



# *From Ritual to Memory: Declining practices of the Flah Festival among the Monpa tribe of Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh: a case study of Lhou Village.*

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## Abstract

The Flah festival is one of the oldest ritual practices rooted in the Bon religious tradition among the Monpa tribe of Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh. Historically, flah functioned as a community-wide ritual aimed at propitiating local deities, ancestral spirits, and natural forces to ensure protection, agricultural prosperity and social harmony. However with the gradual dominance of Buddhism, increasing modernization, formal education, and socio-economic transformation, the ritual significance and collective participation associated with the flah festival have been steadily declining. This paper examines the transformation of flah from a vibrant ritual practice to a fading cultural memory, using Lhou village as a case study. Based on qualitative field observations and community narratives, the study explores the changing meanings, reduced participation, and the challenges faced in preserving this traditional practice. The paper argues that while flah no longer holds the same ritual centrality, it remains a crucial marker of monpa cultural identity and historical consciousness. Documenting and reinterpreting such indigenous practices is essential for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the face of rapid cultural change.

Keywords: Flah Festival, Bon religion, Monpa tribe, Tawang, Cultural Change, ritual decline, indigenous heritage, intangible cultural heritage.

## INTRODUCTION

Tawang district, located on the western most edge of Arunachal Pradesh, is predominantly inhabited by the Monpa tribe, a Buddhist community with deep historical and cultural ties to the Tibetan Plateau. Prior to the widespread adoption of Tibetan Buddhism, the Monpa practiced Bon, one of the oldest indigenous spiritual traditions of Tibet. Bon was not a single, unified religion but a collection of beliefs and practices related to nature worship, ancestor veneration and the veneration of deities associated with mountains, rivers, and other natural elements. The earliest forms of Bon were animistic, with rituals intended to honor the spirits of the natural world and seek their protection.

With the gradual spread of Buddhism in the region, Bon practices were significantly marginalized. However its imprint can be found with the practice of the ritual such as Flah.

Flah is one of the most important Bon festival traditionally observed by the Monpa community practiced in the few villages of Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh. It is a rich and complex belief system that highlights living in harmony with nature, respect for various deities and the pursuit of spiritual awakening. Celebrated once a year, the festival reflects the community's spiritual beliefs, ritual practices and collective participation through dance, chant and symbolic performance. The festival earlier observed in Lhou village, was practiced once a year in the

second month of the lunar calendar (Nyipa) for three days consecutively – Tse 13, 14 and 15 of the particular month. Each day is marked by distinct ritual activities and performances.

This study focuses on the Flah festival as formerly practiced in Lhou village and document its ritual forms, meanings and eventual decline.

### **Study Area**

Lhou village is situated in the mountainous terrain of Tawang district in Arunachal Pradesh, a high altitude region of the eastern Himalayas bordering Tibet to the north. The Village lies at an approximate elevation of 3,865 metres (12,680 feet) above mean sea level, within Jang sub-division, bordered by Tibet to the north and Bhutan to the west, featuring alpine meadows, dense forests and the Mago chu river system.

Lhou village is inhabited predominantly by the Monpa community, an indigenous group whose socio-cultural life has historically been shaped by agrarian practices, trans-Himalayan trade networks, and religious traditions rooted in both Bon and Tibetan Buddhism.

**Objectives of the Study-** The study aims to;

1. Document the structure and ritual component of the Flah festival.
2. Examine the symbolic meanings of ritual dances and chants.
3. Analyze the factors contributing to the decline of the Flah festival in Lhou village.
4. Highlight the significance of ritual practices in cultural transmission among the Monpa community.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on qualitative ethnographic research conducted in Lhou village. Data were collected through informal interviews and oral narratives from elderly villagers, formal ritual performers and community leaders. Participant's recollection served as the primary source for reconstructing the ritual sequence. Performances and symbolic interpretations associated with the Flah festival.

Fieldwork was conducted between June- July, 2025 and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to documentation. Interviews were carried out with three key informants aged between 54 and 70 yrs, selected based on their direct involvement in or knowledge of the Flah festival.

### **The Flah Festival: Duration and Ritual Structure**

The village community is traditionally organized into six distinct groups-namely Chikorpa, Nangkorpa, Grellingpa, Yondakpa, Khambakpa and Totpa. Responsibility for organizing and conducting the Flah festival is distributed among these groups on a rotational basis, with each group on a rotational basis, with each group assuming ritual and organizational duties in alternate years. This system of rotation ensures collective participation, shared accountability and the equitable transmission of ritual responsibilities across the community.

The Flah festival traditionally commenced with the participation of the Bon po (head priest) and the Tsor gan (village head) and other designated ritual performers such as the Bai dong pon, Broi pon, Broipa, Baw krokkan. Prior to the main performances, all participants circumambulate the local Gompa (temple) three times before proceeding to the designated ritual ground known as Flah leng.

The festival was observed over three days each carrying specific ritual meanings.

#### **Day One: Baw Krodu :**

The first day, locally known as Baw Krodu, is considered an auspicious beginning of the festival. Ritual dances were performed in the compound of the local Gompa (temple) from mid afternoon until twilight. This day was considered a period of collective blessings for the community.

#### **Day Two: Ritual at Flah leng**

On the second day ritual performance moved to the Flah leng, the designated ceremonial ground. Dances and performances continued throughout the day and villagers gathered at the site to witness the festival. This day emphasized communal participation and public witnessing of ritual performance.

#### **Day Three: Baw Sheedo :**

The third day, known as Baw Sheedo, marked the conclusion of the ritual cycle. Dances were performed throughout the day, symbolizing ritual closure and the restoration of cosmic balance. In earlier times, an additional day followed, during which horses were brought to the village for exchange and sale, reflecting the festival's economic dimension.

However an additional day, day four was being celebrated where the horses were taken to the village, where they are being sold.

### **Role of the Bonpo and ritual Specialists**

The Bonpo served as the principal ritual specialist responsible for organizing the festival, preparing the ritual ground, and conducting offerings. Ritual offerings were made during Tsen la (night) and Nyen la (day) before a sacred tree known as Flah Sheng. The initiation of the ritual was marked by chants recited by dancers to invite the Bonpo, a practice locally referred to as Doksa Chadu.

The head priest who organizes the ritual is known as Bon po. Bon po is assigned with the responsibility to carry out the offering and prepare the ground for the festival. Offerings are made during Tsen La (night) and Nyen la (day) before a sacred tree known as Flah Sheng. Before the initiation of the ritual, Bon pa is called out by dancers reciting the chant 'Ho Ho Ho' which is locally known as 'Doksa Chadu'. A Bonpo is remunerated by taxes which were collectively paid by the villagers.

The Bonpo was remunerated through collective contributions made by villagers. It was believed that oracles were invited from the land of Tibet to bless the village with peace, prosperity and harmony. Rituals were performed to facilitate the arrival and departure of these oracles, including farewell chants know as Khap She.

### **Ritual Dances performed during Flah Festival**

#### **Baidong Pa Dance-**

The Baidong Pa is one of the most significant ritual dances performed during Flah. The dance comprises seven performers, with the central figure known as the Baidong pon acting as the leader. The remaining six dancers resemble the warriors carrying arrow (lee) and sword (Pai dung). The faces of the warriors are covered; they follow the movements and chants, collectively reciting rhythmic vocal expressions, 'Ho Ho Ho' following Baidong pon who recites the main chant. The Baidong pon assumes multiple symbolic roles, including those of leader, warrior and protector.

#### **Broipa Dance**

Broipa dance is performed by young boys between the ages of seven and thirteen, under the guidance of a leader known as Broi pon. The dance serves as a medium for transmitting ritual knowledge to the younger generation. The performers wear attire resembling that of deities, accompanied by ornaments like kye kor- (precious stone necklace) with gau (pendant). The boys are often accompanied by an elder to avoid any misconduct.

#### **Baw Brokkan Dance**

Baw Brokkan is a solo performance symbolizing the movement of a cow. The dancer carries cow horns and performs rhythmic movements believed to ritually purify the environment and prepare the space for subsequent performances. This dance emphasizes individual devotion within the collective ritual framework.

The above dances are found to be exclusive to Lhou village where the rituals are being performed through dances.

### **Chants and Symbolism in Baidong Pon-**

The Baidong pon leads ritual chants during the performance. He first chants-sho..sho...sho...sho and then the other six dancers collectively uttered –aehehehe....(symbolizes as a sound of horse). Baidong pon then chants aa-haiii, aa-haiii (2 times)

Chant 1-

*Thamche khen la cha tsa lo*

*Thamche khen la cha tsa lo*

*De reng nam la tana- Karma-zang-*

*Ho-ho-ho- ho –ho*

*De reng barla tana, tsetang Zang*

*Ho-ho-ho- ho- ho*

*Sala tana, nyima zang*

*Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho*

These chants symbolically invoke natural elements, such as clear sky with stars, good weather and auspicious time. Baidong pon recites the main chants and the repetitive vocal expressions ho-ho-ho-ho-ho is followed by other 6 dancers. Collective vocal repetitions during performances reinforce unity and rhythmic coordination among participants. The chant praises the nature for its bounty and protection.

Chant 2-

*Tsa mikyang rella, dakpa reh*  
*Dakpa reh la, damchik reh*  
*Damchik reh la, Zha dang reh*  
*Zha dang reh la, yumchik reh*

The chants are being recited to seek permission from the local spiritual protector known as *Sa dah* (Sa meaning land and dah means protector or owner) for the procession of the ritual on their protected land. The hymns are sung to appease the spirits.

Chant 3-

*Tsa mikyang reh la, doksa reh*  
*Doksa reh la, nyerpa reh*  
*Nyerpa reh la, tat thongyuh.*

The chants are recited to handover the permitted Flah land by thanking the spirit. The hymns are sung again to show the appreciation and respect to the *Sa dah*.

### **Cultural Decline of the Flah festival**

According to local narratives, the Flah festival ceased to be performed in Lhou village following the death of the Bonpo priest Lama Karma Gombu. The absence of a trained ritual specialist, coupled with broader socio-cultural changes, contributed to the discontinuation of the festival. The decline of Flah illustrates the vulnerability of indigenous ritual traditions in contexts where ritual transmission depends heavily on specific individuals.

The Flah festival illustrates the close relationship between Bon religion, performance and community life among the Monpa tribe. Ritual dance such as baidong pa, and broipa serve not only religious purposes but also function as mechanisms for cultural transmissions. The decline of the festival underscores the urgent need for documentation and preservation of indigenous ritual knowledge.

### **Discussion**

The decline of the Flah festival reflects broader processors of religious transformation, modernization, and changing value systems within Monpa society. While Buddhism has become the dominant religious framework, the erosion of Bon ritual practices has resulted in the loss of embodied ritual knowledge. The transformation of Flah from a practiced ritual to a remembered tradition aligns with theories of cultural memory, wherein rituals continued to exist in narrative form even after their performance ceases.

### **Conclusion**

Flah represent an important yet diminishing ritual tradition of the Monpa community. Although no longer actively performed, it remains a significant cultural memory that reflects the community's historical relationship with Bon religious practices. Documenting such festival is essential for preserving indigenous knowledge system and understanding the cultural dynamics of tribal societies undergoing rapid change.

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Oral narratives collected from –

1. Shri. Ngu ( 70 yrs), former Baidong pon, Lhou village..
2. Shri. Sang Dakpa (60 yrs), resident observer Lhou village.
3. Lama Tashi Norbu ( 54 yrs), Gaon Bura Lhou village.