

The historical significance of the Ache lhamo performance of the Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: This paper is a historical examination of the Ache lhamo performance, a vibrant tradition of the Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Ache lhamo performance is enacted through the medium of dance. The performers are royal, celestial and symbolic figures, representing the human and divine. The Monpas have successfully preserved this performance, which continues to resonate with the Tibetan performing arts today. The performance becomes an integral part of the Monpa culture of the state. However, the Ache lhamo faces numerous challenges that threaten its preservation are influence of modernization and urbanization that has led to a decline in the number of skilled performers. Despite the challenges, Monpas have contributed in preserving Ache lhamo till to this date. This study sheds new light on the historical connection between the Ache lhamo of Arunachal Pradesh and ancient Tibet, contributing to our understanding of cultural exchange and heritage preservation in the region. Ethnographic method was employed to understand the social aspects of Ache lhamo in this paper. This study was conducted mainly in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, and utilised participatory observation to explore the Ache lhamo tradition.

Keywords: Ache lhamo; Monpa; Arunachal Pradesh; Tibetan performing arts

1. Introduction

The Ache lhamo is a vital part of Monpa culture that tells stories through music, dance, and drama. The performance is prevalent in Tibet (China), Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh in India. Existing studies on Ache lhamo have primarily focused on Tibet and Bhutan, such as those documented by Snyder [1], Lobsang [2], Ross [3], and the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA). According to Snyder (1979), 'Lha mo' is a classical secular theatre of Tibet, akin to western opera, characterized by its performance that incorporates music, dance, mask, and costumes. TIPA discusses Ache lhamo tradition which was influenced by Buddhist culture, while also characterizing lhamo as a classical theatre form. Syed Jamil Ahmed (2006) has described the conflict and cultural politics of the Tibetan Ache lhamo tradition. The work also highlights the spiritual leader Dalai Lama's contribution in preserving the Tibetan culture. Fitzgerald's (2004) works also critique the oversimplification of Tibetan opera (lhamo) performances, highlighting the impact of political aesthetic prejudices on our understanding of this traditional Tibetan art form. However, these studies lack insight into the unique characteristics of Monpa's Ache lhamo, which has been an integral part of their culture for centuries. This oversight underscores the need for a dedicated study of the Monpas Ache lhamo, which will uncover the distinctive features and socio-cultural significance of this traditional performance, in preserving the Monpa cultural heritage. This emphasis on performance is essential because performance encompasses every moment of our daily lives,

manifesting through both conscious and subconscious means [5]. It is an expression that draws upon prior knowledge and experiences, while also embracing new thoughts and modes of expression to ensure sustainability. Nevertheless, it maintains a connection to its roots, preserving its primal essence.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs an ethnographic approach, utilizing methods such as interviews, questionnaires, and observations. Through a qualitative research approach, this study draws upon both primary and secondary data sources to explore the cultural tradition and historical context of the Ache lhamo in the community. Secondary data sources, including printed materials such as books and articles, were utilized to support the research findings. These sources comprise 'Preliminary Study of the Lha mo' (Asian Music, 1979), 'Lhamo: The Folk Opera of Tibet' (The Tibet Journal, 1984), 'Lhamo Opera from the Roof of the World' (1994), Tibetan Opera in and outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (Asian Theatre Journal, 2004), and 'Lhamo' in Contemporary Cultural Politics' (Asian Theatre Journal, 2006). Online resources from the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts [4] contributed to the research as well. Primary data for e.g., masks, costumes, bridges and narratives of Monpa community was collected from six villages in the West Kameng district, namely Boha, Morshing, Thembang, Namsu, Yewang, and Sangti (Figure 1). Additionally, the historical site, the *Chak-zam* bridge in Tawang, was visited. Fieldwork was conducted between October 2022 and October 2024. This study gathered insights from eight in-depth interviews with Ache lhamo trainer (*lopen*), performer (*champa*), village committee member (*magma*), monk (*lama*), and the villagers. Mobility within the region and language barrier were the challenges. The researcher interacted with the informants in Hindi language. The Monpa though speak Tibetan language also are fluent in speaking Hindi language.

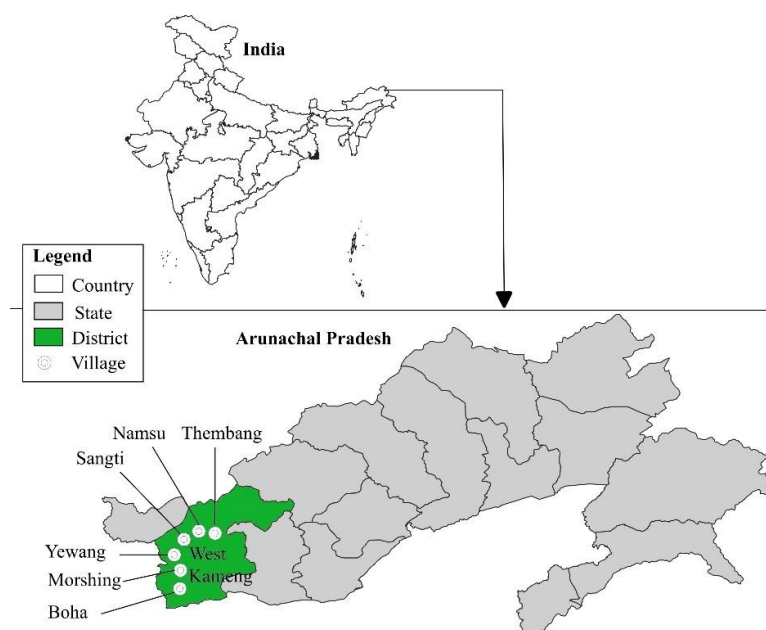


Figure 1. Map of the Study area

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Monpas

The Monpa are one of the major tribes inhabiting Tawang and West Kameng districts of the state comprising total population of 60,516. As per census (2011), Monpa tribe are recorded as 43,700 Monpa, 7,133 Tawang monpa, 7,172 Dirang monpa, 2,232 Lish monpa, 255 But monpa, and 24 Panchen monpa. According to the Monpa tradition, *Mon* means western or lower region, and *Pa* means people, indicating that the Monpas are people of the western region. In West Kameng, they reside mainly in five circles: Dirang, Bomdila, Thembang, Kalaktang, and Balem. The Monpas land was part of the historic Monyul region. The Monpa has a history of ties with the Tibetan royal dynasty. According to local tradition, West Kameng District has four prominent Dzongs (forts) that serve as centers of governance. These are Taklung Dzong at Morshing village, Dirang Dzong at Dirang village, Thembang Dzong at Thembang village, and Senge Dzong at Senge village. Until 1951, the Monpas were under Tibetan authority and paid tribute to the rulers at Lhasa in Tibet [6]. Presently, the Monpa land shares international borders with China and Bhutan, as well as a state border with Assam (India) in the southern part. As followers of Tibetan Buddhism with the Mahayana sect, their socio-cultural aspects are influenced by this faith. The main livelihood of the Monpa tribe are agriculture and cattle rearing. The commonly grown crops are maize, paddy, beans, bajra, millets, etc. They also engage in cattle rearing, with livestock such as yaks, cows, pigs and sheep serving as a major source of income.

3.2. The origin of Ache lhamo

The Ache lhamo originating from the esteemed Tibetan performing arts tradition, 'Ache lhamo', the term itself is derived from the Tibetan language, with 'A che' meaning 'sister' and 'lhamo' signifying 'fairy' or 'goddess' [3, 4]. The TIPPA acknowledges the contribution of 14th-century mystic Tibetan hermit Thangtong Gyalpoⁱ (1385-1464) in popularising Ache lhamo, also known as the king of bridges. He was the most popular Tibetan lama, who worked in various fields. He is famous for 'Mahāsiddhas of Tibet' [7], architecture, geologist, and 'universal artist: the creator of Ache lhamo' [8]. Historically, he was known as a builder of various iron suspension bridges, monasteries, stupas, and *mane* prayer walls across the region. He initiated noble work to connect Tibetan people and he built 58 iron and suspension bridges around Tibet, Bhutan, and India. Notable bridges constructed by him include *Chung Riwoche chakzam* (Tibet), *Phutsolling chakzam* (Tibet), *Lhutse chode chakzam* (Tibet), *Yuena Rinchen chakzam* (Tibet), *Drikung Qu chakzam* (Tibet), *Podho chakzam*, *Tamchog chakzam* (Bhutan), *Transhigang chakzam* (Bhutan), *Doksum chakzam* (Bhutan), and *Chakzam bridge* (India) on Tawang chu river [8]. The *Chak-zam*ⁱⁱ bridge (Figure 2) on the Tawang Chu River of Arunachal Pradesh in India is a region predominantly inhabited by the Monpa tribe. Thangtong Gyalpo's works had a significant impact, connecting Tibetan communities, trade, and promoting cultural exchange. His bridges played a crucial role in connecting the isolated communities of the Himalayas.



Figure 2. The *Chak-zam* iron suspension bridge at Tawang River (*chu*)
Image: Authors, Tawang, 17 October, 2024

Thangtong Gyalpo is widely accepted as the creator of Ache lhamo. According to oral and written historical accounts, Thangtong Gyalpo created the Ache lhamo performance, as a means to collect funds and resources for his massive constructions of bridges [3,4]. It is said that Thangtong Gyalpo created this performance by seven female performers to collect resources to build a bridge in Tibet. Thangtong Gyalpo then popularized the performance in different regions of Tibet (China), Arunachal Pradesh (India) and Bhutan to support bridge-building efforts. Later, the tradition was institutionalized by his holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama in the 17th century with new costumes and mask arts [9].

3.3. *The Ache lhamo of the Monpa*

The tradition is popularly known as *Aji lhamu cham* in the Monpa society. The Monpa *Aji lhamu cham* is referred to as the Tibetan Ache lhamo. It means ‘deity sisters dance’ e.g., *Aji* meaning ‘sister’; *Lhamu* meaning ‘deity’ or ‘celestial’; and *Cham* meaning ritual dance. In the Tibetan tradition, *Cham* denotes a sacred or ritual dance form that is performed on specific religious occasions. The *Cham* is characterized as a monastic dance that embodies religious character and mythological narratives. A study on Tibetan folk opera, *Lhamo: The Folk Opera of Tibet* [2], discusses four points of differences between *Cham* and *Lhamo*. There is a contestation regarding *Cham* in terms of its performances that are performed by monks and some by trained community performers. In contrast, the Monpas have another dance form known as *Bro*, which denotes common or recreational dances with no specific order, allowing participants to join in at will. Significantly, *Ache lhamo* is primarily performed within the monastery premises, characterized by specific stories, characters, and performers.

In the Monpa tradition, the mythological origins of Ache lhamo are summarized in two distinct narratives. The prevalent account attributes its creation to Thangtong Gyalpo, revered for his bridge-building endeavor, including the iconic bridge in Tawang District. Another mythology prevalent in certain Monpa regions is credited to Tantric master Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche (800-900 AD). He was a legendary Indian Buddhist *guru*, who was renowned as the founder of the Tantric Buddhism in Tibet.

Guru Padmasambhava, as the creator of the Ache lhamo hailed from West Kameng district, especially in Sangti and Yewang villages. During this study in Sangti and Yewang villages, interviews were conducted with the following key individuals: Sang Jangmu, a *Sangeet Natak Akademi Award* (2020) recipient from Sangti village, Passang Tsering, the village headman of Sangti, and Ley Khandu, the *lopen*ⁱⁱⁱ (trainer of the performance) of Yewang village. The oral traditions attribute the performance created by Guru Padmasambhava, who allegedly initiated the dance to protect humanity from demons. According to their narratives, a powerful demon known as Gepu Langdar terrorized their region and claimed one human life daily. Unable to locate the demon, Guru Padmasambhava created five dance performers from his fingers, endowing them with captivating masks and choreography. These dancers were given the task to lure the demon. But they could not locate him. When a village girl, who was destined to be the demon's next victim, was kidnapped by the demon to his hidden cave. Witnessing her distress, the demon inquired about her sadness, prompting her to accept that her life would soon end due to his promise of daily consumption. Moved by compassion, the demon proposed a conditional release. He would spare her life if she vowed not to disclose his location or appearance to anyone. The girl agreed, and the demon allowed her to return to the village. Subsequently, she cleverly crafted a bamboo flute, composing a distinctive melody that conveyed crucial information. When she began performing this tune, the five performers deciphered its encoded message. The tune conveyed the demon's precise location and appearance, enabling the dancers to track and ultimately kill him. According to the local tradition in the Dirang circle villages, the mythological story of Guru Padmasambhava's creation is considered as the foundation of the Ache lhamo. Additionally, the narrative attributed to Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambha) were prevalent in Bhutan also [10]. A document presented to the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) by Robert Dompnier, with the title 'Traditions of the Brokpa of Merak and Sakteng' was collected by the researcher which stated that Ache lhamo was created by Guru Rinpoche. However, Thangtong Gyalpo is also credited with creation of Ache lhamo in this document.

A widely accepted Tibetan narrative portraying Thangtong Gyalpo as the creator of Ache lhamo is similarly prevalent among the Monpa community. The oral accounts, especially in villages under Kalaktang circle, where locals remember Thangtong Gyalpo using Ache lhamo performances to help the massive construction of bridges. According to the myth, Thangtong Gyalpo initiated this dance to collect donations for building an iron suspension bridge in Tibet. Later, he employed a similar approach in various places, including Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. The Tawang bridge, popularly known as the *Chak-zam* bridge built by Thangtong Gyalpo is built across the Tawang River in Arunachal Pradesh. The *Chak-zam* bridge committee has erected a sign board stating Thangtong Gyalpo's time frame from 1385 to 1464. Besides the myths and legends that provide valuable insights in understanding Ache lhamo, the study collected a narrative from a monk in Morshing village in West Kameng district, which recounts Thangtong Gyalpo's visit to Taklung Dzong to collect funds and materials for the Tawang iron bridge. In the past, Taklung Dzong was a prominent fortress in West Kameng, and its ruins remain in Morshing village. Now, the idol of Thangtong Gyalpo is placed in the Lhagyala monastery of Morshing in respect of his connection to the region.

Additionally, Monpas spiritual traditions narrate a notable incident that took place during Thangtong Gyalpo's visit, related to the present Lhagyala monastery site in Morshing village. The site is known as the birthplace of the prominent 'Dharma' practitioner, Khandro

Drowa Zangmu (700 AD). The renowned Thangtong Gyalpo is said to have saved Zangmu's skull from demons at the present monastery site. Significantly, the life biography of Zangmu has been performed as a traditional script in Tibet with the title *Drowa Sangmo*. According to existing literature, the Tibetans believed the story of *Drowa Sangmo* 'to have taken place in the far east of India, near the border with Tibet' [3]. The popular narratives show the enterprising nature of the lamas who went across regions to popularise the religion along with the socio-cultural exchange.

A cultural exchange between Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh, through the Ache lhamo has left a lasting legacy in the Monpa community. The Tibetan *Drowa Sangmo* narrative has a fascinating connection to Arunachal Pradesh, particularly in the local myths of the Tawang and West Kameng districts. Here, the mythological character *Drowa Sangmo* is revered as Khandro Drowa Zangmu, a revered figure from Morshing village in West Kameng. The Tibetan *Drowa Sangmo* story, bears similarities to the local narrative of the Monpa community. The term 'Khandro' is used to refer to 'Dakini' or 'Devi'. Drowa Zangmu is deeply revered as a celestial deity, worshipped with great devotion by the Monpa community. According to the myth, Drowa Zangmu was born as a human to poor parents at the present site of the Lhagyala monastery. She undertook rigorous meditation and devotedly practiced the *Dharma* (religion). Eventually, Drowa Zangmu was married to Tawang king Kala Wangpo, and they were blessed with two children. Significantly, Drowa Zangmu introduced the path of *Dharma* in the region (Monk from Lhagyala monastery, interviewed by the researcher, 19 October 2024). However, there is no proper information available regarding who and when this story was adapted into an Ache lhamo script in Tibet. In this regard Ross [3] description is notable, as she noted 'Tibetans especially love the story for its rich religious symbolism'. This cultural exchange highlights the shared heritage and spiritual connections between the Monpa community and Tibet. This story also reminds us of Thangtong Gyalpo's visit to Morshing village. It is possible that he collected stories from this village and developed the narrative for Ache lhamo in Tibet.

3.4. *Culturescape of Ache lhamo*

The Ache lhamo has been performed since time immemorial in particular villages of the Monpas of West Kameng district. Although some villages lack the strength of performer troupes, they sustain this tradition by hosting troupes from other villages. Conversely, the troupe takes tours to other neighboring villages to show their performance and collects resources that are offered by the villagers in return as a sign of kindness and appreciation. This study focused on traditional troupes from several villages in West Kameng District, including Boha, Morshing, Domkho, Sangti, Yewang, Thembang, and Namsu village. Apart from the Monpas, the Sherdukpen / Shertukpen^{iv} community, a Tibetan subgroup inhabiting Rupa and Shergaon circles, has preserved the tradition of Ache lhamo. Although they differ slightly from the Monpas in socio-cultural aspects as narrated by Chhezang Khrimey at Rupa village, there are many similarities between the two communities (interviewed by the researcher, August 21, 2023).



Figure 3. Ache lhamo performances (a) Monpa tribe, Boha village (b) Sherdukpen tribe, Rupa village
Image: Authors

The Ache lhamo is performed mainly during the winter season, at religious occasions, local festivals, and other social events. The Losar and Choekor are significant festivals of the Monpas where Ache lhamo is performed. The Losar is significant as the local new year is celebrated based on the Lunar calendar. During these festival days, Ache lhamo is performed, to showcase unique traditions, preserve its cultural legacy, and strengthen social bonds. Choekor is a significant ritual festival where they recite sacred Buddhist scripts in a monastery for 7 to 8 days. A procession takes place on the final day to their sacred places like lakes, ponds, mountains, groves, and agricultural fields. The Ache lhamo troupe of Boha village presents their performance on the day before the procession. Additionally, the troupe from the Sherdukpen tribe in Rupa village participates in the Choekor procession as a dance troupe. They preserve and pass down history, mythology, and cultural traditions to future generations through this performance.

There is also an economic aspect associated with Ache lhamo performance. The tradition serves as a medium for community development. They perform Ache lhamo to raise funds for their needs. The performer troupes tour neighboring villages, showcasing their talents and collecting resources to support their community's needs, such as the construction of *gonpa* (monastery), *mane* (prayer stone wall), *chorten* (stupa) etc. The collected funds are primarily allocated for religious and social welfare projects, as acknowledged by the community members.

3.5. Thematic contents of Ache lhamo

The Tibetan Ache lhamo consists of different stories. It comprises nine traditional stories, including *Chungpo Dhonyoe Dhondup*, *Drimeh Kundan*, *Drowa Sangmo*, *Gyasa Bhelsa*, *Nangsa Woebum*, *Prince Norsang*, *Pema Woobar*, *Sukyi Nyima*, and *Thepa Thepa*[3]. These stories embody a rich tapestry of Tibetan historical figures and mythological references, with particular stories and historical backgrounds often connected to ancient India. Some stories are believed to be derived from ancient Buddhist literature of India, such as the *Jataka*

tales. According to TIPA [4], the Prince Norsang story is considered the oldest written Tibetan opera, drawing its narrative from *Jataka Tales*.

The Monpa Ache lhamo performance is traditionally centred on the romance of Prince Norsang, also known as Choegyal Norsang. Prince Norsang is known as Prince *Zalee* in their Ache lhamo performance. The story highlights *Zalee*'s bravery and devotion as he fights to rescue his celestial queens *Lhamu ana* and *Lhamu anyi* who were kidnapped by two hunters. In this story, the Prince's blissful life with his celestial queens is disrupted when they are abducted by the hunters, triggering a divine conflict. This narrative theme is mirrored in the TIPA's description of Prince Norsang's story, 'where a malicious king from a Southern Indian kingdom attempts to lure the Nāgas, the source of prosperity, away from the northern kingdom'[4]. Both stories feature a struggle for power, protection, and justice, highlighting the importance of courage and determination in the face of adversity.

The story consists of five major characters, namely *Zalee*, *Lhamu ana*, *Lhamu anyi*, *Nyapa*, and *Nyarok*. The prince character, *Zalee* is inspired by *Prince Norsang*. They believed the *Norsang* was born as a human, but he is the 'owner of the universe'. The female characters *Lhamu ana* and *Lhamu anyi* are his queens, drawn as celestial sisters. Another two characters, *Nyapa* and *Nyarok* are drawn as hunters (fishermen). According to the tradition, each of the characters represents particular deities, accordingly: *Choegyal Norsang*, *Lugir Chumu*, *Seten Lhamu*, *Tungden Ngomba*, and *Pagla Zimba* (Sang Jangmu, Sangti village, interviewed by the researcher, 12 October 2024). Additionally, they have several subsidiary characters, like *Yapchen apa* (the prince's father), *Yomchen Ama* (the prince's mother), *Lham chari* (a satirical character), *Karmu namu* (the transforming character of *Lhamu ana*), *Jachug/ Thrung thrung karmu* (a bird character as messenger), *Ngakpa* etc. But they have mainly five performers. The subsidiary characters are also performed by the core performers with different masks and costumes.

Table 1. The key characters of Ache lhamo

Character Name	Role/ Description	Significance in the performance
Zalee	Prince	The central figure of the story, ideals of bravery, devotion, and selfless love.
Lhamu ana	Prince's queen	A tragic figure, her happy life disrupted by kidnapping, and circumstances beyond her control.
Lhamu anyi	Queen's sister	A loyal and supportive figure, standing with her elder sister.
Nyapa	Hunter	The villain, kidnapped the queen sisters and married them, sparking the central conflict of the story.
Nyarok	Hunter's brother	A supportive figure, standing with his elder brother.

Traditionally, the story was transmitted in written form in traditional Tibetan script. The script has been preserved among them for centuries. However, the text written in the Tibetan language has become inaccessible to common people. Currently, most of the performer troupes have lost their scripts. Now, the text is found in particular villages, especially where it was performed for generations. During fieldwork, interviews were conducted with the *lopens* (trainers) and elders of Namsu and Thembang villages. They admitted the existence of the text in their traditions, preserved by their trainers; however, there is no proper information about who and when these were written. With the help of Samten Tashi Tsarmu, a trainer from Namsu village, a script with songs and narratives was found. According to local tradition, the script had been brought from Tibet by their ancestors in ancient times (Samten Tashi Tsarmu, interviewed by the researcher, Namsu village, 20 August 2023).

3.6. Nature of Ache lhamo performance

The Ache lhamo performance is a vibrant and dynamic blend of various art forms, including elements of dance, acting, mime, song, music, chant, dialogue, and satire. Here, the audience enjoys a fascinating storytelling experience, where immersive theatrical elements keep them engaged. The captivating visuals, dance postures, and music stir their emotions and spark their imagination. Performers wear vibrant masks and colorful costumes. The performance tells its story, especially through songs featuring traditional folk instruments.

The performance is typically structured into three distinct sections: introduction, narrative, and conclusion. The ceremony commences with the invocation and worship of nature deities, encompassing the earth, mountains, forests, and rivers. The performers seek permission to utilize the land and extend an invitation to the deities to participate. In the narrative section, the story unfolds through an integrated blend of dance, acting, and dialogue exchange. In conclusion, the five main characters converge to perform a unified dance, while also paying homage to the nature deities, thereby bringing the ceremony to a harmonious close.

The performance area primarily takes place in front of a monastery or in an open ground. When troupes perform in their native village, the monastery courtyard serves as the primary performance space. However, during tours to other villages, the performance may take place on an open ground or in front of the local monastery, allowing the troupe to share their art with a broader audience.

The masks (*bha*) are an integral and iconic part of the Ache lhamo tradition, playing a vital role in representing characters, conveying emotions, adding vigour to the storytelling. The hunter's mask (Figure 4), characterized by its distinctive bearded design, as the iconic symbol of the Ache lhamo tradition, instantly is recognizable across Tibetan culture. The Monpa mask has similarities with its Tibetan counterpart, reflecting the unique cultural nuances of their tradition.



Figure 4. The hunter's mask of the Monpa Ache lhamo using goat skin and fur

Image: Authors

The masks and costumes are carefully crafted for each character, adding depth and meaning to the performance. They wear masks, garlands, crowns, and jewellery. Prince *Zalee* wears a distinctive round hat crafted from climber vines, while the celestial sisters, *Lhamu ana* and *Lhamu anyi* wear fairy crowns made from wood, featuring colourful paint. The hunters, *Nyapa* and *Nyarok*, wear striking animal-bearded masks crafted from goat skin, adorned with fur beards. Supporting characters also play a significant role in the performance, featuring unique masks that add to the narrative. The bird character, *Jachug* serves as a messenger, informing Prince *Zalee* of the celestial Queens' abduction by the hunters. *Jachug* wears a wooden mask which is bird-shaped with two horns. The transformative character *Karmu Namu* wears a mask in white and black colour representing the duality of good and bad in human nature. The exquisitely designed costumes and masks not only enhance the visual appeal of the performance but also convey the rich symbolism and themes that represent the Ache lhamo tradition.

7. Conclusions

The study of cultural history and evolution offers valuable insights into the development and transformation of traditions over time. The Monpa Ache lhamo discloses the complex dynamics of cultural exchange, adaptation, and resilience that have shaped the Monpa identity. The historical connection between Ache lhamo of Arunachal Pradesh and ancient Tibet contributes to our understanding of cultural exchange and heritage preservation in the region.

The present scenario of Ache lhamo performance in Monpa communities reveals significant challenges. Despite being an integral part of their cultural heritage for centuries, the tradition is facing challenges in its continuation. Currently, the tradition faces in terms of sustainability, lack of institutional support and funding which has made it difficult for troupes to sustain themselves, leading to a decline in the number of performances. Furthermore, many skilled lhamo performers are aging, and there is a pressing need to pass on the tradition to younger generations to ensure its continued survival. This study identified traditional troupes in several villages of West Kameng, including Boha, Morshing, Thembang, Dirang, Yewang, Namsu, Sangti, and Thembang. However, it was observed that some villages have discontinued the practice. Thembang village has not performed Ache lhamo for over five years, while Namsu village has not performed it for over three years, and Yewang village has not performed it for over two years. A qualitative analysis of the reasons behind this decline revealed several factors. These include a shortage of skilled performers and trainers, their migration, time constraints, and inadequate knowledge transmission. The training requires substantial time and commitment to become an efficient Ache lhamo performer. Furthermore, some villagers noted that the performers in their community are students, who are unable to devote the necessary time to the tradition.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the Ache lhamo tradition among the Monpa community, highlighting its historical significance, cultural importance, and current challenges. The key observations of this study underscore the need for urgent attention to preserve this intangible cultural heritage. To ensure the continued survival of Ache lhamo, it is essential to address the challenges faced by the troupes, including lack of institutional support, shortage of skilled performers, and inadequate knowledge transmission.

A way forward could involve initiatives such as documentation, capacity-building programs for young performers, and community engagement to revive and sustain this tradition.

Multidisciplinary Domains

This research covers the domains: (a) Culture, and (b) Community and (c) Performance

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

Declaration on AI Usage

The authors declare that the article has been prepared without the use of AI tools.

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Notes

ⁱ Thangtong Gyalpo: According to Monpa tradition, this name literally means king of the empty land. The term consists of *Thang* (plain), *tong* (empty), and *gyalpo* (king).

ⁱⁱ Chak-zam/ Chak-sam: This term is derived from two words: *chak* (iron) and *zam/sam* (bridge). The *Chakzam/ Chaksam* refers to the iron bridges built by Thangtong Gyalpo in Arunachal Pradesh (India), Bhutan, and Tibet (China). A few of these historic bridges still exist in these regions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lopen: The trainer of the Ache lhamo performance, is called *Lopen* or *Guru*. According to the Monpas tradition, a performer can eventually become a trainer after some years.

^{iv} Sherdukpen: The *Sherdukpens* are permanent inhabitants of West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. They mainly reside in Rupa and Shergaon circle.

Losar: The *Losar* festival is the local new year, which falls on the first month of Lunar calendar (January to March). This festival is celebrated by the *Monpas* and *Sherdukpens*.

^{iv} Choekor: The *Choekor*, *Choe* means Scripture and *kor* means procession around. The *Choekor* is a religious festival, celebrated by the *Monpa* and *Sherdukpen*. They move around the village and their agriculture land with holy books and statues.