



Matrimonial Traditions Of The Monpa Tribes Of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The Monpa tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabiting predominantly in the West Kameng and Tawang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, India, comprise distinct groups, each distinguished by distinctive linguistic and cultural traits within the Buddhist group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. This paper explores the matrimonial traditions of the Monpa, focusing on the institution of marriage, known as "Nyen," which is intricately related to family structures. Marriage among the Monpa establishes in varied forms echoing the community's rich cultural diversity. By examining these practices, this study highlights how marriage serves as a universal yet culturally distinct institution, shaping social organization and identity within Monpa society.

Key terms: Chemin, Graying Lakhan, Ngoi Cho, Monpa tribe, Barmins, Brakpan, Nyen.

Introduction

The term "Monpa" is traditionally used by Tibetans to refer to people living in the lowlands south of Tibet. In Arunachal Pradesh, it now denotes various tribes and subtribes in the West Kameng and Tawang districts, collectively known as the Monpa community. This community includes groups such as the Panchen Monpa, Tawang Monpa, Dirang Monpa (also called Central Monpa), But Monpa, Lish Manpas, Chug Monpa, and Kalaktang Monpa (known as Tsangla Monpa). The Tawang Monpa are referred to as Brahmi Monpa. These groups vary in their languages and cultural practices, with their dialects belonging to the Bodic group of the Tibeto-Burman language family.

In Monpa society, marriage, known as "Nyen," is a fundamental social institution, closely linked to the concept of family. Marriage and family are interdependent, with marriage serving different purposes and taking various forms across cultures. Among the Monpa, marriage practices include monogamy, polygamy, polygyny, and polyandry, reflecting the diversity of their cultural traditions.

This paper examines the matrimonial customs of the Monpa tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.

Rules of Marriage

The Monpa society is patrilineal, with descent traced through the father's lineage. Cross-cousin marriage, particularly between a son and his father's sister's daughter, is preferred. This practice reduces the need for extensive bride-price negotiations among familiar kin, balancing the high bride-price. The bride-price paid by one family to acquire a bride is often recouped when a daughter from that family marries into the other family later.

For example, the bride-price paid for A's marriage may be recovered when A's brother's son marries A's daughter.¹ Monogamy is the most common form of marriage, and widow remarriage is socially accepted, while child marriage is not practiced. Polygamy, including both sororal and non-sororal polygyny, is also observed in the society.

Ways of obtaining a Bride

The primary method of securing a bride in Monpa society is through Phunkhan, a negotiated marriage. The groom's parents initiate the process by appointing two respected mediators, known as Barmin (meaning "middle man"). These mediators visit the bride's (Chemin) home, carrying an Ara Palang (a bamboo tube for alcoholic beverages) and a khadah (a white cloth) as a marriage proposal. The mouth of the Palang is smeared with butter in a ritual called kargen. At the bride's home, the mediators present the proposal to her parents, who first seek their daughter's consent. If the girl agrees, negotiations proceed; if she declines, she may visit the groom's family to return the gifts and politely reject the proposal without hesitation.²

If the bride initially rejects the proposal, the Barmin (mediators) may revisit her family with the same gifts—an Ara Palang (bamboo tube with an alcoholic beverage) and a khadah (white cloth)—to renew the marriage proposal. If the girl still declines, she can return the gifts to the groom's parents, politely refusing the match. However, if the mediators visit a third time, tradition dictates that the girl cannot refuse the proposal. Upon her consent, her parents accept the Yu (alcoholic beverage), drink it, and place the khadah around the girl's neck, formally initiating the marriage proceedings.³

Following this, the groom and his family visit the bride's home for the engagement ceremony, known as Makpatang. The groom's parents bring alcohol and white cloths as gifts for all members of the bride's family, marking the occasion.

After the engagement, the Makpa (bridegroom) traditionally serves the bride's family for three years, though this is often reduced to one year depending on the bride's family circumstances. If the bride is the eldest daughter and the primary support for her parents, the bridegroom serves the full three years. This service, called Maka Jukpan, involves household tasks such as tending to animals, fieldwork, fetching firewood, and caring for livestock like cows and horses. Upon completing the service period (one or three years), the bridegroom's parents send a message via a mediator to the bride's parents to arrange the marriage. The bride's parents then prepare for the ceremony.⁴

Both families consult a Lama to select an auspicious day for the wedding, on which the bride moves to the bridegroom's home. Graying Lakhon (love marriage) is also common. In such cases, the couple informs their parents of their relationship, and the boy requests his parents to send a marriage proposal to the girl's family through a Barmin (mediator). If the boy's parents approve, the proposal is sent; if not, the marriage may be disallowed. Some couples accept their parents' decision and part ways amicably, while others defy their parents and marry against their wishes.⁵

Graying Gandikhan (marriage by elopement) is common in the society, often driven by factors such as young men and women growing close while working together in fields or living in the same village. The primary reason for elopement is parental disapproval of the couple's relationship, leaving the lovers with no choice but to run away and marry. Initially, parents may reject such marriages, but they often accept them after the couple has a child, performing traditional customs to celebrate the union.⁶

Forced marriage also exists, particularly among the Monpa community, with a unique practice. Typically, a girl is compelled by her parents to marry her deceased sister's husband, especially if the late wife left behind young children. This is done to ensure the children receive maternal care from a close family member. Despite the girl's reluctance, parents may impose conditions, leaving her no option but to agree.⁷

Another traditional practice is cross-cousin marriage in the Monpa community, considered a form of forced marriage. A man's niece (his sister's daughter) is expected to marry one of his sons, symbolically filling the role of her deceased sister. This practice

has declined recently. In cases where the bride's parents have no male heir, they may adopt a son-in-law through a Bu-Tshap marriage, requiring the groom to live permanently in the bride's household.⁸ This involves the groom's family providing double the usual gifts to the bride's parents.

Inter-community marriages are increasingly common, with individuals marrying partners from different communities. Though parents may initially disapprove, they typically accept these marriages over time.⁹

Bride price and exchange of gifts

In Monpa society, the custom of paying a bride price, known as Dong Sen, is widely practiced. The groom's parents negotiate the bride price with the bride's parents through a Barmin (mediator). Typically, the bride price includes Sha (yak meat) and Nor (an animal, usually a horse), provided one day before the marriage ceremony. Additional gifts include a Shingka (cloth) for the bride's mother as Jabkhow, a Patar or Khadah (white cloth) for the bride's relatives, one Palang of Ara (a bamboo jar of drink), one Muder of Yu (a saucepan of maize beer), and Bot Betrangs (Tibetan silver coins), ranging from 10 to 100 in number. If the groom's family is less affluent, they may substitute cow meat for Sha and pay Rs. 500 instead of a horse for Nor.¹⁰

Historically, wealthier families offered items like Therpu (a copper and bronze big saucepan for storing water), Tow (a type of saucepan), and Ngoei Joma. The bride's mother provides her daughter with ornaments such as Ngoi Cho (silver bangles), Nganskor (necklace), and Gowoe. Poorer families traditionally gave simpler items, including an aluminium saucepan, Medam (a tripod iron hearth), Jagam (a wooden box), and one Alung (Eri silk) placed inside the box.

If the groom's family cannot pay the bride price at the time of the ceremony, the couple is expected to settle it later when financially able. If they remain unable to pay, their son is obligated to pay the bride price on behalf of his mother, as her brother may demand it. This underscores the compulsory and intergenerational nature of the bride price in Monpa society.¹¹

Marriage ceremonies

During the marriage ceremony, the groom's parents may choose to sacrifice a yak or cow, referred to as sha. This ritual is optional and can be performed later on a suitable day and time if not done on the ceremony day. After the sacrifice, the meat is distributed among the bride's brothers, uncles, and relatives. The head of the animal is retained by the groom's parents, while the Brang Sha (chest portion) is given to the mediator, and the remaining meat is shared among the bride's brothers and relatives.

Those receiving the meat bring an array of gifts, known as Janglam, for the bride. These include traditional items such as Shingka (gown), Tudung (coat), Pangten (wraparounds), Chudoug (belt), utensils, ornaments, animals, gold, silver, and boxes. These gifts become the bride's personal property.¹²

On the ceremony day, the bride and groom wear traditional attire. The bride is accompanied by a Chemin Rock (a friend chosen from her relatives), and the groom is joined by a Maka Rock (a friend selected from his relatives). Additionally, two singers, one from each family, participate in the ritual. As the bride leaves her home, the singers place a Sodas (coloured cloths tied to a stick) behind her neck, chanting phrases like De Jamu, Sui Jaws Yen, De Jew, Xuaei Jaws Yen, Jow De Baei La Khooxa Yen, meaning "Whose bride is this? This is our bride, and we will take her to Tibet." They then make a special Ki-Ki sound three times. The bride carries a sibekhalu, a silver disc with zodiac signs, to ward off evil spirits.

Relatives from both families and villagers attend the ceremony. The singers continue singing throughout the procession, and the bride and groom wear khadahs (ceremonial scarves) around their necks, with their friends accompanying them. The groom's parents host a feast featuring local drinks, meat, rice, and other dishes. The couple stays an additional day at the bride's home during the celebration.¹³

During the marriage ceremony, the Chemin Rock (bride's friend) serves drinks to the Makpas Avang (groom's uncle) and the gathered guests. The Chemin places a khadak (ceremonial scarf) around their necks. After drinking the Yu (traditional alcoholic beverage), the uncle and others return the khadak to the Chemin with cash gifts. Nowadays, cash is given, but historically, Bot Betrang (Tibetan silver coins) were used, with two coins equalling one rupee. The Chemin's uncle typically gave at least 50 Bot Betrang, while relatives and others gave 5 to 10, depending on their willingness and financial status.

The wedding party then proceeds to the groom's house, accompanied by two singers performing blessing songs. Upon arrival, celebrations continue. The bride's parents stay overnight at the groom's house and return the next day. Three days later, the bride's parents and close relatives are invited to the groom's house, where they share a meal featuring the head of a yak or cow.¹⁴

Post-ceremony, the bride's and groom's parents, along with the couple, formalize the marriage agreement in the presence of the village head and prominent villagers as witnesses. The agreement details the bride price, gifts from relatives to the bride, and gifts from the parents to their daughter. It declares the bride as part of the groom's family, adopting their family title. The document also outlines divorce terms: if the bride is at fault, she must pay double the fine and leave without any claim to her husband's property; if the husband is at fault, he pays a fine to his wife and forfeits his property, which is inherited by their children.

After the marriage, the groom's parents invite the both the Barmins (mediators) to their home, treating them to drinks and meat and giving them a cash gift for their role. The Chemin Rock receives half the money collected by the bride for serving drinks during the ceremony. The Makpa Rock (groom's friend) and the two singers receive no payment. The marriage ceremony concludes with the feast for the Barmins.¹⁵

Divorce

Divorce (Brakpan) is common in society, governed by specific customs and rules. It occurs due to various reasons, such as differing opinions between spouses, a husband's desire to marry another woman, or a wife's infidelity.

If a husband seeks divorce due to his wife's faults—such as neglecting household duties, disrespecting her husband, or failing to care for the children—he can initiate the divorce. In such cases, the wife must return double the value of all items and animals provided by her family at the time of marriage and must leave the home. Children are divided during the divorce: sons stay with the father, while daughters go with the mother. If the wife has a young son, she may care for him temporarily, but he will eventually return to the father.¹⁶

If the husband is at fault—for example, having an affair or marrying another woman without his first wife's knowledge—the wife can initiate the divorce. The husband must leave the home and return all items the wife brought from her family during the marriage. The wife and children remain in the home, and the son inherits all property.¹⁷

If the wife is barren, the husband may marry another woman, but the first wife retains a higher status than the second. If the first wife is unwilling to live with the second wife, she can divorce her husband and receive a portion of his property.¹⁸

While the Monpas traditionally follow these customs, their practices are declining due to modern education and external influences. Nowadays, simpler marriage customs are preferred, with money often given to the bride's brothers and uncles instead of traditional items like yak meat (Sha) or animals (Nor). Giving money has become a fashionable alternative to exchanging goods and animals.¹⁹

Conclusion

The matrimonial traditions of the Monpa society, a patrilineal community, reflect a blend of cultural continuity and rational social provisions that reinforce family and kinship ties. The preference for cross-cousin marriage, particularly between a son and his father's sister's daughter, not only reinforces familial bonds but also eases the financial burden of high bride-prices through reciprocal exchanges. The prevalence of monogamy, alongside socially accepted practices like widow marriage and forms of polygamy (both sororal and non-sororal), features the flexibility and diversity within Monpa marital customs. The Phunkhan process, mediated by respected Barmin, highlights the importance of mutual consent and ritualised negotiation, confirming respect for the bride's family while adhering to cultural norms. The iterative proposal process, culminating in the Makeatang engagement ceremony, symbolizes the community's commitment to maintaining harmony and consensus in marital alliances. These practices collectively demonstrate how Monpa society balances tradition, economic considerations, and individual choice, preserving its cultural identity while nurturing social structure. This exploration of Monpa matrimonial tradition offers valuable understandings into the complex interplay of kinship, ritual, and social structure in shaping community life.

Notes and references

1. Vide interview with Chhojom Pem, on 6th May 2005, Khaso village.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Vide interview taken from Sange on 8th May 2005, Sangti village
5. Vide interview taken with Norbu Pem on 9th May 2005, Dirang village.
6. Vide interview with Tsering Dorjee on 9th May 2005, Dirang village
7. Ibid.
8. Vide interview taken from Drakpa Pem on 10th May 2005, Dirang village.
9. Ibid.
10. Vide interview with Khandu Rinchin on 12th May 2005, Thembang village.
11. Ibid
12. Vide interview with Mr. Leiki Rinchin on 13th May 2005, Yowang village. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid
15. Vide Interview with Mr. Negei-Chung Lama on 15th May 2005, Khaso village.
16. Vide interview taken on 18th May 2005, Sangja Pem, Bomdila.

17. Ibid.

18. Vide interview taken from Sangley and Namgey Kesang on 20th May 2005, Sangti village.

19. Ibid.