

Unlocking the Socio-Cultural Perspectives of Tiji Festival in Mustang

Bhim Nath Regmi

Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

This paper explores the socio-cultural dimensions of the Tiji Festival by delving into its historical origins, symbolic meanings, and cultural relevance to establish social harmony among the people. The Tiji Festival, an annual three-day ritual celebrated in Lo (Mustang), Nepal, holds deep cultural-historical significance as it embodies the socio-cultural and religious ethos of the region. Rooted in Tibetan Buddhist traditions, it embodies the triumph of good over evil forces through the re-enactment of the legendary battle between Dorje Jono and the demonic forces. Situated in the trans-Himalayan region, Mustang has been a cultural crossroad for centuries, blending Tibetan Buddhist customs with indigenous practices. Beyond its religious significance, the festival functions as a platform for communal gathering, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Despite modern influences, the resilience of Tiji highlights the dynamic interplay between tradition and adaptation. By unlocking the socio-cultural perspective of this vibrant festival, this study underscores its role in maintaining Mustang's historical legacy while evolving within contemporary socio-cultural contexts. It reflects this unique synthesis, serving as a means of social cohesion, identity reinforcement, and spiritual renewal for the local community. The elaborate masked dances, sacred chants, and ritualistic performances not only preserve the ancient oral traditions but also convey ethical teachings vital to Mustang's collective consciousness. The acceptance of creative potential factor of Tiji festival is analyzed through the lenses of cultural theorists that justify call for historical practices of it.

Keywords: culture, harmony, Lama, Tiji, Vajrakila

Introduction

The kingdom of Lo was first established as “an independent kingdom in 1440 AD” (Dhungel, 2002, p. 4), and became “part of Nepal in 1790 AD” and “opening up of the kingdom of Lo to tourists in 1992 encouraged tides of foreign visitors, donors, scholars, and seekers of ‘authentic’ culture.” (Craig, 2004, pp. 13-14). Lo was the “cultural centre for Buddhism” (Chapagain, 2019, p. 42), and local people celebrate Tiji Festival twice in Lo Manthang (Mustang), the ancient walled city of Upper Mustang. Tiji Festival has a historical and cultural connection with the “Cham” cultural dance that originated in Tibet. Tiji festival of Mustang in the contemporary globalized world reflects the local, national, and cultural identity of the Buddhist tradition. Samuel and David (2016) observe, “... Cham provides a general introduction to pre-modern Vajrayana Buddhist societies... in the contemporary context. Cham has been among the best-known aspects of Tibetan religion for more than a century” (p. 7). It is a historical and walled palace focused on traditional structures. It is a living cultural tradition of

Buddhism and characterizes the rest of Nepali Buddhist society even in the postmodern society. Lama Tiji, which is for the Lamas of Chosde Monastery, and the other is termed Gyalpo Tiji dedicated to all the communities of Lo Tso Dun are the cultural events of Lo Manthang. The historical region, particularly antique land with its depth, richness, complexity, and its diverse relationships indicate socio-cultural harmony of people in Lo Manthang. This cultural practice has the general function of constituting a social reality which is as lived experience cannot be a false subject. This cultural concept as a cultural ideology is the imitation of social formation and people's relation to politics of that society. Barker (2002) views, "It is not possible to escape values any more than we can ground them in metaphysics, so that historically and culturally specific value-based knowledge is an inevitable and inescapable condition of human existence" (p. 50). In line with this, Tiji is a cultural-based ancient knowledge deeply rooted in local culture of Lo Manthang. The principal objective of celebrating the festival is to flourish the knowledge of Buddha in the region by subjugating evil spirits. The concept of Tiji culture functions as a lens for investigating human behavior from different world views. The message of practicing this culture is not merely describing the social phenomenon, it also replicates an assessment and implicit justification of the vibrant concerns of its time.

Williams' *Keywords* (1983) is a landmark writing in cultural studies and it scrutinizes the importance of tracing the historical evolution of culture. The key challenge of Tiji is to observe how the concept has been framed over time and for what purposes it was executed in different contexts. As this, the secondary concern of the festival is to establish harmony among the people which unites them culturally and socially together. This three-day ritualistic festival was historically presented in front of the Sakya Trijin—Ngawang Kunga Sonam by the eighth Gyalpo Samdrub Rabten of Mustang—in 1650 AD, known as *Phur zlog (dok)*, the connotation of negativities through *Kila (Phurba)*. The festival is celebrated in May, following the Tibetan lunar calendar, and holds great religious, historical, and cultural attachment of the Mustangese people. It is deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism and is observed annually by the people to commemorate the victory of good over evil. Hall (1992) argues, "Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as a discursive device that represents difference as unity or identity" (p. 297). It reminds the folk history of Dorje Jono (Vajrakila)—a deity in Vajrayana Buddhism, and Guru Rinpoche—Padmasambhava a part of Tibetan Buddhism who defeated the evil forces to bring prosperity and acted on the guidance of Padmasambhava himself. Tiji Festival revolves around the myth of a deity Dorje Jono (Vajrakila) who is believed to have fought and defeated a powerful demon that brought chaos, drought, and destruction. It implies the refurbishment of harmony and the triumph of divine power over malevolent forces. The monks of Chode Monastery perform under the leadership of Buddhist mystical leaders.

The Tiji is a local cultural festival marked by decorative incognito dances performed by local Buddhist monks of Lo Manthang in the open space of the monastery. Massey (1998) opines, "[Local cultures are] constellations of temporary coherence ... set within a social space which is the product of relations and interconnections from the very local to the intercontinental" (p. 125). Among the performances, the "Cham" dance in Tiji renovates the classical anecdote of Dorje Jono's struggle to defeat an evil demon which signifies the cultural resistance of people against the negative forces. Barker (2002) writes, "Everything turns on what we mean by resistance, on what is being resisted by whom under what circumstances and for what reasons" (p. 73). It serves an important part of local cultural religion and attracts both locals and outsiders to seek to observe unique traditions. It revitalizes the cultural linkage between Tibetan and Lo Buddhist traditions and is observed in the third month of the Tibetan lunar calendar especially in May (in Jestha of the Nepali calendar) for people of Lo

Tso Dun and in August (in Bhadra of the Nepali calendar) for the Lamas of Chosde Monastery. Its origin traces back to Aaham Samdrub, the ninth king of Lo, who saw the premature death of his six sons and survived only one son—Aaham Tsewang Samdrub. With the king's commitment to monastic discipline, his concerns upon the request of the people of Lo, he presented monastic robes and codes and began to practice the ritual of Tiji as a festival in Mustang. Its main objective was to remove hindrances to the propagation of Buddhist traditions and teachings. The offerings of a-story-high Thanka of Buddha and a two-story-high Thanka of Guru Padmasambhava were for ensuring the long-term sustenance to celebrating Tiji festival.

Cultural practice occurs within fluid yet identifiable boundaries, and it is expressed through regular practices and representations of social traditions. It is a creation of human beings to fully comprehend culture as Barker (2002) "realized signifying system" (p. 69) and its symbolic expressions must be analyzed within its material context. Giddens (1992) proclaims, "[It] flows from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies" (p. 214). The main performer of the Tiji ceremonial festival assumes the form of Dorje Jono, an incarnation of Guru Padmasambhava, following an intensive three-month retreat in a monastery or cave as part of the Vajrakīla cham (costumed dance) tradition. Before making a public appearance, the performer undertakes a two-and-a-half-day offering ritual in Thubchen Lhakhang, though it was celebrated within the Lo Manthang Palace, now due to spatial constraints, it is rearranged to Thubchen Lhakhang. In alignment with the Choho, senior Lamas from Chosde Monastery in Lo Manthang lead an assembly of monks in performing various traditional dances and reciting sacred Vajrakīla scriptures associated with the Dorje Purba lineage, and a series of "Cham" dances performed over three days as part of the cultural and spiritual festival. Cantwell (1995) assumes, "Vajrayāna rituals are intended to bring about a transformation of the physical, vocal and mental states of the practitioner, the nature, of which depends on the specific class of practice performed" (p. 47). The festival concludes with a grand procession led by the Choho. The dancers, accompanied by monks, the king, the royal family, and people march from the walled city of Lo Manthang to an open space beyond its gates.

The five red tormas, prepared in the mandala at Thubchen Lhakha, are carried during the procession. A brief dance is performed at the gate to reinforce its protection against malevolent forces. The procession then reaches Jhiwa Chorten, a stupa outside the city walls, where the Choho conducts additional prayers and a special consecration ritual to safeguard the region against future evil influences. The participants continue their journey to several predesignated sites, where they perform rituals to eliminate the last vestiges of evil. The final destruction of the effigy takes place at a location of significant spiritual potency. This act is marked by ritual prayers, the use of ancient weapons such as bows and arrows, and the forceful discarding of the tormas. The ritual participants practice it every year and they are keen to see their images in the mirror of the society. Sartre (1967) views, "Culture saves nothing and nobody, nor does it justify. But it is a product of man; he projects himself through it and recognizes himself in it; this critical mirror does show him his image" (p. 157). These actions and resistances serve to banish demonic forces from the territory permanently. The congregation jubilantly shouts "Lha Gyallo" (May the Gods be victorious), celebrating their collective triumph over negativity and malevolence. Upon returning to the palace, the festival concludes with an elaborate final celebration. Participants offer prayers, tormas, and tsampa to the deities in gratitude for their protection. The occasion is also marked by the exchange of khadars (white silk scarves) between the king, Khenpo, Lamas, and other high-ranking officials as a gesture of reverence and goodwill.

Historical Background of Tiji Festival

In recent years, the festival has also drawn large numbers of national and international tourists, who visit Mustang to witness this extraordinary cultural and spiritual event. The main ritual of the ceremony is centered on the act of subduing the devil by *Dorje Sonnu/Dorje Phurba (Vajra Kumara/Vajra Kila)* who took the human incarnation to save the whole territory from the evil forces. Barker (1992) opines,

Cultural studies must increasingly engage with life-politics that are, at their core, cultural questions. In any case, such a politics has much to do with justifying cultural values and lifestyles and little or nothing to do with ideology as untruth. (Barker, 1992, p. 64)

Padhmasambhava in Samye Monastery initially started this Vajrakila tradition. There are various versions of Vajrakila cham, but the meditation related to the attainment of empowerment and the consecration of the territory by defeating the demonic forces and subduing the local spirit possessed evil force by the ritual control through “Phurba” or Vajra is related to Padhmasambhava. According to Dudjom Rinpoche (2002), in the text, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, this tradition was initially started by Padhmasambhava at Samye, which later came up with many versions of meditation practice. Among them, the Sakya lineage traces the meditation to Khon Luiwangpo, who was one of the disciples of Padhmasambhava. In this regard, Garchen (2022) states that this ancestry tradition was conveyed in an unbroken succession and preserved through both doctrinal and familial performances within the Sakya tradition to solidify the Buddhist heritage and identity.

This Festival has a distinct historical connection to the Sakya lineage, as referenced in *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, Dudjom Rinpoche Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje narrates the historical transmission of the Phurba tradition within the Sakyapa school which traces its origins to the dissemination of Vajrayāna Buddhism by Sakya Pandita. Historically, it was initially transmitted as a *terma*—revealed teaching—related to empowerment, tantra, and Vajrakīla instructions bestowed upon King Trisong Detsen. These teachings were covered under the rock of Sewalung in Yerpa and Darcarupa received the Vajrakila transmission from Padmasambhava in the cave of Dawa Phug at Yerpa, where he ultimately discovered the Phurba (or Kīla), and the Tiji ritual symbolizes the destruction of obstacles of the Tiji Festival. Using the power of the Vajrakīla, Sakya Pandita was victorious over the extremist forces using the mantra “OM VAJRAKYILI KYILAYA HUM PHAT”, which translates to invoking Vajrakīla’s power to subdue evil. In this connection, Dudjom Rinpoche (1991) further elaborates on these events, stating:

Then Sakya Pandita, as a heroic sign of victory in debate, led Haranandin along, so long as he still refused ordination. But since the great master Padhmasambhava had ordered the Twelve Goddesses of the Earth to protect the doctrine in Tibet from extremists, the inflicted their punishment: At the Tibetan border near Kyirong the extremist vomited blood from his mouth and was sent down the fifth path. Subsequently, upholders of non-Buddhist philosophies were not to be seen in Tibet. Some may well have arrived, but no one with the intellectual power capable of really disputing the Buddha’s teaching. (Rinpoche, 1991, pp. 715-716)

The performance of the Tiji follows the ritual reverence of various deities, and enacts a parallel narrative of Buddhist traditions. In the ritual context, Dorje Sonnu, embodied by the *Choho* (master of the ceremony), reinterprets historical and spiritual struggle for modern people through ancestry dance. This performance incorporates local costumes, masks, offerings, mandalas, *tormas*, and sacred music to ensure the continuity of this profound religious and cultural heritage. Beer (1999) exemplifies the intricate relationship between

Vajrakīlaya and Samye highlights its role in the dissemination of Buddhism and underscores the significance of this *sādhana* about Padmasambhava's enlightenment and its impact on his twenty-five disciples. In the Nyingma tradition, these disciples are intrinsically connected to the mindstreams of the principal *tertön* (treasure revealers):

In the biography of Padmasambhava it is recorded that he travelled to the northern land of Kashakamala, where the cult of the *kīla* prevailed. Later, whilst meditating on the deity Yangdak Heruka (Skt. Vishuddha Heruka) in the "Asura Cave" at Parping in the Kathmandu valley, he experienced many obstructions from the *maras*, and in order to subjugate them he request the *Kīla Vitotama Tantras* to be brought from India. Having established the first Tibetan monastery at Samye, the first transmission that Padmasambhava gave to his 25 "heart disciples", in order to eliminate the hindrances to the propagation of the *buddhadharma* in Tibet, were the teachings of the *Vajrakīlaya Tantra*. (Beer, 1999, p. 246)

Vajrakīlaya is an enraged appearance of the Buddha Vajrasattva, illustrated by his symbolic weapon, the *phurba* or *kīla*, a ritual dagger. He is typically portrayed with three faces of different colors. Dorje (2018) states that his central face is blue, the left part is red, and the right is white color, and possesses six arms, with two holding the *phurba*, two grasping a vajra each, one wielding a flaming snare, and another carrying a trident.

Tiji Festival: Rituals and Performances

The first day of Tiji is commemorated on the twenty seventh of the third month of the Tibetan calendar with an assembly of monks at Chosde Monastery. They conduct primary rituals to continue this tradition. In the afternoon, the Choho, attended by other monks, moves towards the palace and plays traditional musical instruments such as drums, *dungchen* (long horns), and cymbals. During the festival, the local people of Lo Tso Dun, representatives of Rural Municipalities, traditional *Mukhiyas* (chieftains), internal tourists, and international tourists gather in front of the palace of Lo Manthang to observe this cultural festival. Families of the local community come together in their homes to feast and mark the joyous occasion of conquering evils. Williams (1989) acknowledges, "We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort" (p. 4). As this, they indulge in traditional foods, drink, and sing to strengthen the socio-cultural bonds of the community people. The oral tradition of Tiji has a connection with the great master of Ngari Dzongkha, Chopel who had once practiced tantric Lonté at a palace Laram Chokal to harm the Lobo people and the royal family of Lo. In response, King Aaharm Samdrub Palbar Aaham Samdrub Palbar requested Cobgey Dorje Sengey to perform religious offerings and practice rituals to offset the malevolent effects of the Lonté practice. Key rituals, such as Je Drog Jhyang Drol and Tiji cultural ceremonies were executed to oust local spirits and eliminate obstacles. The second day of the festival falls on the twenty-eight and marks the central event of the Tiji Festival. On this day, Dorje Sonnu, the central figure of the ritual, symbolically subjugates malicious spirits before the audience comprising the King, Queen, high-ranking Lamas, monastic authorities, monks, nuns, and representatives of local government, local communities, and an increasing number of national and international visitors. The principal performance represented by Dorje Sonnu, initiates the day's proceedings with a full Vajrakīlaya ritual within the monastery. Following this, the participants move to the palace courtyard, where another *thangka* of Guru Padmasambhava is ceremoniously displayed. This particular *thangka* portrays the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava, accompanied by two *dakinis*, as well as the King and Queen presenting offerings beneath the image.

The dances of the second day are more dynamic, lively, aggressive, and intricate. They depict the systematic suppression of negative forces and the ultimate destruction of the demon to increase hope and faith in life. These performances symbolically remove hardships to the spread of Buddhism and reinforce the triumph of ethics over malevolence. The dancers exercise different ritual weapons, use animal masks, and employ distinct hand mudras and bodily postures to endorse the progressive weakening and eventual expulsion of evil forces. Among the many dances performed on this day, the Nga “Cham”, or “Drum Dance”, holds special significance. Dancers don wrathful blue masks and rhythmically beat drums, and they symbolize the victory of virtuous beings over vindictive entities. According to tradition, the sound of each drumbeat confers spiritual enlightenment upon those present and contributes to the alleviation of suffering.

During the performance, dancers meditate on boundless compassion for all sentient beings. The drumstick is observed as an illustration of skillful means and the drum itself symbolizes the wisdom of human beings. The unity of drum and stick in the performance epitomizes the triumph of ethical *dharma* over negativity. Another significant dance performed on the second day is the Menle Dhakey Do-We Cham, a composite dance sequence representing the symbolic slaying of the demon. This performance integrates multiple deities, including Dungmara and Chewmara, who are revered as the ancestral deities of the King of Mustang. The arrangement is performed as an act of homage before the King and Queen. The dancers, attired in animal masks and wielding ritual daggers, enact scenes of intimidation and confrontation to reinforce the spiritual subjugation of the demon. The Tiji Festival features a series of ritual dances performed by monks wearing various animal masks, including those representing tigers, deer, yaks, crows, vultures, and horses. These animals symbolize different associates of Phurba (Vajrakila) and are integral to the ritual performance. The dancers employ these masks and movements to elucidate the religious significance of the festival, ensuring a comprehensive explanation of the ritual. Additionally, specific dances are performed for children to ward off obstacles and alleviate their fears.

On the third day of the Tiji festival, the main Tiji ritual cultural part begins in the open courtyard of the Tashi Gephel Palace. The dance is a central feature of the festival which lasts for three days and is performed before the traditional King, Queen, village heads, and the entire Lo Tsho Dun community. One of the primary dances of the first day is the Tsa Cham, a performance that remains for several hours. This segment comprises of slow and graceful movements and sets the atmosphere for the more elaborate performances of the following day. During this dance, the Choho occupies center stage, encircled by supporting dancers who gradually form a mandala, representing the symbolic foundation for the ritualistic destruction of obstacles and malevolent entities. The Choho moves towards the northeast with deliberate Dorje (Vajra) steps, and other dancers assume positions of corresponding deities within the mandala. In this crucial ritual, the demon is metaphorically separated from its malevolent components and the Choho narrates concentrated verses holding a Phurba (ritual dagger) and a skull cup, culminating in the formation of a lotus mandala. Throughout the dance, the performers appeal Dharmapalas (protective deities) and other spiritual guardians. Over fifty complicated dance movements are executed and symbolically purify the ground in preparation for the final confrontation with the demon. Subsequently, the Tse Cham dance follows, incorporating offerings to the four fundamental elements—air, water, earth, and fire. This sequence consists of fifty distinct dance movements, each contributing to the consecration and completion of the mandala. These ritualistic dances collectively serve to regulate the spatio-temporal dimensions of the religious proceedings under the guidance of the Choho. In the evening, the Lo Tso Dun communities partake in cultural programs, sharing their oral traditions, songs, and narratives of past accomplishments. The communal aspect of

the festival fosters a sense of unity, as participants celebrate their cultural heritage through storytelling, music, and shared feasts. Reflecting on the significance of Tiji in Lo, Gyalchung Jigme remarked.

This festival is a major festival of Lo Tso Dun. People celebrate to ward off negative forces and ensure the prosperity of all biosphere in the region. Tiji avoids diseases and promotes a good harvest. Among the numerous festivals observed in the Himalayan region, it is unique and establishes socio-cultural harmony among the people. It unites together all community people and representatives of Rural Municipalities of Mustang. The unity of people, representatives of local government, and Mukhiya (Chieftains) sit together to make this festival a grand success. (Interview)

The practice of Vajrakila rituals is like a traditional concept, and, Kabat-Zinn (1990) admits, “Knowledge is limited and needs to be used within the domains where its descriptions are valid and relevant.” (p. 196). At Vajrakila rituals, Lamas unfurl a grand Thangka of Guru Padmasambhava in the palace of Lo Manthang. The local Lopa people witness the ritual moment with deep reverence to pay tribute to the Thangka and honor Guru Padmasambhava’s role in strengthening Buddhism in the Himalayan region. This procession offers a large thangka, believed to be over four hundred years old, and conspicuously depicts Guru Padmasambhava at the center, flanked by his two consorts. The Lamas accomplish preliminary masked dances to establish harmony and friendship among the people by playing traditional musical instruments. The festival memorializes the triumph of Dorje Jono (Padmasambhava) over an evil force that harmed destruction in the Mustang region and is filled with momentous rituals and deep spiritual significance. It conserves the traditional way of life in the posthumanistic phase. Barker (2002) agrees, “Conversations are a mode of practically enacted cultural conduct involving the circulation of ideas, concepts, meanings, attitudes, beliefs, and so forth, within an intersubjectively moulded arena” (p. 41). Inside the monastery, monks offer tormas at the altar before the commencement of the sacred dances. The Choho, along with other dancers, dramatize various ritualistic dances wearing traditional cultural costumes and pointed red hats. The Khenpo and other prestigious Lamas preside over the event sitting on elevated seats. The performance officially begins with the resonant sounds of dungchen, the chanting of prayers, and offerings of incense.

The black hat dancers initiate the cultural dance within the Tashi Gephel Palace, opening with a private audience before the king in his chamber. The Choho then formally introduces the purpose of the Tiji Festival and describes its historical and mythological significance. The performance prioritizes the achievement of Buddhist teachings over malicious energies and hindrances. The dancers bejeweled in traditional Lama dress-up with flamboyantly colored hats perform a continuous sequence of cultural movements. The initial choreography involves five dancers in a linear formation and gradually advances in unison to form a circular arrangement to defeat the negative forces and bless human beings. The movement of the dancers with the execution of rhythmic arm gestures, foot stamping, and controlled rotations, all while maintaining a clockwise circular motion makes this ritual vibrant and lively. The tempo of the performance intensifies to establish a structured and rhythmic cadence.

On the third and final day of the festival, observed on the twenty-ninth day, the morning rituals commence as usual with offerings for the Vajrakila ritual. Deities are acclaimed, and ceremonial worship before the Choho and his corresponding dancers emerge from the monastery in the afternoon. At this point, the Choho performs the Serkhemp, a ritual offering of nectar to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities, dharmapalas, and other divine beings, invoking their assistance in eliminating negative and malevolent forces for the benefit of all sentient beings and the furtherance of Buddhism. The culmination of the festival involves the ritual destruction of the effigy representing the demon. The third day of the festival, known as Phur Zlok (Dok), signifies the ultimate

subjugation of evil by the Choho through the power of the Phurba. This symbolic act underscores the triumph of Buddhist teachings over destructive forces, reinforcing the establishment and propagation of Dharma in the region. The festival, in essence, serves as a reenactment of the legendary exploits of Dorje Sonnu, connecting contemporary practitioners with their cultural and religious heritage. The Choho, facing northeast, symbolically stabs the effigy in the heart with his Phurba, severs its head, and casts the blood toward the northwest. This act signifies the suppression of local spirit possession practices associated with Shamanism, particularly in western Tibet. Liu (2023) asserts, “It is generally believed that a shamanic culture is a form of local knowledge, which appeared in the Stone Age and was produced in the national culture” (p. 2). The head of the effigy is buried at the entrance of the palace, while the remaining parts are gathered with other tormas and disposed of in designated areas associated with evil forces in the northwest section of the settlement.

Tiji: A Festival of Socio-Cultural Harmony

Historically and culturally, in the Tiji is an intangible cultural mirror and one hundred male monks, known as Terkim-Tewa Kechim, participate to celebrate the dance. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) puts,

there has been an important shift in the concept of intangible heritage to include not only the masterpieces, but also the masters. [...] the most recent model seeks to sustain a living, if endangered, tradition by supporting the conditions necessary for cultural reproduction. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p. 53)

However, in contemporary practice, only five Ngagpa Lamas symbolically fulfill this role. Similarly, five Gelung Lamas and five Tongpa monks perform various sets of dances. Every three years, the festival features a more elaborate presentation, whereas, in the intervening two years, certain dances are omitted. A major moment in the festival is the final act, known as Dhakey, which represents the slaying of the demon to free the people from fear and extend hope in society. This act is symbolized by the piercing of a straw effigy, fashioned in the form of a linga, with the Phurba (ritual dagger) wielded by the Choho. This dramatic enactment demonstrates the triumph of Dorje Sonnu over demonic forces. The Tiji festival has a connection with a period of famine and natural disasters during the reign of King Kunga Sonam. Local Lamas, particularly experts in astrology, urged the king to invite monks from Tibet to perform the Tiji ritual to restore peace and harmony in the society. The revered faith of this ritual function establishes prosperity in the region by expelling malevolent forces associated with the indigenous Bon tradition. Regarding the socio-cultural significance of the Tiji Festival, Galchung Jigme remarks:

It is the biggest festival in Lo Manthang of Upper Mustang. It comes every year twice which establishes the triumph of good over evil forces. The main attractions of it are masked dancers in colorful costumes. The dancers play drums, Buddhist horns, and chant Buddhist words. This celebration is famous among the people of Upper Mustang as it is a vibrant cultural festival that establishes a humanistic relationship among the people and society. (Interview)

Before 1990, especially during *Panchyat* reign when the monarchy was in power in Nepal, local Mukhiyas were invited to participate in the festival. The festival was organized collectively through donations gathered from all the villages and residents of Lo Tso Dun. However, due to limited food production and time constraints, the financial responsibility of the festival is now entirely managed by the Lo Gyalpo Jigme Foundation. Given the remote location of Lo (Mustang) and the economic hardships faced by the region, organizing the festival remains a costly endeavor. After 2017 the representatives of local government participate to celebrate the cultural function to mark it a symbol of peace and social harmony in the region.

A significant ritual of the Tiji festival involves nailing the main totem, symbolizing the control of local spirits by the Choho to counteract the influence of Bon religious practices, particularly black magic. The Choho's residence and his astrological significance are honored during the festival. In Mustang, the ritual performances are exclusively conducted by the Sakyas. Gyalchung further elaborates on the financial management of the festival to its broader social benefits. Gyalchung Jigme remarks: The Lo Gyalpo Jigme Foundation manages it, and the financial commitments related to the festival is a part of the same foundation. It alleviates the economic burden on the five Rural Municipalities of Mustang and their residents. The representatives of these Local Governments convene in Lo Manthang to participate in and celebrate the festival. Historically, it was brought to Tibet by Padmasambhava in the form of Dorje Phurba (Vajrakila) and later it was adapted for Sakya by Ngachang Kunga Sonam who was the expert and invited to Mustang. (Interview)

The Lama receives the blessings (*dwang*) from the head masters who have previously attained the *meditation dwang, lung, and thi*. Under the guidance of the head lama, the Choho engages in a three-month meditation practice focused on the control and protection of the land, sentient beings, and the surrounding territory. In Lo Manthang, two Tiji festivals are practiced as Lama Tiji and Gyalpo Tiji, also known as Public Tiji. Lama Trashi, has its traditional roots in history as:

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, all the community people of Lo Tso Dun collectively contributes sixty to seventy KGs of food grains and firewood for celebrating the festivals. These offerings were given to the Lamas of Chosde Monastery through the nominated authorities. In spite of the shortage of grains, the internal management system of performing Tiji festival vast could not be continued and communal practice of it ceased. However, the Lamas continues their religious practice even after the vast social tradition faced a problem. (Interview)

However, Lo Tso Dun later experienced natural problems and calamities that led to the revitalization of the festival under the supervision of Lamas and astrologers. At present, Lama Trashi pursues to hold the Lama Tiji festival in Kathmandu to stimulate its preservation and promote its cultural significance with a wider audience.

Lo Tso Dun endures the festival by collecting food grains and firewood and contributing to the monastery through religious donations made by the community. This practice reproduces the ancient Vihara tradition of India, where Buddhist communities supported practitioners through collective offerings to turn religious celebrations into social gatherings for establishing harmony among the people. Through these ritualistic dances and ceremonies, the Tiji Festival serves as a profound religious and cultural event to celebrate the victory of good over evil. It reinforces communal bonds and collective spiritual aspirations. It symbolically represents the removal of evil and negative forces and paves the path for the establishment of Buddha's teachings and the spread of Buddhism in the region. This exciting and lively celebration is a living intangible heritage of the entire Himalayan region. The performance of the monks of Choede Monastery and their sacred ritual dances during the festival were rebuilt exclusively for the Lamas inside the monastery during the fifth month of the lunar calendar. It serves as both a celebration and reaffirmation of this ancient myth and its events and story unfolds through dramatic performances over three days. Regmi (2024) states that it marks the transition from the dry season (late winter/spring) to the wet monsoon period (rainy season in Nepal) and signifies the "chasing of the demons" (p. 171). It revolves around the legendary tale of Dorje Sonnu, a deity who must confront and defeat his demon father to save the Kingdom of Mustang from devastation. The demon wreaks havoc by causing a severe water shortage—an especially dire threat in Mustang's arid landscape, where water is the most essential life-sustaining resource. He opines, "Dorje Sonnu eventually defeats the demon and banishes him from the land" (p. 171) to restore harmony to the region. Local people believe it commenced in the traditional structure of the ancient society. Now, the ability of people and necessity shape their own future (Beugelsdijk, 2007), which indicates a

high degree of agency (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). As this, Tiji festival is an innovative celebrated in collective programming of local people which motivates them for uniting the people.

Conclusion

The Tiji festival establishes socio-cultural harmony in the region and reaffirms their ritual pride in conserving this centuries-old religious tradition. It continues to unite the local people together—not only the locals of Lo Tso Dun but also Nepalese citizens and international tourists who come to witness this amazing event of Lo Manthang. It is one of the last remaining living intangible heritages of the Himalayan region, and it ought to be preserved for future generations. The Government of Nepal and local government should take the lead in its preservation to link Buddhist tradition within and beyond Nepal. Beyond its cultural practice of Tiji festival, it contributes to the local economy by attracting foreign visitors and enhances the country's cultural reputation as a hub of rich traditional heritage. The Lo Gyalpo Jigme Foundation has been bearing the costs and expenses of the festival to ensure its continuation. Therefore, it is imperative to secure its future through dedicated preservation efforts. The international organizations engaged in the protection of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage must appreciate the cultural value of Tiji and initiate expressive steps toward its long-term sustainability. This festival benefits everyone—locals, national citizens, and international attendees alike—as its core purpose is the liberation of all responsive beings through sacred rituals and practices. The monks of Chosde Monastery have played the most significant role in preserving the festival. The conduct of the sacred dances to perform the Vajrakila “Cham” which empowers and oversees the overall management of the event is a major part of this cultural festival. In this way, Chosde Monastery helps as the bridge to connect the living intangible heritage of Lo Tso Dun to Nepal and the broader Himalayan region. As one of the most vital cultural traditions of Lo Manthang, the Tiji festival must be collectively maintained by the community of the Lamas. This festival is deeply intertwined with the history, culture, traditions, mores, faith, and values of the local people and the lives of the entire Himalayan region.

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