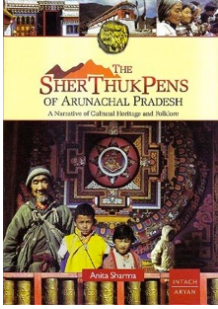


## REVIEW: *THE SHERTHUKPENS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH*

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Anita Sharma. 2013. *The Sherthukpens of Arunachal Pradesh: A Narrative of Cultural Heritage and Folklore*. New Delhi: Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage and Aryan Books International. xv+184pp, foreword, preface, maps [x+xii], 32 color plates before page 1, appendix, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 9788173054440 (hardcover 1,500INR).

Scheduled tribes – indigenous people who are acknowledged to some formal extent by national legislation – of Arunachal Pradesh, formerly part of the North-East Frontier Association, in North-East India, have been largely neglected in terms of cultural and linguistic study, with a few exceptions, such as Elwin (1958, 1959, 1988), Das (1995), and Chowdhury (1973). This region, however, is home to a diverse group of individuals who have only recently been introduced to modernization. For this reason, until recently, most tribes in the area have retained traditions that were maintained for centuries or longer. Due to the contemporary influx of roads, electricity, and television, these traditions have been threatened and are gradually giving way to modern (largely Western) ideas and practices. It is for this reason that Anita Sharma's *The Sherthukpens of Arunachal Pradesh: A Narrative of Cultural Heritage and Folklore* (henceforth *Sherthukpens*) comes at an opportune time to investigate and record the heritage of the Sherthukpen people as it was and is now becoming.

*Sherthukpens* is a hardbound book with a well-made, attractive cover. The work features sixteen double-sided pages of color images. Following the foreword and images are thirteen chapters, an appendix, glossary, and bibliography. The first chapter provides an introduction to the Sherthukpen people and the region

where they live, and historical context, as well as cross-referencing some of the few historical writings that can be found about the people.

Chapters Two and Three investigate Sherthukpen social structure. The second chapter delves into the kinship system such as class/ clan and traditional marriage customs, including inheritance. The clans include the lower class, Chaos, upper class, Thongs, and a migrant class, the Yanlaks, who emigrated more recently from Bhutan (12-13). The Chao and Thong clans are both subdivided into several clans, based on a story indicating each clan descended from a son of Gyaptang-Bura (also Japtang Bura) who was the younger son of King Geporading-darje of Debolojari (Tibet) (2-3). The class/ clan system, therefore, is based largely on these perceived kinships. However, Sharma indicates that divisions are largely traditional and not strictly enforced in most interactions. The Yanlak clan, in contrast, appears to receive some ill-treatment (15). Marriage is generally not cross-class and often stems from negotiation or arrangement (19). The arrangement or negotiation is generally done secretly without the girl's knowledge, between the prospective groom and girl's parents. An assortment of traditional processes are generally followed, culminating in the girl's temporary abduction, feasting (excluding the girl), and gift-giving ceremonies. Inheritance is declared verbally before an individual's death (30). Sons generally receive property, because Sherthukpen wish to keep property within the clan, and because females from any clan can be married into any other clan. However, the Thong Clan does not approve of marriage with the Chao Clan (19).

The third chapter focuses on political positions, their hierarchy, and traditional judicial practices. It also introduces the titles of many positions and names for both permanent and temporary community/ cultural groupings. Permanent positions, such as the *gaonburah* 'headman' are held until the elected person is too old to continue (39) or until they step down for some reason. Temporary groupings include the *brampu*, which is a labor group sought for agricultural help, or to aid in house construction (45). Sharma indicates that some of these positions and several traditional group practices have recently fallen out of practice.

Chapter Four provides an overview of the traditional Sherthukpen economy: slash and burn agriculture supplemented by scavenging, hunting, and barter and trade practices, largely with Assamese and Monpa groups. Due to restrictive forest clearing policies, slash and burn farming is much reduced and limited to non-reserved forests (56). This, in combination with modernization in the form of new roads and imported goods, has created greater wealth and also greater poverty, especially for families with little access to education.

Chapter Five delves into religion as it exists in its various forms across the tribe's villages. A concise description is difficult because (semi-)urban and rural villages have been influenced differently based on their contact, or lack thereof, with outside religions. Lamaism and the author's self-defined Lo religion are the two religions practiced to varying degrees throughout this region. Lamaism is a Tibetan Buddhist-based religion while Lo is considered the tribe's older, more traditional, religion. Sharma investigates the priests and practices of both, providing some comparison and ongoing changes involving both religions.

Chapter Six provides a list of rites and festivals, including birth and death practices.

Chapter Seven discusses indigenous knowledge which, the author claims, is being lost due to the reduction of need, as villages become increasingly dependent on modern development and a Western lifestyle. Indigenous knowledge explored in the chapter includes language, folklore, and traditional medicine.

"Material Culture", the title of Chapter Eight, is a misnomer, as this chapter mainly focuses on production of materials and infrastructure, e.g., basketry, weaving, carpentry and wood-carving, smithing, bridge-building, hunting, fishing, clothing styles worn by gender and age, and jewelry. These topics encompass the Sherthukpens' means of making a livelihood.

Chapter Nine examines architecture, specifically of *gompa* 'monasteries' and stone and wood houses. Nothing is mentioned about construction techniques or rites relating to *gompa*. Rather, there are indications of architectural influence by Lamaist and

Bhutanese styles. House rites, before, during, and after completion are also provided.

Chapter Ten focuses on diet and is primarily a list of the most common foods constituting the staple diet. There is some discussion on the role of meat in the culture, including restrictions for *dzizi*'s 'priests' and Thongs 'the upper class'. *Phak* 'local beer' is also highlighted in terms of the common production method and consumption, which Sharma repeatedly insists is quite often.

Chapter Eleven presents a brief insight into music and dance, primarily as performed during festivals and ceremonies. Sharma indicates that music is also used during agricultural work, fishing, hunting, and when collecting honey.

Chapter Twelve's "Behaviour and Morality" considers social acceptability and how the community teaches and upholds these practices. Taboos are introduced and Sherthukpen social attitudes are compared to those of other tribes in the area. Sharma also illustrates how patriarchal culture does not impose strict social or legal limitations on gender roles in society.

The last chapter, "Modernity and Change", is an overview of pre-1962 Arunachal Pradesh and the continuity of change happening since, with a focus on the Sherthukpen. The most pronounced of these changes involves an influx of popular (especially mainstream Indian) culture, roads, agricultural development, and administrative changes. For the most part, these changes have been imposed upon the Sherthukpen in relatively short order and have accelerated the loss of traditions.

Sharma references the major published sources on the Sherthukpen, as well as adding a Thukpen Village Council (TVC) draft of meeting minutes from 2002. Sharma often, however, re-summarizes the information in the quotations she uses without providing meaningful additions. Furthermore, she often references neighboring tribes, such as the Aka, but provides few citations to support the details. For example, while there has been convincing evidence of Aka's warlike ways, Sinha (1962:11-12) indicates that after a peace agreement in 1888, the Aka became a "peace-loving people." This casts some doubt on Sharma's description of them as "a source

of terror and disruption for the Sherthukpens well up to the 1940s," (160), which has no citation. Consequently, descriptions of non-Sherthukpen peoples in this monograph should be treated cautiously.

The book suffers several other unfortunate drawbacks. The first, and perhaps the most avoidable, is the obvious lack of proofreading. There are errors of a single item being repeated twice in the same list (115, 141). Additional issues include spelling errors (e.g. "restrain" vs. "restraint", 149), beginning Chapter Five with a quote having no context, and multiple English expressions used incorrectly (consider "since long" vs. "since long [ago?]", 135). A skilled copyeditor would have addressed these embarrassments, including mistakes such as, "Perhaps this brings to conclude that [sic]" (78-79), "... detailed as under [sic]" (127), "But Some [sic] of the ..." (130), and "there is [sic] 675 hectares" (56). Sharma also seems to introduce grammatical issues in citations she uses, such as on page 102 "...was journeying [sic] his kingdom", without indicating that the source had the original error, via *sic*. Another questionable practice was copying almost an entire paragraph from page 22-23 and using it in a footnote on page 171. It is challenging to understand why Sharma did not contextualize the footnote with the applicable appendix content, or direct the reader to that paragraph.

Stylistically, Sharma uses multiple italicized Sherthukpen words throughout her text without immediately identifying their meanings. These words are often not clearly defined until many pages or chapters later. This situation leaves the reader confused or required to break their current thought process to look up the words in order to better understand. There is a glossary of these items, but Sharma does not accommodate the reader by consistently defining them within context.

Further problems arise from the fact that Sharma must have overlooked various aspects of her work. Consider her description of the Sherthukpen language being included in the "Tibeto-Burman school of languages" (94). Even a cursory search on Tibeto-Burman languages would have indicated that there is no 'school' of languages, but rather a language family. These types of basic research problems cause the reader to question some of the arguments that Sharma

presents throughout *Sherthukpens*. For example, the word for the people and their language(s) is commonly spelled Sherdukpen (Sarkar 1980, Sharma 1961, and Lewis et al. 2013 <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/sdp> – for some examples of how both the literature and the people themselves render the word). Why does Sharma spell it with a *T* instead of *D* and with an extra *H*? The book offers no explanation. Nonetheless, Sharma's spelling has been used here to be consistent with the book.

Despite these many problems, the book is a useful record of the people, offering valuable insight into a people transitioning from traditional village life to a modern lifestyle. For readers interested in the traditional cultures of South/ South-East Asia, *Sherthukpens* is packed with details from all walks of the villagers' lives. *Sherthukpens* is a good synthesis of knowledge obtained through Sharma's firsthand experience and existing records involving the tribe.

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