



BLENDING FAITH WITH NATURE: THE ART OF CARPET MAKING AND PAINTINGS OF THE MONPAS

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Abstract: From an early period in history, the Monpas have been living in the mountainous regions of Western highlands of Arunachal Pradesh, in the districts of Tawang and West Kameng. They dwell in the houses made of stone and wooden planks. Agriculture and animal husbandry being their main occupation they reared herds of yaks and flocks of sheep while maintaining the sanctity of the nature. Therefore, agriculture, craft practices, customs, socio-religious practices have a deep connection with the natural environment where they reside. They worshipped the forces of nature. However, from the eighth century onwards, with the coming of Buddhism in the region they began to associate themselves with Buddhist faiths and practices. Thus, the Monpas started to take deep interests in the art of carpet making and paintings associated with Buddhism that has gradually become part and parcel of their socio-cultural and religious life. This paper is an attempt to showcase the art forms and process and significance of carpets and Buddhist paintings amongst the Monpas.

Keywords: Nature, Buddhism, Monpas, carpets and paintings.

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Introduction

The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh are known for their rich cultural heritage. From weaving, pottery making, paper making to leather works, the Monpas are rich in skill and craftsmanship. The Monpas are culturally very close to the Tibetans and Bhutanese. They follow the same religion- Mahayana Buddhism and the Monpas were once under the Tibetan rule. The Tawang Monastery,

the second biggest and oldest monastery in Asia is revered by the Monpas. As followers of Buddhism, the Buddhists symbolism in art is widely followed in the paintings, temple walls, ceilings and also adorns other sacred places of the Monpas. Even the dance forms displays Buddhists characteristics showcasing the affinity between faith and nature. Nature forms an integral part of Buddhist religious culture. Animals, birds, flowers, creepers, trees are widely used motifs as Buddhist art.

This paper tries to focus on how natural elements were imbibed in the art of the Monpa people. Although such elements could be seen in the dances, folk songs and even in the designs and motifs used by the tribe in their traditional attires; this paper mainly focuses on the art of carpet making, scroll painting and rock art of the Monpas which have basic religious significance. For the purpose, first hand information is gathered by field trips to the cottage industry situated in Tawang Township. Also visit to monasteries, houses of the local people in the villages as well as visit to the sacred places of the Monpas amidst the hills; have been undertaken to get a clear idea of the same. The paper has then been corroborated with other secondary sources to get a true picture of the same.

Art of Carpet Weaving

A beautiful form of art practised by the Monpa people is Carpet weaving. It is one such craft of the Monpas where one can see Buddhist elements blend with nature. From ages, Weaving in the Monpa society has been done exclusively by the womenfolk in the villages. The Monpa women engage themselves in weaving of garments, carpets and handlooms in which they show their exceptional weaving skills. The carpets known locally as *broom taan* are beautifully designed with sceneries, flowers, dragons etc., also sometimes depicting some legendary stories. It involves a long process from wool herding, washing, carding, spinning, dyeing, weaving to trimming. So the basic articles required for weaving the carpet are coloured woollen yarn, cotton and a wooden loom¹. Iron rod, hammer, scissor and hand carder are other essential devices and equipments.

It is said that the Monpas had adopted the art of carpet weaving from the Tibetans. Carpet weaving involves the age old technology practised by the tribe. Sheep wool is considered as the basic raw-material for weaving of carpets. Once the wool cutting process is over, the wool is taken to separate the unwanted grass and impurities attached to it to get the finest quality of wool. Then it is washed and dried. After that carding process begins where the wool

is comb by placing it between two hand cards that comes with a handle and stainless brush. The purpose of hand carding is to detangle, clean and to give a roll like shape for its uniformity. Then it is taken for spinning where the wool is drawn and twisted to make yarn. And then finally, it is coloured by applying natural dyes or synthetic dyes.

The art of carpet making is very time consuming. Traditionally done on loom; the weaver first sketch the design on a sheet of paper and then try to implement the motif in the loom with different colours of wool. Generally the wrap weighted loom is used for carpet making. The heddle bar is placed across the wrap and tied to individual wrap threads. The wrap threads pass alternately through a space between the heddles. When the shaft is raised, half the threads raise up and when the shaft is lowered, the same threads which initially passed through the shaft gets lowered. This leads to the making of the patterns as well as weaving the carpet at the same time. Then the knots are tied and later cut with scissors thus giving it a smooth furry look. After the completion of weaving process, the carpets are stretched from all its four corners with the help of a metal frames and hooks to retain its perfect shape. And in the final process the carpet is trimmed once again if there is any uneven yarn².

The carpets that are woven with a variety of colours can be divided into different categories based on its uses: -

First category of widely used carpet is called *Khatan*. It is generally used as seat cover for *bootan* (a kind of small size cushioned mat which can be folded). It was mostly used in the prayer rooms of houses where *khatan* were placed to show respect as well as to welcome revered monks who come for performing pujas. *Khatan* now mostly adorn the houses of the rich and the wealthy people. There are different types of *khatan* such as *Sange-Norbu*, *Khangoon-ma* and *Meesering*. *Sange-Norbu*, is beautifully designed with an imaginary snow lion. Legend has that two snow lions being impressed by meditation of a saint in the mountains offered their milk and from then onwards snow lion became an integral part of Buddhist religious depictions in art and dance forms. *Khangoon-ma* is another type of *khatan* which is specially woven with yellow colour with round designs meant for the seat of the monks as they do not sit on carpets with animal figurines.

Meesering is another type of carpet use as the back cover of the cushions meant for the monks. This carpet has beautiful scenic depiction of flowers, tress, mountain and other natural elements. Its background is woven with maroon or yellow colour.

Thrisutan is another name of a carpet which has a design of a flying bird. This design is called *cha-sung*. *Mupcha* is another design with an intricate weaving of figurines of two peacocks and a tiger, another one showcasing four dragons with their backs to each other while each facing towards the centre is called *Druk-Khaptak*.

Another carpet named as *maksu-maktan*, (war equipment) with two winged design to be used on saddle of horseback³. However, with modernity stepping in the Monpa society, many of the earlier practices are discontinued. So now only in some rare occurrence *maksu-maktan* is seen tied on the saddle of a horse in honour of a renowned *lama* or village headman.

Thangka Painting

Another work of art of the Monpas which also is depiction of their religious beliefs is the *thangka* painting. *Thangka*, is a scroll painting painted on a piece of cloth. The process of painting is long and time taking. It is a religious painting or scroll to depict Buddha's image or other deities related to Buddhist pantheon or Buddhist symbols. Along with Buddhists images of gods and symbols, the natural elements of trees, flowers and creepers are used as ornamental art. It is painted on a rectangular or square piece of canvas which is stitched to the borders of a wooden frame by means of a strong thread⁴. The frame is made by fitting four stripes of wood. The ends of the strips are fixed on rectangular



A *Thangka* painting of Lord Buddha

or square shaped frame called *gya gshing*. Different sizes of frames are needed for different sizes of scroll paintings⁵. A thin coat of glue prepared from animal skin, a small quantity of enamel paint and water is applied on the surface of the cloth and allowed to dry. Then artists paint beautiful images on it with deep and vibrant colours. After the painting process is completed the *thangka* painting is stitched with silk fabric borders to be hung inside the monastery or household prayer halls. Additionally on it a fine plane silk fabric is attached to use as curtain to the *thangka* painting. Then it is taken to a renowned monk for *ramnai puja* where the monk purifies and infuses life to the painting. It is pertinent to mention here that such paintings are not done by ordinary artists but only those who have undertaken rigorous trainings on Buddhist art and themes in the monasteries⁶. These paintings are mostly hung inside the halls of the monasteries as well as in the prayer rooms of local inhabitants.

Rock Paintings

Another beautiful form of art is rock art which is practised by the Monpas. Usually huge rocks in the hills or near the river side are beautifully painted with Buddha image or other Buddhist symbols. The rocks are curved into the shapes of Buddhists deities, symbols and steles where *mantaras* are curved.

Then it is painted with different colours. Such forms of painting depict the close relationship with nature that the pious Monpa people inherit. Such rock art are usually done for earning religious merit but at the same time it also symbolises the harmonic relation that man have with nature.



Rock curved painting of
Guru Padmasambhava

Conclusion

Usually the Monpas were pagan worshippers of the *Bon* faith. But with the coming of Buddhism in the eighth century from Tibet, *Bon* religion was relegated to the background. However, the inherent pagan themes associated with nature still continues to have its mark on the art and paintings of the Monpas and have now become totally blended with Buddhism.

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