

Bon Religion among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh: Continuity, Transformation and Syncretism in the Pre-Buddhist Religious Tradition

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Abstract

The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh constitute one of the oldest Buddhist communities inhabiting the eastern Himalayas. While Tibetan Buddhism dominates their present religious life, numerous indigenous beliefs and ritual practices continue to survive beneath the Buddhist framework. These beliefs originate from *Bon*, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet and the trans-Himalayan region, which profoundly influenced the spiritual worldview of the Monpas before the spread of Mahayana Buddhism. Drawing upon extensive fieldwork conducted in *Khaso*, *Lachang*, and *Phudung* villages of West Kameng District, together with secondary historical and anthropological sources, this paper examines the cosmology, ritual system, priesthood, and concept of supernatural beings in the *Bon* religion. It analyses how *Bon* continues to shape everyday religious practices despite centuries of Buddhist influence. The study further argues that the Monpas did not abandon their indigenous faith upon the introduction of Buddhism; rather, they incorporated *Bon* deities, rituals, and cosmological beliefs into Buddhist religious practice, resulting in a distinctive form of religious syncretism. The persistence of *Bon* traditions demonstrates the resilience of indigenous religious knowledge and reflects the adaptive capacity of tribal societies in preserving cultural identity amidst religious transformation. The paper contributes to the growing scholarship on Himalayan indigenous religions by documenting a rapidly disappearing oral tradition and highlighting its significance for understanding the cultural history of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Bon Religion, Monpas, Indigenous Religion, Shamanism, Buddhism, Syncretism, Arunachal Pradesh.

1. Introduction

Religion occupies a central position in the socio-cultural life of the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh. Every stage of human existence from birth and marriage to death is intimately connected with religious beliefs, ritual performances, and community ceremonies. Although the Monpas are widely recognized as followers of Mahayana Buddhism, their religious practices exhibit a remarkable continuity of indigenous beliefs that predate the arrival of Buddhism in the eastern Himalayas. These indigenous traditions are generally identified with *Bon*, the ancient pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet.

Bon has historically been characterized as a complex system combining animism, shamanism, ancestor worship, nature worship, divination and ritual healing. Long before Buddhism became the dominant religion in the Himalayan region, *Bon* provided the philosophical and ritual framework through which communities interpreted natural phenomena, illness, death, fertility, and human relations with supernatural forces. Rather than disappearing after the spread of Buddhism, *Bon* gradually merged with Buddhist philosophy, producing a unique religious synthesis observable among several Himalayan communities, including the Monpas.

The Monpas, residing mainly in Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh, maintain numerous rituals whose origins clearly lie in *Bon* traditions. Sacred mountains, rivers, forests, rocks, and trees continue to be regarded as the abodes of powerful supernatural beings. Ritual specialists such as *Bonpu* (shamans) and *Yumin* (oracles) continue to perform healing ceremonies, divination, and appeasement rituals, particularly in rural areas. These practices coexist with Buddhist monastic institutions and reveal a dynamic process of cultural adaptation rather than religious replacement.

The present study explores these indigenous beliefs from both anthropological and historical perspectives. It argues that *Bon* should not merely be regarded as a primitive religion superseded by Buddhism but as a living cultural tradition that continues to influence the religious identity of the Monpas. Understanding this relationship is essential for appreciating the cultural diversity of Arunachal Pradesh and the wider Himalayan region.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical origin and development of *Bon* religion among the Monpas.
2. To analyze the religious worldview and cosmology associated with *Bon* traditions.
3. To identify the various supernatural beings worshipped by the Monpas and their social significance.
4. To study the institution of *Bon* priests and indigenous ritual specialists.
5. To examine the interaction between *Bon* religion and Tibetan Buddhism.
6. To analyze the emergence of religious syncretism among the Monpas.

3. Research Methodology

The present study is based primarily on qualitative research methods. The empirical data have been collected through intensive fieldwork conducted in *Khaso*, *Lachang*, and *Phudung* villages under Dirang Circle of West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh. Information was gathered through participant observation, unstructured interviews and informal discussions with *Bon* Priests (*Bonpu*), Oracles (*Yumin*), village elders and community members possessing traditional knowledge.

The principal informants included *Bonpu Shri Sangja* of *Khaso* Village, *Yumin Late Dawa* of *Lachang* Village, *Yumin Late Tsering* of *Phudung* Village, and *Yumin Shri Chumpi* of *Khaso* Village. These oral narratives were supplemented with secondary sources comprising books, journal articles, government reports, ethnographic studies and historical literature on *Bon* religion, Tibetan Buddhism and tribal societies of the eastern Himalayas.

The study adopts a descriptive and interpretative approach to analyze indigenous religious beliefs within their socio-cultural context.

4. Review of Literature

The study of *Bon* religion has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the past century. Early Western scholars such as *Giuseppe Tucci* and *David L. Snellgrove* viewed *Bon* primarily as the indigenous religion of Tibet preceding the introduction of Buddhism. Their pioneering works demonstrated that *Bon* possessed an elaborate cosmology, ritual system, and priestly hierarchy rather than being merely a collection of magical practices.

Subsequent research by *Samten G. Karmay* challenged earlier assumptions by arguing that *Bon* developed into a sophisticated religious tradition with philosophical doctrines comparable to Tibetan Buddhism. His work highlighted the historical evolution of *Bon* and its continued survival within Himalayan societies.

Anthropological studies conducted by *Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf* and *Verrier Elwin* documented the persistence of indigenous beliefs among tribal communities of Northeast India. Their observations revealed that although Buddhism and Hinduism influenced tribal societies, indigenous cosmological systems continued to regulate everyday life.

Despite these contributions, scholarly literature dealing specifically with *Bon* religion among the Monpas remains limited. Most available works emphasize Buddhist monasteries, art, architecture and festivals, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the indigenous religious practices that continue to survive within Monpa society. The present study seeks to address this gap by documenting the living traditions of *Bon* among the Monpas and analyzing their interaction with Buddhist beliefs.

5. Historical Evolution of Bon Religion among the Monpas

The origin of *Bon* religion among the Monpas is closely connected with the early cultural history of the Tibetan plateau and the trans-Himalayan region. Before the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet during the seventh century CE, *Bon* constituted the dominant religious tradition of the Himalayan peoples. Historical sources suggest that *Bon* was not merely a primitive belief system but a highly organized indigenous religion with its own cosmology, priesthood, ritual texts and philosophical doctrines. As cultural interactions intensified between Tibet and the *Mon* region (*present-day Tawang and West Kameng*), *Bon* beliefs and ritual practices gradually became embedded in the socio-cultural life of the Monpas.

The spread of Buddhism under the patronage of the Tibetan kings, particularly during the reign of *Songtsen Gampo* and later under *Trisong Detsen*, profoundly transformed the religious landscape of the Himalayas. However, Buddhism did not completely replace the indigenous *Bon* religion. Instead, many *Bon* rituals, local deities, and concepts of sacred geography were incorporated into Buddhist practice. This process of religious accommodation became especially evident in Monpa society, where Buddhist monasteries coexisted with village ritual specialists and indigenous ceremonial traditions.

The Monpas continue to perceive the natural environment as a sacred domain inhabited by numerous spiritual beings. Mountains, rivers, forests, rocks, lakes, and ancient trees are believed to possess supernatural powers capable of influencing human welfare. Such beliefs clearly reflect the *Bon* worldview, which emphasizes harmony between human beings and nature through ritual observance and moral conduct.

Unlike organized institutional religions that emphasize scriptural authority, *Bon* among the Monpas has been transmitted largely through oral tradition. Ritual knowledge, sacred chants, and ceremonial procedures are preserved by ritual specialists and inherited across generations. Consequently, *Bon*

remains an important repository of indigenous ecological knowledge, oral history, and traditional cosmology.

6. Bon Cosmology and the Concept of Supernatural Beings

The cosmological worldview of the Monpas is founded upon the belief that the visible world coexists with an invisible realm inhabited by numerous divine and semi-divine beings. These supernatural entities govern every aspect of human existence, including health, prosperity, agriculture, fertility, climatic conditions, and social harmony. Human suffering is generally interpreted as the consequence of disturbing or offending these spiritual forces.

The Monpas classify supernatural beings broadly into benevolent and malevolent categories. Benevolent deities protect individuals and communities, ensure good harvests, safeguard livestock and promote prosperity. Malevolent spirits, on the other hand, are believed to cause disease, epidemics, natural disasters, crop failure, infertility and even death. Rituals of propitiation are therefore essential for maintaining equilibrium between humans and the supernatural world.

This cosmological system closely resembles Animism, as described by *Edward Burnett Tylor*, wherein spiritual beings are believed to inhabit natural objects and phenomena. It also exhibits characteristics of shamanistic traditions found across Central Asia and the Himalayan region, where ritual specialists mediate between the human and spiritual worlds.

Unlike the dualistic conception of good and evil found in several organized religions, *Bon* cosmology recognizes that a single deity may exhibit both benevolent and destructive characteristics depending upon human conduct. Proper ritual observance, ethical behaviour, and respect for nature are therefore regarded as indispensable for maintaining cosmic balance.

7. Major Deities in the Bon Religious Tradition

The religious universe of the Monpas encompasses a rich pantheon of deities, guardian spirits, ancestral souls and supernatural beings. Each possesses distinct functions within the cosmological order and governs specific aspects of human life and the natural environment.

7.1 Sadok: Guardian of the Earth

Sadok is regarded as the deity of the land and cultivated fields. Agricultural prosperity depends upon maintaining a harmonious relationship with this deity. Desecration of sacred land, indiscriminate felling of forests or pollution of ritual sites is believed to provoke *Sadok's* anger, resulting in illness, crop failure or natural calamities. The worship of *Sadok* reflects the intimate ecological relationship between the Monpas and their environment.

7.2 Ke-lha: The Household Deity

Every Monpa household possesses its own guardian deity known as *Ke-lha*. This deity protects family members from disease, misfortune and supernatural attacks. Offerings are periodically made to ensure domestic harmony and prosperity. Failure to honour *Ke-lha* is believed to invite sickness and family discord.

7.3 Yul-lha: Territorial Deity

Yul-lha serves as the guardian deity of villages or territorial communities. The welfare of the entire settlement depends upon maintaining favourable relations with this deity. Epidemics, landslides, droughts, excessive rainfall, and crop destruction are interpreted as manifestations of *Yul-lha's*

displeasure. Community rituals are therefore organized annually to invoke blessings and ensure collective well-being.

7.4 Lu (Nāga Spirits)

The *Lu(s)* are serpent-like supernatural beings residing beneath rocks, springs, rivers, and underground water sources. Similar to the Nāga traditions of South Asia, the *Lu* is associated with fertility, wealth, and water resources. However, they are equally capable of inflicting severe diseases, particularly skin disorders and paralysis, when their habitats are disturbed. Ritual purity is considered essential while approaching places believed to be inhabited by the *Lu*.

7.5 Duedh: Water Spirits

The *Duedh* inhabit rivers, lakes, ponds and marshlands. They are generally regarded as malevolent spirits capable of capturing the souls of individuals who unknowingly violate sacred places. Illnesses caused by *Duedh* require elaborate rituals conducted by Bon priests to retrieve the lost soul and restore the victim's health.

7.6 Phu: Mountain Deities

Mountains occupy a sacred position within Monpa cosmology. *Phu*, the mountain deity, is regarded as the protector of villages located below mountain ranges. The deity controls climatic conditions and is believed to prevent epidemics, landslides and environmental degradation. Ritual offerings are performed before undertaking journeys across high mountain passes or initiating construction activities near sacred peaks.

7.7 Shinang: Wandering Souls

Shinang refers to the restless soul of a deceased individual who has failed to attain liberation. Such spirits wander between the worlds of the living and the dead, causing illness, nightmares, and sudden deaths. Funeral rituals and merit-making ceremonies are therefore considered essential to guide the deceased toward a peaceful afterlife.

7.8 Lha-shing: Sacred Groves

Sacred trees and forests are collectively known as *Lha-shing*. These locations function as the abodes of powerful deities and spirits. Cutting trees, collecting firewood or damaging sacred groves without ritual permission is strictly prohibited. Such beliefs have historically contributed to the conservation of biodiversity and forest ecosystems among the Monpas.

7.9 Phu-da: Lesser Deities

Phu-da comprises numerous minor protective spirits who influence the health of children and livestock. Their worship forms an integral part of household rituals aimed at preventing common illnesses and ensuring family prosperity.

7.10 Sinpu and Sinmu

Sinpu (male spirits) and *Sinmu* (female spirits) are generally regarded as harmful supernatural beings responsible for various physical and psychological ailments. Particular attention is paid to protecting pregnant women from the influence of *Sinmu* through ritual observances and protective amulets.

The classification of these deities demonstrates that the *Bon* religion is fundamentally an ecological religion. Every significant component of the natural environment—mountains, forests, rivers, rocks, agricultural land and household space—is conceptualized as spiritually alive. Such beliefs regulate human behaviour towards nature and function as indigenous mechanisms of environmental conservation. From an anthropological perspective, *Bon* religion represents a sophisticated system of environmental ethics rather than a mere collection of superstitious beliefs.

8. Bon Priesthood and Ritual Specialists

An indispensable feature of the *Bon* religious system among the Monpas is the institution of ritual specialists who function as mediators between the human and supernatural worlds. Unlike the ordained Buddhist monks who derive their religious authority from canonical texts and monastic discipline, *Bon* priests acquire ritual knowledge through hereditary transmission, apprenticeship, spiritual experience, and oral instruction. Their primary responsibility is to diagnose the causes of illness, interpret omens, appease supernatural beings, perform healing rituals, and safeguard the spiritual well-being of both individuals and the community.

The two principal categories of ritual specialists continue to be recognized among the Monpas are called *Bonpu* (*Framin*) and *Yumin* (*Lha-jukkan*).

8.1 Bonpu (Framin)

The *Bonpu*, also known locally as *Framin*, functions as the traditional shaman of the community. The *Bonpu* performs rituals through the chanting of sacred hymns, ritual invocations, symbolic offerings, and communication with spiritual entities. His duties include healing illnesses believed to be caused by offended deities, retrieving lost souls, conducting agricultural rituals, purifying households and preventing natural calamities.

The office of *Bonpu* is not necessarily hereditary. Instead, aspiring ritual specialists undergo a prolonged period of apprenticeship under an experienced *Bon* priest during which they memorize ritual chants, ceremonial procedures, sacrificial rites, and indigenous knowledge regarding medicinal plants and sacred geography. Because *Bon* knowledge is transmitted orally, the continuity of the tradition depends significantly upon the survival of experienced practitioners.

Strict ritual discipline governs the life of the *Bonpu*. During important ceremonies, he observes dietary restrictions, maintains physical and ritual purity and abstains from activities considered spiritually polluting. Community members believe that any violation of these ritual obligations diminishes the efficacy of his ceremonies and may even invite supernatural punishment.

8.2 Yumin (Lha-jukkan)

The second category of ritual specialist is the *Yumin*, often referred to as the oracle or spirit medium. Unlike the *Bonpu*, whose authority derives from ritual knowledge, the *Yumin* acquires legitimacy through the ability to become possessed by particular deities or guardian spirits during ceremonial performances.

During rituals, the *Yumin* enters an altered state of consciousness induced through prolonged chanting, rhythmic movements and ritual concentration. Community members believe that the deity temporarily inhabits the body of the *Yumin*, enabling him to diagnose misfortunes, prescribe appropriate rituals, predict future events, identify causes of illness, and advise the community on important decisions.

Among the Monpas, the office of *Yumin* is frequently hereditary, passing from one generation to another within particular families. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of a *Yumin* ultimately depends upon community acceptance and demonstrated spiritual efficacy rather than hereditary succession alone.

Anthropologists have observed similar institutions among indigenous societies across the Himalayas, Siberia, Mongolia, and Central Asia, where shamans function as intermediaries between human society and the spirit world. The Monpa *Yumin* therefore represents an important example of Himalayan shamanistic traditions that have survived despite centuries of Buddhist influence.

9. Bon Rituals and Ceremonial Practices

Bon rituals occupy a central position in Monpa social and religious life. These ceremonies are performed not merely as acts of worship but as practical means of restoring harmony between humans, nature, and the supernatural world. Rituals seek to avert illness, ensure agricultural prosperity, promote fertility, protect livestock and maintain collective well-being. *Bon* ceremonies may broadly be classified into community rituals and household rituals.

9.1 Community Rituals

Community rituals are organized collectively by village residents and are intended to secure the welfare of the entire settlement. Such ceremonies reinforce communal solidarity while simultaneously reaffirming the community's relationship with territorial deities and guardian spirits. The most important community rituals include:

- Plha
- Lha-soishi
- Jomu
- Kakung-Torkhan
- Jukla
- Lhamo Moitang

These ceremonies generally involve collective prayers, ritual offerings, sacred chants, symbolic purification, and communal feasts. They are often conducted before the agricultural season or during periods of epidemic, drought, or other natural disturbances.

9.2 Household Rituals

Household rituals address the spiritual needs of individual families. These ceremonies are conducted during illness, childbirth, marriage, construction of new houses, or when omens indicate the displeasure of household deities. The major family rituals include:

- Chongan
- Sondri
- Yong
- Kharam
- Moitang
- Ke-lha Soikhan
- Ke-lha Shakpa

Although these ceremonies are smaller in scale, they possess considerable significance because they reinforce kinship relations while preserving indigenous religious traditions within the domestic sphere.

10. Nature of Ritual Offerings

Offerings constitute one of the most distinctive aspects of Bon ritual practice. The Monpas believe that supernatural beings possess specific preferences regarding the nature of ritual gifts. Consequently, different deities receive different forms of offerings depending upon their attributes and the purpose of the ceremony. The different ritual offerings include:

Offering	Description	Symbolic Significance
Yetak	Dry fish and meat	Nourishment for guardian spirits
Khaji	Mixed food preparations	Community prosperity and abundance
Yuthong	Traditional fermented liquor	Ritual hospitality and communion

Tsok	Collection of edible offerings	Ritual hospitality and communion
Bruina	Mixed grains	Agricultural fertility and prosperity
Phan-naka	Coloured ceremonial cloth	Appeasement of protective deities
Phan-shing	Prayer flags attached to bamboo or shrubs	Blessings, protection, and purification
Torma	Ritual figures made from dough	Symbolic substitution for sacrificial victims
Tse-thar/Lhayak	Release of live animals	Compassion, merit-making, and liberation
Sur	Burning fragrant leaves and incense	Purification and communication with deities

The symbolic meaning of these offerings extends beyond religious devotion. They express reciprocity between humans and nature and reflect the indigenous ethical principle that harmony with supernatural powers requires generosity, respect and ritual observance.

11. Transformation of Sacrificial Practices under Buddhism

Historical evidence indicates that early Bon rituals frequently involved the sacrifice of animals to appease powerful deities and malevolent spirits. Livestock such as yaks, sheep, goats, pigs and fowls were offered during ceremonies intended to cure illness, avert disasters, or secure agricultural prosperity. However, the gradual spread of Mahayana Buddhism among the Monpas introduced a significant transformation in these practices. Influenced by the Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and compassion toward all sentient beings, animal sacrifice was progressively abandoned.

Instead, symbolic substitutes came to replace actual sacrificial victims. Ritual specialists began preparing *Torma*, elaborately shaped figures made from barley flour, butter and dough representing humans, animals, and various supernatural beings. These symbolic offerings retained the ritual significance of sacrifice while conforming to Buddhist ethical principles.

Another important innovation is the practice of *Tse-thar*, whereby live animals are ceremonially dedicated to religious merit and released rather than killed. This practice illustrates how Buddhist notions of compassion became integrated into indigenous Bon rituals without eliminating their original symbolic framework.

The transition from literal sacrifice to symbolic substitution represents one of the clearest examples of religious adaptation among the Monpas. Rather than abandoning their ancestral traditions, the community reinterpreted them within a Buddhist moral framework, thereby preserving ritual continuity while embracing new ethical ideals.

The evolution of *Bon* ritual practices among the Monpas demonstrates that religious change is rarely a process of replacement. Instead, it often involves negotiation, reinterpretation, and synthesis. The persistence of Bon priesthood, sacred landscapes, ritual offerings, and indigenous cosmology within a predominantly Buddhist society illustrates the resilience of local religious traditions and their capacity to coexist with institutional religions.

From the perspective of the anthropology of religion, this process exemplifies religious syncretism, whereby elements from different religious systems are selectively combined to create a new, locally meaningful tradition. Among the Monpas, Buddhism did not erase Bon; rather, it transformed Bon into an integral component of their lived religious experience.

12. Interaction between Bon and Buddhism: Religious Syncretism among the Monpas

The encounter between *Bon* and *Buddhism* constitutes one of the most significant developments in the religious history of the eastern Himalayas. Unlike many instances of religious expansion where one faith entirely supplants another, the introduction of Buddhism among the Monpas produced a gradual process of accommodation and synthesis. Rather than abandoning their indigenous beliefs, the Monpas integrated Bon cosmology, ritual practices, and local deities into the Buddhist worldview. The result is a distinctive form of religious syncretism that continues to shape Monpa identity.

Historical accounts suggest that Buddhism spread into the Mon region through sustained cultural and political interactions with Tibet, particularly following the establishment of the Tawang Monastery in the seventeenth century. The monastery became the principal centre of religious learning and Buddhist administration. Nevertheless, Buddhist monks recognized the enduring influence of indigenous beliefs among the local population and, instead of rejecting them outright, adopted a conciliatory approach. Local guardian deities (*Sungma*), sacred landscapes and ritual observances were incorporated into Buddhist practice and reinterpreted as protectors of the Buddhist faith.

One of the clearest manifestations of this synthesis is the coexistence of Buddhist monks (Lamas) and *Bon* ritual specialists. While monks perform canonical Buddhist ceremonies associated with life-cycle rituals, merit-making, and monastic festivals, *Bonpu* and *Yumin* continue to conduct rituals concerning healing, spirit appeasement, agricultural prosperity, and protection from natural calamities. In many villages, families consult both Buddhist monks and indigenous priests depending upon the perceived nature of the problem. Such parallel religious authority reflects not conflict but complementarity.

The persistence of sacred groves, mountain worship, household deities, and spirit propitiation demonstrates that Buddhist doctrine has not displaced indigenous cosmology. Instead, these practices have been reinterpreted within a Buddhist ethical framework. Ritual animal sacrifice, for instance, has largely been replaced by symbolic offerings such as *Torma* and the practice of *Tse-thar*, thereby preserving ritual continuity while aligning with Buddhist ideals of compassion and non-violence.

From a sociological perspective, this process may be understood through the concept of religious syncretism, which refers to the blending of elements from different religious traditions into a coherent cultural system. Among the Monpas, syncretism has enabled the preservation of indigenous cultural identity while simultaneously facilitating integration into the wider Tibetan Buddhist civilization. Consequently, Bon should not be viewed merely as a historical relic but as a living component of contemporary Monpa religious life.

13. Discussion and Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Bon religion among the Monpas represents far more than an assemblage of primitive beliefs or magical practices. Rather, it constitutes a comprehensive indigenous worldview encompassing cosmology, environmental ethics, social organization, ritual practice, and moral values.

One of the most significant characteristics of Bon religion is its ecological orientation. Mountains, rivers, forests, lakes, rocks and sacred groves are not regarded as inert physical objects but as living entities inhabited by powerful spiritual forces. Such beliefs function as effective indigenous mechanisms for environmental conservation. Sacred forests are protected from indiscriminate exploitation, water sources are treated with reverence, and community members observe strict behavioural norms while entering spiritually significant landscapes. Contemporary environmental scholarship increasingly

recognizes that such indigenous cosmologies contribute substantially to biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management.

The institution of *Bon* priesthood similarly reflects the intimate relationship between religion and community welfare. *Bonpu* and *Yumin* perform multiple functions extending beyond religious ritual. They serve as healers, counselors, custodians of oral tradition, interpreters of customary law, and repositories of indigenous knowledge. Their continued relevance illustrates the resilience of traditional institutions despite increasing modernization and expanding state administration.

The persistence of *Bon* beliefs also challenges earlier evolutionary theories of religion that regarded indigenous faiths as inferior stages destined to disappear with the spread of organized religions. Instead, the Monpa experience demonstrates that religious change is a dynamic and negotiated process. Indigenous traditions exhibit considerable adaptability and often survive by incorporating new religious ideas without losing their essential identity.

Furthermore, the coexistence of *Bon* and *Buddhism* among the Monpas illustrates that religious pluralism need not produce conflict. Instead, the two traditions have developed a complementary relationship in which Buddhist philosophy provides ethical and doctrinal guidance, while *Bon* rituals continue to address practical concerns relating to health, agriculture, protection, and communal well-being. This harmonious interaction offers valuable insights into the processes of cultural continuity and religious accommodation in multicultural societies.

However, the study also indicates that *Bon* traditions are facing increasing challenges. Modern education, urbanization, migration and the declining number of traditional ritual specialists have contributed to the gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge systems. Younger generations often possess limited familiarity with traditional rituals, oral narratives and ceremonial practices. Unless systematic efforts are undertaken to document and preserve these traditions, an invaluable component of the cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh may be irretrievably lost.

14. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that *Bon* religion constitutes the indigenous spiritual foundation of Monpa society and continues to influence contemporary religious life despite centuries of Buddhist dominance. The religious worldview of the Monpas reflects a profound relationship between human beings, nature, and the supernatural realm, in which sacred landscapes, guardian deities, ancestral spirits, and ritual specialists collectively sustain social and ecological harmony.

The spread of Tibetan Buddhism did not eradicate *Bon* traditions; instead, it initiated a gradual process of cultural adaptation and religious synthesis. Indigenous deities were incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon, ritual practices were modified to conform to Buddhist ethical principles, and symbolic substitutes replaced animal sacrifice. This process produced a distinctive syncretic religious tradition that remains central to Monpa identity.

The study also highlights the importance of *Bon* as a repository of indigenous ecological knowledge, oral history, customary law, and intangible cultural heritage. In an era characterized by rapid socio-economic transformation, the documentation and preservation of *Bon* traditions assume considerable academic and cultural significance. Future research should undertake comparative studies across different Monpa communities and neighbouring Himalayan societies to explore regional variations in *Bon* practices and their contemporary transformations.

In conclusion, Bon religion should not be regarded merely as a remnant of the past but as a living tradition that continues to shape the religious consciousness, cultural identity, and environmental ethics of the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh. Its study contributes significantly to the broader understanding of indigenous religions, Himalayan civilisation, and the dynamic processes of religious continuity and change.

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