



Revisiting Priesthood System of Limbu Community: Structure, Practices and Relevance of Pegi Fangsam/ Murabang

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Abstract: Limbus are one of the major tribes residing in the hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, Sikkim, Eastern Nepal and other parts of Northeastern states of India. They worship ancestors, nature and various deities. They call their religion ‘Yumaism’ or ‘Yuma Samyo’ and their religious philosophy ‘Mundhum’. Based on Mundhum they have numerous customs, tradition and customary laws, rites and rituals. They have their self-established priesthood system comprising of different categories of priests, collectively known as Pegi Fangsam or Murabang in Limbu language. The Murabangha are an indispensable part of Limbu community. Limbus believe that without Murabangha, the existence of *Mundhum* is unimaginable and all their rites and rituals will remain unattainable. In the absence of the concept of temple, idols worshiping and religious texts in the Limbu community, the relevance of Murabangha are utmost. They are believed to possess a comprehensive knowledge of Mundhum and have immeasurable responsibility of protecting, preserving and passing on the Mundhum. With this background, this paper attempts to revisit the relevance of priesthood system, their structure and role in Limbu community. This study is supplemented by both primary and secondary data. For primary information, interviews of Limbu shamans and Mundhum experts were conducted. Existing literature including books and articles on Limbu culture and traditions were referred to as secondary source of information.

Keywords: *Limbu, Mundhum, Priesthood system, Pegi Fangsam, Murabang.*

The Limbu *Mundhum* revolves around the discourse of supreme Goddess *Tagera Nigwafung*. The Limbus believe that their omnipresent Goddess is the creator of all the elements on earth including human beings. According to Mundhum, the first human on earth was *Mujigna Kheyongna*. She miraculously gets impregnated by the wind deity and gives birth to a son named *Susuweng Lalaweng*, which translates as “son of the wind”. Mundhum further claims that *Susuweng*

Lalaweng's son *Sutchhuru Suhamphewa*, from his first wife, and daughter *Tetlara Lahadongna*, from his second wife, entered in an incestuous marriage (Subba 2021: 31). The *Tumyahan*ⁱ considered such marriages involving stepbrother and stepsister as against nature and against their way of life. They punished them and urged them to promise that they will never meet again and that such acts will not be repeated. *Tumyahan* pronounced that if they meet or reiterate such acts or if anyone indulges in such incestuous relations in future, the entire lineage will have to bear its disastrous consequences. The brother will arrive as a raging thunderstorm and the sister will arise as a devastating earthquake. As such, the present-day Limbu community considers incest or marrying in the same blood line as unnatural and they also believe that if they indulge in such relation, it will bring them bad omen.

Further, Mundhum states that when *Sutchhuru Suhangpheba* and *Tetlara Lahadongna* were separated, they already had seventeen children. The *Tumyahan* decided to filter them through a sieve. Among them, the custody of nine children who remained above the sieve was given to their father. They were called *Pegi Fangsam* or *Murabang*, which means, one who possess divine knowledge and power. While the custody of other eight children who passed through the sieve were given to the mother. They were called *Sawa Yethang*, who came to be normal human beings on earth and their progenies in course of time were called the Yakthung people or Limbus. (Mabuahang and Lawati B.S 2078: 195). Limbus believe that the concept of priesthood system in the Limbu community came from those *Pegi Fangsam* or *Murabang*, who possessed divine power and knowledge. Even today, a Limbu priest who possess divine knowledge and power and is believed to be the chosen one, is referred to as a *Pegi Fangsam* or *Murabang*.

According to some Mundhum experts, the same event was also the initial point of existence of teacher-pupil system among *Murabangha*ⁱⁱ. They say that out of seventeen children, the custody of eight was given to their father and the custody of other eight was given to their mother. There was a daughter named *Niyara Lingpang Hangma*, who got stuck in the sieve. Limbus believe that the upper part of her body, which remained above the sieve, was blessed by *Tagera Ningwafung* to become a deity called *Sameydhangma Yepmedhanga* (Subba 2023: 70). She received a blessing to be a guru/teacher of *Murabangha* and was worshiped by them. While her lower body which remained below the sieve became *Sogaha*, a spirit from unnatural death. According to Mundhum experts, the spirit *Sogaha* remained on earth and gave distress to the humans (Subba, K. 2025).

Thus, Limbu Mundhum is also a testament to the concept of teacher-pupil system among the Murabangha and to the notion of unnatural death as well. Until today, Murabangha offer prayers to Sameydhanga Yepmedhanga to get vibration in their bodies before performing any ritual. Besides, the concept of Sogaha is still relevant as Limbus believe that the soul from the unnatural death becomes Sogaha and are conceived as bad spirit causing distress.

Mundhum further says that, with time, the progenies of first human started to multiply. They learnt to interact with nature and overcome obstacles. While living amidst nature, they faced numerous difficulties, some of which they overcame and some were beyond their abilities. Specifically, in matters of human sufferings like illness, death and other woes they could not find remedies. Hence, they remembered Tagera Ningwafung for a way out. On the instruction of *Tagera Ningwafung*, *Sodungen Lepmuhang*ⁱⁱⁱ sends a priest or shaman named *Sigera Yabhunding*, to find solutions for their human related sufferings. However, he failed to reach to the human world and for the second time, Tagera Ningwafung instructed *Set Cher Senehamgwa* to acquire the knowledge from *Sigera Yabhunding* and work to heal people's sufferings (Muringla, 2018: 04). Mundhum says Set Cher Senehamgwa was the first Murabang to arrive in the human world and Limbus believe that since then the tradition of Pegi Fangsam or Murabang (priesthood system) started among the Limbu community.

Limbu Mundhum and the Priesthood system

For Limbus, Mundhum is a source of knowledge, passed on from generation to generation in the form of oral narration. Mundhum is incanted orally, which resembles the form of poetic lyrics. They perceive Mundhum as a religious guidance, which gives meaning to their religion, *Yuma Samyo* or *Yumaism*. The significance of Mundhum is so enormous for the Limbus that Mundhum is their religion and their religion is Mundhum because they believe that without Mundhum the existence of Yumaism is irrelevant (Muringla 2018: 44). Mundhum is also considered as a repository of knowledge and wisdom as it provides a guidance for religious, social and legal practices. It is also a source of information about their origin, history, culture and tradition (Tamling 2025: 30). They believe that Mundhum consists of both *Maang-pan* (heavenly message) and their ancestors' stories, knowledge and experiences. The Limbu Mundhum are of various types and these are narrated by Limbu priests on different occasions. Mundhum is not stagnant knowledge, rather it has expanded with the passage of time. Limbus believe that the knowledge

gained by their ancestors or forefathers while leading their lives became *Mundhum* as well. Thus, Limbus are a tribe known for worshipping ancestors along with nature and various deities.

In the Limbu community, there exists a profound connection between *Mundhum* and the priesthood system. Karnahang Subba (2025), a *Mundhum* expert, says, “There is an eternal relationship between Murabang and *Mundhum*. *Mundhum* needs Murabangha for interpretation, preaching and protection. Similarly, the existence of Murabangha need the existence of *Mundhum*. They are incomplete without each other”. If *Mundhum* is analysed, it not only presents the source of origin of Murabang but also provides the authority to the priesthood system. *Mundhum* is evidence on the importance of the role of Murabangha among Limbu community and acts as their in performing various rites and rituals. Similarly, as the *Mundhum* are not in written form, the Murabangha have passed it from generations through oral narrations and protected it from extinction.

The Limbu community is culturally rich. Their various customs, traditions and festivals, along with their distinct religious values and beliefs are all centered around *Mundhum*. Reciting *Mundhum* while performing their rites and rituals are an integral part of Limbu tradition and the medium of language used is always Yakthung pan/Limbu language. To perform such rites and rituals, a person who possesses divine power, expertise of *Mundhum* and Limbu language, is a prerequisite. Unlike the prominent religions of the world, whose rites and rituals are performed by common priests, in Limbu community there exist a diverse category of priests, collectively known as Pegi Fangsam or Murabang (Subba 2023: 72). There is an integral belief among Limbus that a particular category of priests can only perform specific rites and rituals. Thus, Limbu community have a unique priesthood system with different roles and responsibilities.

The structure, role and relevance of Pegi Fangsam or Murabang

Unlike other recognised or institutionalized religions around the world, the structure of priesthood system is different in the Limbu community. For instance, in Hinduism, the priesthood system is majorly based on caste hierarchy, precisely only those belonging to the upper level of caste structure are meant to become a priest. In Christianity, a person with theological knowledge can become a priest. Whereas in Yumaism, priest or Murabang must be the chosen one (Khamdhak R.L 2024). One cannot be a Murabang by just acquiring the knowledge of *Mundhum* or by learning proficiency of performing various rites and rituals. It is a common belief among the community

that Tagera Ningwafung herself chooses these individuals when they are in their mother's womb or at any point in their lives. However, these chosen Murabangha require a guru or a teacher to transform fully into a Murabang. Thus, there is an institutionalisation of the structure of teacher-pupil relationship in the Limbu priesthood system.

There also exist a belief that there are high chances that such Murabangha may appear in those families who already had least one Murabang in their family lineage (Khamdhak 2015: 82). R L Khamdhak (2024), a Limbu Murabang from west Sikkim explains that Murabangs are chosen in three different ways. One can be chosen as a Murabang, firstly, on the day they are conceived in their mother's womb; secondly on the day of their naming ceremony and thirdly, in rare cases, a helper of a Murabang can also become a Murabang. While in the first and second case, a person is destined to become a Murabang as they are chosen by Tagera Ningwafung herself, in the third case, the departed soul of a Murabang chooses to rest in the body of his or her helper. In the Limbu tradition, there are numerous rites and ritual that are performed both inside and outside homes. While performing these rites and rituals, a Murabang needs a helper to prepare place, materials needed for prayers, and for repeating the verse of Mundhum chanted by the Murabang.

As Murabang differ in categories, their helpers are also known by different names. They are called *Yegapchi*, *Sanlang*, *Mangjum* and *Khausaba* in Limbu language (Muringla 2018; 74). In the context of these helpers transforming into Murabang, Khamdhak (2024) explains that once a member of a Limbu community dies, their death rites have to be performed according to Limbu tradition based on Mundhum. In case of a Murabang's death, if the family members fail to perform the death rites in a veracious manner, their soul will wander on earth. Ultimately, their soul rest on the bodies of those helpers. Khamdhak (2024) further says that their soul chooses to rest on the bodies of the helpers because while helping Murabangha, they gather knowledge of Mundhum and are familiar with rites and rituals. However, the belief associated with the transformation of helpers into Murabangha rests on the fact that even though the soul of dead Murabangha reside on their bodies, they need a living guru for a complete transformation into a Murabang.

According to Limbu belief, the Murabang derive their knowledge and divine power from various Limbu deities in their dreams. If a person is destined to become a Murabang they will indicate through different activities, the most common being body tremors. The ritual of transformation of a person into a Murabang is broadly known as *Thansing-Ma*. Once a person

starts showing such symptoms, they have to undergo a ritual called *Manglang Thakma*. It is believed that if he or she is actually destined to become a *Murabang* they will start incanting usually in Limbu language during this ritual (Subba, K. 2005). Once a person is certain to become a *Murabang*, a final ritual called *Phungsok Temma* (Guru Puja) is performed. The Guru referred to here is *Sameydhangma Yepmedhanga* (Muringla 2018: 34). Finally, after a person becomes a *Murabang*, he or she performs *Phungsok Temma* every year on the month of Kartik-Mangsir (October-November).

Limbus worship both animate and inanimate entities, which includes various deities, ancestors and nature. They call their deities *Sammang* or *Mang* and these deities are either *Him-Sammang*, *Taap-Sammang* or *Nubun-Sammang* (Subba, K. 2025). ‘*Him-Mang*’ roughly translates as ‘Home-Deity’ and these deities are worshipped inside Limbu houses, which include both *Yuma-Sam* and *Theba-Sam*. Similarly, ‘*Taap*’ translates as ‘open space or outside’ and the deities who are worshipped in natural surroundings are called *Taap-Sammang*. According to Limbu belief, *Nubun-Sammang* are those deities which come from the maternal side, i.e., if a woman gets married into Limbu tribe, she brings her deities along with her into Limbu household. This is also relevant in case of inter-caste marriages and the deities brought by the woman are worshipped at home or outside based on the nature of the deities.

Limbus also believe that a life cycle revolves around four stages; conception, birth, marriage and death (Muringla 2018: 24). Their understanding of life cycle can be testified by the kind of rites practiced by the Limbus; *Sapok-Chomen/ Shik-Chomen*, a prayer performed for the wellbeing of fetus and mother, *Yang-Dang*, a naming ceremony, *Mekhim*, a marriage ceremony and *Sima-mama*, a death ritual. Limbus believe that their customs, rites and rituals, which revolve around their life cycles all are based on Mundhum. So, based on their belief system they offer prayers to their deities, ancestors and nature. Likewise, on their understanding of life cycle, they also practice various religious, social and cultural rites. To offers prayers and conduct various Limbu rites and rituals, they have an institutionalised priesthood system, which comprises of different priests/shamans.

The existence of different types of *Murabangha/* priests within the established priesthood system can be witnessed in Yumaism. The distinction is made based on their roles and functions and not based on hierarchy. Sometimes these differences are also evident in the dresses they wear

and instruments they use while performing rites and rituals. Muringla (2018), has categorised Murabangha into five types; *Phedangba*, *Samba*, *Yeba*, *Yema* and *Yetchamba*. Khamdhak (2024) claims that according to Limbu belief system, the Murabangha can be broadly classified into eight categories; *Mang-thamba/ma*, *Sing or Lung Phedangba/ma*, *Phedangba/ma*, *Samba/ma*, *Pungdhingba/ma*, *Nanjoba/ma*, *Yeba/ma* and *Sida samba/ma*. Here ‘ba’ signifies male priest and ‘ma’ signifies female priest. This classification between ‘ma’ and ‘ba’ is also a peculiar distinction observed in the Limbu priest hood system, as compared to other recognised religions of the world. Khamdhak (2004) says, “In *Yumaism*, the process of becoming a Murabang is not codified by human beings or society, but they are chosen by Tagera Ningwafung herself”. So, it apparent that in *Yumaism*, there is no gender barrier; both male and female can be born and serve as a Murabang.

Karnahang Subba (2005) links this existence of different types of Murabangha with Limbu *Mundhum*. Subba says, “*Mundhum* is not pre-decided or pre-planned, whatever incidents or events occurred or whatever difficulties our ancestors came across and their experiences in dealing with them, became *Mundhum*”. He further says, “It is the same with the existence of different types of *Murabangha*. When human beings started multiplying, initially they only faced certain difficulties like sicknesses and other health related sufferings. So, on their request, a *Phedangba*, with knowledge to treat such sufferings or to perform rituals related to those ailments was sent. In course of time, humans also had to deal with death and *Phedangba*’s knowledge was not sufficient. So, a *Samba* was sent, with knowledge to deal with such events and perform rites associated with it. Later humans also had to deal with unnatural deaths and as *Phedangba* and *Samba* did not possess knowledge to deal with such events, there came a *Yeba*.” Like *Mundhum* developed along with these events and the existence of different types of Murabangha also got institutionalised.

The Limbu Murabangha are healers as well as performers of Limbu rites and rituals. Healing can be both spiritual and physical healing. For spiritual healing, Murabangha use various methods like reading through rice grain (*Tumdumseri*), prayer beads (*Sirpong*), rolling egg (*Washibo Yumnumadhan*), fermented millet (*Samu Sirays*), counting ‘kaudies’ and sometimes even fowls or pigs are sacrificed to decipher the nature of illness (Khamdhak 2025). Once the illness is diagnosed, the final process of healing would be through the incantations of required *Mundhum* by the *Murabangha*. However, only those Murabangha with the knowledge of traditional herbal uses perform physical healing. First, they try to identify the illness or disease and

then some herbal products like plant leaves, roots, flowers, fruits, oils and various parts of animal, birds or insects etc. are used in the form of medicines to cure the illness. (ibid, 2025). Among the two healing methods, spiritual healing is the most common practice among the Limbu tribe.

Limbu rituals can be categorised broadly into two groups. First, *Chhukmuba Hingmuba Mundhum* or *Hing Mundhum*, which comprises of rituals performed for deities and living people. Second, *Yagu Chhang Sima Mundhum* or *Si Mundhum*, which comprises of rituals for departed souls (Mabuhang B.S 2069: 39). Based on this division, these rituals also require different types of *Murabangha*. Depending on their knowledge, *Murabangha* have predetermined roles. Only in rare cases or in the absence of a required *Murabang*, another *Murabang* can perform their role, provided they know *Mundhum* required for conducting such rites (Subba, K. 2025). Among all, a *Phedangba* performs *Hing Mundhum*, which includes prayers and rites like *Him-Sammang* (deity of home), *Akwanam* (main pillar of Limbu houses), *Yu-Mang* (mother nature), *Thisok-Chasok* (harvest puja), etc. *Samba*, *Yeba* and *Yema* are believed to possess the knowledge and power to take the soul of dead to *Theba-Yuma Waya Faktung*, a place where their ancestors' souls rest. While *Samba*, *Yeba* and *Yema* may perform some of the *Hing Mundhum*, they mostly perform *Si Mundhum*. In case of *Si- Mundhum*, while a *Samba* performs ritual related to natural death, *Yeba* and *Yema* perform unnatural death rituals. According to Limbu belief, a *Yetchamba* possesses the knowledge of different *Murabangha* but their existence is rarest of the rare.

In Yumaism, there is no concept of temple, idol worship or God-man. Lack of such tangible and visual forms of worship could be one of the reasons for the declining relevance of Yumaism in contemporary times. Limbus also believe that as compared to earlier times, the number of *Murabangha* has also declined. So, in this case, *Mundhum* experts say that the decline in the number of *Murabangha* is concerning and could bring about severe consequences in the Limbu community. Highlighting the existential relevance and importance of *Murabangha*, B. Muringla (2018) writes, “*Murabangha* give a real meaning to the existence of *Mundhum* and relevance of *Yumaism*. They have tremendous responsibility in the preservation of religion, culture, custom and tradition and have kept it alive through various practices of rites and rituals”.

Emphasizing the relevance of priesthood system among the Limbu community, Subba (2025) asserts, “Without *Murabangha*, every Limbu prayer, culture, custom and tradition is incomplete. It is also because all of these are based on *Mundhum* and *Murabangha* are those few

people with the knowledge of *Mundhum* and are also acquainted with the Limbu system. They act as a bridge between *Mundhum* and Limbu people. Most of the times, the meaning that *Mundhum* carries and the structure of word formation used in the development of *Mundhum* are difficult for the normal people to understand. *Murabangha* translates those messages. So, in a way they also mediate between *Mundhum* messages and Limbu community, by simplifying the messages of *Mundhum*.”

Conclusion

Priesthood system is an integral part of any religion and community. The priests serve as a mediator between a belief system and people, which also provides them an authority for religious conduct. Like any other community, the existence of priesthood system has immense importance for the Limbus. In Yumaism, the role of Pegi Fangsam or Murabang are not just limited to spiritual and physical healing or conducting the rites and rituals but goes beyond them. In the absence of written form of *Mundhum*, their existence is also required for its preservation and passing it down as a source of way of life.

The practice of priesthood system found in Yumaism is one of a kind in itself. The categorisation of *Murabangha* based on their roles and not based on hierarchy makes it distinctive from other priesthood system of the world. Similarly, the belief associated with the concept of ‘chosen ones’ and the ‘teacher-pupil connection’ also makes them different from others. The existence of each *Murabang* is necessary because of the ingrained belief system that stresses on the infeasibility of a common *Murabang* performing all rites and rituals, specifically in case of performing both birth rites and death rites. Limbus trace these categorizations of *Murabangha* from their origin in *Mundhum*. Therefore, these different categories of *Murabangha* and their respective roles acquire an authority from *Mundhum* and the Limbu people. Moreover, the system has been institutionalised in the Limbu society since ancient times, probably along with the initiation of *Mundhum*.

Interviews with Limbu experts revealed that in the contemporary times the numbers of *Murabangha* are declining. Similarly, the relevance of *Yumaism* is waning among the Limbu community. There are both internal and external reasons for it. Among all, the conversion of Limbus to other religions could be one. Furthermore, for a long time, the internalisation of other major recognised religions in the Limbu Community can also be witnessed. Such phenomenon has

caused a profound impact on the Limbu belief system and practices. Within Yumaism, the rise of other sects is also concerning. The concept of temple, idol worshiping and the notion of Godman have never been prevalent in Yumaism. However, these rising sects are redefining the belief system, which have a potential dilute the real principles of *Yumaism* based on *Mundhum*. Language barrier is another reason. The *Limbu Pan* is one of the endangered languages according to UNESCO interactive atlas. The fixated idea of Limbu Pan while narrating *Mundhum* and the declining rate of Limbu speakers may pose a barrier in bridging the gap between *Mundhum* wisdom and Limbu community. Considering the significance of Murabangha, their declining numbers may pose a grave threat to the existence of *Mundhum*. Consequences may be witnessed in the form of fading Limbu practices and ultimately in the demise of Yumaism.

ⁱ Tummyahang system is one of the traditional systems that still exist among the Limbu community. Tummyahang consists of well-informed aged people with knowledge of *Mundhum*, Limbu traditions and customs, who settled judicial matters related to Limbus. According to *Mundhum*, in this case Tummyahang were primordial settlers, who were described as those who sheltered under the mushrooms, struck fern, butchered lice, and rested on goat's manure.

ⁱⁱ Murabangha, plural form of Murabang.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sodungen Lepmuhang is a name given to Sutchhuru Suhamphena after they become Pegi Fangsam or Murabang.

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