

# **Theravada Buddhism and Traditional Religion in Lathao: A Tai Khampti Village in Arunachal Pradesh**

Vijanti Namchoom\* and Janet C. Lalhmingpuii\*\*

## **Abstract**

*The article provides a descriptive and analytical account of the religious beliefs and practices of the Tai Khampti of Arunachal Pradesh. The issue which is addressed in the paper is the co-existence between Theravada Buddhism and animistic practices which define their religious world-view. We argue that the Tai Khampti follow a syncretic form of religion which is composed of Theravada Buddhism and the traditional religious beliefs and practices where Theravada Buddhism forms the dominant belief system with non-Buddhist beliefs placed in subordination to it. The paper is presented through ethnographic evidence which came from Lathao, a Tai Khampti village located in the Namsai District of Arunachal Pradesh.*

## **Introduction**

In spite of the enduring interest in studies on religion, there is no distinct or uniform anthropological theory or methodology for the study of religion (Das, 2009). Scholars have pointed out the inadequacy of definitions of religion as such definitions tended to over-generalise the religious allegiance of the people concerned and did not take into account the differences in the character of religious beliefs. According to Sir James Frazer, there is no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much as the nature of religion, and to frame a definition of it which would satisfy everyone is impossible (Frazer, 1932). Das has pointed out how earlier definitions such as those by Taylor and

Durkheim very often ignored the syncretic and synthesised religious domain (Das, 2009).

The word syncretism is derived from two Greek words *syn* meaning with and *krasis* meaning mixture, which means the mixture of two or more elements. The Oxford English Dictionary defines syncretism as the attempted union or reconciliation of diverse and opposite tenets or practices, esp. in philosophy and religion. For Kamstra (1967), syncretism means amalgamation, something opposite to an encounter, i.e., the existential meeting of two religions. The Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology defines it as hybridization or amalgamation of two or more cultural traditions.

Das (2009) has defined religious syncretism as the blending of two or more religious beliefs systems as also the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from other traditions. Syncretism further is a matter of degree where in some societies two religious dogmas may be integrally blended while in others only particular aspects of the original or adopted religion have been retained. It pertains to a co-mingled religious sequence whose ill-defined frontier shapes its fundamental collective character (Das, 2003). An outcome of the process is the assimilation of deities, synthesis of traditions and customs, similarities in rituals and so forth.

It has been pointed out that syncretism is hardly a central theory in social-anthropology; however, it has resurfaced as a tool that provides a valuable understanding of the complexity of the dynamics of plurality, interconnectedness and identity (Das 2009). In this paper it has been used as an analytical model for the study of the religious beliefs and practices of the Tai Khampti of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **The Tai Khampti**

The Tai Khampti are recognised as one of the 26 major scheduled tribes of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. They migrated from Moungh Khampti Loung (located in Shan state of present Myanmar) during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The name Khampti means a 'land of gold' where the name is a combination of two words - the meaning of the word *kham* means gold and *ti* means place. They affix the name Tai to themselves denoting that they belong to the Tai race. The Khampti language belong to the Tai speech family of the Siamese-Chinese family

which forms a branch of the Indo-Chinese family. There are three main speech families of the Siamese-Chinese family- the Tai, Karen and Chinese. Under the Tai speech group there are the languages of the Siamese, Lu, Lao, and Khun of the trans-salween Shan states, Shans of Burma and Yunan and finally the Ahom and Khampti language fall (Gogoi, 1971).

The Tai people's present habitat extends from Assam in the West to Hainan and Kwangsi in the East and from the interior of Yunnan in the north to the southern- most extremity of Thailand in the South (Gogoi, 1971). The groups of Tai people who inhabit the Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh are Khampti, Phakiyal, Turung, Khamyang, Aiton and Nora. But when asked for their identity they introduce themselves as Tai Khampti, Tai Phake and so on.

The Khampti territory falls in the Namsai district, bounded by Lohit to the North, Changlang to the east, Assam to the South and Dibang to the West. They occupy the low lying plain regions drained by the Tengapani and Noa Dihing rivers. Lathao village is one of the biggest villages of the Khampti in Namsai District and it has a uniform Buddhist population. It is a relatively well to do village with 163 permanently residing households. Agriculture is the mainstay of the village economy where both permanent wet and dry cultivation is practiced. Cultivation of their *na* (rice fields) is by far the most important activity of the villagers. This is supplemented by the cultivation of cash crops such as mustard, taro, potatoes and, more recently, tea.

### **Theravada Buddhism among the Tai Khampti**

The Khampti of Arunachal Pradesh profess the Theravada school of Buddhism. They refer to it as *Tra Stratow*. Buddhist practices manifest themselves in almost every aspect of their daily life. Theravada means "Doctrine of Elders" where the elders refer to senior monks who are the preservers of tradition. The title then claims some form of conservatism. It is the oldest form of Buddhism and arose in India during the time of the historical Buddha and eventually spread throughout South-East Asia. Gombrich (1988) has maintained that it would be misleading to call Theravada Buddhism a sect; instead, it would be more precisely defined as a denomination.

The distinctive features of Theravada Buddhism are that Pali forms its main sacred language and the use of the Pali Buddhist canon as its sacred scripture. Buddhists consider that there are three jewels that define their religion, namely, the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* and the *Sangha*. Rituals and religious ceremonies are always started by taking refuge in the three jewels three times. When they say that they take refuge in the Buddha they think of Gotama Buddha, where Buddha is a title meaning enlightened or awakened. The Khampti refer to the Buddha as *Chow Kotama* or *Phra Pen Chow* (the enlightened one). The Khampti believe that *Chow Kotama* occupies the fourth position in the line of Buddhas and after the five thousand years of his death he will be succeeded by Ari Mitya, the fifth Buddha. The word *Dharma*, the intellectual content of Buddhism is translated as doctrine. The doctrine of the *Dharma* is regarded as truth and law and both prescribes and describes. Taking refuge in the *Sangha* a Buddhist primarily thinks of the monks (Gombrich, 1998).

Buddha's teachings can be summed up in the term *Dharma* or truth/law or principle of righteousness. The Buddhists believe that if one lives by *Dharma* one will ultimately attain *Nipaan* (Sanskrit - *Nirvana*) and thus be relieved from all types of sufferings. According to Buddha's teachings it is said that a person comes to *Dharma* through their own efforts with the development and control of the mind and through the purification of ones emotions. The ultimate goal then is to be liberated - *jati, jara, byadhi, marana longthaw tangtai* - freedom from rebirth, freedom from all pains of old age, freedom from all sufferings arising from one's body and mind, freedom from death and finally to attain *Nipaana*. Most Khampti consider enlightenment to be a desirable goal and an end to suffering but they also believe that it is incredibly difficult to attain. They consider themselves to be too entangled in the retributive causality of ethical action (*karma*) and too attached to worldly pleasures to master the path to enlightenment. Mindful of the arduous self-control for the required practice, disciplined action, speech and thought, they feel that the circumstances of their rebirth do not warrant enlightenment to be anything than many lives away.

### **The Khampti Cosmology and Belief Systems**

The Khampti believe that the universe is divided into three types of beings - *phan kon* (humans), *phan phi* (spirits), *phansang* (the world of gods). They believe that there are *sam sipet phum* or 31 planes/ levels in which these different categories of beings live; hence the Khampti say *Moung phi hok khong* which means that there are six levels of the spirit world, *moung sang sau khong* which means that the world of gods has 20 planes, *mong kang phum lerng* or one world of humans and lastly *apaya see chan* or four types of hells. An individual's present state is dependent on their *karma* - and depending on the kinds of deeds performed during the current life they are reborn in these different worlds. They believe that out of these 31 worlds there is only one plane where one can earn *akieu* (merit). They perform various kinds of *lu* (offerings) in their lifetime to earn *akieu* so that they are reborn in *moung kang* and *moung phi* (the world of gods). They believe that the world of gods is a happy world. The *gods* are reborn in these worlds because of their good *karma* and their life span is a hundred times more than human beings.

According to their *karma* when they die they are immediately taken to these worlds where they live in palatial houses and they have everything in abundance. The people perform *lu* (offering) in hopes of earning merit and accumulating good *karma* so that they are reborn in the world of *devas*. Making merit through participation in a variety of celebrations was the most obvious aspect of religious life in the village under study. The villagers believed that those who were blessed enough to reach *nipaan* do not return back to mortal life. While the ultimate goal is the attainment of *nipaan* most Khampti believe it to be many thousand lives away. They believe if they keep doing *sutong* from this life itself after many thousands of lives they may reach *nipaan*. Their life as human beings does not permit them to live as pure beings hence they feel they have to keep accumulating merit so that in their next life they are reborn in a better form and place. Hence some villagers said: As human beings we have hunted and killed animals, fished in the river and in the course of an ordinary day killed so many insects and even when we try to meditate with sincerity our mind keeps roving around - that's why for us human *nipaan* is many thousand lives away.

We observed that the villagers were intensely mindful of the karmic consequences of their actions which they believed occurs on the violation of the precepts of the Buddha. Their circumstances in the present life were explained as a result of their karma in the past life. They believe that karma is a kind of metaphysical force which is responsible for the successes and failures of an individual's actions. They believed that karma is a consequence of merit or demerit. One's rebirth is never an accident or consequence but is absolutely determined by their karma. Thus if a person is wealthy they believe that it is entirely due to his good deeds in the past life. In the religious actions they were intensely concerned with making a good life for themselves in their rebirth. Stereological goals such as *nipaan* which they refer to as *nipaan* and rebirth assume great importance.

The path to attain a good rebirth is through charity/ performance of *lu*, morality and meditation - as they believe that these three ways are the means to attain a higher state of being. In their religious practice, the main goal is the achievement of a higher state of being in their next birth, and all their actions in the religious domain are oriented towards this primary goal - "so that they go to a good place". It was observed in Lathao that it was particularly the old people who immersed themselves in the practice and observance of all the rules and regulations of the religion. In fact, when an individual reaches old age it is considered essential for them to concentrate on religiously oriented activities so that they can collect *akieu* for their next life, hence many of the older people said that they should observe the *sin pet* (eight precepts) whenever they had the chance and perform *lu* (offering) so that they are ensured of a good place in the afterlife.

They also believe in the existence of a whole plethora of gods. According to them, there are *sam sean chow* - over three thousand different types of gods; hence their names may not be known at one time by human beings. *Chow Khun sang* (the creator) is the most powerful amongst all the gods. *Chow khun sang loung* in the world of gods was so powerful that he never died - he was immortal. It is believed that even the gods are not entirely immortal as they live only till the time they have *tanglu*; once their *tang lu* is over they die; and another one assumes their role.

### **Traditional Religious Beliefs**

Among the Khampti of Arunachal Pradesh side by side with the canonical Buddhist beliefs there is also a belief in *Phis* (spirits) and gods of all kinds both benevolent and malevolent. The sphere of religious oriented actions are therefore not exhausted by rituals centred around the temple. The Khampti believe that they live in a world inhabited not only by human beings but by spirits and gods of various kinds. Just as in the human world there are so many different types of human beings with varying characteristics, so too in the world of spirits there are as many types of spirits. The spirit world has hundreds and thousands of different types and is larger than the human world. The power of spirits is all pervasive and everything in the physical world is controlled by one spirit or the other. The relation of the villagers to these spirits is one of reverential fear, dependence, submission and propitiation. They believe that everything in the world is animated by spirits - the *phi* live in houses, fields, water, rice, cows, trees and so on.

In their daily lives, the Khampti think that their actions are influenced by a variety of spirits which are characteristic of various times as well as by the concepts of power and efficacy. In the religion practiced by the Khampti then there are two broad categories, first is the canonical Buddhism that they practice and the second is the traditional extra Buddhist beliefs and practices.

Spirits exist in every known habitation and in every form - they live in streams, rivers, bamboo groves, tree creepers, in the jungle, in the rice fields, even inside their homes and they roam amongst the human beings. There are generally two kinds of spirits - the benevolent and the malevolent spirits. The benevolent spirits are those which have to be propitiated for prosperity and well-being. If they are not propitiated, the villagers believe that there would be loss and lack of fulfilment. The malevolent spirits create trouble; such spirits wander around and some have abodes in natural surroundings. They bring misery and ill luck to people through various ways. The malevolent spirits are a cause of great concern for the Khampti due to the kinds of sufferings they can inflict on human beings. In spite of taking precautions, people find it difficult to keep out of their way entirely since they can never tell when and where they may bump into them. There is always a danger that they may offend one spirit or the other at some point or the other. Rites have to be

performed in order to propitiate these spirits and seek pardon for unwittingly offending them and seek relief from the misery caused by them.

Continual human effort is required in the relationship between the spirit world and the world of humans. The benevolent spirits are friendly and helpful and appreciation is shown through the human effort of prayer. The malevolent spirits are troublesome and it is required to either appease them or to avoid them altogether. To ensure the goodwill of the spirits and to guarantee that they are not offended and neglected human effort is required. They must be recognised and propitiated and kept happy lest they become angry and inflict their wrath on them.

They then acknowledge the power of a plethora of spirits which explain all phenomenon, whether sickness, ill fortune or prosperity and fulfilment as the hand of a particular *phi*. While there is a strong belief in spirits among the Khampiti there have been no attempts made to reproduce in image form a particular *phi* which exists in the mind. These spirits dwell everywhere and they live among the human beings but while the spirits can see the human world, humans cannot see them; but they must be wary of their presence and acknowledge their existence lest they offend them in some way and become a victim of their wrath.

In Lathao, Buddhism and Buddhist principles were undoubtedly predominant; however, the extra-Buddhist beliefs and practices were also followed both at the individual level and at the collective level of the village. The basis of the belief is that the world of spirits is much stronger than the human world.

The acknowledgement of spirits is considered to belong to the profane world and is kept apart from the Buddhist practices. The monastic order does not participate in these village activities and neither does the village priest. Propitiating the spirits is done in a space and time that belongs to the world of the profane. Thus, for instance, when the *phi moun* (spirit of the country) is being propitiated it occurs in the afternoon hours as they consider that the hours after 12 noon belong to the world of the profane and not the sacred.

While the village collectively propitiated the *phi moun* (spirit of the land) on a grand scale they were often not open to discussing their participation in the propitiation of other spirits of the individual or household level. Whenever a question was posed on the prevalence of



the practice of spirit worship they often found themselves in a dilemma. Some of them said that the propitiation of spirits was done for worldly purposes, which was apart from Buddhism. Some respondents said that since these spirits were so powerful one could not ignore them even if one was a Buddhist. Often the rationale for the acknowledgement of spirits was that the world of spirits has power only in worldly matters, while Buddhism is concerned with supra worldly ends which is distinct from worldly matters. For the most part, thus, *phi* are associated with the profane and not the sacred.

In the religion of the Khampti, as evidenced in Lathao village, we then find a domain which straddles two worlds which they regard as antithetical to each other but which nonetheless co-exist mutually. The traditional extra Buddhist beliefs and practices of the Khampti exist alongside the primary religion they profess. They are regarded as separate domains where the *phi* and gods are treated as entities that have an indisputable power which have to be acknowledged but which are nonetheless subordinate and ancillary to the predominant Buddhist beliefs.

### **The Village Temple and Monastic Order**

The *chong* (monastery) formed the central component of the village. At the time of organisation and formation of the village one of the first and most important sites that was demarcated for the village as a whole was the *chong*. Having a *chong* was, in fact, the defining characteristic of the village as it was through this institution that the members of village are united as one community. Having a temple meant that the village existed as a unit separate from other villages.

The monastery is distinctly kept apart from the everyday social activities of the village. Ideally, Khampti temples are constructed at the edge of the community. While it formed an integral part of the village it is kept isolated and physically separate from the village - the sacred territory of the monastery remains ritually marked in comparison to the profane world of the village. In Lathao, the temple compound was enclosed by a more or less substantial fence. Inside the compound were a number of structures. Within the enclosed area was the temple which forms the prayer hall where the village congregates for ceremonies.

Khampti village monasteries usually have three categories of persons living in them - the *chowsras* who keep the 227 monastic rules, *chowsangs*/novices who take the ten precepts and the young boys who have been sent to the temple either because their parents cannot afford to feed them, they have discipline problems, or they seek access to better schooling. The young boys, after they have completed learning the *suttas* and the *Lik Tai*, are deemed ready for ordination.

As monks are bound by the strict rules and code of conduct, they do not have any form of direct interaction with the village folk. The monks do not move out of the village monastery except when they are invited by the village folk or by *chongs* of neighbouring villages for the observance of religious festivals. The villagers' interaction with the monks is of extreme deference and respect and, while speaking to them, they have their heads bowed down and they are always seated at a lower level than the monks. The villagers interact with them primarily when they require their services for conducting certain rites and rituals at the individual or household level such as birth, marriage or death ceremonies. In Lathao, the monks did not involve themselves in any kind of worldly matters, such as the socio-political affairs of the village. The *chow sras* had no say in any matter relating to the management of the village or its social affairs which included even the organisation of religious feasts and festivals. The strict code of conduct keeps them apart from all extra monastic affairs that fall into the profane sphere of the mundane world. The villagers, in turn, had no say in the internal management of the monastery as no lay person interferes in its affairs unless asked specifically by the head monk.

### **Village Duties towards the Monastery**

The *chong* in Lathao depended entirely on the village for its day-to-day subsistence and maintenance. The monks survived on the offerings made by the members of the village. A monk's robes, food and shelter were all offered by the village population. In Lathao *sawm*, food offerings were made every day to the monks. For this purpose a system was started where the *mou sipik* or the alms bowl of the monk is passed on from one household to another and as the *mou sipik* reaches a particular household it takes the responsibility to prepare and offer cooked food to the monastery in the early morning hours. The women

folk of the household are usually responsible for this duty and on days that food is being cooked in the house for the monastery they must ensure that nobody has eaten food before it has been delivered to the *chong*. The first servings of all that is cooked is given to the monks carried in baskets above their heads as it is believed that the food becomes impure if the basket is carried below the shoulders. Every household, thus, has the responsibility of making an offering of cooked food to the monks in the early morning hours before afternoon as the monks do not consume food after 12 pm.

Each day one household prepares food for the monks and in return the monks pray for them and give them their blessings which is believed by the Khampti that it will earn them great merit. The villagers also considered it a great merit making action to offer the first harvest of their rice to the *chong*. No matter the size of one's rice fields, the villagers attempt to perform this action as they considered it to be very auspicious to offer *thir khao mer*/new rice harvest to the monks. Hence after the harvesting is completed each household in the village makes a request to the head monk inviting him to their house to perform the *mankala hern* (house purification) where they also make the offering of their *khao mer* (new rice).

When the services of the monks are required the village people perform the ceremony of *pang*, which is a customary form of invitation that is done personally by the individual who requires the services with a humble request in the form of a prayer. The responsibilities of the monastery and the village are reciprocal in nature. The monastic order fulfils the requisites of conducting rites and rituals in the socio-religious life of the village. While the village looks after the basic needs and necessities of the monks, the monks perform the function of blessing the village which is needed by the people who believe that this will earn them merit which is required for the after-life. They have a symbiotic relationship where the monks provide religious services, educate the youth and oversee festivals while the villagers attend events, make offerings and ensure the continuation of Theravada teachings and values by looking after their temple and monastery. The monks provide the lay people opportunity to make offerings during different types of social and personal occasions such as birth and death rituals. Such offerings allow the lay people to earn merit. To a Khampti the presence of monks in a

village is essential as it is the monks who give blessings and send love to the community.

### **Village Level Prayer Ritual at the Monastery**

It was observed in the village temple that the prayer ceremony that took place had a prescribed set of rituals and rites that was followed for every religious gathering. Every gathering at the temple began with the ritual of *kanto* (seeking forgiveness) for any misdeed that they may have committed. Led by the *chow chere* (village priest), the villagers first perform the *kanto chow phra* (seeking forgiveness from the Buddha). This is followed by *kanto tra* (seeking forgiveness from the *dharma*) and thirdly *kanto sangha* (seeking forgiveness from the monks). After taking refuge in the name of the *Buddha*, *Dharma* and the *Sangha*, the villagers then performed the ritual of *lu* (offering). For this purpose, the villagers, in the early morning hours or on the day prior to the day of prayer service in the monastery, prepare the candles, incense sticks, flowers and food to be given as offering to the *Buddha*, *Dharma* and the *Sangha*. First the *lu simi* (offering of candles) was made, this was followed by then *lu mokya* (offering of flowers), and lastly the *khong lu* (offering of requisites) to the monks. For each of these offerings three sets of candles and flowers are made for the *Buddha*, *Dharma* and the *Sangha*. After *khong lu*, the villagers offered *khao tang sawm* (food offering) to the Buddha and the *arahants*.

The Khampti believe that in the early morning hours the *arahants* (those who have attained *nipaan*) may be around them since they identify that time when they go for alms begging. They raise the food offering above their heads bowing down and uttering a prayer to the *arahants* to accept their food offering. After all the offerings have been made the monks bless the people. When the monks recite the *suttas* for blessing the people the villagers fold their hands in prayer after which the villagers say *sathu, sathu, sathu*”, thanking the monks for the prayer of blessing they have uttered for them. When palms are folded in prayer the villagers believe that they should not be empty; thus they offer *khao teak* (popped rice). Then the monks lead the congregation in the *Kham-sin* (taking of precepts) - first the villagers take the *sin ha* (five precepts) - they repeat the lines of the five precepts following the monks. This is then followed by the *sin pet* (eight precepts) which is taken usually only

by the older population of the village. These are the five precepts for devout lay people- refraining from killing, stealing, lying, intoxication and improper sexual conduct.

The eight precepts have three additional rules of refraining from eating after noon, indulgence in any form of entertainments and sleeping on high and wide beds. After the *kham sin* the next part of the ritual is the *thom tra* (listening to the *Dharma*) or the Buddha's teachings. For this the head monk of the monastery translates from the Pali texts the words of the Buddha, sometimes from the *Vinaya Pitaka*, sometimes from the *Abhidhamma* - in poetry form - the head monk writes down in Khampti and literally sings it out for the congregation. After the *thom tra* the villagers again perform the *kanto* ritual to the *sangha*/ monks present. The *chow chere* then performs the *woi akieu*. The last ritual that was performed was the *ye nam* (water libation) where the villagers pour water gradually whilst uttering a prayer for Nang Musuntri, the earth goddess to bear witness to the good deed they performed on that day. The villagers believed that Nang Musuntri was all enduring as they said that human beings and even other gods may forget and not recollect their good deeds, but that the earth is ever present and she bears witness to all things good and bad, hence she will always remember. The villagers, when they utter a prayer during the *ye nam*, share the merit they acquired with their loved ones, even those who have passed away, as well as with all the gods and spirits.

### **Village Level Traditional Religious Ritual**

At the collective level the village as a whole participated in the propitiation of only one spirit - the *Phi moun*. The villagers believed that the *Phi moun* was a benevolent spirit who guards and watches over the village and was the most powerful of all the *phis*. 'He was the only spirit singled out by them for special veneration collectively. The villagers explained the characteristics of the *phi moun* thus - He is like the king of the village and has an entire ministry under his force very much like a king in the human world who has ministers to carry out his orders. Everything within the boundary of a village is under his control. He is the Lord of the mountains and he lives on the top of mountains from where he can see everything. All the village lands fall within his jurisdiction and he controls all phenomena in the village - the good

fortunes and the misfortunes of the village are all under his control'. Based on the above characteristics described commonly by the villagers they believed that this guardian spirit must be propitiated collectively by them every year; otherwise, they feared that the village might become a prey to death, disease and famine - crops go bad, cattle die and the village becomes a place of disunity and disharmony.

In Lathao, the *phi moun* was propitiated twice. This directly corresponded with the agricultural season - the *phi moun* is propitiated once before *loang na* or stepping down into the rice fields, marking the start of work in the *na*, and once before the commencement of *pat khao* (harvesting). When the weather is unfavourable and dry and there is not enough rain for the starting of the preparation of the rice fields, the village prays to the *phi moun*. The villagers believed that if the spirit is not propitiated he begins to 'eat' things up in the village - cows, buffaloes, elephants, creatures that roam in the jungle and even their crops.

In Lathao *paang si moun* or the propitiation of the country spirit is conducted only on *wan trangnoi* (Sunday) in the hours after 12 noon as it is believed that the afternoon time is the time of the *phi* while the morning hours are the hours of the *phra* (gods). Unlike the religious occasions of the *chong* where an auspicious date and time is consulted for every occasion, in the world of *phi* there is no requirement for this. Whenever it is judged that the time to step down to the rice fields is drawing near, the village performs the ceremony usually in the month of May and once again when it is felt that the rice is ripe and ready to be harvested in the month of early December. The study observed that the senior generation members of the village did not participate in the *paang si moun* since most of them take the *sin pet* (eight precepts) and they felt that there is a conflict between that and participation in the realm of the spirits. The monastic order and the *chow chere* also do not form a part of this ceremony since they belong to the sacred realm of the *phras* (gods). The villagers said that all the *phis* belong to the world of the profane; but since they form a part of their cosmology they have to acknowledge them. The villagers believed that the *paang si moun* ceremony does not lead them to acquire any form of merit; however, it has to be performed since they have powers to wreck destruction on the village.

The main event in the ceremony is the preparation of the food. A grand feast is prepared with all the seasonal vegetables, meat and fish, and this is offered to the *phi moun*g who is requested to come to the village and partake of the feast.

Apart from the collective propitiation of the *phi moun*g, the villagers also propitiated and recognised a whole number of spirits at the individual level such as the lightning spirit, the spirit of ancestors, the spirit of the trees, the spirit of the cremation ground, the spirit of the rice fields and so on.

The struggle between the Buddhist and traditional non-Buddhist practices are apparent as attempts are made to do away with practices that run contrary to the Buddha's teachings. In Lathao, an attempt was made to stop the bi-annual *phi moun*g ceremony; thus, the chief of the village passed an order that the villagers should discontinue the performance of this ceremony. He ordered that, instead of offering food to the *phi moun*g, the village should offer *khao tang sawm* in the monastery and, instead of praying to the *phi moun*g for protection, they should seek it from the temple. For one season thus the *pang si moun*g ceremony was not performed in Lathao. However, this order was reversed the following year again by the chief as dreams and visions of ill health and misfortune troubled him continuously. The villagers were very quick to point out that if they do not perform the *phi moun*g ceremony, everything in the village 'goes bad'. Hence, every villager ensures that they are present and participate in this ritual for fear of their rice fields going bad or to avoid having to deal with the wrath of the *phi*.

The villagers reasoned that the *phi* are an unavoidable and necessary part of the world in which they live. They have a right to exist in the world in the same way that humans, plants and animals do. They must acknowledge the good as well as the bad; hence they must acknowledge the power of the *phi* as well as the goodness and virtue they accumulate for themselves in following the precepts of the Buddha and merit by following the rituals. Some villagers were of the view that the presence of different *phi* in the village has greatly been reduced as the village has grown and as demands of a growing population has led to clearing of trees and shaded bamboo groves and other such nooks and corners which they believed were the abodes of the spirits.

## Conclusion

We find that village life is centred around the *chong* and Theravada Buddhist beliefs and practices, to a great extent, are the defining characteristics of the Tai Khampti and that they play an important role in many aspects of creation of that identity. Along with the canonical Buddhist principles, the village population also had a belief in a wide range of beliefs and practices which principally revolve around the belief in *phi* or spirits. In this village, the teachings of Gautama Buddha and the world of the spirits co-exist mutually. The villagers were inclined to be mindful of both worlds although the world of the *phi* was definitely placed in subordination to the beliefs and practices that revolved around the Buddha's teachings. The spirit world is interpreted as something unavoidable that one must acknowledge since they have power over their fortunes and misfortunes. The belief in the Buddhist doctrines is related to metaphysical goals, the ultimate being the attainment of *Nipaan* (Snaskrit- *Nirvana*). The Tai Khampti people of Lathao village thus profess a syncretic religion where Theravada Buddhist beliefs are blended with the traditional non-Buddhist beliefs.

A syncretism of the old pre-Buddhist beliefs and practices, mythology and rituals with the dominant Buddhist religion exists among the Tai Khampti. Despite this co-existence, they maintain a definite boundary between the two different religious domains in so far as practices are concerned. The Buddhist beliefs and practices are considered to be superior and the predominant belief system of the villagers; hence it belongs to the sacred world. The belief in spirits, on the other hand, is regarded as profane; hence, they must be kept apart from the Buddhist beliefs and practices. The syncretism of the traditional beliefs and practices with canonical Buddhism forms the essence of present day Buddhism among the Tai Khampti of present day Arunachal Pradesh.

## References

- Das N.K. (Ed). (2003). *Culture, Religion and Philosophy*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Das, N.K. (2009). Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism and the State in South Asia: An Anthropological Reappraisal. In Das, N.K and V.R. Rao (eds.). *Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State - South*



Vijanti Namchoom and Janet C. Lalhmingpuii

*Asia in Perspective*. (pp. 420-439). Delhi: Mac Millan Publishers India Ltd.

Frazer, J.G. (1932). *Magic, Art and Evolution of Kings*. London: Macmillan & Co. Limited.

Gogoi, L. (1971). *The Tai Khamptis of North East India*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications.

Gombrich, F.R. (1998). *Theravada Buddhism - A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Kamstra, J.H. (1967). *Encounter or Syncretism: The Initial Growth of Japanese Buddhism*. Lincoln: Anybook Ltd.

\***Vijanti Namchoom** is a Ph.D., research scholar of the Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya.

\*\***Janet C. Lalhmingpuii** is a Ph.D., research scholar of the Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya.