

# Lhashukgen in Monpa Community of Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

This topic is about “Lhashukgen,” who is also known as “*sku rten pa*”, basically a native Oracle of Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh. It explores the whole concept of a local Oracle in Monpa Community, his works, his nature, his importance in monpa community etc. This topic also attempts to understand the genealogy and origin of institution of *sku ten pa*. It also explores the full process and step through which one becomes an Oracle being chosen by the deity and how it becomes hereditary in nature. It also tells that why being chosen by deity one cannot refuse to become an Oracle. Given the limited availability of written records, my research on this topic was largely based on oral sources and accounts. Although there are some books available on Oracle, they are primarily based on the Oracle of either Tibet or of other areas.

**Keywords:** Trance, Monpa, *Sku ten pa* (Oracle), *Srung ma* (Deity), *Ku* (Picture of Deities or Gods).**Copyright © 2025 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh is the 24<sup>th</sup> state of India formed on 20 February 1987, located in the most Eastern side of India sharing international borders with Bhutan in the West, Tibet in the North, and Myanmar in the East [1]. It shares border with Indian state of Assam in the South. Arunachal Pradesh is known to be diverse in nature with different languages, dresses, cuisines, culture etc. around 26 major and more than 100 sub-tribes resides in the state. Being culturally important, Mithun (*Bos Frontilis*) is the state Animal and Hornbill is the State Bird. State has two Three Tiger Reserves, two being the National Park of States with several Orchid centers. NorthEast's most famous Tipi Orchid Centre is also located in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Tawang is one of the 28 districts of Arunachal Pradesh formed on 6 October 1984, carved out of West Kameng district [2]. Tawang is located in the most western side of Arunachal also located in highest altitude among the all districts in State. Tawang is best known for Gaden Namgyel Lhatse, the largest and one of the oldest Monastery in India, which was constructed by Merak Lama Lodro Gyatso during the time of His Holiness The 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. In spring, the whole mountains turn colorful due to variety of flowers, particularly the Rhododendrons. In winters the mountains and even the valleys turn white due to

snowfall. The word Tawang derived from two Tibetan words “*Ta*” (Horse) and “*Wang*” (occupy) meaning the place occupied by Horse. The place where Tawang Monastery was constructed was believed to be chosen by the Horse of Merak Lama.

The Monpas are the tribal people living in western sides of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly in two districts of Tawang and West kameng. According to the Tibetan sources the term “Monpa” is originate from the word “Mon”, which is largely connected to an area, which includes the whole of Sikkim state, Bhutan, and Mon Region, i.e. the Tawang and West Kameng districts in western most part of Arunachal Pradesh [3]. Monpa people are follower of Buddhism since 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, and it is said that Guru Padmasambhava, a Buddhist Tantric master from the *Udayana*, the first to sow the seed of Buddhism here [4]. Monpa people are known for their art of traditional paper making, which is also in the list of G I (Geographical Indication) tags. Monpas are also well versed with art of curving of verities of articles from woods such as, traditional masks, wooden plates, wooden bowl and cup etc.” Monpa people are believed to be migrated from Tibet during 300BC to present place Tawang and its surrounding areas’. Tawang was also ruled by a local king once during 7<sup>th</sup> century called king Kala wangpo.

Institution of a Priest, a ritual expert, learned in a special knowledge of the technique of worship and

accepted as a religious and spiritual leader. Throughout the long and varied history of religion, the priesthood has been the official institution has mediated and maintain a state of equilibrium between the sacred and profane aspects of human society. It is a superstitious belief that priest can see spirits and feel evil spirits unlike normal human beings. The priests acquire this supernatural ability through their painstaking meditation in seclusion for many years and by learning and chanting 'Nga' tantric mantras.

### Types of Priests

Traditionally there are various priest in the monpa community who does have sort of supernatural powers;

1. *Mo* (a forecaster) *Lama*: Priests have the ability to foresee the future and tell about past. The priest with the aid of special book and the timing and other minute details of the missing article can locate the lost article. Sometimes Priests show the direction of the lost article by using a special type of dice generally made of animal bones
2. *Chipa Lama*: They are priests as others but with particular responsibility to look over the ways of carrying our last rituals for deaths. They even sometimes hold special prayer at household demanded through forecasting.
3. *Manipa Lama* (who defines the meaning of Mantras).
4. *Skutenpa* (Oracle): The priest who guide the public while in trances. They can be monks or laypersons as being chosen by the particular deity.

*Lhashugkhan/Skutenpa* is Oracle who guide the public while in trance. An Oracle is a medium, primarily interact with the worldly spirits and deities who are to be understood as symbol standing for particular nature and powerful operating in the world. The ceremonial garments worn by the oracle-priests when entering a prophetic trance belong certainly to the strangest and most colourful dresses used by the Tibetan clergy. They have to be worn over the usual ecclesiastical or layman-dress of the medium. The robes which the medium dons as well as the other paraphernalia it carries should make it appear similar to the traditional picture of the deity who is going to assume possession of its body. Form and colour of the garments and also the style of the corresponding headdress depend therefore on the nature of this deity [5]. All deities which enter an Oracle are the subjugated native deities referred to in Monpa as *Sprung ma* (Sanskrit Dharmapala) meaning dharma protector. In the Tibetan cosmological scheme, these subjugated beings are "Gods of the world" (*jigten pari lha*). They possess supernatural powers, they are capable of working miracle, but not without restriction, nor exclusively in the service of salvation. If they are offended in some or are discontented their violent

nature wins the upper hand. Many of these *Jigtenpa* gods are, however benevolent in disposition and ready to fight evil powers.

The medium are chosen by *Sprung ma* itself. Their physical body condition has to be something different and on the top of that, he had to go into specialised ritual training and meditation under the guidance of a *Rinpoche* (a reincarnated dharma expert). This practice is necessary to enable the deity to manifest himself clearly and prevent malicious spirits from entering the mediums body. Through frequent embodiment of the deity during this period of training, the relationship between the deity and the medium was solidified. The institution of oracle is instrumental in dealing with the problematic issue of various kinds. Oracle was consulted for every important religious doing. The oracle was also invoked regarding such matters as the safety of the people, health and harvest prospects. The possessing *Sungma*(deity) compels the medium to go into trance at least once a month, and he may also become entrance involuntarily at other time. However with appropriate meditation and ritual preparations, the *Skutenpa* (Oracle) is able to enter into trance upon requested by others, regarding matters of national urgency, which is among the principle of Oracle. Oracle does prophecies in different affairs.

When the *Kuten* was asked to perform officially, the *Skutenpa* or *Kuten* wears an elaborate colourful costume that weighs nearly seventy pounds and resembles the outfit worn by the deity in traditional art work. He also wears on his chest, a circular polished metal mirror that is adorned with tortoise. Prior to going into trance, the oracle can hardly move. Accompanied by assistants, who must physically support him because of the weight of his ritual costume, the *Kuten* arrives at the designated place. The *Kuten* is then seated on the throne. Some monks begin playing horns, cymbals, and drums, while other recite the invocation mantras. The *Kuten's* going into trance depends upon these invocation mantras by the monks.

*Kuten* Passang describes a feeling of "unimaginable intensity as he is in trance, characterizing the sensation as both distressful and exhausting. As he enters into trance, his facial expression, mannerism, and even his stature changes as per nature of the deity which he enters. His voice changes as well. Indicating that it is the divinity occupying the *Kuten* body that is speaking. The transformation is extremely forceful and initially the *Kuten* must be restrained by his assistants. The volcanic energy of the deity can barely contain who moves and gestures as if his body made of rubber and driven by a coiled spring of enormous power.

Once the *Kuten* is seated he begins to breathe more loudly and heavily and starts making hissing sounds which is taken as an indication that he is now in

deep trance. Then assistants put on the *Kuten* hat, which is estimated to weigh over thirty pounds, and is tightly secured with a heavy knot. It is believed that only a person possessed by a god, and therefore endowed with superman strength, can move with great ease as the oracle does while wearing the heavy output and without being choked to death by the hat. Then *Kuten* bow down near the high dignitaries and near the “*Ku*” (picture of deity) and he starts dancing.

Oracle was put some questions, then Oracle dances some more and then reply. Earlier, a monk standing by use to write down whatever Oracle utters for later clarification and interpretation. These days the digital recordings and video tapes are made for same purposes. Then the Oracle with dancing tosses grains of barley over the monks and other attendees in order to remove obstacles. Upon completion, exhausted, *Kuten* collapses, marking the end of the oracular session. The *Kuten* is clearly not the master of the deity that possesses him. On the contrary, he is mastered by the divinity that overtakes his body and consciousness. He is simply a flesh and blood conduit that overtakes his body and consciousness. He between the natural and supernatural worlds, a receptacle through which the gods relay directions and receive messages the deity needs a human support so that it can act and speak [6].

The history of origin of Oracle has its beginning long back to Tibet around 1200 years ago. It started from the monastery called Nechung. It was in 1544 for the first time Nechung deity, Dorje Draken enters man, since then Oracle became hereditary [5]. When one Oracle passes to another family member takes up the responsibility and certain family has to take the responsibility for several generations. An interview scheduled with the only Oracle in Monpa Community, Kuten Passang Tsering, on 27 May 2021. He narrates his journey of beginning as Oracle, when first time divinely enters him, he lost his consciousness and when he regain he did not remember anything. When the divinity enters an Oracle, he or she feels and see what is going on but eventually the feeling dissolve and fall into a sort of dreaming state, deity full captures his mind. After that he does not remember what happened to him and his mind and personality begin to dissolve. It is as you see dream in sleep and forgets in the morning [7].

*Kuten* Passang is the only Oracle in whole Monyul. Currently he resides in Dirang circle under West Kameng district. Oracle is hereditary in his family. He is the 9<sup>th</sup> Oracle from his family lineage. His ancestors were practicing Oracle since the time of HH the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. *Kuten* Passang belongs from *Terton pema Lingpa* Family and his family is assigned with the work. An Oracle does not choose by themselves to become an Oracle, it is the Deity chooses its medium body. *Kuten* Passang was also chosen by deity itself.

Once deity chooses somebody as an Oracle or medium, he or she cannot refuse. Kuten Passang narrates his story, even he refused initially to become an Oracle but he had gone through many difficulties like getting sick again and again, nose bleeding etc. These problems continued until he except as an Oracle [8].

Four *Sungma*(deities) enter *Kuten* Passang while going into trance as an Oracle. The key deity among them is Gachen Karma Thinley, whom people of Mon Tawang called “*Mem Gelong*” out of Love and respect. The second *Sungma* is “*Tamri Kessang*” and the Third one is “*Thokchen*” and the Fourth *Sungma* is the “*Kyu*”. The speciality of last deity is that, it catches different animals like, snakes, frogs and tortoise etc. he was even invited to our village multiple times to perform Oracle. An Oracle guides the public and tells what to do and what not. He even warns for bad coming.

Just like every society has a supernatural Priest and whose guidance are important in every event in their lives. In Monpa community, this guidance is done by an Oracle. The Oracle predicts in trance for the future of the people. Oracle himself is a spirit medium and not necessarily that Oracle should be a man only. A god will in most cases take possession of a man, while women will be visited by goddesses. The male mediums are by far in the majority. There are women Oracle too exists, like the present oracle Khandro La, the Oracle of Tsering Chenga, the goddess protector of Tibet. Monpa people believe that spirit Dharma protector posses with numerous mediums over the last 1200 years by practicing, healings and predicting the future and advising the public.

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