

The 'spirit-mediums' (*lha pa*) of Rebkong in Dhomay

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The paper is primarily based on my personal interest and research into the history, beliefs and ritual practices of all the practicing 'Spirit-Mediums' of Rebkong area in light of the changes taking place in their socio-cultural, economic and political context. For over ten years I have had first hand acquaintance of this unique phenomena in my local village of Changkya in Rebkong County. My subsequent research covers the 'Spirit-Mediums' of Rebkong, an area that is widely considered the cradle of 'Spirit-Mediums' in Amdo region.

The presentation focuses on the following main areas of investigation:

Myth and facts surrounding the origin of 'Spirit-Mediums' in Tibet; a brief account of how a predominantly 'Bon' religious practice and rites evolved into a Buddhist religious practice and rite.

First of all, the predominantly conservative society holding on to ancient beliefs and the relative lack of external influence, control and check on 'Tibetan psyche' and beliefs is seen as fertile ground for the prevalence of 'Spirit-Mediums' prior to the Cultural Revolution and; the evolving religious and social status of the 'Spirit-Mediums', public perception and attitude towards 'Spirit-Mediums', and their impact on Tibetan social and individual psyche and world-view under social conditions of near poverty.

Secondly, the paper considers how people lost faith and regard for the 'Spirit-Mediums' during the Cultural Revolution when all 'olds' were targeted for destruction and stringent restrictions imposed on Tibetan people's religious faith and practice; how the 'Spirit-Mediums' lost their socio-religious status and role in arbitrating social affairs; how they were forced to lead a life of mendicants; how some devout and fervent believers among the people continued to revere and consult and support them, and what were the consequences of the forcible displacement of the role and function of the 'Spirit-Mediums' on the wider Tibetan society.

Thirdly, the paper considers the position, role, functions and real influence of the 'Spirit-Mediums' in Rebkong commensurate with the changes taking place locally and globally in terms of ideas, attitudes, material and spiritual progress during the last twenty years or so since the end of the Cultural Revolution when a modicum of religious freedom was restored to the present times when there is absolute religious freedom.

The paper also discusses how 'Spirit-Mediums' are discovered and initiated, how they operate to mediate with the other worldly beings, their special costumes, chants and 'mudras' during the ritual of 'possession and trance'; how they discriminate between

possession by the desired 'deity' or 'spirit' and how they thwart attempted possession by unscrupulous and evil spirits'. In particular, mention is made of the adaptations to certain rites that 'Spirit-Mediums' had to make following conflicts and contradictions of their traditional beliefs with 'modern' rational beliefs and concepts.

Finally, the paper takes up the issue of the future role and status of the 'Spirit-Mediums' and posits that given the reality of the mass illiteracy and contemporary social and cultural situation of the Tibetan people, the phenomena of 'Spirit-Medium' practice and ritual should be reviewed dispassionately on the basis of their relative benefit and harm and accord them a status that is due to an ancient and integral part of Tibetan religious tradition and practice rather than condemning them outright or using them as convenient scapegoats for advancing one's own petty beliefs or ulterior motives.