

# **Tawang Monastery as a site of Memory: the role of Tawang Monastery in Preserving Cultural Methods and Practices**

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**Tenzin Yeegha**

**Registration No.TZ189828 of 2018**



**Department of Cultural Studies**  
**School of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Tezpur University,**  
**Napaam, Tezpur**

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## **Chapter-6**

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### **Conclusion**

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Religion has been an important component of all societies, since time immemorial, be it the primitive societies in the form of totemism or the advanced capitalist societies in the form of highly organized belief system. It is this religion, which acts as a force in creating solidarity among the members of the society, and provide for a meaningful path towards achieving the common goal of the society concerned. Emile Durkheim, an eminent sociologist had gone to the extent of saying that religion is nothing but the reflection of the society itself and it is the society which we worship in the name of religion. Yet it must be admitted that this Durkheimian interpretation is a case of extreme social realism. On the whole there is an agreed consensus that religion is an irreplaceable part of all societies.

The organization of monastic communities deserves particular attention within a study of the Monpa religious life. Not only are the monasteries highly respected and extraordinarily fruitful centers in which Buddhism received its impetus and from which it spread itself; the entire political and cultural history of the Mon region was and is still dominated by the Tawang Monastery. The conditions and demands of everyday life, as well as the continual growth in the power of the monasteries as they become more and more involved in secular activity had strict monastic observance.

Memories are never formless” (Wagner-Pacifici ,1996), nor are they once-for all fixed fragments of information stored in people’s brain and available for retrieval at any time. Rather, they are the result of complex revision and (re) construction that take place each time we call something (Bal et al.1999; Rose 1992) and rely on various media that provide “frameworks for shaping both experience and memory” (Erl and Rigney,2009). In oral and later, writing cultures, memories were created, maintained, and passed on to new generations through “texts, icons, dances, rituals and performances of various kinds” (Assmann 2008; Halbwachs,1992).

Written and oral memory system utilize both word and image to convey and remember the past. Equally important as cultural memory system are the more material monuments of past cultures as well as the plastic and other representative arts such as paintings.

Buildings and monuments, sculpture and painting are tangible and visible means of maintaining cultural continuities across the centuries and also of engineering change. Artists and artisans, like historians and poets, create works that reflect and help shape the culture of their times. And like the written and oral transmitted work, works in stone or paint-pottery and pictures, buildings and statues are records of culture. (Candice Goucher, Charles Le Guin, and Linda Walton, 1998)

The Tawang Monastery is the center of ethno-religious and sociopolitical edifice of the kingdom of '*Mon*' that was incorporated into Tibet during the late seventeenth century by the Lhasa Tibetan Government is today an integral part of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern Himalayas. The available Tibetan sources referred it as the seat of ethno-political authority of the '*Mon*' a distinct ethnic group inhabiting that region known as '*Monyul*'. The historical cross-cultural interface that Mon and Tawang Monastery cropped up with Tibet was spiritual interaction.

Buddhism has an overreaching influence on almost all aspects of the Monpa society. This is reflected in the Monpa way of life. The various economic activities such as mural paintings, mask making, wood carving, local paper manufacturing, incense stick production, prayer flags, idol sculpture, pottery, carpentry, carpet making and so on, is a direct by product of the demands of the religion. The social events like Torgya, Lossar, Choekar, pilgrims, Sangdui etc. serve among the dual purposes of cementing of solidarity among the members and fulfilling the spiritual needs of the society. To understand the socio-economic functions, one must focus on the institution of Tawang Monastery around which revolves the day-to-day routine of the Monpas.

Large scale festal occasions are not only an affair of the monks. The functions of these ceremonies (exorcism of the evil forces, invoking a better era, calling up of the good fortune for the year) grant them an all- embracing range. The performance of these festivals, with its common hopes and struggles, not only for the welfare of an individual but for the good of the community as a whole, integrates the monkhood and the lay world into a social totality. It is not surprising to see that these occasions have become a community festival of the whole of the Monpa Community. Even if the common man is not called upon to participate directly in these rituals, but are merely present as spectators, their presence underlines the participation of all the central impulse of the monastic community. The common man bears an active joint responsibility for the efficiency of

the rituals; he makes his contribution to the process of accumulation of good and wholesome powers, among other things by taking part in the ritual circumambulation of the sacred building, which also includes the monastic press. Through such religious acts he pays homage to the gods and goddess of the monastery and collects merit not only for his personal salvation but also for the collectively whose future welfares the communal rituals ensure.

Local memory translates into cultural practices and gives a vibrating stance to culture. Here, it is important to make a distinction between the laity's celebration of the festivals and the monks who are in charge of the cultic rituals. The laity are the free-moving viewers, while the monks are the actors. It should not be forgotten that these religious rituals always benefit the laypeople since they create merit that is distributed to everyone, at least in theory. All benefit from a good action through the transfer of its results. As a result, the believers are urged to donate money or provide other services to help the sacred rite run well because doing so is morally right. Tawang Monastery has always been a site of religious importance in terms of the beliefs and practices of those who live in and around the Monastery. The cultural practices and belief that has been carried out from generations to generations has always laid the importance of Tawang Monastery not only as a mere piece of building but as an important part of their cultural Identity.

History is but one of the memory systems by which community is defined and cultural knowledge transmitted. These memory systems share with history the processes of shaping, defining, and perpetuating community cultural memory. Transmitters of community cultural knowledge, such as teachers and preachers, historians and dramatists, entrepreneurs and artists, help define the identity of the community whose cultural memory they shape. Historians, artists, scientists, religious leaders, and philosophers all share responsibility for the cultural memory systems of their communities, creating, propagating, and perpetuating communal culture over time and across spatial boundaries (Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, 1998).

The organization of monastic communities deserves particular attention within a study of the Monpa religious life. Not only are the monasteries highly respected and extraordinarily fruitful centers in which Buddhism received its impetus and from which it spread itself; the entire political and cultural history of the Mon region was and is still dominated by the Tawang Monastery. The conditions and demands of everyday life, as

well as the continual growth in the power of the monasteries as they become more and more involved in secular activity had strict monastic observance. The entire monastic life is ruled by the regularly repeating cycle of liturgical assemblies, spiritual recitation, rituals, and some mundane works.

At the time of the construction of the Tawang Monastery, each village voluntarily constructed part of the monastery and the outer walls. Even today, the respective villages are responsible for maintenance of their part of the monastery and the outer walls. As per the traditional system each family has to contribute food grains to the Tawang Monastery twice in every year, once in the summer and then in winter. Besides this the villagers also supply firewood to the monastery in rotation. Nowadays some of them pay in cash in lieu of the firewood.

The monastic institutions suggest a strong organic linkage between the Monpa society and the Monastery. The Monpa society provides for the logistics and provisions for the survival of the monks of the monastery for effectively relinquishing their religious duties, and the monastery in return provides for their much-needed spiritual refuge to the common Monpas. Thus, a sort of symbiotic existence can be visualized in the Monpa society- monastery interface. Above all the calendar of the Monpas is fixed according to the activities of the Tawang Monastery which in turn takes into account the agricultural cycle of the land.

Here, it is important to make a distinction between the laity's celebration of the festivals and the monks who are in charge of the cultic rituals. The laity are the free-moving viewers, while the monks are the actors. It should not be forgotten that these religious rituals always benefit the laypeople since they create merit that is distributed to everyone, at least in theory. All benefit from a good action through the transfer of its results. As a result, the believers are urged to donate money or provide other services to help the sacred rite run well because doing so is morally right.

Numerous festivals are created as a result of the traditional local celebrations being adapted to the Lamaism culture. Buddhism in Tawang has instead left its mark on the traditional rites and festivals, which have been permitted to continue and retain key elements of their original forms, rather than outlawing celebrations in honor of the local deities (*Sungmas*). Festivals "are the outward manifestations of social behavior" (Dutta, 1999). Large-scale

religious celebrations are not just for monks. These rituals serve to drive away evil spirits, invoke a better age, and summon good fortune for the coming year, which will give them broad scope. The celebration of this festival, with its shared aspirations and struggles, unites the monastic and lay worlds into a larger social whole, promoting not only the welfare of the individual but also that of the community. Therefore, it is not surprising that this event has evolved into a national holiday for the entire Tawang Pa. Even if the laypeople are just invited to observe the cult rather than actively participate in it, their presence nonetheless emphasizes that everyone is involved.

“Festivals are the external expressions of the social behavior” (Datta, 1994). Large scale festival occasions are not only an affair of the monks. The functions of these ceremonies are, exorcism of the evil influences, invoking a better era, calling up good fortune for the year which is to grant them an all-embracing range. The performance of this festival, with its common hopes and common struggle, not only for the welfare of the individual but for the good of the community integrates the monkhood and the lay world into a social totality. It is not surprising then that this occasion has become a national festival of the whole Tawang Pa’s. Even if the laymen are not called upon to participate directly in the cult, but are merely present as spectators, their presence underlines the participation of all in the central impulse of the monastic community.

The success of the monastic form of Buddhism in the Himalayan belts has been attributed by many scholars on the ecology of the region. They are of the view that the celibate system of monkhood is a response to the restraining factors of the ecology in the form of a limited carrying capacity of this ecosystem.

For an individual, as well as for nation, cultural memory is a complex and stratified entity connected not only to the history and the experience of either the individual or the nation, but also to the way in which that very history and experience are read in time, individually and collectively. Each time, the past acquires new meanings and the same fact, even though it stays the same, is nevertheless shaped through remembrance; inevitably, it is juxtaposed against new backgrounds, new biographies, and new collections. Hence, following the theoretical debate which has characterized the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and which has determined ontological categories and disciplinary statutes, it is possible to argue that it is no longer possible to offer a final and absolute vision of the past. The breaking of all canons, the juxtaposition of macro and micro history, the

questioning of the ideas of objectivity and subjectivity in the historic rendering, as well as in literature, have taught us all to be prudent observers and to use the plural instead of the singular: no longer a unique “memory”, but many “memories”, many traces left by the same event which in time sediment in the individual consciousness, as well as the collective consciousness, and that are often- consciously or unconsciously- hidden or removed; traces that nevertheless stay and that suddenly or predictably re-emerge each time the historical, political, or cultural context changes. It has become evident through memory studies that no unitary definition of memory exists and that memory is dynamic. It is memory as a process (over the course of time) which is reshaped according to the present- hence its pivotal role in interdisciplinary studies of both the notion of historical context and that of the context of the dialectics of temporality (Rigney, 2010).

Sites of memory are places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express “a collective shared knowledge [...] of the past, on which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based” (Assmann,1995). According to the definition laid down by Assmann Tawang Monastery is a site where from many generations’ ritual, rites and festivals are celebrated and the importance of which had been laid down into many generations right from the time of the construction of the monastery till date through the help of individual memory and shared experiences.

Large buildings of permanent materials such as stone are among the oldest examples of memory. By constructing buildings that reflect the needs and ideals of their times, architects and artisans embedded the memory of times in their work. For example, no record preserves the culture of ancient Egypt more clearly than the pyramid, a monumental stone that represented the sun, a power nearly as important as the Egyptians in the Nile itself. Tawang Monastery too has no proper written records about its establishment and the importance of it in history but Tawang Monastery as an architectural Monument depicts the importance of it not only to the people living in and around the Monastery but also to all the followers of Buddhism in the world. The building made up of stones which started with the aim of establishing Buddhism in the Monyul region is today an epitome of Buddhist Religious and Cultural Practices.

With the passage of time their relationship has grown stronger and people have begun to realize the importance of them in their daily life and existence. Common people have actively started participating in all the rites and rituals conducted in the monastery. Their



accessibility to the monastery has become easier and stronger. Right from admitting a new monk, conduct of any programme the Tawang Monastery and the villagers are inter dependent upon each other. As Lord Buddha has quoted “No Monks No Buddhism”. In new times, “No followers no Monks and hence no Religion”. All three are inter related to each other supporting their existence.

With the advent of modernization, the existence of Lamaism has become a danger in the Monpa society. The monastery at present has more than 530 lamas residing in the monastery which has increased due to the introduction of modern education in the monastery school. But the numbers of new enrollment of lama in the monastery has seen a rapid decline in last few years. Many developmental activities have been introduced like the introduction of Common Kitchen, Corpus Fund for the monastery, introducing modern education in the Tawang Monastery school. Yet, it must be admitted here that the process of modernization is bringing about changes both desirable and undesirable. A society in transition has put the common man into a situation where he has to fulfil the demands of an age-old tradition and at the same time respond to the changing socio-economic conditions as a result of modernization. Thus, in light it is a matter of conjecture how Monpa will face the changed situation and resolve the problems.