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## The Limbu tribe and the significance of kinship and clan in marriage

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### Abstract

The Limbu tribe is indigenous to the Himalayan region of eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland, Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal. The tribe has a rich heritage and culture of their own. Generally regarded as the bravest among the Nepali community, the Limbus follow a vast and colourful ceremonies and rituals from birth till death. The Limbu clans are many in number and it is forbidden to have marital relationship among the same clan.

**Keywords:** Limbu tribe, Yakthung, clan, ethnicity, marriage ceremony, religious rituals

### Introduction

The Limbu or Yakthung are a Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic group indigenous to the Himalayan region of eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland, northern West Bengal, and western Bhutan. Limbus are considered the first settlers of east Nepal and are thought to be descendants of the Kiratis. Limbus became known to history in the eighteenth century, at a time when a number of small chiefdoms in Limbuan were under the authority of the kingdom of Bijayapur. Limbu, the second most numerous tribes of the indigenous people called Kiranti, living in Nepal, on the easternmost section of the Himalayas east of the Arun River, and in northern India, mostly in the states of Sikkim, West Bengal, and Assam. Altogether, the Limbu numbered some 380,000 in the early 21st century.

The Limbu are of Mongolian stock and speak a language belonging to the Kiranti group of Tibeto-Burman languages. It has its own alphabet (the Kirat-Sirijonga script), believed to have been invented in the 9th century.

The original name of the Limbu is Yakthung or Yakthum. Limbu males are called Yakthungba or Yakthumba and Limbu females are called "Yakthumma" or "Yakthungma". Ancient texts state that "Yakthung" or "Yakthum" is a derivative of Yaksha and some interpret its meaning as the "Yaksha winner". In the Limbu language it means "heroes of the hills" (Yak - hills, thung or thum - heroes or mighty warriors).

Subba is a title given by the Shah Kings only to Limbu village chiefs. Subba was not an indigenous Yakthung terminology, but now the two terms are almost interchangeable. People often debate about the use of term "Subba" as their surname in Limbu/Yakthung tribe. It is important to note that only the village chiefs were allowed to use the term Subba in their name. It was how the village chiefs were distinguished from other villagers in Limbu tribe. Family lineage of the village chiefs are often found with their surname as Subba.

Their history is said to be written in a book called Bangsawoli (Genealogy), also known as Bansawali. Some ancient families have kept copies of their chronology and details. There are hundreds of Limbu clans and tribes, classified under their tribe or subnational entity or according to their place of origin.

The Chinese text Po-ou-Yeo-Jing, which translated in 308 AD, refers to the Yi-ti-Sai (Barbarians bordering on the north), a name which is an exact equivalent of The Limbu/Yakthung, were also one of the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim. Yakthung are known as Tsong in Sikkim and they are original inhabitant of Sikkim. The name of the Indian state itself is a combination of two Limbu words: Su, which means "new", and Khyim, which means "palace" or "house".

The most Limbu (Yakthung) tribes are the original inhabitants and descended from the ancient Kirata mentioned in such Hindu epics as the Mahabharata. Although, some of the clan names may not be unique for example: Chongbang or Maden.

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They are divided by listing their tribe's name before or after their clan. Chongbang can be Sireng-Chongbang or Hukppa-Chongbang or Chongbang Kyak, similarly Maden clan can be specifically Tilling-Maden or Thokleng-Maden or Tunlung-Maden or Phendua-Maden. Listed Chaobisia, Mawakhola, Tambarkhola, Charkhola, Maiwakhola, Panthar, Tinkhola, Phedap and Yangrok are the names of the places where the respective clans belong to. Chaobisia refers to present day Dhankuta and Morang districts, Tambarkhola area is in present-day Taplejung district, Mewakhola area refers to present day Taplejung and Sankhuwasabha districts, Charkhola is a present-day Ilam and Jhapa districts, Maiwakhola area is in present-day Taplejung district, Tinkhola is in Panchthar district, Panthar is Panchthar district, Phedap is the north-central area of Terhathum district, Athraya is in northeastern Terhathum district, Chethar is in southern Terhathum, Sankhuwasabha and eastern Dhankuta district. Yangrok area is in present-day Southeast Taplejung, Northeast Panchthar districts and west Sikkim. All of these areas make up Limbuwan.

### Limbu Clan

To Limbus, genealogy is very important before conducting marriages. Limbus do not marry within their own clan known as incest and not into their mother's clan or their grandmothers' clan. Some Traditional and cultural Limbus with strong background, avoid marriages into clans from which they derive their blood, up to seven generations in their father's line and up to five generations in their mother's line. That means Marriages into great-great-great-grandmothers' clans are also avoided. The Limbu nation is made up of hundreds of clans. Each Limbu clans are classified under their Tribe or subnational entity or according to their place of origin. Almost all the Limbu clan names are unique, therefore it is not necessary to specify the Tribe or the place of origin every time the clan's name is said.

The clan names have terms attached to it as well, Libang means the Archer, Tilling means the Police, Menyango means the successful one, Samba means the priest, etc. However, clans also have meanings which evolved from sentences e.g. Hembya was according to legend, evolved from "Hey' nangh wa" which translates to "Over there also". However, on original verbal dialect, 'Hembya' would be pronounced as "Hem-phe". This name was previously used to identify Thebe's next clan who settled in a different territory.

### Marriage, and Family

Marriage is defined as a legitimate union between a man and a woman so that they may produce legitimate children. In the past, marriages were arranged by families with neither the bride nor the groom having much say on the marriage payments or ceremonies. Asking for a woman's hand is an important ceremony. In that system, the woman can ask for anything, including any amount of gold, silver, etc. This is practiced to confirm that the man is financially secure enough to keep the bride happy. A few days after the wedding, the man's family members must visit the woman's house with a piglet and some alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, depending upon the financial status of his house. The most important ceremonies of a Limbu wedding take place in the groom's house rather than in the bride's because the bride must stay with her husband. There are two special

dances in this ceremony, one is called Yalakma or dhan nach in Nepali (rice harvest dance) and "Kelangma" or Chyabrung in Nepali. After the wedding the girl would give up her last name for her husband's. In course of time this practice has changed and now both parties have a chance to choose and decide on the matter. The giving of gifts continues after the wedding and marriage payments extend over many years. Women play a great and very active part in the marriage. The woman is the decision maker concerning the house, children, marriage, and business. Women also influence the stability of a marriage. The mother-in-law phobia is strongly felt, and in most cases the mother-in-law is the prime reason for a bride's departure. Language is also a barrier if the bride is from a different Region. The Limbus, like many Nepalese, are hesitant to address one another directly. Calling out a name in public is taboo and creates embarrassment; therefore, the new bride is called "you" or "the wife of so-and-so" and she does not have full status as a woman until she bears a child. Until full acceptance by the mother-in-law, the marriage is uncertain, as the wife can return to her natal home if she is made to feel uncomfortable. Polygamy is not widely practiced; it is practiced only if the wife is barren or has failed to produce sons.

Kinship is very important in a marriage. A union with kin is considered successful and ideal. For the Limbus there are three types of marriages: adultery, arrangement, and "theft." All three are legal. In case of adulterous marriage, a bride-price is not required. Some compensation is paid to the former husband by the new husband. Also, if the woman is single, the new husband visits the woman's natal home with offerings to form a closer bond with her family. "Theft" marriages are common. The term "theft" means that she has agreed to be taken without negotiations. Such elopement is one way to avoid the high cost of a bride-price. The women in these marriages are considered as weak subjects, labour resources, and child bearers. For the Limbus these undesirable marriages, especially theft of married women, are usually initiated at dances.

Families related "by the bone" make up patrilineal lineages and clans. Death of a member brings pollution on the local agnatic descent group. During this time adults refrain from eating meals cooked with salt and oil. Wives who have taken their husband's family name also take their impurities by eating leftovers from their meals. Lineage and clan groups are exogamous, so men and women with the same clan's name are forbidden to marry or have sexual relations. Today, lineages do not have a great influence on marriage, though payments are made to the chief of the clan. In general Limbu families are economically and ritually independent of each other.

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