offering of blood, using effigy representative of an objects, food, water, *chang*, butter lamp, incense and redeeming animals from slaughter. They use effigy made of dough from millet called *torma* to use as a source where a person's sins are to be transferred. This effigy is stumped in dough with the help of wooden carved effigy. This effigy represents human figure, deity, spirit and animal, stuffed with reproductive organ and red juice to symbolise blood. The red juice is prepared from mixing red colour with melted butter. The *torma* is considered incomplete until their consecration ceremony to animate it with life is performed. The theory behind the offering of *torma* as alternative to sacrificial ritual is to ransom it in place of a dying or ill person. The *torma* is supposedly considered superior to any human body. The *torma* is thrown away at the end of the ritual or at constant intervals. They also use sacred religious instrument of bells, drum, trumpets, conch, *Dorjee (vajra)*, *Phurpa*, rosary and weapons vigorously for successful performance of the ritual. They also perform ritual, which cannot be succeeded without having sacrifice.

The rituals take two days to three weeks to complete and require presence of more than three *Lamas* for the practice. On the first day of the ritual, the assistant *Lamas* called *Choi-pen* prepare all the material required for the ritual like *torma* and butter lamp. After the materials required have been prepared, the senior *Lama* consecrated the *torma*. With the consecration, they start the rituals. During the rituals, the *Lama* and his assistant stay in the person house until the final completion of the ritual. They also perform various rituals for the construction of house, for departed member of the family, for wealth, harvest, passage of lifecycles like birth and marriage.



Fig-2: Statue of Aapo Dorjee Drakchen

The first reference of sacrificial ritual among the Memba is found in the form of ritual called *Aapo Dorjee Drakchen*. This ritual is performed in favour of demon named *Aapo Dorjee Drakchen*. They perform it once in every year in a place called *Tsensi-gang* in Menchuka village. Every year a black coloured chicken is sacrificed as offering to the deity. A chosen *Lama* performs the ritual. Earlier in Menchuka, a *Lama* named *Lama Thupden* performed it. After his death, the Head *Lama Dongse Thinley Narbu Naksang* continued the ritual until the reincarnation of Late *Lama Thupden* named *Lama Dorjee Phurpa Buru* took charge. It is believed that if the sacrificial offering is not performed then the Memba people would have to face the wrath of *Aapo Dorjee Drakchen*.

The story behind this ritual is that, when *Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava)* was given the task of the construction of Buddhist Monastery in *Samye* and *Buchu Targo-Lhagang* in Tibet, he called upon all the deities and demons of Tibet to follow Buddhist path and to help him in construction of the monastery. Every one accepted his request except for *Aapo Dorjee Drachen* and instead started to create hurdles in the construction process. He was a very powerful demon and all lived in fear of him. This action of him angered the *Guru Rinpoche* and in order to punish him, *Yaksha* ritual was performed to destroy him. The demon became afraid and requested *Guru Rinpoche* to stop the ritual and promised to obey his order. *Aapo Dorjee Drachen* also pleaded that he could not live without eating human flesh and requested *Guru Rinpoche* to provide an alternative. *Guru Rinpoche* accepted his pleading and said, "in return of your service towards Buddhism, the people of Tibet will sacrifice one chicken once a year in his favour." Hence, the *Nyingmapa* sect of Tibetan Buddhism continues to follow the ritual practice of sacrificing for *Aapo Dorjee Drachen* till today.



Fig-3: Lama visiting Karte-Neh

The first reference of sacrifice ritual associated within Menchuka area is of *Karte-Neh* pilgrimage. The pilgrimage is associated with their migration history. The Pilgrimage is organised in the fourth or fifth week

of January month every year. The place contains numbers of holy sites called *Sada Bumba Chorten* built by *Lama Lorde Gyatso*, foot prints of *Lama Lorde Gyatso* and his horse, *Ba-Chu Lansa*, *Shing-Yong Masar* and *Dutse-Lansa*. During pilgrimage, they perform sacrificial ritual by offering one hen in favour of local deities named *Dorjee Barwa Sungma*, *Lha-diu-Chenm* and *Zingkyong-Yab-yung*. The ritual is performed in the site where *Sada Bumba chorten* is located. If the sacrifice hen fall towards the stream it symbolizes deity accepted the offering and Menchuka Valley will be prosperous in that year. On the other hand, if the sacrificed hen jumps towards the land it symbolises that the deity is unhappy and will bring catastrophe. In order to avoid the wrath of the deities the required ritual of sacrifice is performed again. The system continues till the sign of favourable condition is not indicated by the deity.

The beliefs of such practice reveal that, when *Guru Padmasambhava* visited *Karte*, he encountered the deities of the area. These deities were non-believers of Buddhism and very powerful and cruel in nature. They ate human flesh and always harassed the humans by spreading diseases. *Guru Padmasambhava* requested the deities to follow the path of Buddhism, but instead of listening, they rejected the request and tried to harm him. Thus, in order to bring them under the umbrella of Buddhism, *Guru Padma Sambhana* performed *tantric* ritual and ordered them to follow his command or face his wrath. By seeing the *tantric* power, the deity accepted the order, but they requested *Guru Padmasambhava* to provide them with some other alternative in order to make them not to harm any human being. Since, they could not survive without consuming flesh and blood, *Guru Padmasambhava* brought up the practice of sacrificing hen once in a year for these deities in return for doing no harm to human and to follow the path of Buddhism.

Karte-Neh pilgrimage begins by visiting *Sada Bumba chorten* and ends with the collection of holy water from *Dutse-lanse*. The lamas first visit *Sadha Bumba chorten* and perform the religious ceremony and sacrifice. On the second day, the pilgrims begin their visit to the site. It was after this pilgrimage that the Lamas on the third day leaves *Karte-Neh* and start visiting every village or *Chim* where they perform *Lama- Regtsen* or *Tse-dup* ritual for one day and collect donation called *Dratsang-Senyom* from every household. The practice of collecting *Dratsang-Senyom* starts from Kardasila and Sekar village and ends at Lha-Lhung village in Menchuka.

Morjuae

This ritual is associated with delivery of a baby. The people practice it when there is a sort of complicity in delivering a baby. They follow two

system of practicing this ritual, one is a sacrificial ritual called *Morjuae* and the other is a service ritual. *Morjuae* is performed, when there is any complication related to the delivery of a baby, where they slaughter one black colour chicken and then they removes its skin. The slaughtered chicken is then hung outside the compound of the entry of the house, erected with the help of pole as offering for the demon. The demon causing the obstacle is offered chicken in exchange for the mother and baby's life for a safe delivery.

The second system of service offering is performed when there is no improvement in the condition of the delivering even after the *Morjuae* ritual. In this system, the family member goes into a nearby stream looking for blockade and if found then it is cleared immediately. Thus, helping the water deity and in return expects for a normal delivery of baby. The ritual is another example of *Bon* practice followed by Memba people.

Religious instrument made of animal and human body parts

The Memba believed that after the death of special or dreaded person, their body parts could be converted into very powerful instrument through proper ritual and useful to counter the spirit and deities. It is believed that those person who have committed sins in their whole life, those who have died of dreaded diseases, those children who have died before reaching the age of teenage and those person who have lived more than hundred years, the body parts of such persons are considered fit to be used in the ritualistic performance. They also considered that hairs of female who are barren in her whole life are most feasible to be used as an instrument for ritual. They use skull, thigh bone, backbone and hair of female to make instruments to be used for performance of various types of rituals. However, before taking their body parts, permission of their family member is sought. In most of the cases, the family members give the permission with a belief that the deceased soul will get the blessing of God and will have a favourable rebirth. Besides using human body parts they also use animal body part most commonly skin to prepare instrument to use in their ritual.

The first reference of using human body parts is found in their history of *Sam-ten-yamchak Gomp*. The *Sam-ten-yamchak Gomp* is the first *Gomp* constructed in Menchuka. It is located at *Pema-Ziling* at a distance of 6 Km from Menchuka town near Shaegong Village. The *Pema-Ziling* is important pilgrimage site that holds very important place in the history of migration of the Memba in Menchuka [7]. It is said to be a place where *Lama Lorde Gyatso* with his *Shapji* (assistant) meditated during their stay at Menchuka. During his visit to *Pema-Ziling*, his foot impression along with the foot impression of his yak

and a horse were left in a stone in a place called *Narbu-Chulung* near River *Yargap-Chu*. Interestingly the foot impression of the Lama and his horse face towards the Menchuka while on the other hand the foot impression of the yak faces towards Tibet. The direction of the foot impression symbolise the return of yak to Tibet while on the other hand the horse escorted the Lama further into Menchuka Valley. Before him another Lama named *Kardu Sagya Rinpoche* visited *Pema-Ziling* and meditated in a cave called *Saija Phupa*. Besides this the place also consists of numerous small caves having large stone slab to sit and sleep used by Lamas for hermitage and also a throne made of piles of stone from where *Lama Yab-meh-pao Dorjee* taught his disciple. The earliest *Gomp* constructed in Menchuka by *Pha-yul Lama Ter-ton CheojeLingpa* and *Lama Dondup*, which symbolise the spread of Buddhism in Menchuka, is located in *Pema-Ziling* Neh area. To reach the site of *Sam-ten-yamchak Gomp* one had to cross river *Yargup-Chu* with the help of a cable bridge. The *Sam-ten-yamchak Gomp* is the first *Gomp* constructed in Menchuka. To reach the site of *Gomp* one had to cross *Yargup-Chu* river with the help of a cable bridge. They constructed *Sam-ten-yamchak Gomp* during the period of 3rd Rinpoche, *Pha-Yul Lama Ter-ton Cheoje Lingpa* in early 17th-18th century A.D. It is believed that before him *Lama Yap-meh-pao Dorjee* tried to construct the *Gomp* in *Pema-Ziling* area but the demon and evil spirits always put hurdles in his way and he constantly gave up the idea of constructing the *Gomp*. However, his successor *Lama Cheoje Lingpa* with his power subdued the demon and constructed the *Sam-ten-yamchak Gomp*.



Fig- 4: Statue of Pha-Yul Lama Ter-ton CheojeLingpa

During the times of Vth Rinpoche *Tha-Lung Lama Ngawang Drakpo* the *Gomp* was almost in the verge of destruction caused by heavy landslide that had occurred from water flowing from the stream of *Shinjong* Mountain, the water over flew towards the *Gomp* premise leading to soil erosion. The Rinpoche performed many rituals to alter the problem but could not succeed. Then he consulted an oracle and accordingly, he went to Tibet to find an instrument required to curtail the deeds of the demon that was causing the water to overflow. After few weeks, he returned from Tibet and brought one *Kapali* a bowl made out of human skull of a person who had died of leprosy. Next day he performed the ritual and hanged the skull in the source of stream from where water was flowing towards the *Gomp*. Then automatically the skull made the stream water to divert towards underground and finally saved the *Gomp* from destruction.

Soon after the death of *Rinpoche Tha-Lung Lama Ngawang Drakpo*, the demon again began to cause trouble in the *Gomp* so much that it ultimately led to the evacuation of the *Gomp* by *Lamas*. The ruins of *Sam-ten-yamchak Gomp* can still be seen at Pema-Ziling. The native still believe that the *Gomp* is still haunted as told by the *Rinpoche Lama Dondup*. He also declared the location of the *Gomp* to be inauspicious for the people in the future. With this belief, the *Lamas* residing there evacuated the *Gomp* listening the *Rinpoche's* advice.

Following are the instrument made of animal and human body parts used by Memba while performing their ritual.

1. Kapali



Fig-5: Kapali (Human Skull)

kapali is a bowl made from oval upper section of human skull. It is used to serve sacrificial offering to wrathful deities or fruits and other edible item to the peaceful deities. It is also used as bowl to serve *prasad* and holy water to the devotees. In order to obtain a *kapali* bowl, selection of suitable skull is of immense

importance for the success of the ritual. Skull of a person who lived for hundred years or more is preferred. The skull of such person is believed to possess great *tantric* power. Besides this, they also take the skull of a person who has died from disease for making of a bowl. The skull of a person who died at the age of sixteen years is used for making hand drums. Before taking, the skull of any such person the consent of their living family member is always sought.

2. Musical Instrument

According to Memba traditional, music plays an important role in the process of inner transformation towards enlightenment. They consider music as one of the path through which one could discover the truth of absolute reality and supreme bliss of wisdom and compassion. The *Lamas* of Memba community plays various types of musical instrument such as drums, trumpets, flageolets, conch, bells and gongs made of wood, metal, animal body, conch shell and human skeleton. These musical instruments are mainly used for performing prayer service and rituals rather than for singing purpose [8]. They brought most of the musical instruments from Tibet, except for few instruments made of bamboo, animal body and human body parts that are made locally. In order to prepare instrument from human bone a special elaborate incantation is done, otherwise the sound produced from such music would be considered insufficiently powerful to summon the demon.



Fig- 6: Human Thigh-bone Trumpet

- a) The thigh-bone trumpets instrument is made of a single human thigh bone with holes on the top to blow and thumbholes below to release sound by the *Lamas*. To prepare this they use bone of dreaded criminals or those who have died by violence. They decorate thigh-bone trumpets with brass rings, animal skin and with fine quality of semi precious stone.



Fig-7: Hemispherical drum made of human skull

- b) Drums are of two types- large and small one. The large one is of a barrel shape covered with animal skin hanged upon a wooden frame of about three feet long or in a ceiling with the help of a rope. Some of these drums are also fixed with wooden handle. These large drums are beaten with cane stick to produce sound. The small drum is made from two hemispherical wooden bowl joined together on their convex side. The base part is covered with snake skins and decorated with colourful ribbon strips at the joint. In order to play it, two leather ball or cloth ball is attached to a rope long enough to reach the base of the drum and fastened to the centre of the joined convex. This drum when shaken with the help of hand will cause the leather ball attached with rope to swing and strike the cover of the skin to produce sound.
- c) The Memba Lamas also play a small hemispherical drum made of human skulls. The instrument made of human skull is considered to contain special power to summon demon during the performance of a ritual. For the preparation of such instruments, they follow certain kinds of taboo. In the preparation of skull drum the skull of those persons who have died at the age of sixteen years are preferred. In some of these drums, one can also witness the presence of decorative pony hair taken from the dead women head who have been barren in her lifetime.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion we can see that how the Memba still belief and practice their age old belief based on Tibetan Buddhist tradition of sacrifice and religious ritual using instrument made of animal and human body parts. In modern world where human civilisation depend on the scientific invented technique and allopathic medicine prescribed by Doctor for remedy. The Memba on the other hand used both modern and their age old religious practice and tradition for the same. It was through this belief and practice that

they were able to survive and sustain all the odds that came before them from many centuries.

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